Performing Nirbhaya (Fearlessness): Reframing Sexual Violence Discourse in Modern Urban India

by

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Table of Contents

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Chapter 1

'Nirbhaya' as Person, Event, and Performance

Introduction

On December 16, 2012 in New Delhi, India, a young woman and her male companion boarded a bus after seeing a film at a South Delhi theater. Instead of taking them home, the six men already on the bus brutally gang raped the woman and then dumped her and her male companion on the side of the road. Thirteen days later in a Singapore hospital, she died of the injuries she had received that night. Her name was Jyoti Singh Pandey, but the media referred to her as "*Jagruti"* (awareness), "*Jyoti"*(flame), "*Amanat"* (treasure), "*Nirbhaya"* (fearless one), "*Damini"* (lightning, after the 1993 Hindi film) and "Delhi Braveheart" (Banerjee and Bakshi; Chandra; Roy). By the time she died, the story of her rape was internationally infamous. It had sparked massive public protests and outrage throughout India. It had also shone a spotlight on the particular problem of public violence against women in urban India.[1] While initially critiqued for its underwhelming response to the gang rape and its violent police response to protests, within one week of the attack the Indian government had convened a special judicial committee, the Justice Verma Committee, to offer recommendations for amending the criminal code to better protect women from sexual violence. This did not satisfy all protestors, however, who continued to amass in large numbers in multiple Indian cities, well beyond the new year.

The protests in the wake of the rape were unlike any seen in recent memory in India, inspiring comparisons to the Arab Spring (Dutta and Sircar 294). The world watched as thousands descended on India Gate to express their outrage and issue a variety of demands for

changes both cultural and political. What was striking about these protests was not only their massive size, but also the diverse set of politicized claims that used the story of Jyoti Singh Pandey's rape and murder as their touchstone. Feminists—who had protested in large numbers in response to a number of infamous crimes against women, including the custodial rape of Mathura, the rape and murder by the Indian army of Manorama, and the revival of the practice of sati in which Roop Kanwar threw herself onto the flames of her husband's funeral pyre—took this latest atrocity as a rallying point for reinvigorating a discussion of governmental policies, enforcement, and patriarchal cultural norms. Conservative pundits exploited the gruesome nature of the incident to argue for stricter laws to deal with urban migrants from lower classes and castes, to "condemn the 'Westernization' of Indian women," and to further constrict women's freedoms outside the home (Shandilya 473; Roychowdhury, "The Delhi Gang Rape" 285-86). The Western media often echoed colonial representations of Indian men, suggesting that India was backwards or regressive in its treatment of women, that—as in the famous construction by Gayatri Spivak—white men (and women) *and* Western notions of women's rights (and/or feminism) were needed to save brown women from brown men (Dutta and Sircar 295; Roychowdhury, "The Delhi Gang Rape" 283-285; Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak" 297). The gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh Pandey had become an event whose reverberations would reach forward and backward in time, reframing the global discourse around sexual violence.[2]

As a feminist performance studies scholar, I was particularly struck by the creativity and number of performances made in direct and indirect response to the Delhi bus gang rape. These performances were also central to the protests that occurred after the rape, attracting media attention and publicity that political performance almost never receives. They circulated not just as aesthetic experiences in elite circles, but as a means of engaging a wider public and expressing

a shared feeling of outrage. The Delhi bus gang rape perfectly illustrated the performative nature of rape itself. Though it can be argued that all rapes are somewhat performative in nature, it was as if the perpetrators of the Delhi bus gang rape needed to prove to one another and the world the sheer power and rage of their violent masculinity. Scholars and clinicians who deal with rape survivors emphasize the fact that rape is not about sex. It is about demonstrating and performing power and control (Filipovic 2013). In other words, rape always has some significance in a larger context than just the act itself. The sheer brutality of the Delhi bus gang rape, its excessive violence, suggest that this group of men had a message they wanted to write through the performance of violence upon Pandey's body.

This study begins from the premise that reading the Nirbhaya event through a performative lens will help to make the rape and its aftermath fully legible. A performance studies methodology demonstrates the important reframing of the event that live, body-to-body representational encounters can provide. Performance demands of its participants, both performers and spectators, a being-present together, a world-making exercise like the one Jill Dolan describes in *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*, in which "live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world" (2). It also foregrounds the body and its minutiae, from ritual movements of the everyday to the expression of emotion through facial expression, posture, and gesture. In its focus on repetition and training, it demonstrates what our bodies can do, and how their daily movements affect our own attitudes and our relationship with the world around us.

The performances and performative acts in this study all fall under the category of affective responses that mobilize specific politicized claims. Lauren Berlant defines affect as "a

metaphsychological category spanning what's internal and external to subjectivity…its activity saturates the corporeal, intimate, and political performances of adjustment that make a shared atmosphere something palpable and, in its patterning, releases a poetics, a theory-in-practice of how a world works" (Berlant, *Cruel* 2). From this definition, I focus most closely on affect's role in creating a bodily response that is both deeply personal and felt by all, a response that is excessively public even to the point of feeling external to those who are being affected, that produces a new way of moving through the world and in so doing, begins the process of *creating* a new world. The performances in these pages use affect to draw attention to the small, daily violences practiced upon women's bodies that create a world in which women expect violence, particularly in public space, and respond accordingly at both conscious and unconscious levels. However, these performances not only draw attention to the body's affective responses to small acts of sexual and gendered violence—they use affect as a political tool to begin creating a world in which women's confident and comfortable presence in public space is normal, in which they do not constantly anticipate the possibility of sexual violence.

Unsurprisingly, then, I focus my analysis of performative responses to the Delhi bus gang rape on how the small, the slow, and the everyday become political. I want to think with theorists of affect about the circulation of cultural feelings, and I am deeply invested in the idea that affect, too, can be political. When I say political I do not mean it exactly in the third-wave feminist sense of the personal becoming political. I am not talking about the politics of individuals. Rather, I mean political in the sense of challenging structures of oppression. Kathleen Stewart says of ordinary affects that

> Ideologies happen. Power snaps into place. Structures grow entrenched. Identities take place. Ways of knowing become habitual at the drop of a hat. But it's ordinary affects

> that give things the quality of a *some*thing to inhabit and animate. Politics starts in the animated inhabitation of things, not way downstream in the various dreamboats and horror shows that get moving. (15-16)

I take from Stewart, then, the idea that affect is the beginning of politics, the moment when things accrue just enough structure that they have the potential to be inhabited with larger political meanings. Ideology, power, identities—the structures that seem like forces beyond our control even as we engage with them and change them subtly through our daily performance of life—they all, before they solidify, becoming themselves, begin with ordinary affects.

Unlike Stewart, however, in my argument affect must be understood in far more than a pre-political sense. The politics is already happening before it can be consciously known, articulated. Thus, I imagine affect to function much like Sara Ahmed's concept of the cultural politics of emotion or Ann Cvetkovich's idea of trauma as a national feeling. I take from Sara Ahmed's analysis of how "emotions work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies" the idea that affect, like emotions, takes on collective meaning through the repetition of its performance on and through bodies, eventually creating social norms and structures of power that feel out of our control and that often attach us to living lives that aren't good for us (*Cultural Politics* 1). I, like Ahmed, am interested in exploring how emotion and affect might, in fact, be generating a cultural politics through its enactment. From Cvetkovich, on the other hand, I take the idea that trauma, in particular, "as a name for experiences of socially situated political violence…forges overt connections between politics and emotion" (2-3). While Cvetkovich goes on to draw a distinction between national traumas and the kinds of personal traumas she is more interested in excavating, her overall goal, "to suggest how affect, including the affects associated with trauma, serves as the foundation for the formation of public culture" echoes Ahmed in its

emphasis on how feelings circulate between bodies, creating the cultural and political landscapes in which we live (10). The artists whose work fills these pages have purposefully turned to the slow, the small, and the everyday to create a politics. This politics is sometimes enacted on the level of expressing individual desire, but it is not individual precisely because it is performative and thus involves the creation of a collective, a public, those sharing the experience of the performance. Brian Massumi writes of the relationship between politics and affect that, "affect is proto-political. It concerns the first stirrings of the political, flush with the felt intensities of life. Its politics must be brought out" (ix). What I am arguing, then, is that performance can, under the right circumstances, allow us to bring the politics of affect out in order to consciously engage with affect as a political force.[3] The relationship between performance and affect should be an obvious one, for, as Massumi writes, "affect is only understood as enacted" (vii). In other words, performance is what allows affect to be seen, felt, written and talked about. Affect *exists* through its enactment. More than that, affect is what keeps the event in view. The strong affective response to the Delhi bus gang rape is what has made it a cultural touchstone, a moment we continue to refer back to when thinking about sexual violence. Affect takes our personal emotional responses and makes of them a shared public experience, something that seems larger than any single reaction. Through affect, we respond to the event. Thus, performances made in response to the Delhi bus gang rape *are* affective responses at their core, an attempt to work through the public emotions of the event with the body.

Some of the performances I analyze do not, at first, seem to be performances at all. Instead, they are political protests that may incorporate some minor performative elements. However, my project insists on a more capacious understanding of the performative nature of politics and uses affect as its primary medium for understanding the ongoing implications of the

Nirbhaya event. If the real urgency of the Nirbhaya event, as I will argue, lies in women's rights to experience pleasure in public space, what better way to demand that right than for women to perform live, one or more bodies affectively communicating with others? If the danger of the reactions to the Nirbhaya event is an increasing neoliberal regulation of public space (and turning of public space into semi-private spaces of consumption like malls and coffee shops), what better way to explore alternatives than through an amateur theater that rejected any relationship to profit-making from the beginning?[4] Theater and performance are central to a critical analysis of the Nirbhaya event precisely because they foreground live bodies and the risks those live bodies must take to occupy public space and captivate the public eye. They also shift the emphasis from a discourse that tries to recover Jyoti Singh Pandey's specific voice and story to one that uses representation to engage Nirbhaya as a moment in which women can think critically about their own lives and the structures of oppression that make the Delhi bus gang rape possible.

What's in a Name?

I draw a clear distinction between using the phrase, "Nirbhaya event," and using Jyoti Singh Pandey's name or referring to the Delhi bus gang rape. The politics of releasing Jyoti Singh Pandey's real name to the press are complex. For instance, as Krupa Shandilya observes,

> In the absence of information about the rape victim's identity, her story struck a chord with protestors because what happened to her could have happened to any of the protestors: her story represented the perils faced by 'everywoman' in India. While the notion of 'everywoman' served as a potential tool for solidarity, bringing together disparate activist groups as well as citizens from all walks of life to the protest, the category was co-opted to mean a Hindu, upper-caste, middle-class woman. (468)

In other words, while one might argue that symbolic names such as Nirbhaya and Damini allowed protestors to put themselves in Pandey's shoes, imagining that they could just as easily have been victims of a brutal act of sexual violence, Shandilya found that such names quickly became a symbol for a certain kind of woman, one who was considered particularly deserving of the crowd's outrage. Another concern I share with a multitude of activists and scholars is that, by using a pseudonym, rather than Pandey's real name, I erase her individuality and her agency, covering her real experiences with the politicized claims I wish to advance.

And yet, my entire project is grounded, not in Pandey's real experiences—as important as they are to recognize—but in the ways in which her experiences were taken up as part of a larger discourse on sexual violence in urban India. Dutta and Sircar suggest that the many names given to Pandey "had, literally…turned [her] into India's national property" (299). Though the pseudonyms were a way of giving form to a woman whose name the media at that point was not legally allowed to release, they also turned Pandey's story into India's story by erasing certain aspects of her identity while creating a very specific representation of her character. Pandey's real name reveals her religion and her caste, and also provides access to her individual history and family life. The pseudonyms, on the other hand, turn what was a terrifying, painful, and atrociously violent experience for a real woman into a story of hope, courage, and, yes, fearlessness for the entire Indian nation. One brutal irony of this is that these names also subtly imply that it was Pandey's fearlessness that got her killed in the first place. The rapists were adamant that, if she had not fought back, they would not have been so violent (Udwin). This is, of course, a common justification made by rapists for their violence, and yet another reason that Pandey's story held such appeal across the political spectrum: in popular public perception, it was clear that she had fought for her "honor." The reality of the fact that Pandey was fighting for

her life was obscured beneath a public discourse that turned her into a martyr and treated the indelible marks of violence on her body as evidence of her virtue.

Shandilya, too, distinguishes between the use of Pandey's name and of the pseudonym Nirbhaya: with the former, she is "reiterat[ing] the importance of acknowledging the identity of rape victims and thereby recognising their agency," while she uses the latter to refer to "the larger political mobilization around her rape [in order] to situate the rape case within a global analytic of feminist mobilization against rape" (466). Though I appreciate Shandilya's distinction, I do not quite adopt it as my own, partly because I wish to emphasize the unstable temporality of the event. For me, the term Nirbhaya refers to an event that was catalyzed by the rape and murder of Pandey but came to encompass something far more than simply the political mobilization that occurred in its wake, something that is still unfolding in the present, continually invoking and giving new meaning to specific incidents from the past, and potentially reframing how we move into the future. I see the event in Deleuzian terms, as "a vibration with an infinity of harmonics or submultiples, such as an audible wave, a luminous wave, or even an increasingly smaller part of space over the course of an increasingly shorter duration" (77).[5] Using the metaphor of a sound or light wave to imagine the event reveals a few critical features of the Deleuzian definition. First, sound waves are affected by every physical body with which they collide. The event, too, is constantly changing as it comes into contact with new objects, new ideas, other events. Each contact changes the event in tiny but infinite ways, to the point where it is impossible to trace the contours of the inciting incident, the "real" event. This study, then, is not about what actually happened to Pandey; as important as that story is to tell, it is not mine. I will not describe an authentic event and the ways in which re-presentations of that event change it. Rather, I assume a performative quality to the event itself that effectively overwrites the real,

obscuring it beneath the constantly evolving public perception of the event. The reverberations *become* what we think of as the event, and a cultural analysis of these reverberations will allow us to make sense of the context in which the event already took place, is taking place, and will continue to take place and how that context is influencing the event even as the event influences the context. Deleuze offers us another metaphor to make sense of the complexity of the event:

> A concert is being performed tonight. It is the event. Vibrations of sound disperse, periodic movements go through space with their harmonics or submultiples. The sounds have inner qualities of height, intensity, and timbre. The sources of the sounds, instrumental or vocal, are not content only to send the sounds out: each one perceives its own, and perceives the others while perceiving its own. (80)

The event responds to itself even as it responds to other occurrences happening around it. The second insight the metaphor of the sound or light wave offers is the importance of space and time in interpreting the event. Re-presentations of the event exist in discrete moments of time and space. We *can* trace the context in these moments, but it is important to ensure that in doing so we do not forget the nearly infinite time and space the overall event takes up. The re-presentations then are *both* discrete moments *and* part of the overall event, much as light is both a wave and a particle simultaneously.

I employ the phrase "Nirbhaya event" throughout this dissertation to refer to these reverberating and continual re-presentations. Here, both words are critical to my argument: event, for its Deleuzian connotations, and Nirbhaya for what it says about what meanings those who continued to call Pandey Nirbhaya, even after her real name was released, take from her story. Nirbhaya functions in Sanskrit as both an adjective and a noun, so it can mean "fearless" or "fearlessness." When it is being used to refer to Jyoti Singh Pandey, it often implies a loser

translation of "fearless one." When I first read about the gang rape, I was horrified that the media would symbolize her as fearless as part of the popular discourse of martyrdom. Of course she was afraid, in pain, and aware of her own powerlessness in the situation. She was raped to death. But that does not take away from the fact that she fought to survive. Why must popular discourse assume that she was fearless in order to emphasize her bravery? Isn't it arguably more impressive when someone is brave in spite of their fear, as opposed to being fearless to begin with? Where is this fear coming from and how is it circulating? And what does it mean when we name someone, who clearly had something to fear, fearless? Defining her as "the fearless one" became part of the affective power of the event. Fear was a crucial part of understanding sexual violence in contemporary, urban India.

The pseudonym Nirbhaya and the questions it raised became even more important to me as I began to encounter performative responses to the Nirbhaya event that specifically addressed the role of fear in contributing to the continued oppression of women. Performances and performative political protests such as Blank Noise's "Meet to Sleep" and Delhi's *Pinjra Tod: Break the Hostel Locks* were far more interested in the social construction of fear, the ways in which the affective politics of fear were used to control women's movements through public space, than they were in pretending that women moving through public space are fearless.

> As Sara Ahmed writes of the relationship between fear and women's bodies:
>
> Fear of 'the world' as the scene of a future injury works as a form of violence in the present, which shrinks bodies in a state of afraidness, a shrinkage which may involve a refusal to leave the enclosed spaces of home, or a refusal to inhabit what is outside in ways that anticipate injury (walking alone, walking at night and so on). Such feelings of vulnerability and fear hence shape women's bodies as well as how those bodies inhabit

> space. Vulnerability is not an inherent characteristic of women's bodies; rather, it is an effect that works to secure femininity as a delimitation of movement in the public, and over-inhabitance in the private. (*Cultural Politics* 70)

Thus, even as the name "Nirbhaya" becomes aspirational, that which women are working toward rather than that which Jyoti Singh Pandey actually had, it also teaches women that there *is* something to fear. The Nirbhaya event demonstrates that by leaving their homes, even with a male companion, by engaging in the middle-class pleasures of neoliberal consumption, they leave themselves open to violence. It encourages their fear, reminds them of their vulnerability. This circulation of fear becomes a form of violence that is just as important to attend to as the far more obvious violence of the gang rape and murder. It is a violence that lives in affect, in the everyday choices women make about where they will go and what they will do. Not only that, but it is a violence that affects men, too, particularly in terms of "which bodies become read as the origin of fear" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 71). Too often, those bodies are poor, lower caste, and/or Muslim, and that fear is used to justify violence against them. In the case of the Nirbhaya event, the bodies to fear were the bodies of urban migrant men, who were depicted as resentful of middle-class women's success because of their own economic and personal hardships. The story of the "Fearless One" consequently became a tool for the violent oppression of both men and women.

Why Nirbhaya: The Making of a Global Event

Before I begin a discussion of the specifics of my argument and methodology, it is critical to establish both why Jyoti Singh Pandey's story became a rallying cry for massive political mobilization—feminist and otherwise—and why I have chosen the Nirbhaya event as

my central focus for this study. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, in 2011, India had 24,206 rape cases reported—with many more going unreported ("India: Rape"). Against such a statistic, the amount of attention this particular rape received both nationally and internationally seems anomalous. Poulami Roychowdhury found more than 1,515 articles on the Nirbhaya event in the United States in the two months following the violent gang rape ("Delhi Gang Rape" 282). So why is this the narrative that captured the world's attention and became a catalyst for political and cultural change? Rape happens all over the world, all the time. And while India is treated by the international media as particularly dangerous for women, one need only look to stories such as the Steubenville rape that occurred in August 2012 for proof that women in the United States are also brutally raped and that justice can be just as difficult to come by.[6]

Why Nirbhaya? Jyoti Singh Pandey was out late with a male friend. They had gone to see a movie. By the time they got out, it was difficult to find the public transportation they needed to get home (Bresnahan et al.). What happened to Pandey highlights the fact that a large city like Delhi is not safe after dark for women (even if they have a male escort). And as Phadke et al. argue, "safety and order are prized in the new global city" (15). This new global city is the neoliberal city, the city saturated with international corporations, a city that is meant to belong to the upper and upper middle classes. Thus, "safety for women is framed through the creation of a fallacious opposition between the middle-class respectable woman and the vagrant male" (Phadke et al. 19). This is what led to international media mobilization as well: this event could be read as "a violation of modern, rights-bearing subjects" in an India that is rushing to embrace a neoliberal value system, particularly in urban areas (Roychowdhury, "Delhi Gang Rape" 282-83). The Nirbhaya event thus served as an example of how unsafe women are in urban, public

spaces after dark *and* to the growing influence of neoliberal governmentality on these urban spaces.

This leads to the second reason the Nirbhaya event captured the public imagination so completely. Jyoti Singh Pandey was a physiotherapy student, paying for her classes with a job at a call center, a woman firmly on the upwardly mobile quest for true middle class status (Schulz). Her father had sold some of his land in his native village to come to Delhi and "worked two shifts a day loading luggage at the airport to pay for her college education" (Sharma). Pandey was engaging in a behavior that the international cosmopolitan city prioritizes for its citizens: consumption as leisure. She was behaving respectably and cautiously; she was not wandering out alone at night. Pandey was the perfect heroine, a young woman with a bright future in front of her, a potential member of a burgeoning middle class, and "respectable" (in other words, capable of being defiled). Perhaps even more central to the reasons the Nirbhaya event became an international media phenomenon, "the violence inflicted on her body becomes legible as a violation because it fetters her desire for modernity and its accoutrements. And as such, her violation rationalizes a set of politicized claims" (Roychowdhury, "Delhi Gang Rape" 285). In other words, the gang rape and Pandey's subsequent death could be mobilized as a cautionary tale of the challenges India faces in its attempts to modernize (i.e. become more Western and more neoliberal).

The perpetrators of the violent gang rape, on the other hand, were the perfect villains, the people from whom women in public space must be protected, the epitome of the "vagrant male (read: lower class, often unemployed, often lower caste or Muslim)" (Phadke et al. 19). For instance, as Roychowdhury observes, "CNN likened the assailants to men in other 'traditional societies' who 'see improvements in the status of women as a challenge to their own' and who

use rape as a weapon of power against such advances. Notions of Western gender progressivism implicitly and explicitly guided these commentaries" ("Delhi Gang Rape" 283). Four of the six men accused of carrying out the gang rape lived in a slum called Ravi Das Camp, "a poor pocket in the otherwise largely middle-class neighborhood of RK Puram, whose tree-lined boulevards contrast with the narrow lanes and open sewers of their slum" (Kotoky and Roychoudhury). Two of these four were described as loud and heavy drinkers who had a tendency to drink and drive (Sharma). The crime itself took place in a relatively affluent area of the city; Pandey and her companion had just left a modern mall after seeing *Life of Pi* in English (Mehrotra). The way in which the minutiae of the incident were described in such detail indicates their importance in constructing a specific narrative. These men were seen to be attacking not just Pandey, but her way of life as symbolized in the carefree act of going out to see a film.

Many other stories have since come to light, which, in terms of sheer brutality, measure up to the Nirbhaya event, but hers was the first that the media covered quite so extensively.[7] Whether the media was following the whims of its consumers or vice versa is debatable, but the fact is that the publicizing of the Nirbhaya event across international media outlets opened the door for other stories to be told more publicly. My answer, then, to the question of "why Nirbhaya?"—why not write about some other event, some other performance of violence against women—is as follows. The Nirbhaya event represents a substantial shift in the narrative of women, sexual violence, neoliberalism, and public space in India. It placed violence against women in the spotlight as part of a narrative of Indian and international human rights problems. It engaged issues of Indian tradition and modernity as both the Hindu right and leftist feminists attempted to use the story to support a set of politicized claims. It demanded that the modern Indian woman consider her access to urban spaces and her right to neoliberal consumption. It

presented a nearly perfect heroine in the form of the educated, hard-working, innocent, and upwardly mobile Jyoti Singh Pandey. The shame and suspicion that frequently accompanies women who dare to cry "rape" was absent in her case because of the obvious physical signs of violent assault. It focused the narrative on violence against women outward toward public space and stranger danger—a much less controversial topic of discussion than the far more common abuse of women by people they know in their own homes. Finally, the Nirbhaya event has inspired fascinating and challenging responses to the question of what any of us should do next to address the increase of violence against women all over the world.

Framing Nirbhaya: Event, Interpretation, Performance

Within six months of the gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh Pandey, it became clear that performance was becoming a major part of how the event was being interpreted by the public both nationally and internationally. Within two years, performances made in explicit response to the Nirbhaya event had appeared in nearly every major Indian city and in the U.K. and the U.S. As I explored these performances, I found myself stumbling upon work that had a more implicit relationship to the Nirbhaya event. These pieces might not mention Pandey or Nirbhaya, or rape, but they still clearly engaged a narrative of women in public space and their fear of sexual violence. My research methodology was purposefully organic. I began by contacting the artists who had created works that were obviously and explicitly about the Nirbhaya event: Maya Krishna Rao's *Walk*, Yael Farber's *Nirbhaya*, Sohag Sen's *Haaye, Haaya!* (Shame, Shame!), Jana Natya Manch's *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai* (This, too, is Violence), and Rasika Agashe's *Museum of Species in Danger*, among others. Where possible, I met with and interviewed the directors, watched rehearsals and live performances of their work, and asked

them if they knew of any other performative responses to the Nirbhaya event. I quickly discovered in them a deep suspicion of anyone writing about the event, a suspicion that fundamentally changed the direction of my work. For many of these women (with the exception of Farber), the writers asking about Nirbhaya seemed to be interested only in the "glamour" of the event, in capitalizing on the abject nature of the trauma and the international attention it had received. These writers did not provide an accurate representation of what life was like for Indian women or how the Nirbhaya event had influenced women's daily experiences.

I expanded my definition of what counted as a response to the Nirbhaya event, realizing that any piece made in the aftermath of the Delhi bus gang rape that engaged with women, public space, sexual violence, or justice had to on some level take account of the ongoing effects of Nirbhaya. Through the artistic contacts I had made, I reached out to more artists whose work had not made the original cut, since they did not seem to be explicitly responding to the Nirbhaya event. Works that constituted implicit responses to the Nirbhaya event included Kalyanee Mulay and Vishnu Barve's *Unseen*, Faezeh Jalali's *7/7/7*, Mallika Taneja's *Thoda Dhyaan Se* (Be a Little Careful), and Theatre Formation Paribartak's *Praatohkrityo* (Morning Ablutions), among a host of others. While none of them mentioned Nirbhaya or Pandey and many of them eschewed instances of traumatic sexual violence, they all explored how women's bodies were affected by daily sexual harassment and gendered expectations, particularly of how women were supposed to behave in public. With these artists, I employed a research methodology not unlike what Clifford Geertz has called "deep hanging out." While I did everything that I had done with the first set of artists above, I found myself wanting to understand more of how they, themselves, moved through daily life, how their own experiences of being gendered were shaping the work they were doing. We had dinner, drinks, went out to see shows together. They invited me to meals in

their homes and on trips to perform their pieces in different cities. I watched and listened and talked and learned as they told me about their lives and went about the business of living them.

This, in turn, led me to a third set of performances that seemed crucial to include in this study: protests that employed performance as a means of doing feminist activism. These pieces include Blank Noise's many public art/protest pieces, Why Loiter, and *Pinjra Tod: Break the Hostel Locks* among others. They might not initially seem to be performances at all—though Jasmeen Patheja, the founder of Blank Noise treats her work as public art and Neha Singh, the founder of Why Loiter, since reading my chapter on the group, has agreed enthusiastically that Why Loiter is performance and thanked me for providing better language for her to discuss the group's work. However, what sets them apart from many forms of activism is their sense of audience and their deliberate shaping of their actions to create a public performance in order to change the world around them. Seeing their work, one might not even realize one was seeing a protest (this is slightly less true of *Pinjra Tod*) but instead think this was some public art piece or that this was just a group of women behaving a bit strangely. And that is exactly the point. Occupying the liminal space between performance and protest, these pieces trouble easy categorizations and expectations of women's behavior in public space.

As I met more of these artists and got to know them personally, something else became readily apparent. The ones who were creating more indirect responses to the Nirbhaya event had a truly different approach to thinking about sexual violence. Rather than the feminism of the Indian Women's Movement of the 1980s and 90s, these women were coming at feminism from a different, more personal direction. They did not want to talk about sexual violence as a traumatic rupture in their daily lives; they saw this as a means of enforcing patriarchal control through the constant threat that violent rape might happen to them. Instead, they wanted to talk about daily

life itself, and the sexual violence that was woven into it. They also had very little interest in appealing to or critiquing the Indian state or the workings of the law. In a striking departure from the tactics of an older generation of feminists, these young women seemed to think that no matter how much the law was reformed, it would always represent a patriarchal way of approaching the struggle for true gender equality. They wanted to find a way that focused on changing culture first in order to change politics, rather than the other way around. I found this divide to fall almost entirely along generational lines: the majority of the women and works that focus on daily life and avoid discussions of state-based structures of oppression are in their twenties or thirties. Those who continue to include the state in their feminist tactics are older. I do not want to overstate this observation, but it seems to me that this younger generation of feminists is trying to find a new way of doing feminism, and it is their story that has become the center of my project to understand the Nirbhaya event through the medium of performance.

In the protests in the immediate aftermath of the event, Maya Krishna Rao's one-woman performance *Walk* was one of the first performances to appear, and it was critical to contextualizing the rape within a larger narrative of women's rights to walk the streets at night. As Bishnupriya Dutt describes her *Walk*, "Rao metaphorically continued Jyothi's [sic] unfinished walk to recovery and empowerment. As she walked there was a sense that she was walking for Jyothi, together with and also for the enthusiastic audience all round her" (377). Dutt had the great privilege of being there for that first *Walk* on January 1, 2013 on the Jawaharlal Nehru University campus in Delhi and her article captures and emphasizes the affective power of performance to rally political society together to demand the rights and privileges of civil society. Dutt employs Partha Chatterjee's argument that India is divided between two mutually exclusive groups: "political society" and "civil society" (Dutt 373). Civil society is comprised of

a small group of the political elite, who engage in "rights-based discourse according with Western normative notions" (Dutt 373). Political society, on the other hand, describes the vast majority of the Indian population "who negotiate advantages for themselves outside of legitimate rights-based discourses…[and] are not seen as political subjects or citizens in the proper sense, and instead are those on whom welfare and concessions are bestowed as exceptions, allowing political gains to be made but without power sharing" (Dutt 373). Dutt suggests that performance, and particularly Maya Krishna Rao's performance in response to the Nirbhaya event, mobilized protesters in a way that undercuts the logic of Chatterjee's political society/civil society binary, exactly because such public performances cannot be classified as performance alone, but rather as performance as political engagement. Rao's *Walk*, according to Dutt's reading, brought political society together to demand better treatment of women through "legitimate rights-based discourses."

Dutt's reading of Rao supports my analysis of the generational divide taking place in contemporary Indian feminism. Rao's piece is powerful and important, and it energized the protests in the immediate aftermath of the rape. However, I believe, alongside Nivedita Menon, that there is a significant critique to be made of Indian feminism's continued focus on rights-based discourse as the primary means of fighting for political change. Dutt's methodology foregrounds the history of the Indian Women's Movement and feminist performance, rather than looking to how the Nirbhaya event fundamentally changed feminist discourse, particularly around the issue of sexual violence. My methodology, while also deeply invested in the power of history, contextualizes Rao's work (and others like it) within this shifting discourse and imagines how it might contribute to productive political change that stems from changing cultural norms rather than appealing to legitimate rights-based discourse. While Rao is of an older generation

than most of the artists I discuss, her work continues to be relevant exactly because she makes connections across different strands of feminist thought and uses her embodied performance to challenge audiences to imagine a different world.

Yael Farber's *Nirbhaya* previewed in London July 19-23, 2013 and opened at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival on August 1, 2013. A semi-devised play bringing together South Asian women to tell their own stories of sexual trauma within the frame of the Nirbhaya event, Farber's piece has been performed in the U.K., the U.S., Canada, and India, and it has received positive critical attention everywhere it has been. "Theatre as Advocacy: Asking for it and the Audibility of Women in *Nirbhaya*, the Fearless One," by Maggie Inchley explores the way in which the play *Nirbhaya* by Yael Farber (and, critically, funding and marketing for it) uses the testimony of individual women who have suffered sexual trauma alongside the Nirbhaya event itself in order to advocate for a specific Western human rights narrative of cultural change. In doing so, Inchley argues, the play risks overshadowing the real, individual women involved and the specifics of the stories they are telling. She concludes with a call for thinking through an ethical response to the kind of testimonial theater Farber's *Nirbhaya* typifies.

In Inchley's reading, Farber's *Nirbhaya* exemplifies exactly the kind of trauma theory-based analysis I will work to invert throughout this study. While I agree wholeheartedly with Inchley's concern that women have a space to tell their stories, and that we must also work to craft ethical ways of hearing that testimony, I am hesitant to re-rehearse the same arguments that serve as the foundations of the subaltern studies school's concerns about the impossibility of recovering the subaltern voice; scholarly work on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which attempts to explore what testimony can and cannot accomplish on both the level of political and personal trauma; and arguments, such as Kristin Bumiller's in *In an*

Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence, that neoliberal governmentality privileges certain kinds of stories of violence against women over others in order to further its own agenda—these among many other works concerned with recuperating stories of trauma. In other words, the questions of whose stories are heard, how they are used, and what testimony can do are all vital to discussions of the Nirbhaya event, but they are not mine, nor are they at the forefront of the majority of performances made in response to the Nirbhaya event. Even Farber's *Nirbhaya* can be read not as a story of traumatic sexual violence but rather as a story of the daily sexual violence and anticipation of trauma that made the Nirbhaya event particularly potent, and this reading is exactly what I do in Chapter Three.

Inchley's article provides a cultural materialist critique of the circumstances surrounding which stories get told, which stories get funded, and how these stories further a very particular (Western, Christian, neoliberal) approach to feminism. Such work reminds us to look beyond what art is being made and ask the questions of how it is being made, who is making it, and who is left out of the story. Farber's *Nirbhaya* is by far the most well-funded and most traditional theatrical piece I discuss. The rest of my archive, like Ann Cvetkovich's "archive of feelings," is from feminist, queer, and radically left cultural and political groups whose work resides profoundly outside the mainstream—though some of them are powerful cultural figures among the political left. While one might critique the limited reach of these performances, I believe with Cvetkovich that,

> performance creates publics by bringing together live bodies in space, and the theatrical experience is not just about what's on stage but also about who's in the audience creating community. I am determined not to underestimate the power of such genres and publics.

> They act as a guard against fears about the displacement of political life by affective life and the conversion of political culture into a trauma culture (9).

I thus employ throughout this project ethnographic observations about who these artists are, how they position themselves politically, the networks and communities they are building, and the allies they seek. This material does not always make it explicitly into my writing about their performances, but it informs how I approach their work and think about the publics they are trying to create.

Feminist theory around the world has engaged the notion that historically women have been relegated to domestic space and made to feel unwelcome in public spaces. In the aftermath of the Delhi bus gang rape the treatment of women in public space came "under intense scrutiny," creating "a worldwide perception that there is an ongoing visceral war waged by men against women" (Natarajan ix). This is not, as much of the international media's treatment of the Nirbhaya event might have led us to believe, culturally specific to India. I call attention to the global nature of this phenomenon because I believe that the ways in which the performative responses to the Delhi bus gang rape break down binaries, connecting domestic and public spaces and the gender violence that happens in both, is globally relevant and potentially world-changing. Nalini Natarajan, in her introduction to *The Unsafe Sex: The Female Binary and Public Violence against Women*, confidently states that "public violence and private domestic violence are related, though distinct," and this is certainly how they have traditionally been treated (ix).

However, I argue that this relationship has been overdetermined in feminist scholarship, and that live performance is exactly the space in which we see the borders of these two categories begin to fray. As Nandi Bhatia, describing the history of women in North Indian

theater, explains, "examples of theatrical dissent, of the stories of actresses, and the debates in journals…demonstrate the ways in which the conventions and expectations underlying the 'public' genre of theatre created relationships of mutual interdependence between the 'home' and the 'world'" (*Performing Women* xxiii). In other words, theater—and, I would add, live performance more broadly defined—because of its reliance on public space and its ability to bring representations of the home into the world, blurs the line between the two, showing how each mutually constructs the other; what happens in the home has long-term effects on the world and vice versa. More than that, the home is *part* of the world. As Henri Lefebvre observed, in "the modern house…boundaries are crossed by all manner of conduits—electrical wiring, water pipes, gas pipes, telephone lines, radio waves, television signals, and so on. That quintessential space of privacy is actually open to the world" (Amin and Thrift 82). Such conduits carry the world into the house and the house into the world. They are physical manifestations of a larger truth: what happens in the home moves through the world. Thus, the performances and performative protests I discuss refuse to draw distinctions between public and private, tracing the path of sexual violence as it moves back and forth between the two, and demanding that we see both spaces simultaneously as they have inscribed themselves on the live bodies of the women performing.

Natarajan is not the first—nor will she be the last—to frame the problem of sexual and gender violence in India through the binary of private versus public. Much of the discourse on violence against women in India draws upon the ways in which these spaces have been differently constructed and the distinct enactment of patriarchy in each. For instance, Hindu conservative mobilizing in the wake of the Nirbhaya event implicitly and explicitly suggested that women who stayed home unless they were in the company of male relatives—and especially

at night—were far less likely to be the victims of sexual violence (an argument that contradicts the statistics that demonstrate that women are *more* likely to experience sexual violence in the home than outside it).[8] The deliberate breaking down of this binary is, I would argue, a feminist act, and one that is critical to understanding the performances in my study. While most of them seem almost entirely focused on public space, much of their point is that the myth of public space being less welcoming to women than private space is just that, a myth, and that being as comfortable in private as in public can help to change our perceptions of the divide between the two.

Scholarship on the Nirbhaya event has tended to focus on the ways in which Pandey's story can be used to politicize a number of competing claims. Among the critical studies of the event are Poulami Roychowdhury's "'The Delhi Gang Rape': The Making of International Causes," which analyzes the way the international media has developed the story of the gang rape. In particular, Roychowdhury warns that "to the extent that the undeniable tragedy of Pandey's assault and death helps secure Indian's women's abilities to be consumers and ready participants in India's neoliberal economy, the making of this international cause poses real dangers for women's rights" (288-89). Roychowdhury is one of a number of scholars concerned about the dangers of neoliberalism masquerading as feminism, and her warning is one I take up seriously as I consider feminist performances that have been labeled neoliberal because of the ways in which they emphasize the cause of women's rights to risk and pleasure. The question for me is not whether these performances and the Nirbhaya event itself can be used to justify a neoliberal agenda (they certainly can), but how the performers involved are defining risk and pleasure as individually felt but collectively constructed and what feminist work a performative display of women taking pleasure where they are not supposed to can do. And while there is a

class critique to be made of their work, they treat the Nirbhaya event not as the case that deserves the most media attention, but rather as the catalyzing moment in a string of incidents that include many other instances of violence against women of various caste, class, and religious backgrounds. The Nirbhaya event inspired people to start thinking and talking about sexual violence differently, and the artists in my study are doing everything they can to continue the conversation.

Theorizing Violence Against Women in India

The context of the Nirbhaya event is wider and deeper than any single article on the event itself can fully articulate. It is here, then, that I find it critical to examine the literature available on the history of women in South Asia as individuals and groups, as speaking subjects and silent objects, as empowered and oppressed citizens, as the ground on which other debates have taken shape and as the creators of their own political and politicizing claims. A foundational text on women and representation in South Asia that I find myself returning to repeatedly is Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?." Spivak makes an important intervention in how theory itself is understood: theorizing, too, is a practice that can, in its attempt to "recover" subaltern voices, enact its own imperialism (275, 306). The significance of this analysis for my own work is twofold. First, it informs my methodological decisions, as I work to craft theory that arises organically from the work of the performances I discuss, rather than trying to place Western theory on top of these works in order to engage with them. Second, Spivak offers a rubric for addressing the issue of violence against women without making the problematic attempt to "recover" the voice of any particular woman. By performing discourse analysis on the texts written about the practice of sati, she focuses on how ideas move through culture rather than on

the stories of individual women. I want to emphasize here that I am not writing about Jyoti Singh Pandey, nor trying to imagine her experiences. Rather, I am interested in the discourse her story catalyzed and how that discourse compares to what came before.

Feminist writing about violence against women in India emphasizes the specificity of context, but "discard[s] the idea of women as something to be *framed* by a context, in order to be able to think of gender differences as both structuring and structured by the wide set of social relations" (Sangari and Vaid 3). In other words, the concepts of femininity, masculinity, and gender itself are constantly contributing to a situation *and* to how it is interpreted and discussed. Patriarchy is an intrinsic function of such systems as class and caste in India, and women should not be understood as existing within such systems but rather as constantly structuring *and* structured by such systems in their very being. In analyzing the Nirbhaya event, I consider how gender is functioning (and has functioned historically) to structure it. Another text, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, offers a "series of experiments, not programmatic solutions, for the practice of feminist ethnography," with a particular focus on "the issue of rendering women's subjectivity within the contexts of larger dominant narratives—in this case, Western feminism and Indian nationalism"—two subjects that unquestionably act as dominant narratives within the Nirbhaya event as well (10). Like the essays in *South Asian Feminisms*, I, too, am invested in the "specificity of South Asia, in conjunction with a breadth of vision…[in order] to expand the contours of feminist theory and escape the stranglehold of ideas that have emerged from a liberal-colonial history, while also providing resources for confronting the contemporary challenges of feminisms" (Loomba and Lukose 7). Finally, books such as *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law, and Citizenship in Postcolonial India* by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and *Erotic Justice: Law and the New Politics of Postcolonialism* by Ratna Kapur both offer feminist

interventions in the ways in which the law in the modern Indian state shapes and interacts with gender and sexuality. As the Nirbhaya event developed, the role of the Indian state became an important question both legally and culturally. Was the state responsible for what had happened? Could changes in the writing and enforcement of the laws help to fix the problem of sexual violence in urban India? How was violence written into the relationship between citizen and state?

The last of these questions is central to Veena Das's analysis of communal violence in *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, which describes "the way that the [violent] event attaches itself with its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary" and "what happens to the subject and world when the memory of such events is folded into ongoing relationships" (1, 8). Das's insistence that violence is part of everyday life, that it has inscribed itself in the ordinary, significantly informs my analysis in Chapters Three and Four. However, I go a step further, arguing that it is not just memories of violence that get folded into everyday life, but that small acts of everyday violence interact with those memories in unpredictable and potentially damaging ways. I call these everyday acts "slow sexual violence," adapting the idea Rob Nixon develops in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor.* In describing what he means by slow violence, one example Nixon offers is from stories of domestic violence: "a locked door can be a weapon. Doors for women are often long-term, nonlethal weapons that leave no telltale bloody trail; doors don't bear witness to a single, decisive blow" (16). Nixon, then, while he goes on to focus particularly on environmental examples of slow violence, recognizes the role of slow violence particularly in violence against women. Much of the daily violence against women is, like the door, lacking a specific agent or

an easy labeling of cause and effect. Performance allows women to embody their affective response to this diffuse and difficult-to-articulate violence.

Veena Das argues that gendered, communal violence is inherently performative, describing "how it is that the imagining of the project of nationalism in India came to include the appropriation of bodies of women as objects on which the desire for nationalism could be brutally inscribed and a memory for the future made" (*Life and Words* 38). In other words, men enacted their nationalist desires on the bodies of women, turning rape into a performance of religious, communal, and national fervor. Rape was the physical act of claiming woman-as-territory both in the moment and in the future, through the shame she would feel and the children she might have. *Life and Words* clearly articulates the importance of performance studies and speech-act theory to understanding the issue of violence against women in modern India. It is the only book that so clearly links performance, violence against women, and specific cultural analysis of South Asia.

Other scholars writing on violence in modern India have also emphasized the ordinary, the everyday, and the routine, and their work supports my argument that violence as trauma is not the most effective way of interpreting sexual violence within the South Asian context. Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* compiles the results of interviews she conducted over a ten-year period with women who had lived through Partition. Butalia's main goal is to challenge the notion of a history based solely on large events by focusing on the everyday and the ways in which women in particular are more likely to narrate stories of their everyday life than they are to discuss macropolitics. Butalia's text aligns with Das's in its insistence on the importance of seeing the ongoing role of violence in the stories of the ordinary and the everyday and not just in the moments of extraordinary violence that

interrupt them. Maya Dodd contributes to the conversation the ways in which violences enacted on the individual "acquire primary signification through their performance of community" (153).

Gyanendra Pandey adds the term "routine violence" to describe the "violence written into the making and continuation of contemporary political arrangements, and into the production and reproduction of majorities and minorities" (1). In other words, Pandey sees violence not only in the everyday and the ordinary, "not as an isolated act, or a series of isolated acts, but rather as…a *total social phenomenon*" (1). Violence occurs in the very act of constructing (and reconstructing) an historical event as knowledge. To summarize, these works articulate the role of violence both in the routines of the everyday and in interruptions of these routines, in violence against individual bodies and in the performative importance of this violence as a symbol for violence against entire groups, in acts of state creation and maintenance of authority, and in the act of trying to interpret these events and adding to the scholarly discourse on them.

Violence exists everywhere shaping women's relationships to the world around them, and it is particularly crucial in the aftermath of the Delhi bus gang rape to attend to the epistemological violence that acts as a force to control women's movements. It is for this reason that the final book I discuss seems at first glance not to have violence as its subject at all. Rather, *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* by Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade focuses on the importance of women's right to risk (even violence) in public, urban spaces and argues that we should reframe our vision of violence around seeing "not sexual assault, but the denial of access to public spaces as the worst possible outcome for women" (ix). One might even argue, based on *Why Loiter*, that this denial of access itself is a type of violence (and some of the performances I discuss do exactly this). Significantly, Phadke et al. link the patriarchal protectionist impulse to lock women away for their own safety to the new neoliberal

narrative of woman-as-consumer-ergo-citizen suggesting that the private spaces masquerading as public of the shopping mall and the restaurant offer consumption as a means of protection. They also suggest that celebrating fun that is not based in consumerism disrupts the limitations for women of both the neoliberal and the patriarchal. *Why Loiter* is an important book to consider when thinking about violence against women in modern India because it speaks to the potentially negative consequences of focusing solely on violence, of forgetting the many other kinds of experiences that women's bodies can have. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, many of the performances in the following pages are equally if not more concerned with women's experiences of pleasure or desire than they are with violence, and they use these experiences to reinscribe their own bodies with something other than their affective responses to slow sexual violence.

The Nirbhaya event brings feminism, violence, and the performative body into conversation with one another at an important moment in India's history as the powers and agendas of neoliberal governmentality and religious fundamentalism become increasingly intertwined. It allows us to analyze modern South Asian feminisms as embodied practices performed—with all the risks such performances entail—in urban public spaces, to consider the role of performance in creating an ongoing conversation that is both structured by and structuring—a habitus in Pierre Bourdieu's terminology—what it means to be a woman occupying these public spaces and what it means to watch other women do the same. While there is thought-provoking and significant work published on South Asian feminisms, violence in South Asia, and modern Indian theater, the Nirbhaya event and its aftermath affords us an opportunity to think through what performance can do to engage the problem of violence against women.

Performing "Nirbhaya": An Overview

The structure of this study moves from a consideration of the history of scholarly, theatrical, and activist feminist approaches to sexual violence in India to an argument for how performance as a genre is establishing a new framework for feminist thinking about sexual violence. Traditionally, much of the scholarship on sexual violence both in India and around the world has used trauma theory to analyze both the effects of the violence itself and representations of this violence. My study will unfold a method for approaching sexual violence through the everyday, the slow, the small, and the affective by first excavating how performances are linking everyday violence with extraordinary violence before arguing for the importance of articulating the political power of affect in these performances.

The Nirbhaya event is preceded by a history of violence against women in various political and cultural contexts, and the artists in my study are deeply aware of their scholarly and activist feminist predecessors. In Chapter 2, "Beyond the State: Sexual Violence, Discourse, and Performance Before Nirbhaya," I analyze the relationship between the state and women around the issue of sexual violence. In particular, I argue that the Nirbhaya event effectively catalyzed a reaction that had been slowly building for years, that of the Indian feminist turn away from the state as a useful resource in the struggle against sexual violence. Theatrical performance highlights the embodied experience of being a woman in ways that help to understand the complexity of women's relationships to sexual violence and state. The chapter opens with an analysis of Manjula Padmanabhan's 1984 play *Lights Out* in order to demonstrate the distrust even the Indian upper-middle class held for the police as agents of protection or arbiters of justice in the 1980s, a distrust that has only grown in the last few decades. Because many of the

rape laws on the books in India were adopted directly from the British colonial system, I then turn to a discussion of how these laws came into being around specific discourses of violence against women and how sexual violence was used by British colonial powers to support the idea that colonial subjects were savage and in need of civilizing.

Many of the scholarly texts on sexual violence in India focus on the lasting legacy of Partition-era violence against women, and it is here, at the moment of India's founding, that it becomes clear that the Indian nation-state was invested in a particular narrative about its women subjects. Using analysis of the state's plan to "recover" women kidnapped during Partition by men of the "other" religion, I argue that the foundational moment of the modern Indian state also established a relationship of patriarchal protectionism and distrust between the state and women-as-citizens. Once again, performance makes the affective contours of this argument more poignant, and I analyze Kirti Jain's 2001 production of *Aur Kitne Tukde* (How Many Fragments?), which is an adaptation of Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* in order to demonstrate how performance has shaped the discussion of sexual violence. More recent cases of sexual violence have highlighted the state as the perpetrator in the first place, encouraging a feminist turn away from the state and this is perhaps most clearly seen in the performative protests staged by a group of Manipuri women in response to the Indian Army's rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama. Setting the stage for the Nirbhaya event, such cases demonstrated to feminists just how complicit the state could be in sexual violence.

Chapter 3, "Performing Crisis Ordinariness, or Slow Sexual Violence in Yael Farber's *Nirbhaya,*" argues that the Nirbhaya event must be understood not as a trauma in the classic sense, in which it was a rupture in ordinary life, but rather as part of an ongoing trauma that women must live with and through in their everyday lives. I read Yael Farber's *Nirbhaya* first

through the methodological lens of trauma theory, before turning that reading on its head by looking to the moments that create the anticipation for the trauma these women go through. Each woman in Farber's play experiences multiple moments of slow sexual violence that essentially cause her to live in a state of constant crisis. Lauren Berlant gives this condition the name "crisis ordinariness" and differentiates between trauma and crisis ordinariness as follows:

> A traumatic event is simply an event that has the capacity to induce trauma. My claim is that most such happenings that force people to adapt to an unfolding change are better described by a notion of systemic crisis or 'crisis ordinariness' and followed out with an eye to seeing how the affective impact takes form, becomes mediated. Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming (*Cruel* 10).

In other words, when speaking about sexual violence in contemporary, urban India, my argument is that the crisis is happening constantly within people's patterns of everyday life, but the Nirbhaya event was the thing that brought these experiences to the surface, that made women aware of how overwhelming these experiences were. The Nirbhaya event *is* the form that the affective impact of long-term, everyday sexual violence in India has taken.

Performances that have become part of the Nirbhaya event by responding to it thus, unsurprisingly, cannot help but engage the everyday even when they purport to focus on extraordinary trauma, as in *Nirbhaya*. The play at first seems remarkably similar to the plays discussed in Chapter Two. The difference, however, is that while *Aur Kitne Tukde* and *Lights Out* are concerned with the politics of gender violence and both offer a multitude of examples of this violence, both treat the scenes of rape like traumas; they are ruptures in the fabric of ordinary life. The rape scene in *Lights Out*, for instance, lasts through nearly a third of the play and is the

central pivot around which everything else takes place. It literally halts daily life (temporarily). *Nirbhaya*, on the other hand, avoids a traditional narrative structure with a singular climax; instead, each woman's story involves a litany of incidents of gender violence, some "small" and some "large" but all previously unspoken. The Nirbhaya event opened the floodgates, sending all these stories pouring out into the world.

In Chapter 4, "This, too, is Violence: Performing Slow Sexual Violence in the Vernacular of the Everyday," I expand my analysis of the concept of slow sexual violence, conducting in-depth readings of two pieces that demonstrate how performance can make visible the effects of slow sexual violence on culture and on the body. The first performance I offer as a basis for this argument is Jana Natya Manch's *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai (This, too, is Violence)*. By engaging this Delhi-based street theater group's forty-five year history of political performance work, I demonstrate how Janam's version of street theater purposefully takes on the small and the everyday, empowering its audiences to think about how they can contribute to long-term political change. In *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai*, they perform brief episodes of slowly escalating sexual violence, beginning with the gender violence of certain moments in Hindu mythology and culminating in a violent stranger-rape. By linking each of these escalating incidents, *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai* shows how the cultural permissibility of slow sexual violence creates an atmosphere in which acts of extraordinary sexual violence can take place. The everyday sets the tone for these acts.

Rather than focusing on the cultural permissibility of slow sexual violence, Mallika Taneja's one-woman show *Thoda Dhyaan Se (Be a Little Careful)* draws attention to her own body and its affective responses to this violence. Beginning naked on stage, Taneja encases her body in more and more layers of clothing while simultaneously delivering a running monologue about how to "be careful" as a woman in public space. Tracing the affective responses that her

body has developed over time in order to avoid slow sexual violence, Taneja engagingly adopts the persona of a spoiled upper-middle-class young woman who has never questioned her and her family's belief in her own culpability in the violence that is done to her as she moves through public space.

One of the foundational problems of slow violence is how difficult it is to represent in a compelling way so that people want to address it. Nixon says of this problem that "with rare exceptions, in the domain of slow violence 'yes, but not now, not yet' becomes the modus operandi" (9). Even when slow violence is recognized as a problem, it is treated as far less pressing than spectacular violence. In India, there is a term for "mild" sexual harassment: eve-teasing. The term implies that such harassment is all in good fun, an act of violence against a non-consenting victim. Eve-teasing is slow violence. Equally problematic, slow violence does not have a villain because it "typically occurs in the passive voice—without a clearly articulated agency" (Nixon 136). Sexual assault, while it does have a clear villain in the perpetrator, is also typically articulated (in English) in the passive voice: she was sexually assaulted, her honor was stolen, etc. It fits uncannily well into the category of slow violence (when it is not so brutal that it becomes a public media spectacle). Given the diffuse and insidious nature of slow violence, "how do we both make slow violence visible yet also challenge the privileging of the visible" in the first place (Nixon 15)? The Nirbhaya event provides at least one potential answer to this question: live performance that focuses not on the visibility of the violence but rather on the everyday, embodied experience of it.

The relationship between gender and public space is central to Chapter 5, "Women Walking in the Neoliberal Indian City: Performance, Ritual, and Affect," which explores how moving through the neoliberal Indian city affects women's performances of gender and sexuality

through Theatre Formation Paribartak's dance theater piece *Praatohkrityo* (Morning Ablutions/Shitting). Drawing upon the rich writings of scholars such as Michel de Certeau and Walter Benjamin about walking in the city and the work of urban studies scholars such as Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, I argue that attending to the differences of gender, class, race, and caste as they are inscribed upon the bodies of those who are walking reveals a complex affective relationship between women and the city. *Praatohkrityo* is one of a number of performances and performative protests in response to the Delhi bus gang rape that both focus on the relationship between gender and the city and embrace affect as central to inspiring political change within the space of the city. While affect is sometimes treated as pre-political—or even on some occasions apolitical—my analysis of *Praatohkrityo* foregrounds how affect becomes explicitly political through the dancers' embodied performance. Because affect is pre-cognitive, it is nearly impossible to fully articulate its processes in words; *Praatohkrityo* uses dance to stunning effect to engage with the political through bodily affective response.

In Chapter 6, "Why Loiter? as Performative Protest: Pleasure, Neoliberal Feminism, and the Politics of Affect," I connect my previous analysis of the concepts of trauma, crisis ordinariness, the everyday, slow sexual violence, the neoliberal city, and the politics of affect by reading the feminist protest group Why Loiter's work as performance. Why Loiter and other performative protest groups like it are where I see feminist performance in neoliberal urban India going, and there are potential benefits and pitfalls to this direction. Through a close reading of Why Loiter's performance, I point to two intertwined problems central to the fields of performance studies and women's studies respectively. The first is the problem of whether and how performance can engage politics. The second is the problem of where pleasure fits into an embodied feminist politics. In the wake of the Delhi bus gang rape, performative protests such as

Why Loiter?, Slutwalk, *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Hostel Locks), and *Akeli Awaara Azaad* (Alone, Wandering, Free) began to appear in cities all over India, demanding women's rights to move freely through public space, dressed as they choose and doing as they please.[9] Some critics of these performances, particularly the performances that foreground women's rights to their own sexual expression, have cautioned that such performances extend the reach of neoliberal ideology. To these critics, then, they are performances of neoliberal feminism.

In her cautionary examination of feminism's relationship with neoliberalism, Nancy Fraser points to the shift in feminism from claims for socioeconomic justice to "claims for the recognition of identity and difference," which happens to coincide with the global rise of neoliberalism (219). This shift, as Fraser terms it "from redistribution to recognition" had the ultimate effect of divorcing feminist critique from a critique of capitalism, resulting in a "'dangerous liaison' with neoliberalism" (219). Moreover, the feminist critique of "welfare-state paternalism" has been coopted by neoliberal ideologies (Fraser 221). Fraser's primary example is the "explosion of micro-credit" in postcolonial nation-states (such as India):

> Counterposing feminist values of empowerment and participation from below to the passivity-inducing red tape of top-down ètatism, the architects of these projects have crafted an innovative synthesis of individual self-help and community networking, NGO oversight and market mechanisms—all aimed at combating women's poverty and gender subjection. The results so far include an impressive record of loan repayments and anecdotal evidence of lives transformed. What has been concealed, however, in the feminist hoopla surrounding these projects, is a disturbing coincidence: micro-credit has burgeoned just as states have abandoned macro-structural efforts to fight poverty, efforts

> that small-scale lending cannot possibly replace. In this case, too, then, the feminist critique of bureaucratic paternalism has been recuperated by neoliberalism. (221-22)

I quote Fraser at such length because she demonstrates so clearly the ways in which feminist agendas, particularly feminist agendas grounded in cultural critique or in anti-state rhetoric, can become neoliberal. Neoliberal feminism, thus, is not always or even usually intentionally embracing neoliberal ideologies; rather, neoliberal feminism's techniques for working toward a more feminist future are in line with and often coopted by neoliberal agendas. This cooption is another form of slow violence: hard to see and often without any obvious agent. It is thus, I argue, difficult to identify what kinds of actions should actually fall under the umbrella term of neoliberal feminism.

"Why Loiter" engages a diverse public and believes in the feminist power of the women involved enacting their desires to spend time together doing nothing in public space as a means of transforming that space, of making it more welcoming to women, more feminist. However, what critics miss by assigning groups like "Why Loiter" the label of neoliberal feminism is the power of performance. These women are not, when it comes down to it, loitering only or even primarily because of their own desires. Instead, they are performing the action of loitering as publicly as they can in an attempt to combat the insidious affective spread of slow sexual violence in the belief that women are not safe or welcome in public space. They are attempting to create a new affective atmosphere in which seeing groups of women loitering in public space is just as typical as seeing groups of men. Thus, I conclude the chapter with the argument that performances such as Why Loiter transform affect into a political force through the very act of performing.

In their performative and embodied feminisms, Indian artists are creating exciting and challenging work that can help us to imagine a different future. By foregrounding everyday experiences of sexual violence and the ways in which those experiences not only anticipate moments of traumatic sexual violence but also accrue in themselves as affective acts that discipline women's bodies, the performances in my study challenge traditional narratives of trauma and demand that we all examine our own behaviors as potentially contributing to this slow sexual violence. They also provide women with a different sort of agency, one grounded in the ways in which they move through urban space as gendered bodies. These performances emphasize that protectionism—even well-intentioned protection from the threat of sexual violence—is a form of patriarchy, and that one of the most radical feminist acts is simply to enjoy public space. By performing a public in which women are allowed to take pleasure in the city and in one another, feminist artists are beginning the process of creating a new world.

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[1] See *The Unsafe Sex: The Female Binary and Public Violence against Women* by Nalini Natarajan for a thorough investigation of this topic in the wake of December 16, 2012.

[2] Even as I write this, nearly five years later, I find that any new incident of violence against women in India is reported in the media with some reference to the Delhi bus gang rape. Today, the article is about a ten-year-old girl in New Delhi who was repeatedly raped by her stepfather (Kumar). She now finds herself pregnant and too far along to legally be allowed to have an abortion. The Indian courts must give her special permission. The article notes that this story, along with "two other recent rapes in the region have reinforced India's reputation as dangerous for women." It concludes by returning to the events of the Delhi bus gang rape: "the cases recalled the 2012 rape of a physiotherapy student in Delhi who…was fatally injured during a sexual assault." Even the photo displayed in the article is a picture of Asha Devi, the mother of Jyoti Singh Pandey, rather than of anyone involved in the title story. In other words, the brutality of the Delhi bus gang rape has become the measure to which other cases of sexual violence are compared.

[3] The relationship between performance and affect should be an obvious one, for, as Brian Massumi writes, "affect is only understood as enacted" (Politics of Affect, vii). In other words, performance is what allows affect to be seen, felt, written and talked about. Affect *exists* through its enactment.

[4] Significantly for the purposes of this study, India has a far more active amateur theater scene that it does a professional one. Aparna Dharwadker notes the "unusual meanings" the terms "professional" and "amateur" have taken on in the sphere of modern Indian theater: "'professional' had come to denote not just commercial or full-time activity but a theatre that was nonserious, superficial, inartistic, or merely popular, and hence not worth preserving. The counterterm 'amateur'…mainly denoted aesthetic and thematic seriousness, artistic boldness, and long-term commitment to the art" (2005, 43).

[5] 77

[6] The Steubenville rape took place on August 12, 2012 in Weirton, West Virginia. Four members of the high school football team collaborated in isolating and raping a sixteen-year-old girl who was passed out after drinking too much. While two of the boys were eventually convicted of rape, the girl became a public enemy of her entire town because of the perception that she was making the football team look bad (Simpson).

[7] For example, in Delhi in April 2013, a five-year-old girl was kidnapped and raped with a glass bottle (McCarthy).

[8] While this statistic is more difficult to trace in India because of the evidence that sexual assault in the home is very rarely reported, statistics from the United States demonstrate this fact ("Perpetrators of Sexual Violence").

[9] While some of these performative protests predate the Nirbhaya event by a year or two, I include them in my analysis because, as I argue, the Nirbhaya event was the concretization of something that was already happening. These performances demonstrate that, but they also take on new meaning in the wake of the Delhi bus gang rape as the idea of women's rights to public space was embraced by a larger public.

Chapter 2

Beyond the State: Sexual Violence, Discourse, and Performance Before Nirbhaya

"We need to recognise rather, that the experience of feminist politics pushes us towards the understanding that social movements may have reached the limits of the discourse of rights and of 'justice' as a metanarrative. It might even be that trying to bring about positive transformation through the law can run counter to the ethics which prompt entry into legal discourse in the first place" (N. Menon 59).

Lights Out: An Introduction

"Leela (*wheedlingly*): *Can't* you call the police? Just for me?

Bhasker: (*drawing away*): No.

Leela: But *why* not?

Bhasker: We've discussed this before—

Leela: I know, I know—you've told me they're not interested in cases like this, they don't bother about minor little offenses—but—but—I'm frightened. Can't you see that? Isn't that enough?

Bhasker: Go tell the police that you're frightened about noises in the next building! They'll laugh in your face!" (Padmanabhan 5)

Written in the mid-1980s by Indian playwright Manjula Padmanabhan, *Lights Out* (1984) is a play based on a real-life incident that took place in Santa Cruz, Bombay in 1982, in which a group of middle-class inhabitants of an apartment compound witnessed a gang rape taking place in a nearby, abandoned building. Leela and Bhasker are a middle-class couple, living "comfortably"[1] in an apartment in Bombay, until their peace is shattered by a nightly, recurring

incident happening in the next-door compound. At the beginning of the play, neither is sure what this incident is, only that it is loud, disruptive, and violent. By the end of the play, it has become clear to them and to the audience that the incident is a gang rape, performed on a new victim every night. But even armed with this knowledge, they do not call the police for help. Instead, they argue with a small group of their friends about potential courses of action—including attacking the perpetrators with knives, taking pictures of their actions in order to shame them, or running them over with a car—until it is too late to do anything at all. The rape is over and the rapists have left, most likely to return the next night to rape another woman.

The dialogue from *Lights Out* that opens this chapter perfectly captures the complex relationship the Indian middle-class has with the Indian state and particularly with the enforcement of law. Leela assumes that the police are there to help her, to protect her. As an economically-privileged woman she has never been given a reason to assume otherwise. But even with her belief that the police will protect her, she is unable to call them herself. Over the course of the play, she repeatedly begs her husband Bhasker to call them. He ignores her plea, sometimes providing rationalizations like the one above, that the police will not care about a frightened woman, and sometimes simply talking over her until she drops the matter. After hours of this treatment, Leela has an emotional breakdown, screaming for Bhasker to call the police, refusing to drop the matter until he picks up the phone and actually dials—at which point, the call is disconnected (Padmanabhan 44). Bhasker is interrupted in the midst of trying the call a second time, and from that point on, the police become less and less of a realistic option for stopping the violence happening outside. Why does Leela feel like she cannot call the police herself? While this question is never explicitly answered, the play suggests that Bhasker has Leela entirely convinced that the police will not take her complaint seriously, only his. Though

Leela believes the police will help her, she does not feel like she has the authority to ask for that help herself.

There is more about the politics of rape and its relationship to the Indian state buried in this opening dialogue. "You've told me they're not interested in cases like this," admits Leela (Padmanabhan 5). While she has not seen what is happening outside, and thus "cases like this" from her perspective are "minor little offenses" a disturbance of the peace, rather than a crime, Bhasker *has* seen what is going on (ibid). For him, "cases like this" are cases of lower class men sexually assaulting a lower-class woman. "Cases like this," then, are cases where the victim does not fit the normative definition of citizenship, where, because of her class, she is not entitled to police protection. Later in the play, Bhasker makes this argument explicit: "If she's a whore, Leela, then, this isn't rape…so on what grounds could we call the police?" (Padmanabhan 40). As the Nirbhaya event so clearly demonstrated, even when the law does seem to be on the side of victims of sexual violence, only a certain kind of woman has access to legal recourse if she is sexually assaulted. Only an attack on a certain kind of woman has the potential to provoke international outrage. And even then, only if she is in the right place at the right time.

Poulami Roychowdhury observes that "sexual violence attracts popular attention and outrage when it taps into existing social anxieties and tensions" ("Over" 85). As I discussed in the introduction, the rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey did just that by rationalizing a set of politicized claims about the clash between a new modern India embodied by Pandey and the "backwardness" of an impoverished, traditional India embodied by her murderers. The public outrage in the aftermath of the Nirbhaya event forced the Indian state to demonstrate that it took sexual violence seriously as a crime. Roychowdhury writes:

> What is remarkable about the Indian case, however, is the extent to which this general condition of neglect is regularly punctuated by a flurry of state responsiveness: legal reforms, speedy trials, and spectacular punishments. These intermittent outbursts usually follow periods of large-scale political mobilization: lobbying, electoral pressure, and the threat and application of force by mobilized citizens. The aftermath of the Delhi gang rape of 2012, where massive protests initiated legal reforms and helped 'fast-track' the case, provides the most internationally visible example of this dynamic ("Over" 80).

In contrast to the state's mobilization around the Delhi gang rape are citizen's expectations of how the police might normally handle such a gang rape. When Leela continues to appeal to the men around her to call the police, she is told by her friend Naina's husband, Surinder, that, "the police won't lift a finger—what do they care if some poor woman is being raped?" (46)). Even if they were to come, Surinder questions what would actually happen as a result: "See. If we call the police, they'll come two weeks later, there'll be an enquiry, people will be questioned, a little noise will be made and then we will all go to sleep again" (47). Surinder's arguments suggest that the state's form of justice does not apply to poor women being raped, and even if it did, the police are incompetent, slow, and ineffective at enforcing the law. What's more, from Surinder's perspective, after the disruption of a police enquiry, things will just return to how they were for the middle-class occupants of Leela and Bhasker's compound. What, then, is the point of disrupting all of their lives with the inconveniences of a police investigation?

Surinder's words parallel one of the major critiques of the mass mobilization in response to the Delhi bus gang rape: that it is easy to be swept up in the feeling that such extraordinary moments lead to lasting political change, when, in fact, their very extraordinariness masks the systematic nature of sexual and gender violence, a system that the state has historically

reinforced (Roychowdhury "Over" 89-90). The Delhi gang rape and the state's mobilization in response to it seemed like a moment of great change, but once the dust settled, things were more or less the same for the majority of rape victims in India. Jyoti Singh Pandey's rape and murder was not the first case to inspire the kind of mass mobilization that masquerades as long-term political change. Feminist scholars have cited the rape of Mathura and the rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama as cases that not only mobilized large-scale protests and national and international media attention but also served as the catalysts for potential legal reforms (Gandhi and Shah; Baxi; Kannabiran and Menon). The rape laws *were* changed after the 1983 Mathura case, which I will discuss in more detail below. However, as Roychowdhury points out, "these cases did not fundamentally transform the social conditions that give birth to sexual violence against women, children, and sexual minorities: heterosexist gender norms, patriarchal kinship systems, economic marginalization, and the very character of political life. Nor did they address the institutional foundations of state neglect: overburdened courtrooms, ill-compensated and ill-trained police officers, and sexist and classist bureaucrats" (Roychowdhury "Over" 90). In other words, while these cases led to legal reforms, those legal reforms stopped far short of being an effective way of transforming the state's treatment of sexual violence against its citizens. Feminist appeals to the state failed to result in lasting change.

In the remainder of this chapter, I explore the history and representation of the feminist movement's relationship to the Indian state around the issue of sexual violence in order to set the stage for the dramatic turn away from the state that I identify as central to the political strategies of post-2012 performances. What is striking to me is how focused feminist strategies seemed to be on legal reforms *or* critiques of state-enacted violence up until the Nirbhaya event.[2] Either way, the state is at the center of feminist discourse about sexual violence. By engaging the state

in a conversation about the problem of sexual violence, feminists must accept the logic and language of the liberal (and neoliberal) state. Even in feminist performances about sexual violence, the state plays a central role. From Padmanabhan's *Lights Out,* with which I opened this chapter, to Kanhailal's *Draupadi* (2000) and Kirti Jain's *Aur Kitne Tukde* (How Many Fragments? 2001), the state acts as failed protector, violent perpetrator, and tacit supporter of communal violence. *Lights Out* foreshadows India's turn toward economic liberalization in the last decade of the twentieth century and neoliberalism in the opening decades of the twenty-first. Here, citizens take the law into their own hands—or fail to do anything at all. They have decided that the law will not—or cannot—do anything for them. This, then, is the beginning of a shift that has come to fruition in the aftermath of the Delhi bus gang rape. For feminist artists creating work in response, the state is barely a part of the conversation.

The history of the relationship between the Indian women's movement and the state surrounding the issue of sexual violence allows us to begin to understand why the generation of feminist artists I discuss are looking for alternatives to creating political change through legal reform and critiques of the state. It helps us to see how a turn to creating political change through affect might be appealing, and to empathize with the seductive quality of neoliberal governmentality that haunts any such project. It also demonstrates the historical limits of appealing to the state to either change or better enforce its own laws.

Colonial Law and the Politicization of Violence Against Women

One of the most striking aspects of the Nirbhaya event was the overwhelming number of people who participated in protests of various kinds, from attending the massive demonstrations that occurred in Delhi to posting news articles about violence against women in their social

media feeds to creating art in various genres that attempted to speak to the overwhelming emotions many found themselves experiencing in its wake. Many theater and performance artists, both male and female (and many whose work did not make it into my analysis) told me that they felt that they had to create some sort of response, that their emotional reactions to the event had completely derailed other projects. I have already discussed why the Nirbhaya event became such a phenomenon both in India and around the world. In this chapter, I want to establish how the performance work I analyze departed significantly from previous feminist political strategies for addressing the problem of sexual violence. This departure was one that had been many years in the making, but crystallized after December 2012.

The history of the Indian feminist movement is long, rich, and complex, a history that has been written about extensively by scholars such as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Gayatri Spivak, Lata Mani, Nivedita Menon, and Ratna Kapur, to name only a very few. It is a history to which I cannot do justice in a single chapter, but I draw upon it to provide a historical background for the feminist discourse surrounding the Nirbhaya event. The issues I want to address are these: how and why does the state fall out of feminist strategizing in the aftermath of the Delhi bus gang rape, and what role does performance play in this, either as an example or a catalyst of a changing discourse? Krupa Shandilya points out the way in which the politicized claims placed upon the body of Nirbhaya "have many parallels with the colonial and postcolonial debate on *sati* and the age of consent, most significantly their continued manipulation of historical narratives of the past to justify political agendas in the present" (475). In particular, she notes that middle-class, Hindu women are treated as the obvious subjects of these debates, eliding the ways in which women outside these classifications were also affected by them. I would add that the mainstream discourse following the Nirbhaya event focused on appeals to the government for

legal reforms and better enforcement of the laws. Such a strategy assumes that the state is invested in protecting the rights of all of its citizens, something that the Indian state has historically failed to do, particularly when it comes to the interests of the women's movement.

Nowhere are the limits of state-initiated reforms clearer than in the colonial discourse about violence against both Indian and British women. Jenny Sharpe reminds us in her discussion of colonial rape discourse that "*rape* is not a consistent and stable signifier but one that surfaces at strategic moments" (2). Sharpe is analyzing the specter of the Indian man as rapist and the ways in which the mythology of his character was used to justify the exercise of the British colonial state's political power. One particularly potent example of this occurred during the Indian Rebellion of 1857, in which sepoys (Indian soldiers in the British East India Company) violently rebelled against colonial rule. Sharpe details "sensationalist stories" that circulated throughout the British empire of Indian men raping English women, stories that were a response to the British fear of losing control of its colony (66). Rape, then, became a justification for the brutal means taken to quash the rebellion, because "the slippage between the violation of English women as the object of rape and the violation of colonialism as the object of rebellion permits the moral value of the domestic woman—her self-sacrifice, duty, and devotion—to be extended to the social mission as colonialism" (Sharpe 68). In other words, not only did stories of the rape of English women allow the British to justify their own violent behavior, they also served as an allegory for colonialism itself. The British were only doing their duty by continuing to forcefully rule the Indian subcontinent; it was, in fact, they who were sacrificing their bodies and lives for the long-term mission to civilize India.

In this example, rape becomes a means of justifying British colonial violence and excess. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the actual women who were raped are almost entirely absent from this

discourse. This is at least partly due to the belief that "Englishwomen who do not die while trying to protect their 'virtue,' or kill themselves afterward, became [*sic*] morally suspect and hence identify themselves as unreliable informants" (Paxton 8). Hence, while the violence experienced by English women became the justification for British colonialism, they were not expected to pursue justice themselves. And if they were to do so, the very fact that they were still alive would act as evidence against the rape having occurred in the first place.[3] The female rape victim, then, was only the ground upon which to hold a debate about the civilizing mission, rather than a subject in her own right.[4]

The British colonial state was no better in terms of providing women with the potential for justice when it came to the courts' handling of the rape of Indian women. As Elizabeth Kolsky writes, "through the lens of Indian medical jurisprudence, we begin to see how British legal thinking about rape combined with British colonial thinking about the peculiarities of Indian culture in ways that placed an added disability on Indian women who sought judicial remedy in the colonial courts" ("Body" 110). British legal thinking about rape was premised on the belief that women were liars (ibid 111). British colonial thinking about Indian culture was premised on the belief that Indians were liars (Mitra and Satish 52). Thus, Indian women were doubly liars, and their word was not to be trusted in a court of law when it came to accusations they might make about rape. Instead, "according to the early [colonial] architects of medical jurisprudence specifically for Indian subjects, Indians were untrustworthy, and medical evidence was necessary because the oral testimony of Indians could not be trusted, particularly in women's rape accusations" (ibid). The book that set the tone for the field (and continues to shape medical jurisprudence today) came out in 1856 (ibid). The legal system therefore was at its very foundation constructed as an antagonist to the woman as rape victim. Only the very exceptional

woman was treated as a sympathetic victim: one who was upper-class and upper-caste, virtuous, quick to report the crime, and whose physical resistance to assault could be read on her body in the many injuries she had sustained (Kolsky "Body" 116).[5] In fact, Kolsky concludes from her research "that the colonial law of rape may have made Indian women increasingly vulnerable to rape by Indian men" ("Body" 123).

Not only did colonial law make Indian women more vulnerable to rape; by relying on the physical body of the woman to provide evidence that a rape had occurred, the law often subjected women to a second rape. A 2014 study of medical jurisprudence textbooks and their use in case law from colonial times up to the present notes that "although seemingly unrelated, medical jurisprudence textbooks assert that medical tests evaluating a woman's virginity are crucial to understanding the occurrence of rape" (Mitra and Satish 53). Two "medical" tests were regularly performed to evaluate a woman's virginity and thus the veracity of her claim of rape. The first involved checking on whether the hymen was intact, and the second involved checking the elasticity of the vagina through a method called the two finger test, in which a doctor tested how many fingers could fit into a woman's vagina in order to assess her habituation to sexual intercourse (ibid). A woman who was sexually active was assumed to be more likely to lie about being raped. These tests are still regularly performed today. They are recommended practice in medical jurisprudence textbooks and "considered standard protocol for women's genital exams after accusations of rape" (ibid). What's more, "in contemporary India, courts regularly cite both of these methods as relevant to their rape judgments" (ibid). In this way, the reverberations of colonial rape law continue into the present.

British colonial law assumed that Indian women had consented to sex when they came forward with a complaint of rape, and the burden was entirely on them to prove otherwise. One

would think that the very act of coming forward in the face of potential backlash in the form of "social ostracism, stigma, and violence" would suggest to colonial officials that a woman did not consent to her sexual violation. However, records indicate that this was not at all the case (Kolsky "Rule" 1095, 1101). As in the case of sati, British popular opinion about Indian "tradition" and cultural norms determined how rape cases were adjudicated in the legal system. Thus, women could only expect justice if they conformed to a very specific set of expectations; otherwise, the legal system was more likely to victimize them further.

The problems in the British colonial legal system's treatment of rape were not addressed when India gained independence, as "Indian nationalists chose to retain virtually the entire administrative, judicial and penal structures created by British administrators in the nineteenth century, including the Indian Penal Code and the Indian Evidence Act." (Kolsky "Body" 123) . There have been legal reforms to rape law in 1983 and in 2013, which I will discuss below, but, as Kolsky observes, these have not reduced the incidence of rape or increased the rate of conviction in any significant way (ibid). More to the point, the fact that the foundation of the Indian legal system was the British colonial system means that the same distrust of women who dared to report rape continued into the present moment. Is it any wonder, then, that women's groups post-independence saw it as their mission to improve the state's treatment of rape victims?

Post-Independence, Communal Violence, and Custodial Rape

The two decades after Indian independence are notable for their lack of an organized women's movement (Nadkarni 133; Kumar 97; John 104; Sunder Rajan *Scandal* 31). Suggested reasons for this include the fact that the majority of politically-minded women of the 1930s and

1940s were incorporated into the new Congress government of 1947 and the optimism that a new democratic government that had written gender equality into its Constitution and set up "various administrative bodies for the creation of opportunities for women" was committed to defending women's rights (Kumar 97). In other words, for the group of nationalist women who became a part of the Congress party, it seemed to them that they had won. They were out in the streets, accepted in the workplace (up to a certain point), given power to help determine the direction their new nation-state might go. However, though the percentage of female students attending university doubled in the two decades following Indian independence (from ten percent to twenty percent), India's push to develop as a modern nation-state also created new gender inequalities in the countryside (Nath 45). As Nadkarni observes, "in the years after independence nationalist feminist energies get co-opted by the state, and thus a new eugenic woman (who is concertedly *not* feminist) is forwarded as the national ideal" (134). While urban, elite women may have experienced the years after independence as liberating, rural women were encouraged to fit themselves into the mold of the perfect housewife. Another theory is that the feminists who participated in the nationalist movement had "neither openly sought nor identified the enemy in gender terms, due partly to the exigencies of colonialism, and partly to the complexities of a culture in which gender relations were not as clearly distinguished as in the West" (Kumar 97). Because of this, they continued to put their energies into social and political organizing that addressed economic and caste equality, rather than gender equality, such as The National Federation of Indian Women (the women's wing of the Communist Party of India, which Aruna Asaf Ali established in 1954, or the Telangana People's Struggle of 1946-1951 (Kumar 63; Nadkarni 238). A third theory suggests that the trauma of Partition fragmented the women's movement, and that this fragmentation took time and attention to fully work through

(Nadkarni 133). Whatever the case, the dominant narrative across scholarly accounts of the Indian Women's Movement is that there was very little formal organizing before the "1974 Committee on the Status of Women in India's groundbreaking report, *Towards Equality*" (Nadkarni 133-34).[6]

As India gained its independence, rape narratives shifted their focus from stories of the racial "other" to stories of the religious "other" and communal violence. But here, once again, the stories can easily easily read as allegories for the moments in which the dominant culture felt threatened by various minority cultures. Specifically, the demon in these stories was frequently the Muslim man—and the heroine the upper class Hindu woman (Kannabiran "Rape" 32). What is difficult about such stories is that, unlike the stories of Indian men raping British women, which seemed to be frequently entirely falsified, many of the stories of communal violence in the form of rape are true, and can trace their roots back to the political instability that accompanied the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Veena Das observes that "the signature of Partition in both literary and popular imagination has been the violation of women, mass rapes and mass abductions, their expulsion from homes, the imperative to court heroic deaths, and the recovery operations staged by India and Pakistan" (*Life and Words* 13). Partition was, in many ways, defined by large-scale acts of violence against "other" women—those of a different religion or nationality. These rapes were not just acts of revenge and retribution for real and perceived injustices. As Ananya Kabir so compellingly argues, the rape of women by Hindu, Sikh and Muslim men became a means of acting out the fears of the "perceived 'other' while imprinting their own identity on the bearers of future generations" (148).[7] In other words, rape was a means of threatening the future existence of the perceived "other" by either destroying or claiming the

wombs of childbearing women. It was a way of establishing dominance through the forceful "possession" of the other's women and progeny.

Thus, the most popular rape narrative at the beginning of the postcolonial period became one in which religion, rather than race, was the dominant factor. It is worth noting, however, that like colonial rape narratives, this story emphasizes the rapist as Other, as someone who is less civilized, less moral, and representative of a group that may be a threat to the dominant culture. Kannabiran presents these acts of gendered communal violence as a tool of identity formation. By raping women who belong to minority groups—minority in terms of caste, class, or religion—the rapist symbolically defiles the entire "community to which the woman belongs and is justified by demonstrating its [the community's] inherent immorality" (Kannabiran "Rape" 33). Alternatively, by raping women who belong to a majority culture, minorities can symbolically threaten their insinuation into that majority and their ability to disrupt the majority's control over the population. Communal violence and rapes that belong in this category are not a thing of the past; they continue to occur in moments of political instability, such as the 1971 war that led to the formation of Bangladesh, the ongoing Indian occupation of Kashmir, and the 2002 Gujarat riots (Kabir 147).

The state's role in communal violence since independence has been complex, characterized at different moments by acts of patriarchal protectionism, indifference, and even complicity. After partition, the Indian state charged itself with the task of "rescuing" women who had been abducted during the communal violence and returning them to their rightful homes, nations, and religions.[8] Hindu women who were living with Muslim families were to be "recovered," and Muslim women who were living with Hindu families were to be sent to Pakistan. Since it was difficult to determine which women had been abducted and which had

gone of their own free will, the State determined that "any woman who was seen to be living with, in the company of, or in a relationship with a man of the other religion" after March 1, 1947, the date when Partition violence was first recorded, "would be presumed to have been abducted, taken by force" (Butalia *Other* 115). As Veena Das writes, "the figure of the abducted woman allowed the state to construct 'order' as essentially an attribute of the masculine nation so that the counterpart of the social contract becomes the sexual contract in which women as sexual and reproductive beings are placed with the domestic, under the control of the 'right' kinds of men" (Das *Life* 19). Women's voices were almost entirely absent from the state's decisions about what was the right course of action for dealing with the sexual violence that had been done to them. Their fate was determined by men.

Many women refused to go back, having settled fully into their new homes and families, but the state wrote this off as brainwashing, assuming that it knew what was best, and forcing them to leave regardless (Das *Life* 29, Kannabiran and Menon 29). Once again, women were not really the subjects of this discourse around sexual violence; rather, they were the ground upon which the issue of the limits of state authority could play out discursively. In Das's words, "national honor was tied to the regaining of control over the sexual and reproductive functions of women" (*Life* 26). Rather than representing women's interests in issues of sexual and gender violence, then, the state had its own stake in establishing a particular narrative of what had happened to whom and how crucial the state was as a protector of the proper order of things.

This vision of the state's proper role integrates seamlessly with the modern concept of rights. As Wendy Brown writes,

> Historically, rights emerged in modernity both as a vehicle of emancipation from political disenfranchisement or institutionalized servitude and as a means of privileging an

> emerging bourgeois class within a discourse of formal egalitarianism and universal citizenship. Thus, they emerged both as a means of protection against arbitrary use and abuse by sovereign and social power and as a mode of securing and naturalizing dominant social powers—class, gender and so forth (29).

Rights, then, as they were conceptualized in rational enlightenment discourse, were meant to not only further the interests of those already in power, but also to protect the bourgeoisie from the potential abuses of the state. The state commits to respecting a certain set of rights as natural and fundamental human rights when in fact these rights serve the interests of "dominant social powers" (ibid). In the case of the Recovery program of Hindu women who had been abducted during Partition, the rights being protected were not those of the women but rather of men. The state thus upheld a particular view of the proper relationship "between social and sexual contract—the former being a contract between men to institute the political and the latter the agreement to place women within the home under the authority of the husband/father figure" (Das *Life* 21).

I do not want to detract from the real violence that the state was often trying to correct: "some 75,000 women were raped, kidnapped, abducted, forcibly impregnated by men of the 'other' religion" (Butalia *Other* 34). The reality of what these women went through will never be fully understood, though efforts such as Urvashi Butalia's in *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* attempt to capture some of the horror many experienced. However, what I want to emphasize is that the Indian and Pakistani states' "recovery" efforts were less about the welfare of the women and more about the enforcement of a particular social contract upheld by a particular set of rights that reinscribed dominant gender norms. The women abducted, for instance, did not have the "right" to choose where to live when they were

"recovered." Butalia narrates the story of Zainab, a Muslim girl who was abducted on her way to Pakistan and sold to Buta Singh, a Sikh man living in Amritsar (*Other* 101-104). The two lived together as husband and wife for a number of years; Zainab had two children with him. But then, according to popular legend, one of Singh's male family members reported Zainab's abduction in order to ensure that the family land would not pass to Zainab's children and would instead go to them. Zainab was "returned" to Pakistan where her uncle, too, had an interest in what her existence meant in terms of property and landholding. In this case, rumor suggested that the uncle had been the force behind her recovery with plans to marry her to his son so that the family land would stay in the family. This particular story has one last twist. Buta Singh loved Zainab so much he fought through the red tape of bureaucracy in order to travel to Pakistan to get Zainab back. However, when he arrived, he was confronted with a Zainab who told him, while surrounded by her Pakistani family, that she no longer wanted him.

I repeat this story in such detail in order to establish the complexity of women's relationship to the brand new Indian state when it came to issues of sexual violence. Judging only by this story, it is unclear whether Zainab was raped by Buta Singh or her cousin-turned-husband in Pakistan. In both cases, she stated a desire to stay with her current husband, first in India and then in Pakistan. In both cases, however, she was with the family that had an interest in her remaining where she was. Do her words correctly express what she wanted or were they simply a reflection of what the men around her wanted for her? It is impossible to know. But what's particularly striking about this story is that Zainab's declaration of her desires had no effect on the state's determination of how best to "rescue" her from further sexual violation. As Nivedita Menon writes, "the law and the state render invisible women's subjective experience of

oppression since objectivity is installed as the norm. In this sense the law is essentially Male and can only ever partially comprehend the harms done to women" (*Recovering* 4).

To add to Menon's analysis, Zainab's story—and many of the others in Butalia's collection of oral histories—also indicates the problem with the ontological category of "experience" itself. Was there any way to know what Zainab really wanted? In each stage of this story, she is at the center of a web of competing male property interests and it is unclear whether she felt safe enough to express her own desires about what she wanted. Butalia determined that she would never get to the bottom of what Zainab really wanted, choosing instead to pursue oral histories of women she could find[9] (*Other* 104). But how could one fully know, even with the women Butalia was able to interview, whether they felt comfortable narrating what they really wanted? By the time Butalia was conducting these interviews in the 1990s, these women had been living with the same family for upward of forty years. Perhaps they did not wish to upset their loved ones by upending the mythology on which their lives were based. Perhaps they did. The point is that recording their stories does not solve the problem their stories represent: that the State's need to fix definitions, identities, laws, and rights, and to do so by prioritizing the interests of the bourgeois male citizen, is fundamentally at odds with the complex nature of these women's (and all women's) lives.

Here is where performance is a particularly potent way of addressing the problem of large-scale sexual violence. In 2001, Kirti Jain's production of *Aur Kitne Tukde* (How Many Fragments?) premiered in New Delhi at the National School of Drama (J. Menon *Rehearsing* 30). Based on Urvashi Butalia's oral histories in *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, the play gave performative life to four of the stories Butalia had recounted. One of them was Zainab's. But whereas Butalia's account of Zainab concludes with frustration

that she can never find out what Zainab really wanted, Jain's production problematizes the concept of experience itself. As Jisha Menon explains,

> The plot-driven oral narratives in Butalia's collection attempt to excavate the 'experience' of violence that people encountered during the Partition. Jain's project is somewhat different: she explores how conceptions of selves (as victims, survivors, martyrs, perpetrators) are performatively produced through iterative discourses of nation, gender and ethnicity. Jain circumvents the liberal-humanism that structures much of the oral histories by staging a presence constructed and refracted through mediated narrations. Jain circumvents the ontological category of 'experience' by foregrounding the discursive production of sexed and ethnic subjects. By inter-mixing genres, Jain de-stabilizes the fixed subjects of history and oral narratives: they no longer provide unmediated access to the real by means of their experience. Thus, Jain avoids slipping into a 'metaphysics of presence' by emphasizing the theatrical and representational process of the constant production of the subaltern Partition subject. (33)

Thus, embodied, iterative performance gives voice to something that oral history cannot: that experience and memory are constantly being refracted through our present performance of self, that there is no perfect truth of the sexual violence these women experienced, even as that experience still matters and should still be heard. Even as these women deserve justice, a justice they will most likely never receive. Jain's production, then, particularly highlights the problem of turning to the law for justice. Even if the law assumed that women told the truth about their experiences of sexual violence, it needs a fixed experience from which to pass judgment, thus equating experience with truth. Is there something in feminism itself that fundamentally conflicts with this equation, which the law requires? Veena Das observes of this period in Indian history

that, "once the recovery of women was defined as a state responsibility, the identity of a woman was firmly fixed as either Muslim or Hindu" whereas community practices were far more flexible about family, religion, and identity (Das, *Critical* 79-81). The very nature of the law requires it to determine best practices for making consistent determinations about these women's religious identities. However, such consistency runs entirely counter to the fractured experience of sexual violence, and it is "precisely for this reason, because the regulating and defining force of the law is directed towards the creating and naturalising of specific, governable identities, the law cannot be a 'subversive site'" (Menon, *Recovering* 237). The complexity of each individual woman's case entirely falls out of state determinations.

The state is not just complicit in violence against women through its ongoing reinforcement of patriarchal protectionism or its fixing of identities that are necessarily complex and fractured. Often, representatives of the state were themselves the perpetrators of sexual violence. In fact, in many ways, the autonomous women's movement really began to take shape in the late seventies and early eighties around the issue of custodial rape (Agnes, "Redefining" 64; Butalia, "Confrontation" 208; Kannabiran and Menon 6-7). The first such case to inspire large-scale feminist organizing was that of Rameeza Bee. Bee, a poor Muslim woman living in Hyderabad, was returning from a film with her rickshaw-puller husband in March 1978 when she was picked up by the police and accused of prostitution. The police proceeded to gang rape her and, when her husband protested, beat him to death (Butalia, "Confrontation" 209; Kannabiran, "Sexual Assault" 83). In response to this police brutality, protests took place throughout the state of Andhra Pradesh, including a crowd of thousands marching her husband's dead body back to the police station to demand justice.[10] The state eventually gave in to the political pressure of these protests and put together an enquiry commission to determine what had happened (Butalia,

"Confrontation" 209). However, as Kalpana Kannabiran observes, the enquiry justified further state violence toward Rameeza Bee:

> one of the most horrifying events of the Enquiry itself was the sight of the *burqa*-clad Rameeza standing quietly as one man after another entered the witness box to swear that he had had sex with Rameeza on a certain day at a certain place after paying her Rs 10 or 15. Rameeza would then be asked to lift the *burqa*, revealing her face for the man (and the packed, tense courtroom) to stare at before he affirmed that she was indeed the same woman. All these men…had been mobilised by the police to testify in favour of the defence. This repeated public unveiling enabled a moral displacement of Rameeza and her reconfiguration as a prostitute: Prostitutes should not veil themselves and must be open at all times to the public gaze. ("Sexual Assault" 86)

Like earlier incidents of state violence against women, this violence was practiced upon the body of Bee, using her as a conduit for violence against her community by equating her lower-class Muslim status with prostitution (ibid).

While Rameeza Bee's case was important, the first to provoke political action across the entire country, often cited "as *the* case that galvanized the widespread organization of newly political women into groups, coalitions, and ultimately, a coherent post-independence women's movement" was that of Mathura (Armstrong 49).[11] The custodial rape of Mathura actually happened six years before that of Rameeza Bee, but her case did not capture national attention until it reached the Supreme Court in September 1978—six months after Rameeza Bee's rape. In 1972 in Maharashtra, a young, *Dalit* teenager named Mathura was "summoned to the police station on a complaint of abduction lodged by her brother against her lover [Ashok]" (Das, "Sexual Violence" 2413). The police asked Mathura's family to wait outside and took her into

the police station. Inside, the head constable Ganpat raped her twice (once in a toilet), while another officer, Tukaram, attempted to rape her (Das, "Sexual Violence" 2413; Baxi 12). While she was being held, a crowd gathered outside the police station, and "upon hearing that Mathura had been raped, they insisted that Mathura's complaint be registered" (Baxi 13). It was thus that Mathura's case was heard by a Sessions Court Judge in 1974, who determined "that Mathura was a 'shocking liar' whose testimony was 'riddled with falsehood and improbabilities'" (ibid). The court believed that Mathura had had sexual intercourse with Ganpat (the medical evidence proved it), but the judge determined that she must have consented and then later been scared to admit her promiscuousness in front of a crowd that included her lover. In order to establish her "virtue" she accused the police of rape (ibid). The policemen were acquitted. The Bombay High Court overturned this decision on appeal "on the grounds that it [the Sessions Court] had failed to distinguish between 'consent' and 'passive submission'" (Das, "Sexual Violence" 2413). The policemen were both convicted, one of rape and one of the "use of force with the intent to outrage modesty" (Baxi 13). The case was again appealed, this time to the Supreme Court, and in September 1978, the policemen were once again acquitted.

At this point, four law professors wrote an open letter to the Supreme Court and circulated it widely among activist groups. The letter questioned the Court's interpretation of consent, asking, "does the Court believe that Mathura was so flirtatious that even when her brother, her employer and her lover were waiting outside the police station, she could not let go the opportunity of having fun with two policemen and that too in the area adjoining a police station latrine?" (Baxi 16). The letter sparked nationwide protests, which, in turn, convinced the Indian government to amend rape laws that had not been changed for nearly 150 years (Butalia, "Confrontation" 211). A commission was formed to make recommendations to Parliament about

exactly how the law should be rewritten. While the final wording was significantly less powerful than what women's groups had hoped for, the 1983 amendment defined custodial rape and established minimum sentences for rape; it also included "a new section, 114A, [which] was written into the Evidence Act according to which, if a woman stated that she did not consent to sexual intercourse, the court would presume in her favor and the accused would have to prove that he was not guilty of assault" (Agnes, "Protecting Women" WS20; Kannabiran and Menon 8). Unfortunately, judicial discretion continues to ensure, even in the present, that section 114A is rarely followed. The Mathura case also set a precedent for the newly emerging autonomous women's movement as "activists scattered in different parts of the country realized the value of working together, the importance of sharing information, and the sense of togetherness that comes from a broad platform of action" (Butalia, "Confrontation" 212).

The Mathura case became a blueprint for the women's movement's political organizing around rape: "immediately a case of rape took place, groups would mobilize, lobby for the case to be taken up, demand various things from the government, and, if possible, attempt to address the needs of the victims" (Butalia, "Confrontation" 222). What is crucial to understand about this moment in the late seventies and the early eighties, as the autonomous women's movement emerged as a powerful force in Indian political culture, is that the state was at the center of feminist activism, "the primary target of women's demands or grievance" (Butalia, "Confrontation" 219). This is not to say that other kinds of organizing did not happen. There were protests, demonstrations, street-plays to bring public awareness to women's issues, an expansion of social work aimed at helping women, and the formation of legal aid centers to take on women's pursuance of justice in the courts. However, the animating force of all this organizing, "whether it was party-affiliated groups or those who saw themselves as autonomous,

both directed their energies at the state…" (Butalia, "Confrontation" 222). And what's more, the state seemed to be listening (Butalia, "Confrontation" 211). Roychowdhury identifies the 1983 amendments to rape law as a moment when mass political mobilization overwhelmed the power of the state, forcing political change through legal structure ("Rape" 80-81).

Thus, while appeals to and critiques of the state were at the center of the women's movement's agenda, they were part of a larger "process of politicization" occurring at the time, bringing issues of violence against women that had always been treated as private into the public sphere through the use of collective "forms of political protest like street demonstrations, anti-state slogans and dharnas" (Kannabiran and Menon 7).[12] I want to be clear here: in the early days of the autonomous women's movement, feminists focused most of their efforts on the state, but "they did not hold any simplistic notion of the state as a benevolent institution which took account of civil society's needs and demands" (Butalia, "Confrontation" 225). The political organizing around the Mathura case came just a few short years after the lifting of Emergency. The Indian Women's Movement knew the state was a corrupt institution capable of suspending and/or ignoring its citizens' rights with little to no real justification. However, they saw legal reform and the pursuit of justice in the courts as central to the long-term goals of feminism. Nivedita Menon argues that this is because women's groups saw law as a venue for validating their experiences of violence and for "socially delegitimis[ing] a practice" by identifying it as criminal (*Recovering* 117). What's more, "designing a law around an experience proves 'it matters'; law is 'the concrete delivery of rights through the legal system'" (ibid). In other words, law both demonstrates to victims that their experience really happened and that they have a right to have been affected by it, and also shapes culture by identifying what is considered acceptable and unacceptable social behavior. By addressing the state, women's groups were also demanding

that women's rights be protected as the rights of equal citizens under the law (Butalia, "Confrontation" 224). However, contrary to what feminists hope the law will do when it comes to acts of violence against women, "the law legitimates dominant norms, which, ultimately, is what feminist practice contests" (N. Menon, *Recovering* 118). For Menon, the fact that the Supreme Court found in favor of the policemen in the Mathura case is a perfect example of this. The conflicting opinions at each level of the court over whether or not Mathura had been raped, from Sessions to High to Supreme, can be read as partially a result of the tension between, on the one hand, the influence of mass and feminist mobilization, and, on the other, the dominant patriarchal norms that the law had historically upheld—and, I would argue, continues to uphold. Ultimately, the state fails to provide justice for victims of rape, perhaps best evidenced by the fact that "39 percent of registered [rape] cases led to convictions in 1974, [while] that rate had dropped to 26 percent by 2011" (Roychowdhury, "Rape" 82). Menon reads the disturbing lack of rape convictions as one among many examples of the way in which the law is subjective and based on values that are culturally and historically specific (and thus patriarchal).

The state is not just complicit in sexual violence through its flawed laws and legal procedure; in recent years, it has repeatedly been the direct perpetrator of that violence and often used its bureaucratic processes to ensure that the state officials responsible for that violence are never brought to justice. While this is perhaps unsurprising given the criminality of contemporary politicians in India, the scope of state-perpetrated sexual violence has only become a part of the national narrative since the early twenty-first century.[13] Ananya Jahanara Kabir identifies the Gujarat riots of 2002 as the first time that "the systematic rape of women became talked about in the national public sphere" ("Double Violation" 147). Feminists had begun breaking this silence in the early 1990s, resurrecting the history of sexual violence during

Partition at least partly in response to the violence of the anti-Sikh riots that followed the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards (Kabir, "Double Violation" 149). However, the Gujarat riots brought these issues into mainstream discourse in a new way. Unlike previous cases such as Mathura's, the Gujarat riots marked the first public recognition of how rape was used as a weapon of communal violence wielded by the dominant (and often state-sponsored) group (Kannabiran and Menon 161). In Mathura's case, the policemen used their power as representatives of the state to rape Mathura and to escape justice. However, they were not directly equated with the state; it was not the state itself that raped Mathura. The Gujarat riots introduced into mainstream public culture the possibility that the state did not just obscure crimes committed by state officials but might actually be the perpetrator of systemic sexual violence.

The Gujarat riots took place from February 28 to March 3, 2002. They started after a report was put out by the state government on February 27 that a mob of Muslims (who were never actually caught or identified) had attacked a train and murdered 58 people, many of whom were Hindu nationalists (Kannabiran and Menon 161-2). In the days that followed, "more than 2000 people [Muslims] were killed, hundreds of women raped, mutilated and burnt, and a couple of lakhs driven out of their homes and work places" (ibid). While it was never proven due to the state's deliberate obscuring of the facts, the police were directly involved in this violence, participating actively alongside a mob of angry citizens (Kannabiran and Menon 167). What was easy to interpret from afar as chaos and the rule of the mob was in fact a carefully orchestrated, quietly state-sanctioned genocide, and it was a genocide that specifically and purposefully targeted women, as Armstrong describes in horrifying detail:

> Women and girls were gang raped, and then sexually tortured and beaten for hours before their bodies were burned, often while they were still alive. Fetuses were cut from women's bodies and burned before the mothers' eyes. Sarkar summarized the 'pattern of cruelty' against women and children in Gujarat, linking it to the violence against women during the attacks investigated by AIDWA in 1992 in Surat, Ahmedabad, and Bhopal. 'One, the woman's body was a site of almost inexhaustible violence, with infinitely plural and innovative forms of torture. Second, their sexual reproductive organs were attacked with special savagery. Third, their children, born and unborn, shared the attacks and were killed before their eyes' (Armstrong 92).

From the communal violence of Partition and the Gujarat riots to the individual violence of custodial rapes such as Mathura's and Rameeza Bee's, the state has been deeply implicated as a patriarchal structure in which women who have been sexually assaulted are unlikely to find justice. What's more, the modern Indian state has often been one of the direct perpetrators of sexual violence. It has therefore been the primary focus of feminist campaigns to end sexual violence.

"Indian Army Rape Us": Protests in the Borderlands

The details of incidents of individual and collective sexual violence since India's independence are more extensive than one chapter or even one book can relate.[14] It is my goal in this chapter, rather than to provide an exhaustive history of the relationship between women and the state around the issue of sexual violence, to paint the broad strokes of a still-developing feminist discourse of sexual violence and to illustrate the ways in which that discourse focused on the state and on legal solutions to sexual violence. It is with this in mind that I want to

conclude by adding one more layer to the sexual violence discourse that serves as the historical context in which the Nirbhaya event takes place, one that demonstrates the ways in which the state makes determinations about who counts as a citizen and who does not and proceeds to initiate violence against those who fall outside its narrow definitions. In July 2004 in the Northeastern state of Manipur, Thangjam Manorama was taken into custody for suspected militancy by the Indian Army's Assam Rifles Battalion. Three hours later, her body was found. She had been raped and shot repeatedly in the vagina (Kannabiran and Menon 170). The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (1958) (AFSPA) ensures that those who committed this gruesome crime will never be punished for it; it "grants soldiers legal immunity in a 'disturbed' area (which large parts of northeast India have been declared to be) even if they kill someone" (Kannabiran and Menon 171). This means that the Indian Army had to provide no explanation of or justification for what had happened to Manorama. The soldiers had simply been doing what they needed to do to keep the peace in a "disturbed" area.

Scholars point to incidents such as the murder of Manorama and the mass rape of women in Kunan-Poshpora by the Indian Army in 1991 as evidence that the Indian state operates "quasi-colonies" within its own boundaries, identifying spaces and types of people who do not fully count as citizens (Gaikwad; 302; Kannabiran and Menon 188-9). Others adopt Agamben's concept of the "state of exception" to denote a state of legal exception in which "even the most seemingly arbitrary acts were 'believed' to have been executed in order to ensure the safety and stability of the colonial regime and were thus part of the legal sovereignty of the state itself, making for a tension between political exigencies and legal rule" (U. Chakravarti 6). For these scholars, this colonial regime still exists in places like the Northeast and for people who are considered beneath the state's concern, such as *dalits* and OBCs. Manorama's story, then, acts as

an example of the extent to which the state is directly responsible for sexual violence within its own borders. However, it also serves a second purpose within my argument.

The brutal violence enacted upon Manorama's body inspired a performative protest that brought the acts of abuse committed under the protection of the AFSPA to national attention in a way no previous political protest had. The performative nature of this protest and the theatrical performances it (perhaps unknowingly) echoed demonstrate the role performance has played in shaping sexual violence discourse in modern India. A few days after Manorama's body was discovered, a group of about 40 middle-aged and older Manipuri women known as the *Meira Paibi* (women torchbearers) staged a protest in front of the Army Headquarters at Kangla Fort in Imphal, Manipur (Gaikwad 304, Thokchom 2004). Twelve of them stripped and stood naked before the gates, their bodies revealed for all to see, holding up banners that read in red letters on a white background, "Indian Army Rape Us" and "Indian Army Take Our Flesh."[15] An army officer and a group of police officers had to come out and plead with them extensively before finally convincing them to put their clothes on and leave (Misri 604; Thokchom).

Nudity has historically been used by dominant forces in India to shame and punish women, most notably in the 1980 case of Maya Tyagi, whose companions were killed by the police before she was forced to march naked through the streets of Baghpat, Uttar Pradesh, to the police station where she was raped and accused of being a gangster—all because her husband had dared to fight back when a plain-clothes police office sexually harassed her (Butalia, "Confrontation" 210; U. Chakravarti 26; Baxi 297-298).[16] So the *Meira Paibi's* use of nudity to shame the Indian state in return was seen by many as a brilliant feminist maneuver, one that placed the responsibility for sexual violence squarely on the heads of the state as represented by the Assam Rifles Battalion in Manipur. It was the Indian Army who was shamed by the sight of

the naked women. It was also compelling from a performance perspective: the image of a group of respected middle-aged and older women standing defiantly before Kangla Fort demanding that the army rape them went viral in a time before such a concept fully existed, forcing the Indian government to set up a committee to review the AFSPA (Misri 616).[17] Uma Chakravarti points to this moment as the one that catalyzed a new feminist consciousness about the impunity enjoyed by the state, state actors, and those reinforcing patriarchal structures more generally: "After the killing of Manorama in 2004 more writing challenging impunity has begun to emerge and feminists have started to write about impunity in the specific context of sexual violence…" (9). Not only, then, did the *Meira Paibi*'s protest capture the popular imagination, it also influenced subsequent feminist political writing and strategy. Women were reclaiming their nude bodies to turn shame back upon the men who had wronged them and demand justice for what they had been through. However, this emerging awareness of impunity was slow, not fully taking hold of the popular imagination until the Nirbhaya event (ibid). Even in an Indian women's studies reader published in 2008, Chakravarti notes, "there is virtually a silence on the violence of state practices especially in relation to states of exception, sexual violence and impunity" (9).

Whether intentionally or not, the *Meira Paibi*'s protest built on a history of Indian women using their nudity to speak back to patriarchal power. Deepti Misri traces this genealogy back to Mahasweta Devi's 1978 short story "Draupadi"[18]—which itself draws on the mythology of Draupadi from the Mahabharata—and through the Manipuri theater director Kanhailal's dramatization of the story in 2000. After the *Meira Paibi*'s protest in 2004, both Kanhailal's play and the *Meira Paibi*'s performative protest would be incorporated into a third piece, Amar Kanwar's 2007 documentary *The Lightning Testimonies,* which I would then see in an exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2014. Misri's article incisively excavates "what it might mean for

women in India to deploy nakedness as a tool of embodied resistance against the patriarchal violence of the state" concluding that "although naked protest effects a radical break from everyday norms of feminine modesty in India, there is nevertheless a somewhat coherent repertoire of representations around women's nakedness or shamelessness in which these protests participate" (604). Briefly, I want to detail what this repertoire entails and demonstrate how its focus on the patriarchal violence of the state returns Indian feminists repeatedly to being trapped within the language and logics of the very patriarchal state they are critiquing.

In Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi," the titular character is a Naxalite rebel in 1960s Bengal. She is caught by the Indian army and brought before Senanayak, a bureaucrat and interrogation specialist, who orders his men to "Make her. *Do the needful*" (Spivak, *In Other Worlds* 195). They proceed to violently and repeatedly gang rape her. The next morning, Senanayak summons her to his tent, expecting that she will have been beaten into full submission. He expects her to be dressed in the clothes his men have returned to her. Instead, she "stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breaks, two wounds" (Spivak, *In Other Worlds* 196). He cannot comprehend this woman who does not wish to cover her body or the violence it has endured, who seems to feel no shame for being raped, and in that moment of incomprehension is her successful resistance:

> Her theatrical disobedience appropriates the power of signification over her own raped body by rendering that body unreadable—resistant to patriarchal scripting while producing its own script. If the state agents try to interpellate Draupadi as victim, Draupadi refuses the hegemonic script of shame that the wounds of sexual violence are meant to evoke, resignifying her own raped body to produce an inscrutability that escapes Senanayak's interpretive grasp (Misri 608).

Kanhailal's production, in which his wife, Sabitri Devi, played Draupadi, cannily staged this confrontation of a single naked and brutalized woman with an Indian army that was determined to assert both its patriarchal and political dominance. The production implicitly critiqued the AFSPA and the Indian army's abuses of power, particularly those played out on the bodies of Manipuri women. Through her naked performance, "Sabitri invokes the regular stripping and rape in Manipur of women like Draupadi and specifically the fact that such sexual violence is frequently *staged* by the Indian Army for the captive audience of the woman's male relatives" (Misri 613-14). Watching *The Lightning Testimonies*, I was immediately struck by the affective power of both Sabitri's performance as Draupadi and the *Meira Paibi*'s performative protest. While I did not know at the time the extent of the violent atrocities the Indian state had committed (and continues to commit) in Manipur, the strength in their nudity, their refusal to treat their own bodies as vulnerable and violable, and rather to insist that the men in power should be afraid of the power of the nude female body, made me feel empowered.

However, in order to work as a political performance or a performative protest, these two pieces had to use the fact that these men accept the dominant script about what women's bodies are supposed to be. In other words, Draupadi is illegible to the state exactly because she insists her body is something to take pride in or even to fear, rather than to violate. If her body were *actually* something to take pride in, then her naked protest would not have had the same power to interrupt Senanayak's power in the situation. It is because she should not be proud as she displays her naked body, because Senanayak expects her to feel shame as a good woman should, that her protest works. Similarly, the power of the *Meira Paibi*'s protest lies in the discomfort of seeing a group of women who should not be naked standing naked for all to see. The fact that multiple officers pled with the women to cover themselves echoes almost exactly Senanayak's

discomfort: here were women who should have felt shame in their nakedness, and yet they did not. The terror the army had invoked through the systematic rape of women would not have the same effect if the women were (literally) asking for it.

Here, then, is the central problem of conceiving of feminist protest against sexual violence around appeals to or critiques of the state: the logic of the liberal state ends up being the frame in which the protest is interpreted. Namrata Gaikwad argues that

> the Meira Paibi's protest is predicated on a certain understanding of the woman's body as chaste and deserving of respect. By marching down the streets naked, the distraught elderly women evoke an unbelievable horror in the viewer, primarily because of the knowledge that 'normal' women do not bare their bodies to the world…What seems to underlie the narrative of these women is an acceptance of the basic premise of the liberal state. Their indignation stems from a problematic yet wholly reliable aspect of the state, which instead of protecting its citizens has turned upon [them] (305).

And yet Misri reads the exact same protest in an almost entirely opposite way, suggesting that the *Meira Paibi*'s protest stages women's vulnerability as a direct product of the state:

> Rather than staging women's bodies as the grounds of essential feminine vulnerability, the Meitei women's protest staged women's bodies as sites of violence and their vulnerability to custodial rape as the historical, legitimated, and legislative product of a state in which gendered and caste-based (as exemplified by Mahasweta's Draupadi) modes of power converged in the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (620).

Comparing the Manipuri protest to a 2007 naked protest by Pooja Chauhan, a twenty-two-year woman in Gujarat, Misri argues that Chauhan's protest asks for the state to display good masculinity by properly protecting her from her in-laws, who represented bad masculinity.

Chauhan, then, provides an example of a woman accepting the "basic premise of the liberal state" and asking it to properly enact its patriarchal protectionism. On the other hand, for Misri, the *Meira Paibi* are an example of women who reject that premise by demanding that the state take responsibility for the violence it was enacting, essentially owning up to the bad masculinity built into its ruling structure.

Both Gaikwad's and Misri's readings have merit—and Misri does observe that the *Meira Paibi* certainly used the "scandalous media appeal of [public] nudity in general and female nudity in particular" in a patriarchal state to their advantage (Misri 617). On one level the *Meira Paibi*'s performance accepts the logic of a liberal (and neoliberal) state, while on another, it critiques the violence perpetrated by that state. I argue that as soon as one's protest is directed at the state, one cannot help but center a discourse of sexual violence around the state's accountability to women. However, how does one hold the state accountable within its own patriarchal structure, its own logic, for sexual violence it both perpetrates and implicitly facilitates? And how could action from the state solve a problem that stems from the foundational logics of state power? These are the question that the Indian women's movement had yet to answer in December 2012.

In 2004, the same year as the Manipuri protest, Nivedita Menon published *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law*. In it, she argues that feminist practice must shift its focus from the law and the state if it is to have any hope of truly creating an equal society: "To move away from legal and state-centred conceptions of political practice is to think creatively about new forms of political engagement that are located in realms we have not seriously engaged with. We need to evolve the kind of political practice that will work at capturing the meaning of terms in *our* language" (239). In the chapters that follow, I argue that

performative responses to the Nirbhaya event are doing exactly that, rejecting a legal and state-centered understanding of political practice in order to imagine a politics that is premised on the culture women can create together. By turning to performance and explicitly theatrical protests, the next generation of feminists are enacting a prefigurative feminist politics beyond the state, one that insists that women's bodies and desires are a normal and respected part of urban public life.[19]

Conclusion

As I finish writing this chapter in late September 2017, a decision has just come down from the Delhi High Court, reversing a 2015 decision that sentenced well-known theater director Mahmood Farooqui to a seven-year prison sentence for sexually assaulting an American academic (Anand). This project focuses on how theater and performance are being used against sexual violence, but it is important to remember that theater is also complicit in and influenced by dominant cultures. Feminist activists (including many that I write about in this dissertation) have taken to social media to criticize the injustice of this ruling. The High Court judge, in justifying the reversal, wrote that "when parties are known to each other, are persons of letters, and are intellectually/academically proficient, and if, in the past, there have been physical contacts [*sic*]. In such cases, it would be really difficult to decipher whether little or no resistance and a feeble 'no' was actually a denial of consent" (ibid). He continues, "in an act of passion, actuated by libido, there could be myriad circumstances which can surround a consent and it may not necessarily always mean yes in case of yes or no in case of no…At what point of time and for which particular move, the appellant did not have the consent of the prosecutrix is not known. What is the truth of the matter is known to only two persons, namely the appellant and the

prosecutrix who have advanced their own theories/versions" (ibid). His language is shockingly similar to the language with which the Supreme Court acquitted the accused in the Mathura rape case.

The "prosecutrix" in this case might be said to be in a privileged position compared to many victims of sexual assault in India. An American woman with a strong network of support both within India and in the U.S. (including her lawyer, renowned feminist activist Vrinda Grover), she decided to report her assault, even though she must have known the investigation would focus on questioning her own character. After all, she and Farooqui were friends who had engaged in physically intimate acts previously. They had multiple mutual friends who could attest to the complicated and friendly nature of their relationship. She had been alone with him. She had not immediately stopped him when he started getting physical with her. She had a history of romantic and sexual relationships and the belief that she should not be ashamed of that history. Knowing that all of this information would be used against her, she still came forward. In response, Farooqui and his supporters, including his wife, dragged her name through the dirt, denouncing her as both a woman and an academic. But somehow, against the odds, she won her court case, and Farooqui was sentenced to prison for sexually assaulting her.

So when I woke up on the morning of September 26, 2017 to read that the decision had been overturned because the High Court judge, who had the power of determining whether the original decision was a miscarriage of justice, apparently cannot understand the concept of consent, I was disturbed not only on behalf of this woman but on behalf of all the other women who will never report their sexual assault out of the—perhaps, accurate—belief that they are unlikely to get justice. After all, this woman, with all her privilege has been unable to. It is appalling that a Delhi High Court judge can hold the kind of legal authority he does and yet

believe that a "feeble 'no'" in a sexual assault case does not count as a no. It is even more appalling that he then states that this is more or less a case of he said-she said and that, therefore, the default position should be to believe the perpetrator. Have things changed so little since colonial times that women can only be believed if their body evidences the sexual assault? How can feminists believe in the Indian state's ability to fight sexual violence if this man represents the state?

The women I write about are hopeful, optimistic, and unwilling to let the limits of the state get in their way. They are looking for ways to move beyond the state, beyond the law, and reframe sexual violence discourse around their joys, their desires, their subjectivities. I am not saying that it is enough on its own, nor am I criticizing the feminists like Vrinda Grover who have fought legal battles for years to try to improve the situation. What I am saying is that it gives me hope that there is something beyond the law that can lead to large-scale political change, because the law is often exactly the problem.

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[1] I use the word "comfortably," but the play quickly reveals the psychological violence Leela experiences in her own home. Bhasker treats her like a child and ensures that she feels isolated and helpless. The play suggests that this kind of gender violence is an expected part of a "comfortable" middle-class lifestyle.

[2] Mainstream responses to the Nirbhaya event also focused on legal reform, resulting in the Justice Verma Committee, which made recommendations to changes in India's rape laws, some of which were adopted. However, there is a marked discomfort in feminist discourse with this focus on legal reforms and particularly on calls for justice that included a demand that the Indian state "hang the rapists." My dissertation demonstrates how performance might offer an ideal vehicle for a feminist politics that has turned away from the state.

[3] One of the primary reasons the rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey made headlines was that she gave her life trying to protect her "virtue." The fact that this is still what makes a trustworthy heroine more than 150 years later is incredibly disheartening for anyone hoping that things are changing for the better.

[4] Here I echo Lata Mani's analysis of *sati,* the practice of widow-burning, and the colonial debates about abolishing it. As Mani writes, the debate, in which public opinion was mobilized in India and Britain alike, inaugurated a process whereby an exceptional and caste-specific practice was to emerge in the West as a potent signifier of the oppression of all Indian women, and thereby of the degradation of India as a whole" (2).

[5] Once again, it is striking how similar Jyoti Singh Pandey is to this ideal victim of rape in the colonial era: she, too, was middle (though not upper) class, virtuous (though that virtue was defined less by her sexual history and more by her commitment to education and her family), quick to report the crime, and bearing the evidence of her resistance on her body.

[6] This is not to say that sexual violence was not taking place, nor that there was not some organizing around it, but rather to emphasize that a historiographical account of sexual violence discourse between women and the Indian state skips over this period. For instance, Anupama Rao has written about a 1963 incident in a village in Maharashtra in which a group of dalit women "were stripped and paraded naked" through the streets (Rao 52). However, Rao writes that she heard about the incident as the first major case of caste-based "atrocity" after the formation of Maharashtra in 1960 (59). Further work should certainly be done on how much of the discourse of sexual violence is categorized as caste violence and (perhaps unintentionally) dropped from more general conversations about gender violence.

[7] For more specific stories of communal violence enacted upon women's bodies, see Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices From the Partition of India*.

[8] The Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act, 1949 (Act No. LXV of 1949). (Butalia *Silence* 114)

[9] Zainab's story was based on research done in newspaper archives

[10] The police fired on this crowd, resulting in up to 26 more deaths (Butalia, "Confrontation" 209).

[11] Elizabeth Armstrong names the Mathura case as one of the two catalysts of post-independence women's activism. The other was a document, *Toawards Equality,* commissioned by the United Nations to assess the standing of women in India, and distributed widely shortly after the Emergency ended in 1977 (Armstrong 44).

[12] Significantly, this is also the moment when "Theatre about gender injustice, especially about discrimination and violence against women, emerged in India…While women had been active in theatre even earlier—particularly in the Indian People's Theatre Association—and their lives and concerns featured in several plays, a self-conscious 'staging' of gender issues with a deliberate intent to politicizing them happened in this period. In a broader sense, this theatre may be seen as part of the global tendency towards a 'theatre for social change'" (Mangai 39).

[13] One in three members of India's parliament is currently under investigation for criminal activity, including for murder and rape (Roychowdhury "Rape" 87).

[14] For books on this topic, see *Fault Lines of History: The India Papers II* edited by Uma Chakravarti, *9 Degrees of Justice* edited by Bishakha Datta, *Public Secrets of Law: Rape Trials in India* by Pratiksha Baxi, and *From Mathura to Manorama: Resisting Violence Against Women in India* by Kalpana Kannabiran and Ritu Menon (among many others).

[15] The fact that the signs were in English indicates exactly how politically canny this protest was. These women knew that in order to capture the attention of the national media, their protest had to be legible to a large audience.

[16] Deepti Misri also observes that "naked parades of Dalit women are a stock form of humiliation used against Dalits to show them their place" (607).

[17] The committee recommended repealing the act, but the Indian state has yet to do so due to protests from the armed forces who claim that it would handicap their ability to do their job effectively (Misri 616; Gaikwad 301).

[18] The story was translated into English and thus made available to a large majority of literate Indians by Gayatri Spivak in 1988.

[19] The ages of the majority of the artists in my study is significant as I argue that they are representative of a new generation of feminist thinking. The women of Blank Noise, Why Loiter, Pinjra Tod, Praatohkrityo, Unseen, Thoda Dhyan Se, and Genderventions are all under the age of forty (and many are in their twenties).

Chapter 3

Performing Crisis Ordinariness, or Slow Sexual Violence in Yael Farber's *Nirbhaya*

Priyanka: On December 16th 2012,
A young woman boarded a bus in Munirka, New Delhi
with a male friend.
What followed changed theirs and countless lives
forever.
People poured onto the streets in grief and rage –
Demanding justice.
Legally prevented from revealing her real name –
The press named her NIRBHAYA.
"Fearless".

Who knows
why one woman's fate touched so many of our lives,
But in the wake of her death,
Many of us began to break the silence
and speak…
Of the things that happened to each of us,
Which we never dared utter before.

This then
is
Our Story.

—From *Nirbhaya* (2013) by Yael Farber, p. 7

Traveling in India in the summer of 2014, I was immediately conscious of the fact that everyone seemed to know the story of the brutal bus gang rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey that took place in Delhi on December 16, 2012. I brought it up with rock climbing guides in Ladakh, English tourists in Mumbai, and auto-rickshaw drivers in Kochin. Each wanted to tell me what it

meant for the country and how it affected the way they interacted with women in their own lives. The Nirbhaya event's influences reached across boundaries of language, class, religion, and nationality, touching everyone who heard about it. And everyone really had heard about it. By the time Pandey died 15 days later, what had happened to her was internationally infamous. The story of Jyoti Singh Pandey had become an indicator for many of India's "rape problem." It had sparked massive protests throughout India and on social media. People took to the streets in one of the largest demonstrations for social change the nation of India has ever seen. Within one week of the attack, the Indian government had convened a special judicial committee "to look into possible amendments of the Criminal Law so as to provide for quicker trial and enhanced punishment for criminals on account of committing sexual assault of extreme nature against women" (Talwar 108). Clearly, the state felt that it had to demonstrate its commitment to improving its response to sexual violence. As Pandey's story spread, it was treated by the media and by protesters as the proof that incidents of sexual violence had reached crisis levels; a nationally and internationally traumatic event had occurred.

The eruption of public protests in the aftermath of the violent gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh Pandey seems at first anomalous. Pandey was not the first, nor would she be the last woman to suffer a brutally violent gang rape in one of India's cities. For instance, four months later in Delhi, a five-year-old girl was kidnapped and raped with a bottle and a candle. Her story made international news with headlines like "Delhi erupts yet again as 5-year-old Gudiya's ordeal sparks furious protests" ("Delhi erupts"). The "again" in this headline is, of course, referring back to the Nirbhaya event, which has become the reference point for all stories of brutal rape in urban India since December 2012. The brutality of what was done to Pandey was shocking, but it was not unique. Thus, it is a perfect illustration of the idea of "crisis

ordinariness," a term which I have borrowed from Lauren Berlant. Berlant defines crisis ordinariness as an affective experience

> amidst the rise and fall of quotidian intensities [in which] a situation arises that provokes the need to think and adjust, to slow things down and to gather things up, to find things out and to wonder and ponder. What's going on? As Kathleen Stewart would phrase it, why do things feel on the verge—of *something* (dissolving, snapping, wearing out, overwhelming, underwhelming, or just unpredictably different)?" (Berlant "Thinking" 5).

She continues, "'Crisis ordinariness' is my preferred way of talking about traumas of the social that are lived through collectively and that transform the sensorium to a heightened perceptiveness about the unfolding of the historical, and sometimes historic, moment…"(ibid). In other words, crisis ordinariness is a collective experience of suddenly being aware of something that was already there, of realizing only at this moment the trauma that was already taking place, and of sensing the potential that something is about to happen. The Nirbhaya event brought to the surface the collective awareness of the overwhelming nature of violence against women in India rather than merely the traumatic violence of one incident. At the same time, what was, in fact, one of many sexually violent acts committed in Delhi each day was treated as an extraordinary crime, an event so overwhelmingly traumatic that people felt compelled to take to the streets in great numbers to protest acts of violence against women. What many were not quite able to articulate was the sense that this violence had been done to them directly, that it was a moment of collective trauma, not just a trauma for Pandey and her loved ones.

In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant observes that "'trauma' has become the primary genre of the last eighty years for describing the historical present as the scene of an exception that has just shattered some ongoing, uneventful ordinary life that was supposed to just keep going on

and with respect to which people felt solid and confident" (Berlant *Cruel* 9-10). The Nirbhaya event has unquestionably been read as just such an exception, a moment that shattered what would otherwise have been not just an ordinary life but a life to which other working-class people might aspire. In the media, Pandey was almost always described as a working class young woman who was also a medical student, hoping to pull her entire family out of poverty through hard work and persistence.[1] Popular discourse surrounding the Nirbhaya event casts Pandey as the role model for every working class Indian girl who wants a modern (and ordinary) life in a neoliberal capitalist system. Reading the Nirbhaya event as a traumatic event that, while extraordinary in its degree of brutality, is an exaggerated version of events that are ordinary and expected in the lives of all women, this chapter highlights the ways in which the crisis of the Nirbhaya event is, in fact, always-already a part of the everyday in contemporary urban India.

Definitions: Trauma, Crisis, and Crisis Ordinariness

The ordinary is most often imagined as something uneventful, unremarkable, a space in which people feel confident about where they belong and how to relate to it and to one another. Trauma, then, is treated by critical theory and popular culture as the moment that ruptures the ordinary; it is the exception to ordinary, daily life. However, as Berlant persuasively argues, "the present moment increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis, with one happening piling on another" (Berlant *Cruel* 7). Here, then is the tension between crisis and the ordinary, trauma and the everyday. If the experience of trauma is constant and continuous, when does it stop feeling like trauma and start feeling like something else? And how exactly do we experience that something else, that is both trauma and daily life, the rupture in the ordinary that also *is* exactly how the ordinary is experienced?

Thus far, I have been using the terms trauma and crisis somewhat interchangeably, but they do not in fact mean exactly the same thing. Ann Pellegrini writes that "in psychoanalytic terms trauma is a wound that is experienced too soon to be known or narrated" (413-14). Trauma is an event in an individual's life to which she cannot immediately give voice. It is beyond her ability to even recall it exactly as it happened, because it "involves a violent breaking through or rupture in consciousness" (Pellegrini 414). In the traumatic moment, the trauma victim experiences a wound that is unthinkable, unspeakable, and unknowable. Rape can be just such a trauma: "Because it renders impossible for that moment the victim's intersubjective agency, rape is a bodily, sexual assault on a woman's underlying conditions of being" (Cahill 132). In other words, rape not only involves a violent breaking through in consciousness. It penetrates a woman's sense of who she is, erasing the person she was before the rape happened. Trauma is a highly individual experience; a rupture in consciousness might be enacted differently in different people. A traumatic event, on the other hand, is a trauma that is experienced as shared by a group, that seems to be something they have in common. However, what a traumatic event actually does is recall to those experiencing it their own individual traumas. Thus, the Nirbhaya event as a traumatic event comes to stand in for the unknowable, individual traumatic experiences of the multitude.

"Who knows why one woman's fate touched so many of our lives…" wonders Priyanka Bose in *Nirbhaya* (7). Freudian trauma theory provides one possible answer to this question. Cathy Caruth, in reading Freud's analysis of *Gerusalemme Liberata* by Tasso, suggests that the haunting of the cry of pain is not so much "the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but…the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the

very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (8). In Caruth's analysis, the cry of pain echoes in the head of the listener to the cry of pain because the listener herself has experienced her own pain. Maybe not the same pain, but the same kind of pain, a pain that lies in kinship with the pain she thinks she hears in the voice of the other. Thus, Jyoti Singh Pandey's pain spoke to the pain of every man and woman who had experienced sexual violence, from the casual sexual violence of the everyday to the kind of trauma Pandey went through. It reminded them of their own experiences *and* of the potential that Pandey's trauma might have been or could become their own at any moment. That is why her "fate touched so many lives." I have already discussed the cultural and political reasons Pandey's story rose to prominence over other similarly brutal stories of sexual and gendered violence, why it captured the popular imagination. In this chapter, then, I am less interested in why Jyoti Singh Pandey's fate touched so many lives and more interested in *how*. How does her story resonate within a trauma theory framework and how does it—and the many performances it inspired—break that framework?

I use the term "crisis" to denote that which looks like trauma at first glance, but which, in fact "is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming" (Berlant *Cruel* 10). In other words, a crisis is part of a longer, steadier process, woven into the strands of everyday life, but only visible and narratable in the moments when it overflows and becomes something overwhelming. Unlike trauma, which suggests a rupture in consciousness, crisis is already there, waiting to be named. If we take these definitions and try to read the Nirbhaya event as a crisis, if we refuse the psychoanalytic logic of trauma, what happens?

By reframing the Nirbhaya event as both a crisis and one more performance of the ordinary, we find ourselves confronted with the fact that sexual violence and gendered violence

are specters haunting the everyday. Even though an individual woman may not experience physical sexual violence acted out on her body on a daily basis, the threat of it affects every decision she makes. Or, as Ann Cahill writes, "the threat of rape is a formative moment in the construction of the distinctly feminine body, such that even bodies of women who have not been raped are likely to carry themselves in such a way as to express the truths and values of a rape culture" (143). Women calculate their movements based on a constant analysis of the potential risk of getting raped. The violence of this threat is then used as an instrument of control, a means of keeping women from moving freely through public space, from living too loud or attracting too much attention, from fighting back against injustices. In Chapter 5, I will focus on performances and performative protests that explicitly push back against this control. Through the performances in this chapter and the next, however, I explore the tension between treating sexual violence as a trauma and treating it as an essential component of everyday experience and how these two views of what sexual violence is change women's (and all people's) relationship to the world around them. What avenues for creating social change might open up as a result of recognizing that sexual violence is a constant and continuous experience? I argue for the importance of not only reframing the Nirbhaya event within the everyday fabric of contemporary urban India, but of understanding it as simply one particularly brutal example of a problem that inhabits every action in one's daily routine.

In order to do this, I begin with a discussion of how feminist scholars have framed sexual violence and the everyday within the history of the South Asian subcontinent. This is critical for three reasons. First, while I am invested in the transnational importance of what the performances I analyze in the following chapters are doing, I also believe that their intervention in mainstream discourse about sexual violence can only be appreciated within the specific

cultural context of contemporary India. This means thinking about the relationships between sexual violence, colonial policies, gender, race, and the ongoing project of the Indian nation-state. In particular, I contend that sexual violence means something different to people who have lived through or with stories of Partition and communal violence. I have already done some of this work of contextualizing in the previous chapter, but here I focus more closely on how violence against women and the experience of everyday life have been linked in scholarly discourse about gender-based communal violence. The second reason I devote time to analyzing how other scholars have invoked violence as a part of everyday life for Indian women is that the artists I discuss are aware of this scholarship and often have incorporated it into thinking about their work. Finally, throughout my dissertation, I argue for the role of performance in making the Nirbhaya event legible. By comparing these performances to previous scholarly discourse on women, violence and the everyday, I highlight the potential of performance as a feminist political tool.

In the final section of this chapter, I move to a critical analysis of Yael Farber's 2013 play, *Nirbhaya*. *Nirbhaya* was clearly constructed to circulate internationally. It debuted at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2013 and has toured extensively in the UK as well as New York and a few Indian cities. It is almost entirely in English—one character speaks Hindi, which another cast member translates for the audience. Perhaps, then, it is unsurprising that the play easily fits into the dominant western framework of trauma. A *New York Times* reviewer placed trauma at the very center of the play: "above all, there is the idea of a rupture, which carries a double edge. All the women describe the holes left in their lives by violence, gaps into which they feel they can still fall at any moment" (Brantley). While Ben Brantley never specifically says the word "trauma," his description of a rupture, a hole left by violence, echoes the central

tenet of trauma theory, that when an individual experiences trauma, it is trauma exactly because there is a hole in her consciousness where the experience should be. In my analysis of the play, I do not dismiss the surface-level trauma theory framework, but rather insist on *also* attending to the moments that stitch each individual woman's trauma together.

What happens when sexual violence becomes both a constant and a crisis at the same time? By reading *Nirbhaya* as a site of the enacted contradiction between the ordinary and the extraordinary, I lay the foundation for an argument for the importance of treating sexual violence in modern India as a crisis of the everyday and not of spectacular acts of violence as we see circulated in the international media. It is easy to look at the Nirbhaya event either as a traumatic event, a rupture in the daily routine, or as proof that India has a "rape problem,"[2] that rape is a regular part of life. My argument will do neither. Instead, it will treat rape as a symptom of a problem that is both larger and smaller: larger in the sense that every man and woman is both a perpetrator and victim of it, and smaller in the sense that this "it" is not brutal or explicitly physically violent rape but rather a daily performance of inequality between men and women. A constant enactment of crisis is embedded in that daily performance. The Nirbhaya event brought that performance to the surface and forced people to reckon with how it affected them. Through performance, we are able to confront the affective nature of living with the crisis of sexual violence.

Traumatic Pasts: Partition and the Discourse of Violence Against Women in India

There is a history of scholarship on violence against women in India arguing for the importance of attending to women's everyday lives, particularly in evaluating the ongoing effects of the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Urvashi Butalia actually points to gender as

the relevant factor in how individuals talk about living through the trauma of Partition: "I learnt to recognize this in the way women located, almost immediately, this major event in the minor keys of their lives. From the women I learned about the minutiae of their lives, while for the most part men spoke of the relations between communities, the broad political realities" (Butalia *Silence* 12). Butalia's experiences suggest that the women with whom she is talking, when they are thinking about the stories of their lives, think about them through the lens of the everyday. They catalog the importance of moments like Partition in terms of how they affected everyday life. They measure the big by how it impacts the small. Gender affects not only how survivors of Partition tell stories of their lives, but which stories feel like theirs to tell.

While Butalia is writing about how men and women process and articulate their experiences of traumatic events differently, Veena Das focuses on how people's daily lives continue to be affected by Partition, whether or not they are conscious of those effects. In describing her methodological approach, Veena Das writes that "it narrates the lives of particular persons and communities who were deeply embedded in these events, and it describes the way that the event attaches itself with its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary" (Das *Life* 1). In this metaphor, the event is something exterior that inserts itself into the interior of people's daily lives. It is in some way, then, both a part of that daily experience and an entity separate from it. Das's book *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* traces the ways in which the memory of two events, Partition and the Sikh massacres of 1984, "is folded into ongoing relationships" (8). These two events were extraordinarily traumatic, and what Das focuses on is the impact that that trauma has on the ways in which people live after the event. The Nirbhaya event was not violent on anywhere near the same scale as Partition or the Sikh massacre of 1984. One woman died, not thousands. And yet,

people reacted like they had been the ones attacked. In almost a reverse of what Das describes, the daily experiences of individuals folded themselves into the recesses of the Nirbhaya event, making it personally as well as politically relevant.

There is a strange doubling that happens because of this process of folding. The event has already occurred, but the fear of its repetition lives on in the present moment, "embedded in a temporality of anticipation" (Das *Life* 9). That anticipation is a feeling that exists in the present, a constant fear that creates ongoing affective influences beyond the original trauma. I draw attention to this doubling for two reasons. First, attending to the history and context of how violence against women has taken place in India in the twentieth century is crucial in order to understand how the Nirbhaya event was created in the popular imagination. Within national discourse, Partition itself has come to mean "the violation of women, mass rapes and mass abductions, their expulsion from homes, the imperative to court heroic deaths, and the recovery operations staged by India and Pakistan" (Das *Life* 13). As I discussed earlier, it is nearly impossible to detach a conversation about rape from the history of how mass rapes and abductions of women were used as a symbolic attack on the communities to which these women belonged. In fact, invoking the history of communal violence during Partition as a "familiar pattern of sexual violence," Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin contend that, in general, "the most predictable form of violence experienced by women, as women, is when the women of one community are sexually assaulted by the men of the other, in an overt assertion of their identity and a simultaneous humiliation of the Other by 'dishonouring' their women" (Menon and Bhasin 41). In other words, the experience of the Nirbhaya event was colored by an already-existing temporality of anticipation of violence against women stemming both from general experience and from the specific trauma of Partition and subsequent acts of communal violence. Any

discussion of the Nirbhaya event, then, cannot forget that the effects and affective influence of this history are ongoing, even nearly seventy years later.

Urvashi Butalia describes how the stories of Sikh women killing themselves during Partition in order to not fall into the hands of Muslims and thus lose their honor continue to be narrated in the present:

> Today, half a century later, these and other stories still survive, and are held up, not only as examples of the bravery and manliness of the Sikh race (although it is the women who died, nonetheless, the decision to sacrifice their lives—attributed, in this instance, to the men—is seen as the defining act of bravery, for it also 'saves' them from a fate worse than death), but also as examples of the heroism of the Sikh women who 'gave up' their lives 'willingly' for the sake of their religion.[3] (Butalia *Silence* 165)

The violence that was inscribed on the bodies of these women during Partition, both at their own hands and at the hands of men who loved them, is not only spoken of but, in cases like this one, valorized. This valorization performs a kind of ongoing communal violence and violence against women in that it suggests that death is better than the potential of being raped by a Muslim man. The fact that it is told not as a story of horror but of heroism undergirds the continued belief that rape, and particularly rape by a man who is "other"—whether because of religion, class, or nationality—is the worst thing that can happen to a woman. It also binds the meaning of rape in India to the enactment of communal violence, so that referring to one almost automatically invokes the other. This history of valorizing women who sacrifice their lives in an attempt to escape rape may also underlie the purposeful othering of the men who raped and murdered Jyoti Singh Pandey. While the men did not differ from her in religion, it was important to the media's popular narrative to establish them as belonging to a migrant community, one that was not native

to Delhi. Stranger danger takes on new meaning in a society that lives with the ongoing anticipation of communal violence.

The second reason I draw attention to the strange doubling of Partition as both an ongoing past and an anticipated present is that it is useful to pinpoint the ways in which the doubling of the Nirbhaya event, its existence as both an event that has already happened and an event that individuals expect to happen again at any moment, is both similar and significantly different from the violence that scholars such as Das and Butalia are discussing. The first way in which discourse surrounding the Nirbhaya event seems to mirror that of Partition is that, in both instances, the raped woman becomes a symbolic cause, the ground upon which an argument or a set of claims are staked, as opposed to a real person with agency and a complex set of fears and desires. The play *Nirbhaya* provides the clearest example of this when Poorna Jagannathan begins her story of her own experiences of sexual violence by looking at the actress playing Nirbhaya and saying, "I am Her. She is/Me" (Farber 27). One audience member wrote on a notecard in the lobby that, "this was the line that moved me the most. She <u>is</u> me." The word "is" was double-underlined as if to emphasize the transitive process through which one woman becomes another. In just such a way, the real Jyoti Singh Pandey is erased, replaced not once but twice. First, with the delicate singing voice and graceful movements of actress Japjit Kaur and then with the women (including Jagannathan, herself) who identify with "Nirbhaya," to the point of believing that they are the same. While I support wholeheartedly the play's stated intent of breaking the silence surrounding sexual violence, I am concerned about the ethics of substituting one woman's pain for another's and the underlying agendas potentially at work in such substitutions.[4] Beyond the play *Nirbhaya*, Jyoti Singh Pandey became a rallying point for a diverse set of politicized claims, as previously discussed.

Though her article discusses the colonial sati debate that took place more than a century before Partition, Lata Mani has most successfully articulated what happens when specific stories of violence against real women become part of a political and cultural agenda: "I would argue that women are neither subjects nor objects, but rather the ground of the discourse on sati" (Mani "Contentious Traditions" 117). At its heart, then, the debate on sati was neither for the sake of women as subjects with agency in their own lives (and the right to choose to throw themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres), nor for the sake of women as powerless victims (forced to burn to death by manipulative in-laws). Rather, it was a way of establishing Britain's superior civilization. Similarly, during Partition, stories of the abduction of women by men of different religions rarely took into account what the women wanted or who they were.[5] They were, instead, a means of proving the cultural superiority of Indians (when told in India) and Pakistanis (when told in Pakistan). Compelling arguments have been made by Das, Butalia, and Menon and Bhasin, to name just a few, for how the newly created states of India and Pakistan used the stories of the mass abduction and rape of women in order to shore up their own images as Hindu and Muslim states respectively. Similarly, the Nirbhaya event has turned Pandey into the ground for a debate about women's appropriate relationship to public space and men's appropriate treatment of women.

This point leads to another way in which the Nirbhaya event and Partition have striking similarities: both empowered the nation-state to impose protectionist policies for the "good" of its citizens. In the aftermath of the protests in December 2012, the Justice Verma Committee was formed to evaluate India's anti-rape laws and suggest legal reforms. The new laws passed as a result of the Committee extending the definition of rape to include not just intercourse but also other kinds of penetration, including penetration by an object other than a penis (Talwar 40).

They also provided for two situations in which the death penalty could be imposed by a trial judge: leaving a woman in a vegetative state and serial rape (Talwar 39). The Indian government's swift action to reform its laws could be read as a feminist act, but as Delhi-based activist Kavita Krishnan warns,

> Anyone who was paying attention to the movement that flooded India's streets after December 16, would have noticed the anger of the women protesters against being identified as "daughters", "mothers", "sisters" instead of as individual women in their own right. One of the most important things about that campaign was the rejection of patriarchal protectionism that offered "daughters" protection but only by denying daughters freedom. Since then, we have also seen political campaigns (in Muzaffarnagar, for instance, and also the "love jihad" bogey) unleashing hatred and violence against the minority community in the name of "saving daughters". Hailing Indian women as "India's daughters" is something India's patriarchs including Indian government's [*sic*] and the most anti-feminist forces in India have always done. (Krishnan "Nirbhaya Film")

Certainly, the history of government mobilization in order to protect women from sexual violence is not a feminist one. The actions of the newly formed countries of India and Pakistan in response to the mass abductions of women during Partition demonstrate precisely the danger for women in a patriarchal protectionist nation-state. Both governments worked together after Partition to "recover" women who had been abducted by men belonging to the other country and return them to their "rightful" home. Thousands of women in Pakistan were returned to India and vice versa. On the surface, this may seem like an appropriate exercise of state bio-political power. After all, the majority of these women *had* been kidnapped against their will, possibly raped, and taken far away from their homes. However, the social workers who were helping to

implement these returns encountered an unexpected degree of resistance from the women they thought they were rescuing. They attributed this resistance to "false consciousness or a kind of misrecognition to the women. The appropriate sentiment in all such cases was coercively established as a desire for the original home that allowed men on both sides of the border to be instituting the social contract as *heads of households* in which women were 'in their proper place,'" both literally and figuratively (Das *Life and Words* 29-30). Women's own desires in the moment were treated as a result of brainwashing. The state knew best how to protect and care for them as citizens.

It is no accident that in both the case of Partition and the Nirbhaya event, the state's policies of protectionism are articulated through metaphors of familial relationship. By referring to Jyoti Singh Pandey as "India's daughter," one is implicitly suggesting that Pandey only has value because of that relationship, because she is bound by the same social contract as the women who were returned after Partition to "their proper place" within their individual families and their appropriate countries.[6] Evacuating from women's subjectivity their ability to hold value outside these familial ties (on both the person and political level) has far-reaching consequences for women's daily experiences. When the State places protecting women's safety above ensuring their freedom, it interpellates them as objects to be hidden away rather than subjects living their lives as they choose. It also encourages victim blaming when women do not follow the rules set up for their protection.

Here, then, is where I see a significant difference between the violence of Partition and of the Nirbhaya event. I started this section by discussing the strange doubling that happens when a traumatic event inserts itself into the everyday, as Das describes in the case of Partition and the Sikh massacre of 1984. The violence of Partition exists not just as a memory of trauma, but also

as a constant expectation of trauma yet-to-come, an expectation that has weight and solidity enough to affect the present. The violence of the Nirbhaya event, however, is not just doubled but tripled. It exists as a memory of extraordinary violence, an anticipation of extraordinary violence yet-to-come, *and* as ordinary violence performed through everyday acts. In other words, the threat of the Nirbhaya event lives on not only in the fear of extraordinary violence but also in the regular experience of ordinary violence. Das's analysis of communal violence identifies the weight of potentiality in the present, but what my analysis of performances made in the response to the Nirbhaya event captures is not just potentiality but actual violence, a slow violence. It may be difficult to see or identify such acts in the present, but they are happening constantly; they only become visible in the future when they have solidified into something larger. Rob Nixon defines slow violence as,

> violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions plays out across a range of temporal scales. In so doing, we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence. (2)

Nixon is referring to violence done to the environment, such as that which is causing climate change, but his definition is particularly helpful for thinking about sexual violence. It is easy to

dismiss slow violence as not violence at all, because its effects are nearly impossible to see in the moment. Its affective influence, however, might be visible through the genre of performance.

Thus, the Nirbhaya event is experienced not just as a past trauma or the present anticipation of a future trauma; it is also, and I argue most significantly, felt as an ordinary crisis embedded in how people are living their lives in the present. It is not the separate, tentacled monster of Das's description of Partition, clinging to and folding itself into daily life, but rather something that seems to be always-already present in that life, something that, because of the Nirbhaya event, more and more frequently becomes visible as a continuous moment in crisis. It is our job as scholars to engage this violence, to make visible something that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, that plays out in unexpected temporal and affective registers. This is precisely my goal in reading Yael Farber's *Nirbhaya* first as a play with a trauma theory framework and then as a play that is beginning the process of making visible the continuous moment in crisis.

Nirbhaya as Trauma, *Nirbhaya* as Crisis

Yael Farber's *Nirbhaya* is an aesthetically beautiful play, which makes the subject matter all the more disturbing. A spare set is framed by the pieces of a dismembered bus. One actress, Japjit Kaur, dressed in a floating white dress plays Nirbhaya throughout the piece, hovering on the edges of the other characters' stories and singing to herself in Hindi. She haunts the background of every scene, reminding us that she is intimately tied to each story of sexual violence told on stage. She is the only woman not telling her own story, but rather enacting an imagined version of what happened to Jyoti Singh Pandey on the bus. The other five actresses (all Indian or diasporic Indian women) are telling stories of what actually happened to them—or

at least, a performance of what actually happened to them as reimagined through the workshopping process that Farber and the actors conducted in Mumbai shortly after the Nirbhaya event. There is one male actor, Ankur Vikal, who takes on various male roles throughout the play. The other actors play themselves in their own stories and supporting roles, both male and female, in the other stories. They all wear black and use small costume accessories such as scarves and sunglasses to change between characters. By the time I saw this play at the Culture Project in New York City in April 2015, it had moved from its debut at the Edinburgh Fringe festival (2013) to London, Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Dublin, Brighton, and Manchester (*Nirbhaya the Play*). This group of artists had been working together, performing the same piece, for over two years. In my analysis of *Nirbhaya*, I will discuss a working copy of the script sent to me by Yael Farber in May 2014, the performance I attended in New York in April 2015, a filmed fundraising plea by Yael Farber after the Edinburgh Fringe but before the tour in India, and observations from Maggie Inchley based on her multiple viewings of the play in Edinburgh, London, and India. The text I quote is from the script sent to me in 2014, but the images and scenes I describe come from my own observations when I saw the play in 2015.

In contrast to the performances I discuss in the next chapter, Farber's *Nirbhaya* seems at first to conform closely to a trauma theory framework. Not unlike South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission it relies on the idea that the first step in healing not only the victims of sexual violence but also a culture that condones such violence is testimony. That is, those who have experienced this violence must feel free to speak openly about their experiences and must be encouraged not to feel ashamed. There is to be no victim blaming. And, there must be witnesses to this testimony, witnesses who are moved to sympathy for the victims, who perhaps

have experienced their own violence and find themselves more willing to share their own stories after hearing others.

The sequence of events that is understood to underlie rape as trauma is as follows. A subject is living a perfectly ordinary life. She is raped. In the aftermath of the rape, she is unable to say exactly what happened to her, both because it is a hole in her sense of continuity and because of her shame. Perhaps she blames herself for what happened, or perhaps she is concerned that others will blame her. As a part of her healing process, she realizes that she needs to tell her story. She tells it in front of witnesses. The witnesses are moved to share their own stories or at least feel some empathy for what has happened to her. The victim finds that telling her story helps her to heal from her trauma so that she can move back into living an ordinary life.

This is the framework in which Farber's *Nirbhaya* appears to operate. In describing the influence of the Nirbhaya event, Farber reflects that "what followed in the hours of that night [December 16, 2012] changed countless lives forever. Hers, the young man she was with, the perpetrators, people across India and indeed the world. It certainly changed my life and the group of people who gathered around the idea of creating a production that we have since called 'Nirbhaya'" (Sonabend). What has changed for the group of actresses who worked with Farber is that they finally feel empowered to speak about their own unspeakable experiences of sexual violence. The Nirbhaya event comes to stand in for the unknown experience at the center of each woman's trauma.

Nirbhaya is a devised piece, "based on a true incident and the life experiences of the cast" (Farber 1). Actress Poorna Jagannathan starts by describing her father, who beat her mother every day. An Uncle who lived behind her house sexually assaulted her when she was nine years old. Jagannathan tells us:

I am being

Fingered.

Probed.

Eaten.

Devoured.

Disappeared (Farber 31).

We watch as the actor playing the Uncle pulls a child sized dress underneath himself and then lies down on top of it. We watch adult Jagannathan try to assimilate what was done to her as a child into her experiences as a teenager in Delhi and an adult hearing the news of the Delhi bus gang rape. In an interview posted on vimeo, Farber tells us that after the Delhi bus gang rape, it is Jagannathan who reached out to her (over facebook) to ask her to come make a play in response to the event (Sonabend). Even without this information, it is clear in the production that Jagannathan is a leader. A lean, tough woman with wiry muscles bunching under her skin, Jagannathan commands attention with her every word and movement. It is she who first raises her hand in the gesture that will become the symbol of testimony as resistance, as power, as agency, in the play, arm held straight above her head, thumb, pointer, and middle finger strongly extended. In the final image of the play, all the actors except the one playing Nirbhaya stand this way, right arms up and heads held high in defiance.

After Jagannathan, four other actresses tell their stories. Rukhsar Kabir was beaten regularly by her father, though it did not change her love for him. Finally, when she was fourteen, he went too far, attacking her with a broken bottle. At seventeen, she was married to a man to whom she also gave her trust and devotion. As their relationship crumbled under the weight of his family's expectations of her, she suffered through night after night of marital rape.

Eventually, she attempted suicide by drinking bleach. After her recovery, she fled with her daughter, leaving her son behind in the hopes that his family would not follow. Kabir confesses, "I have not seen my beautiful boy in 15 years" (Farber 43).

Sneha Jawale's husband's family "attempted to murder me by covering me in kerosene and setting me on fire" (Farber 46). This was after her husband had already established a routine of regularly beating her. After the burning, Jawale had no choice but to return to the family that had tried to kill her, but two years and seven months later, they abandoned her, taking her young son with them. Jawale's pain is written on her face in scar tissue. Like many brides who have suffered burnings or acid attacks at the hands of in-laws pressuring them for more dowry, Jawale's scars will never allow her to forget what was done to her. Her story is the only one told in Hindi rather than English. Other actors serve as translators for her, and it is difficult not to see this language choice as a deliberate marking of this particular form of violence as incomprehensible, traditional, and uniquely Indian in comparison to the other stories that are told to a mostly white, western audience.

When she was eight Priyanka Bose was molested and raped repeatedly by a fifteen-year-old boy whom her mother had hired to help out around the house. Her father's mother even witnessed one incident of molestation but said nothing. When she was ten, Bose was molested once again by the family cook. These attacks became part of a pattern of behavior as Bose adds,

> My father starts calling me a whore by twelve.
>
> On the busses I am groped daily.
>
> At the park a man opens his foul smelling mouth to kiss me –
>
> and swallows me whole…
>
> An uncle starts touching me at 16.

A friend's father tries his luck too. (Farber 62)

Throughout her childhood, whether at home or out in public, Bose's body was treated like an object intended for the pleasure of men. By the end of her list of assaults, I am both numb and horrified. There is something about the repetitive nature of this trauma that is difficult to stomach, to believe. Bose tells us that her one salvation was her brother, who saw what was happening, who believed her when she told him what was being done to her body, and who, in boarding school, experienced his own (unnamed) sexual assault.

Sapna Bhavnani's father beat her mother and her mother beat the children. "That's just the way we rolled," claims Bhavnani (Farber 66). She describes a childhood thick with verbal abuse, particularly of a sexual nature. But she was resilient, rebellious, owning her own sexuality. She wore what she wanted, dyed her hair, had sex, got tattoos. Bhavnani's story seems at first like the one story in the play that might leave us with a glimmer of hope. But she, too, has experienced sexual assault—in her case, a gang rape at gunpoint at the hands of four strangers on the snowy streets of Chicago.

Five women. Five stories of sexual and gendered violence. By the end, I found myself exhausted by the sense of horror at the violence of their stories, even as I saw these women as heroes for having managed to overcome such trauma in order to share their stories with me. However, what overwhelms any heroism is the very real sense that these women are the exception, that this horror is happening everywhere and no one knows about it, that there is nothing I can do after I have witnessed these women's stories. Farber describes the opening of *Nirbhaya* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2013, when the decision was made

> that the cast should line up in the hall and greet the audience as they left because some kind of communing was necessary. So many people had said to us that they didn't know

> what to do with themselves after the show and so the cast would line up and the audience would file past and I would just quietly watch once again from standing against the wall in the corridor and I would see grown men, young women, mothers with their daughters approach the cast. Some people were silent and some would put their arms around the cast. Others would lean over and whisper in the cast's ears. I don't think there was a single day that we did not have somebody moving up to the cast and quietly taking them aside and saying "I've never spoken about this before but I myself am a survivor of sexual violence" (Sonabend).

To be sure, this is a potentially healing moment for the survivors, when they can share their experience with someone else, when they feel so empowered by the play that they feel able to speak about it for the first time. However, I want to think about everyone else who came to see the show. The theater in which I had the privilege to see *Nirbhaya* had 199 seats. So what about those other 198 people who did not confess, either because they themselves had not had a personal experience with sexual violence or because they did not feel like sharing it. What should they do in response? What *can* they do? While other performances I discuss offer clear, concrete challenges to audience members to get involved in various ways, *Nirbhaya*'s focus on testimony and on extraordinary instances of sexual and gendered violence practically ensures a feeling of empathy fatigue for the majority of the audience.

I am not the first scholar to critique Farber's approach to rape as trauma. In her analysis of *Nirbhaya*, London-based Maggie Inchley begins by noting how shocked she was by the television and online coverage of the original events of the Delhi bus gang rape. When she saw reference to those events in the description of a play at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, she decided to attend *Nirbhaya*. She describes how difficult the experience of watching and listening

to the "catalogue of its female performers' testimonies of their own experiences of violent and sexual abuse" was for her and other audience members, and the sense of trauma that she felt the performers had passed on to them (Inchley 272).

Inchley continues to make an argument for reading *Nirbhaya* as a play intended to advocate (sometimes problematically) for women's rights in India, and, more specifically, as a play that gives a voice to women to articulate the pain of the sexual violence they have suffered, violence that they had never talked about openly before. The power of the play comes from the brutality of these women's experiences, a brutality which demands that the play's audience members respond with their own experiences. Farber's stated goal is to put the audience "in a deep dialogue with themselves about their own lives as survivors, as perpetrators or as silent witnesses of sexual violence" (Sonabend). Thus the violence onstage is intended to call forth the violence in audience members' own lives in order to move them to action. Their traumas speak to one another, just as Caruth describes in her analysis of Freud.

But what if we shift our assumptions slightly? What if we assume that every single individual in the audience *does* have an experience of sexual violence they could choose to share if they wished? What if we expand our definition of sexual violence to include catcalls as one walks down the street, the fear of rape that makes some women hesitant to go out late at night, gendered injustices like the salary gap between men and women? In that case, all women around the world have experienced some form of sexual violence, are constantly experiencing some form of it. In the New York City run of *Nirbhaya*, the cast did not come out to greet the audience after the play. Instead, there were notecards printed with a bright red or green depiction of the hand symbol used by Jagannathan and the other actors as a gesture of protest. Audience members

could write whatever they wanted and post it onto a wall within the outline of letters that spelled out the word “FEARLESS”. We became potential contributors to this testimony.

One card read, “You are all so fearless in telling your story now. I wish I had told my story of over 20 years ago, When I was sexually assaulted at a party by a work colleague. I never reported him. No more silence!! No more shame! —Maria Dublin.” Another read, “When I was fifteen, I was raped. This brief but defining moment stole me from myself. That many women face a lifetime of such moments is a tragedy for which I will never have enough tears, an atrocity for which my rage may never be quenched. I remain on the earth, though that day, a young fifteen, I never guessed I would survive. I have seen the other side of a tunnel which almost claimed me. I can do what countless others could not. My voice is my sword. I raise my hand for those who lost themselves forever.” A third read, “Yes, all women go through domestic violence & sexual harassment, home & outside! The one who should protect you, harasses you. I have suffered each & every harassment since 1973, since my father died. But 7 months ago, my own reflection, my daughter got me out of the Hell Hole…I’m very thoughtful & thankful to you! — Duriya” Once again, the sheer number of stories of violence was exhausting, but now we were all potential participants, invited to share our own stories no matter how great or how small. There was no value judgment about whose story might be more or less traumatic. Until you read each card, you had no idea what it would say. On that wall, they all had the potential to be stories and statements of any kind, traumatic or not. Woven between the cards like the ones I quote above were more general calls for breaking the silence, standing in solidarity, etc. Thus, daily life, the need for action to stop sexual violence, and stories of rape were all part of one narrative response to the play.

Walking out of the theater after the play, I found myself returning to this wall and reevaluating my frustration with the ways in which *Nirbhaya* all but guaranteed empathy fatigue. Perhaps we could read between the lines and see the first glimmer of something else: a desire to convey the ordinariness of these acts of violence against women. The way the neighborhood chanted "Randy! Slut! Whore!" at thirteen-year-old Sapna Bhavnani on her way to school every day blended into her rapists shouting "Slut! Bitch! Cunt!" as they assaulted her at gunpoint (Farber 65, 69). What is the difference between these two moments? In the former, it is the ensemble that calls Sapna names. She was thirteen and, at least according to present-day Sapna, was like:

> fuck that shit! And refused to be what they asked.
>
> I cut off my hair, wore super short skirts, rode a motorcycle and hung out with boys.
>
> (Farber 65)

At thirteen, then, the names hurt, but in a way that empowered Sapna to refuse such easy classification. She used the words to make herself bold. If she was already being called a whore even though she had done nothing, she had the freedom to do anything she wanted without facing worse abuse than what she was already living through. As she describes herself one year later:

> *[Three young men—played by the ensemble surround her]*
>
> At 14 I call 3 boys to drop their pants.
>
> *[They unzip]*
>
> And show me their dragon swords.
>
> I had been called a whore so early so often
>
> That being a virgin was pointless

and I dispensed with that medal in no time at all. (Farber 66)

While Sapna does not pretend that it did not hurt to be called a whore and to have the entire neighborhood regularly slinging insults at her when she was barely in her teens, she muses philosophically, "But around here—it hurts anyway/to be a girl" (Farber 67). In other words, she felt that she was going to suffer abuse for her gender regardless of how she enacted it, so she chose to enact it on what she felt to be her own terms. Her performance of self is thus a direct response to the daily experience of being sexualized by others.

Her body is, I would argue, already suffering the results of the daily experience of sexual violence when she encounters the men who are going to gang-rape her. Once again, three members of the ensemble, playing the characters of young men, surround her. Present-day Sapna describes her sense of foreboding: "Suddenly all my senses are awake./The body already knows" (Farber 69). It is as if she senses the impending violence—or, she has already experienced it in a different form. This time, it is not the ensemble that chants insults at her; it is Sapna herself who says them while telling the story of what happened to her. Watching this scene from the audience, I, too, felt an instinctive, bodily response at this moment, a sense that I knew what was coming. How much of that sense, though, came from the fact that Sapna's story was the last of five stories of horrible, gendered violence? After four such stories, of course I was prepared for a fifth. But for Sapna in that moment, before the group surrounds her chanting, "Slut! Bitch! Cunt!", before one of the men pulls a gun on her and tells her to "swallow each one of us—or you're dead!", the sense of her body anticipating what is to come can only stem from a deep-seated belief that this is what happens to women (Farber 69). While I am not trying to equate the level of violence experienced when one is called vicious, slut-shaming names to that when being gang-raped, I am arguing that both are affecting, and affecting in similar ways; both force Sapna

to view her own body as a powerless site for men to fulfill their sexual urges, as a place of shame and violence. Her body anticipates what is to come because she has lived her whole life—at least since the age of 13—anticipating it, hurting precisely because she is a woman. That all but one of the rapists are played by women adds another layer to that sense of constant, pervasive sexual violence. Slow sexual violence is not only perpetrated by men; women, too enact this everyday violence on one another.

Going back over each of these women's stories, I find the anticipation of constant, gender-based violence in each of their daily lives. I see it in the way Priyanka Bose flippantly describes the daily groping she receives on the bus, a single line shoved between stories of the family cook sexually assaulting her and a strange man at the park attempting to make out with her; in the fact that, even after her husband and his family tried to kill her, Sneha Jawale does not even contemplate returning to her own family and getting away from the danger, because life in her own family would be just as intolerable; in Rukhsar Kabir's desperate devotion to her husband for giving her a sexual awakening even as he and his mother create an atmosphere of suspicion so isolating that the only escape Rukhsar can even imagine is suicide; finally, I see it in Poorna Jagannathan's visceral description of riding the bus in Delhi and the daily experience of sexual harassment in which Poorna learns "to leave my body behind./If this body is no longer Me—/My spirit stays intact" (Farber 33). Her daily experience echoes the feelings she had when she was sexually abused so that it is no longer possible to separate her reaction to one from her reaction to the other. These are the daily stories, the slow violence woven into the brutal and visible violence. This is the reality that performance can reveal better than any other genre: the way in which this slow violence becomes inscribed on our bodies, in our identities and our habitual performances of self.

I do not want to mischaracterize the affective influence of *Nirbhaya*. I think my first reaction to the play, a sense of empathy fatigue at the horror of what I had just heard, *is* the overwhelming first response for most. Certainly, Inchley's writing about *Nirbhaya* describes such a reaction from other audiences. What I am suggesting, however, is that these daily experiences of sexual violence are there, buried beneath the horror of traumatic events, and that attending to them as the cause of a constant state of crisis allows us to read the effects of both large and small moments of sexual violence as something other than traumatic. Not a rupture in the ordinary but a part of it.

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[1] For instance, from a BBC interview with Pandey's father: "A couple of her books on neurology and neuroscience and human anatomy, both photocopied because the family couldn't afford to buy the expensive originals, have made it to the new apartment…She would always tell me not to worry about money. That she would take care of the family" ("How Life").

[2] For more on the problematics of using the Nirbhaya event as proof that India has a rape problem, see Bhaavya Sinha's polemical article "The Adverse Effects of the Western Fixation on India's 'Rape Problem.'"

[3] It is important to note that Butalia's present is not mine. Her book was published in 2000.

[4] Maggie Inchley, for example, points out that "the play's funding suggests the support of neo-liberal alliances which do not necessarily free women from sexual objectification or eliminate economic and cultural violence against them" (284).

[5] For more on this, see Veena Das's chapter "The Figure of the Abducted Woman: The Citizen as Sexed" in *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* and Urvashi Butalia's chapter "Women" in *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*.

[6] Leslee Udwin's 2015 documentary on Pandey and her murderers is titled *India's Daughter* and explores the political and discursive responses to the Delhi bus gang rape. For Udwin, it seems, the title refers to the way in which Pandey's story belonged to all of India, and to how protesters adopted her as a symbol for a larger political struggle.

Chapter 4

This, too, is Violence: Performing Slow Sexual Violence in the Vernacular of the Everyday

"If you don't want trouble then don't invite it, na? If you're going to keep an open jar of pickles in front of somebody, then they're going to want to put their fingers inside and take a little bite." –from *Thoda Dhyaan Se* (Be a Little Careful)

"To confront slow violence requires, then, that we plot and give figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time. The representational challenges are acute, requiring creative ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects" (Nixon 10).

How do we meet the representational challenge of slow sexual violence? How do we tell the stories of the ordinary and everyday in a way that makes them as compelling as the stories of the extraordinary? And how do we do this ethically, so that we are not contributing to the ongoing spectacularization of violence against women? In other words, how do we reframe sexual violence discourse such that its everyday implications are visible without romanticizing the victims of this violence as "transnational artifacts" and/or turning these incidents "into opportunistic spectacles for self-positioning or for certain political agendas?" (Hesford 105). The Nirbhaya event brought these questions to the surface for many artists, who watched with a degree of disgust as the conversation about violence against women in urban India became a conversation about a very specific type of stranger-on-stranger brutality in public space, one that demonized poverty, migrant workers, and supposedly "sex-starved" men while valorizing an uncritical embrace of the neoliberal modernity of shopping malls, upward mobility, and the

desire for a good life (where good equals economically comfortable). When I contacted artists to ask if they would do interviews with me, I quickly discovered their distaste for those who focused solely on the Nirbhaya event. Many of these artists were concerned that it had become "fashionable" to talk about rape, that those who were talking about it were not politically invested in the long-term battle against gender-based violence, and that people like me were essentially trauma tourists, voyeurs fascinated by the lurid spectacle of a brutal rape. This notion of the Delhi bus gang rape as fashionable is epitomized in the story that circulated on social media in the summer of 2014 about a fashion photo shoot entitled "The Wrong Turn," which depicted a woman alone on a bus, surrounded by a group of men. While the photographer claimed that it was not about Nirbhaya, it was clearly themed around the Delhi bus gang rape (France-Presse, Jha). This is the danger in turning sexual violence into spectacle: that it will attract attention less as a cultural or political problem to be addressed and more as a story that is strangely titillating, pleasurable to watch from the safety of temporal, locational, and/or artistic distance.

Yael Farber's *Nirbhaya* talks about the effects of the Nirbhaya event, how "in the wake of her [Jyoti Singh Pandey's] death,/Many of us began to break the silence/and speak…/Of the things that happened to each of us,/Which we never dared utter before" (Farber 7). Certainly, historically, there has been silence surrounding the issue of rape, even in feminist academic circles (Bumiller 38; Gunne and Thompson xi; Mardorossian 743). In India, specifically, rape has often been met with silence and shame. But the fact is that there are far more stories about rape and violence against women circulating in the international media than we might at first think. The problem is not exactly silence surrounding all rape, but rather a combination of silence about most rapes *and* a spectacularization of a certain kind of rape, one that is

extraordinarily violent or shocking. These include Mathura, a young tribal girl, who was raped by the police meant to be rescuing her from "kidnapping" in 1972; Thangjam Manorama, a Manipuri woman, who was raped and murdered by the Indian military in 2004 after they picked her up on suspicion that she was associated with the People's Liberation Army; and, more recently, Gudiya, a five-year-old girl who was raped and left for dead in Delhi less than six months after the Nirbhaya event; Suzette Jordan, a middle-aged woman gang raped in 2012 on Park Street in Kolkata, who chose to reveal her identity to the media in order to break the silence surrounding many rapes; and more. Every culture has these infamous cases, the stories that everyone knows. In India, for instance, the third wave of the Indian feminist movement crystallized around the Mathura rape case, which "drew national attention to women's issues and united different arms of the women's movement" (Gupta 155). It is beyond these extraordinary cases that there is silence. The more complicated stories with the less compelling victims. The women who do not feel like they can go to the police or who are ignored when they do. These are the stories that are less frequently told. But there are stories even beyond these, stories that are not told not just out of shame or fear, but because, at first glance, they do not even seem like stories at all. A look here. A touch there. The kinds of experiences women have become so accustomed to that they barely register, the experiences that are simply a part of everyday life. This is not a silence of shame, but one of habituation and acceptance. Women may feel furious or humiliated, but they have been made to feel that there is nothing to be done, that this is normal behavior for men.

This chapter examines how performers in modern urban India are articulating the relationship between sexual violence and the everyday. More specifically, it compares two performances: one that presents examples of the daily experience of slow sexual violence, from

catcalls and staring to inappropriate touch, and one that avoids the topic of sexual assault altogether, choosing instead to examine how the constant fear of sexual assault performs its own kind of slow violence, one that can only be seen in its affective resonances. The first, *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai* (*This, Too, is Violence)*, is a 2013 revival of a 2005 street theater piece created by the Delhi-based street theater group Jana Natya Manch. Through a collage of short scenes, the play details the daily acts of slow sexual violence with which women in urban India must contend.

In the second, a 2013 one-woman show, *Thoda Dhyaan Se* by Mallika Taneja, one woman discusses the implications of "being careful" while getting dressed to go out into the world. For the women of Farber's *Nirbhaya*, the memory of the extreme violence they suffered lives with them every day, particularly as they perform their stories for audiences around the world. Similarly, for Taneja, the anticipation of the violence she *might* experience in the future haunts her. Her concern with being careful, with doing whatever she can to prevent this future violence, infuses not just the individual experiences of the character she is playing, but the collective language about and expectations of young women in public space. The daily fear of being raped colors every decision that she makes, often on an affective level that is not always immediately obvious.

The Nirbhaya event brought some of this affective resonance to the surface, infusing it with a political meaning that felt like it had already been present. What I will do in this chapter is detail the two different kinds of slow sexual violence found in performative responses to the Nirbhaya event and how this kind of violence creates certain affective responses in the bodies of the women experiencing them. *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai* highlights the slow violence of the small acts of sexual violence that seem ordinary and unremarkable in comparison with rape. *Thoda Dhyaan Se* captures the slow sexual violence caused by the daily and constant fear of being raped. These

two forms of slow violence amplify one another, creating a self-reinforcing loop in which a woman's experience of one automatically triggers her past experiences of the other, dragging them back into the present. Both performances detail the political importance of attending to slow sexual violence and show how performance as a medium is particularly well equipped to address the representational problem of this kind of violence.

Street Theater and The Ambiguity of Slow Violence

We are standing on a concrete road set between two buildings at Ambedkar University in Delhi. It is a hot day in April and I have just arrived after getting horribly lost in the streets of Old Delhi, where, apparently, there are so many universities that asking for directions to one could send you off in any direction. I am lucky to have found Ambedkar at all. From the metro I was sent off in exactly the wrong direction. A man walking the same way I was insisted that he knew the way and that I should follow him. Ten minutes later we were on a dusty strip of road with nothing but a petrol station in sight, and I began to grow suspicious. I asked the next auto rickshaw driver who passed where Ambedkar University was and he offered to take me—after he filled up on petrol. It is so difficult to know when your feelings of disquiet about the way a man is treating you on the street are justified and when they are not, whether I should distrust the man walking next to me or the auto rickshaw driver or neither. As I climbed into the rickshaw, the man walking next to me tried to insist on getting in the auto rickshaw with me to "escort" me to the University. I declined. He ignored me and tried to sit down next to me. The auto rickshaw driver shouted him away. We waited in line for petrol for ten minutes before finally heading back in the direction I had walked. The auto driver turned out not to know where he was going

either, but he enthusiastically asked anyone we passed and, with a few unnecessary side trips, we finally made it to Ambedkar University.

I include this story because it so perfectly frames the play I was going to see at Ambedkar University. The sense of confusion as to whether either the man who guided me or the driver had ill intentions toward me because of my gender is typical of the kinds of behaviors the play labels as violence. It is so easy to doubt oneself in those situations, to think that you are being impolite or even paranoid to feel discomfort. Women in these situations are constantly analyzing the risks of the choices they make in public space, both in terms of what might be done to their bodies and what they might be held responsible for later. They have also been conditioned to be nice, accommodating, to avoid causing a scene (Bielski). At the same time, they are expected to fight back tooth and nail the moment they are threatened with sexual violence. How does one negotiate these contradictions? I recognize that, as a white woman working in India, my answer to this question may be different from that of my Indian friends and colleagues, but I found the irony of my situation—being faced with the question of whether I was being harassed while trying to attend a performance that addressed exactly these kinds of behaviors as sexual and gender violence—telling. While it is entirely possible that both men I encountered on the way to Ambedkar University were well-intentioned, focused on trying to help me find my way, there is no way to be certain. And with that uncertainty comes fear of both these men's intentions and of the vulnerability of one's own body. What happens when we demand that people see the potential gender violence embedded in situations like this one?

I met up with some of the members of the street theater group Jana Natya Manch (Janam) outside the canteen. Two female undergraduate students had invited Janam to come perform their play, *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai*, as part of a school project on activism. A loose translation of *Yeh Bhi*

Hinsa Hai (heretofore *YBHH*) is, "this, too, is violence." *YBHH* is a twenty-minute street-play developed by Janam in 2005 in response to another rape case. However, one of the group's leaders, Sudhanva Deshpande, felt that something was missing from the play, that it was not really working as well as it could (Deshpande, Interview). The play was put away relatively quickly, as Janam is constantly generating new material about timely issues, until the Nirbhaya event happened. A few months after the event, Janam decided to revive *YBHH* in response. They made a few modifications, most notably including male characters marked by upper-, middle-, and lower-class backgrounds in order to generate discussion about how our perceptions of class affect our interpretations of moments of potential sexual violence.[1] This time, Deshpande recalls, the piece felt right, both as art and as urgent commentary on the repercussions of the Nirbhaya event (Deshpande, Interview).

Janam performed *YBHH* all over Delhi over the next few months, in rich neighborhoods and poor ones, for students and laborers, housewives and children. Because of the nature of street theater, the message of the play was made as clear and concise as possible. The group had twenty minutes to capture and keep an audience's attention and make their point: that there is violence in many actions that seem perfectly normal. Many of the actions of the play are obvious instances of violence: hitting a female family member for not living up to expectations, beating and raping a woman who refuses a man's sexual advances. But others are quite subtle. For instance, how might traditional expectations in a marriage potentially enact violence?

Street theater is predicated on the idea that the best way to reach people is to interrupt their daily lives and routines, catching their attention as they pass on the street. It uses the spectacle of performance as a means of entering into a discussion of the ordinary with the people passing by. As Arjun Ghosh writes, "the group has to gather together an audience that did not

plan to view, has little formal theatre experience or etiquette, and has to be moved to stay for the duration only through the power of theatre" (78). Street theater's central challenge, then, is to figure out how to be both spectacular enough to draw attention and relatable enough to keep that attention. In other words, street theater simultaneously engages the ordinary and the extraordinary, intertwining both to make a political point. It is thus, I argue, more ideologically aligned in its form with a belief that sexual violence is an everyday and ordinary event. Janam is masterful at embracing the ideologies embedded in street theater as a form, and this is perhaps why they have been so successful and long-lived as a group.

Janam was one of a multitude of street theater groups that created performances in response to the Nirbhaya event. For instance, the popular training ground for young actors in Delhi, Asmita Theater Group, headed by Delhi-based director Arvind Gaur, created the street-play *Dastak* (Knocking). But whereas *YBHH* leans into the everydayness of street theater, *Dastak* focuses on exactly the kind of extraordinary violence that the Nirbhaya event highlighted. A young woman is pulled into the middle of a circle of men and attacked as she screams, while all the other women huddle outside the circle with their heads in their hands. I saw the play performed as part of a day-long One Billion Rising event on February 14, 2016 in Central Park at Connaught Place in New Delhi. While it was performed on a stage instead of in the street, its origin as street theater still undergirded the play's structure. It was a powerful piece, primarily because of the sheer number of performers (there were at least 50 bodies moving in unison on that stage), but it still came nowhere near Janam's analytical depth and subtlety in dealing with the issue of sexual violence. Rather, *Dastak* relied on the spectacle of so many bodies moving in unison and spectacularized violence to make its point, and in so doing it offered a representation of rapists as "existing in a 'subhuman world beyond ethics and beyond salvation'" (Grehan 11).

Because the rape seemed extraordinary, outside of the usual, it was easier to imagine the rapists themselves as abnormal, inhuman and thus unreachable and incapable of changing their behavior toward women. In other words, one left the play feeling disturbed and upset that such violence happens in the world, but helpless to do anything to stop such criminal acts.

In *YBHH*, on the other hand, Janam focuses on using street theater to expand our definitions of what counts as sexual violence to encompass everyday and routine acts. *YBHH* turns these small acts into spectacles without spectacularizing them, and thus empowers spectators (the majority of whom have most likely been either victims or perpetrators of such violence) to critically analyze, and possibly even change, their own behaviors.

Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai (This, too, is Violence) **and Everyday Acts of Sexual Violence**

Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai opens with slow, deep drumbeats as three actors walk in ritualized unison into the playing space. In quick vignettes, they portray three stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In the first, Indra, the king of the gods, seduces Ahalya, who is said to be the most beautiful woman—and who is already married. When Ahalya's husband Gautama discovers her infidelity, he curses her to become a stone. Since the majority of Janam's audiences would be familiar with this story (and the two subsequent ones), the performers reference the story in three, lyrical and poetic lines: "It was Indra's sin/It was Gautama's curse/which caused Ahalya to turn to stone/*That* too was violence."[2] For following her desire, Ahalya is severely punished. The second story they reference is also from the Ramayana. In this myth, Sita must pass through fire in order to demonstrate her purity to her husband Ram after he has rescued her from her abductor the demon Ravana. "*That* too was violence." Crucially, here, the violence being discussed is not the obvious violence of abduction, but rather Ram's distrust

of Sita. It is Sita who chooses to pass through the fire because Ram refuses to believe Sita's claim that she resided with Ravana without having some sort of physically intimate relationship with him (whether consensual or not). Distraught that the man she loves does not believe her, she puts herself through the dangerous ordeal of trial by fire in an attempt to prove the veracity of her words. This distrust, then, is the violence to which Janam is referring. The third story is from the Mahabharata. In it, Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandava brothers is dragged before the court of their enemies who try to strip her of her sari. She appeals to the god Krishna to protect her, and he makes her sari endless, so that no matter how much fabric is removed, she is still clothed. "*That* too was violence." The background to this story, too, is important to understanding the violence Janam is highlighting. The reason Dushasana felt he had the right to unclothe Draupadi in public was that one of her husbands had gambled her in a game of dice and lost. Duryodhana, having won, summons Draupadi to court and she refuses to appear, claiming her husband had no right to use her as a wager in the first place. Duryodhana wants revenge on Draupadi for an earlier humiliation in the Pandava's home, so he orders Dushasana to fetch her and then to unclothe her before the court. Wrapped up in this story is the question of women's ownership of their own bodies, of property in marital relationships, and of the morality of a woman with five husbands. The violence enacted against Draupadi is not only physical but also a violence of slut-shaming, of claiming her body as an object to be bought and sold.

Rob Nixon emphasizes the importance of temporality to the concept of slow violence, noting that one of the reasons it is so insidious is that it operates on a longer timescale, changing so gradually that it "is decoupled from its original causes by the workings of time" (11). By beginning with a reference to foundational Hindu mythology, *YBHH* is framing a discussion of violence within a long history of slow violence and asking its spectators to see how accepting

this mythology without a critical lens can perpetuate certain gendered expectations that continue to do a kind of violence. I want to be very clear here: I am not saying that violence against women is necessarily a part of Hinduism; rather, I am suggesting that the representation of incidents of violence against women in Hindu mythology without a critical analysis of how these myths create certain gendered expectations leaves space for these myths to enact violence over time. Opening with incidents of violence against women from Hindu mythology, Janam insists on violence against women as a long-term problem, not a new and modern one brought on by the evils of contemporary urban life.

Janam is not the only group whose work in response to the Nirbhaya event references the gender violence in Hindu mythology. Rasika Agashe's Hindi play *Museum of Species in Danger* and Sohag Sen's Bangla play *Haaye Haaya!* (Shame, Shame!) both reference similar myths from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The former tells the story of Surpanakha, the demon sister of Ravana, who expresses her attraction to Ram and his brother Lakshman. They mock her and in her humiliation and jealousy, she attacks Sita. In response, Lakshman cuts off her nose. The latter play uses the same story of Draupadi's sari, except that in Sen's version, it concludes with Draupadi, instead of praying to Krishna, breaking the fourth wall and berating the audience for not intervening in the violent incident. Strikingly, Sen concludes the play with a projection of a volcano exploding, a visual metaphor for what she sees happening with the issue of violence against women. In an interview, she told me that the pressure of so much violence will eventually cause an eruption in society, that just like the volcano, nature will ultimately have her revenge (Sen). That Sen turns to the environment for a visual representation of violence against women is no coincidence; like Nixon, she is looking for the appropriate representation for the violence she sees in everyday life. The volcano as a metaphor for violence against women also

emphasizes the accretional nature of this violence. It builds up in pressure over time until the explosion occurs (in this case, the Nirbhaya event could be read as just such an explosion).

The second scene of *YBHH* moves to the modern-day and the issue of staring. We are introduced to three men, each occupying a different class position, from the vice chairman of a global investment corporation to a car windshield-cleaner. We are also introduced to three women: a girl selling flowers on the street, a woman trying to catch an auto-rickshaw, and a woman driving a car. The fact that these characters occupy different class positions was one of the most important modifications Janam made to *YBHH* when they revived it in 2013. Concerned about the way in which the Nirbhaya event had been used to demonize migrant workers, Deshpande and his fellow performers wanted to emphasize that the perpetrators of violence against women can (and do) come from all socioeconomic backgrounds—as do their victims (Deshpande). Once the narrator has briefly introduced each of these characters, the men turn their backs for a moment and when they turn again to face the audience, they are wearing glasses with giant staring eyes painted onto the lenses. "We will stare. We will stare. We will ogle. We will ogle," they sing and dance in unison, gesturing lewdly with their hands held down by their pelvises, clasped into the symbol for a gun. The sheer enjoyment the men get, not only from staring, but from the object of their gaze's obvious discomfort is somehow funny and highly disturbing at the same time. It is easy to excuse the men's behavior as potentially immature or disrespectful and their ridiculous singing and dancing adds to the sense that this is an action we should not take seriously. As the men exit, the two female actors step forward and discuss what they have just seen, concluding, in sharply sarcastic voices, "they're only looking, not touching. It wasn't rape…staring is not violence is it? No, no, no, not at all."

Certainly, at the extreme, it is easy to see how staring might do a kind of violence, how "it can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other" (Mulvey 17). But that is not Janam's point. Rather, they are clearly mocking those who would argue that staring should not be taken seriously as an act of sexual violence, that it is a "fundamental right" as one of the men wearing staring glasses proclaims loudly. Certainly, walking the streets in urban India, staring is a part of daily life. Both men and women stare, and anyone might be a subject of their gaze. However, this is where the underlying structural aspects of sexual violence are so critical to defining what counts as violence and what does not. If we are unable to recognize the structural inequalities that lie at the heart of what seem at first to be harmless acts, then we may be blind to why these acts are, indeed, violent. As Laura Mulvey writes, "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (19). In other words, the female is always-already the object of the gaze instead of the subject of her own life and this objectification does a kind of violence, stripping the female of her agency. And this happens *because* of the underlying structural violence of sexual imbalance. While Mulvey's larger argument applies strictly to the world of cinema, this particular piece of her analysis applies to daily life anywhere in which this sexual imbalance exists—which means essentially everywhere.

But staring in *YBHH* is more than just the violence of the active male fetishizing the image of the passive female. It becomes imbricated in a larger discussion of the "ideal Indian woman": what she wears, how she carries herself, where she goes in public and why she is going there.[3] This is a point that both *YBHH* and *Thoda Dhyaan Se* will emphasize: the stare is not only violent for its potential to fetishize and sexualize women; it is also an instrument of judgment, a

way of making women uncomfortable with what they are wearing or where they are going, and finally of blaming them for attracting the attention of that stare in the first place. Such blame creates a cycle in which women police their own behaviors in order to avoid potential violence, learning to fear their own bodily desires just as much as they fear the potential for bodily harm (Cahill 157). This argument that the expectations placed on women are themselves a kind of violence is the focus of the third scene of *YBHH*, which takes place in a fantasy "marriage market."

The scene opens with a salesman bragging about the many types of women he has available. A potential client, Mr. So-and-so, enters looking for a wife. The salesman asks him his income and then shows him his options. The first is the marriage market's "latest model". Out struts a woman (played by a male actor) wearing a bright red bra and skirt, a baby pink cowboy hat, and a feather boa. The salesman details her many attributes—all entirely about her looks: "Look at her oomph. Is she not hot? Is she not inviting?" Mr. So-and-so follows on her heels, his hands held up, palms out, as if to cup her breasts or buttocks. When the salesman asks if he would like to touch her—"She won't mind. She's a sport."—Mr. So-and-so agrees enthusiastically, walks up, and touches the top of her breasts. There is a sizzling sound and he falls back, stunned by her hotness. The salesman then describes her consumer needs. After all, she is a modern woman, and she will require a fancy car, deluxe hotel rooms, and expensive clothes. Mr. So-and-so is carried away with lust, but not so much that he does not begin to imagine what having her as a wife would be like. When he realizes that she will be taking care of his family, that they will be having children together, he balks: "She is perfect for a girlfriend but as a wife, no no no!"

The salesman brings out the next potential wife, the "retro model." She has a scarf wrapped completely over her head, hiding her hair and face, and she is bent nearly in two, rushing to kiss the feet of Mr. So-and-so. The salesman touts her abilities as a homemaker, to cook, clean, and take care of the family. Mr. So-and-so briefly considers this before objecting, "can I take her to parties? Can she meet my friends? After all, there should be some romance to life as well. She's perfect for housework but as a wife, no no no!" Instead, he asks if it is possible to get a mix of the two women, and out walks "Woman Number One." As the whole cast of the show steps forward to describe her virtues, "number one in sex, number one in housework, number one wife, number one mother, number one daughter," etc., she dances proudly in the center, a smile on her face. However, as the virtues she is expected to embody multiply, she begins to bow under the pressure of these expectations until she has been pushed into a crouching position with the weight of the roles she is expected to play. She forces herself back to her feet, just in time to be met with all the ways in which she has failed to embody the virtues expected of her, from not ironing her son's jeans to being out too late at night. The other actors take turns expressing their disappointment and punctuate their complaints by hitting her in the face. Finally, she can take no more and again falls into a crouch. Like the violence of staring, it is easy to see how the often-contradictory expectations placed on women to be both perfectly traditional and perfectly modern can escalate from structural to physical violence.

The marriage market transitions into a scene in which a man who thinks he is a Bollywood-style hero beats and rapes a young woman. I am not describing it in greater detail here, because its significance is not primarily in the way it represents yet another brutal rape; rather, it recontextualizes the previous scenes, asking us to see how all of these acts of violence against women, no matter their size, reinforce one another, creating an environment in which

violence has become ordinary. After the rape, the other actors offer their opinions about it. It is hard to remember that this play was actually created years before the Nirbhaya event, because what they say matches news coverage of the event nearly word for word:

> "Well you know…I'm not trying to blame the victim, but if she didn't resist, then it wouldn't have been so brutal."
>
> "You see the problem is that the city is full of slums. And the slums are full of migrants. Crime will happen."
>
> "Right now on our channel, watch a conversation with this case's medical expert. After the break you will see a dramatic reconstruction of what actually happened. So stay with us."

All the actors leave the playing space except for the two women, who leave the audience with a final call to action. Their message: violence happens everywhere, all the time, and there is no excuse for it. It is time to put a stop to it. On that note, the play ends and the audience is invited into a conversation with the actors about what they have seen.

This, too, is violence. What happens when we are asked to see the smallest of behaviors that create gender inequality as forms of violence? Janam's play emphasizes the systemic foundation of violence against women and in so doing, assigns both individual and collective responsibility to those who see *YBHH* to begin working on those systems by attending to the small, the slow, and the everyday. If staring is identified as a potentially violent act alongside the violent act of rape, then nearly every man is guilty of violence against women. If placing unrealistic expectations upon a female family member to live up to both the ideals of tradition and modernity is an act of violence, then we are *all* guilty of it at one point or another. By

shifting our understanding of violence to include these acts, Janam insists on our collective responsibility, but also our individual agency in addressing violence in all its many forms.

Finding Slow Violence in Embodied Affect in *Thoda Dhyaan Se (Be a Little Careful)* [4]

Mallika Taneja stands in a white bra and light pink panties at the front of a lecture hall filled with 150 undergraduate students at Shiv Nadar University on January 20, 2016. Behind her an assortment of colorful garments—scarves, tops, shorts, a dress, socks, a pair of sneakers—hang from a makeshift clothing rack and a chair. Over the course of the performance, as she delivers a breathless monologue on the importance of being careful and taking responsibility for one's own safety in public, she will pile these clothes onto her body, piece by piece. By the end, she will be wearing so many layers that it is difficult to make out that there is a body at all underneath all the clothes. A motorcycle helmet will cover her head. She will have sunglasses over her eyes. Multiple layers of socks will cover both her hands and her feet. From a young woman wearing practically nothing, she will have transformed into a misshapen lump, barely identifiable as human.

But we are still at the beginning now. The lighting is harsh and fluorescent, spilling out onto the students in the audience who have taken every available chair and, for those who did not arrive early enough, folded themselves into the leftover floor space. Taneja stands in silence for more than five minutes, shifting her weight occasionally or turning to the side so we can see her in profile. She leaves her face carefully neutral for most of this time, meeting the eyes of those who look at her, refusing to let the gaze go in only one direction, but hiding her own feelings about being looked at. "I see you seeing me," her eyes seem to say. "I see those of you who are afraid to make eye contact, who cough uncomfortably, who cannot quite hide your laughter

behind your hands." When she is standing in her underwear (or nude), Taneja has said that she feels that "mine is the most powerful body in the room" ((S. Anand). She pulls her hair back from her face in an elastic band and finally begins to speak: "*Thoda dhyaan se rehana chahiye.* You have to be a little careful. You know, times are bad. When you know times are bad, just be a little careful. *Bas*. That's all." [5]

While this is the first time I have seen Taneja's show *Thoda Dhyaan Se (Be a Little Careful)*, she has been performing it for three years in both India and Europe. Her first performance was with her theater collective, Tadpole Repertory Theatre, in a basement in Delhi as part of a show called NDLS, which Tadpole describes as a series of sketches about what it is to live in Delhi, "a series of possibilities for the movement of people in the metro: in local shops and public parks, within the circles of the centre, in the water closets of the class war, not to mention the spawning pools of the hip and the happening" ("NDLS"). From the beginning, then, *Thoda Dhyaan Se* was imagined as a part of understanding the way people move through the city. Since that first performance, Taneja has performed in various settings, from friends' homes to schools, indoor and outdoor protests held in auditoriums or in officially sanctioned protest spaces like Delhi's Jantar Mantar, and festivals such as Zurich's Theater Spektakel in 2015 and the International Theatre Festival of Kerala in 2016 ("ZKB").

It was at the festival in Kerala that Taneja made a decision to begin the performance completely nude. While she had already performed *Thoda Dhyaan Se* this way in Europe and in people's homes, where she had complete control over the guest list, she had never done so in public in India. I interviewed her shortly before the Kerala performance, and she emphasized how important it was to her that the body that starts on stage be completely uncoded, something that she did not feel she could accomplish in a bra and underwear, which have clear class, taste,

and generational connotations based on cut and fabric. Taneja wanted her body to stand in for any and every woman's body. While she was not under the illusion that even her naked body could be completely unmarked, her confident, calm demeanor while nude stands in stark contrast to the character Taneja becomes as soon as she begins speaking, one who is clearly upper-middle class and burdened by the weight of people looking at and judging her. From talking about the kind of man she likes to look at her (one who is wearing a suit and tie) to talking about her job at an office or shopping at the mall, Taneja's character is clearly privileged—even spoiled. One audience member seeing the show for the first time—an actress who works a multitude of odd jobs in order to scrape together enough for rent on a one-room flat in Delhi that she and her mother share—complained that no one in her community would talk in such a way, that Taneja was essentially preaching to the already-converted—and also ignoring the problem of how different a woman's daily experience of the city is if she is not so privileged. And yet, what the character captures is how easy it is to believe that privilege protects women from the constant fear of sexual violence while simultaneously allowing them to displace these fears onto the stranger who is always-already marked as crudely lower-class. By starting in the nude—while she cannot completely remove all class and cultural markers from her body—Taneja attempts to make her body stand in for any other female body, while also asking audience members to project their own assumptions about the naked female body onto hers.

The nude female body has a strong presence in Indian feminist history and the global history of feminist performance art. For instance, as discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two, the 2004 rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama by the Indian Army in the northeastern state of Manipur led to large-scale protests in Delhi and Manipur, most famously including a group of Manipuri women parading through the streets naked and demanding, "Indian Army, Rape Us."

Certainly, any public nudity, particularly when it can be read as a challenge to the authority of the Indian state, cannot help but invoke this famous image. But whereas the Manipuri women demand with rage that the Indian army (and therefore the Indian state) take responsibility for the sexual violence it has perpetrated, Taneja's piece is part of a different set of demands, one rooted in the post-Delhi bus gang rape cultural moment, and in a belief that asking 'who is responsible?' most frequently leads to pinning responsibility on the victim. The Manipuri women's naked bodies are weapons; the spectacle of their nudity drew international media attention and, like Draupadi in the famous Mahasweta Devi short story, their nudity accused, demanding that the men who had wronged them take visible and public responsibility for their actions:

> 'What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man….There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me.' Draupadi pushes Senayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid. (Spivak, *In Other Worlds* 196)

When faced with the bodies of the women they have wronged, these men are forced to come to terms with the inescapable evidence of their own culpability in state-sanctioned violence. The brutalized female body becomes a horrible accusation of these men's wrongdoings. Taneja's nudity, on the other hand, while it does give her power over the room, is not a weapon, nor is it intended to be a spectacle. Rather, the long minutes where she stands in front of her audience, nude and as "uncoded" (her word) as she can make herself, allow her spectators to become inured to the sight. Her naked body is natural, unremarkable. The spectacle, instead, is when she buries her body in layers and layers of clothing. That is the brutality that her body must suffer.

Being naked in public in India for the first time, Taneja was concerned that she might be arrested, that audience members might create a disturbance, and that images of her nude body might be circulated without her permission. The festival staff in Kerala—the first time she performed completely nude instead of in a bra and panties—confiscated the phones of all audience members as they entered the space, returning them at the end of the performance. Taneja asked friends of hers who were attending the festival to sit close to the stage, essentially forming a ring of protection in case the audience reacted poorly. Later she would report back to me that these were unnecessary precautions, that even though the audience was predominantly male, they seemed respectful and engaged in the performance. It is here that I see Taneja's piece as part of a larger movement in contemporary feminist performance to replace what Jasmeen Patheja, the founder and creative director of the feminist public art group *Blank Noise*, calls a "politics of fear" with a "politics of trust" (Patheja). Telling women to "be careful" before they go out (as Taneja's character's father does), and suggesting that what they wear might make them more or less likely to experience sexual violence is a perfect example of the "politics of fear."[6] So when Mallika Taneja walks on stage naked, she is embodying trust in her audience, trust that no one will call the police to have her arrested, trust that her nudity will not become a spectacle in exactly the way she is trying to avoid, trust that no one will take pictures with their cell phone and later use them to harass her (since the Kerala performance, she has stopped confiscating people's phones at the beginning of the show), trust that no one will accuse her of "asking for it."

When talking about how she created the piece, Taneja describes reading a newspaper article questioning what the victim was wearing in the Mumbai Shakti Mills gang rape case:[7] "it triggered something in me….There wasn't so much planning or anything…Because it really sort

of came out of an urgency. There was an urgency to it. And there was a reaction at a very gut level which found itself as this piece" (Taneja). This gut level feeling led Taneja to investigate her own affective response to the constant stories of extraordinary violence against women that were circulating in the media in the wake of the Nirbhaya event. These stories were affecting something deep inside her, and they led to a desire to turn inwards, to understand what that something was. Here, I find Kathleen Stewart's theorizing of ordinary affects particularly helpful to understanding how Taneja's gut sense of urgency coalesced around a story not of extraordinary violence but of crisis ordinariness and why it is so urgent that we attend to these ordinary events. Stewart describes ordinary affects as "rooted not in fixed conditions of possibility but in the actual lines of potential that a *something* coming together calls to mind and sets in motion, they can be seen as both the pressure points of events or banalities suffered…" (2). What Taneja is performing is a body's response to such ordinary affects, a potential way in which they come together within an individual woman's experiences of both the spectacular and the banal. When it comes to understanding slow sexual violence and to making it politically compelling, one must figure out how to embody ordinary affect, demonstrate how what is happening inside the body is shaped by the outside and vice versa, even as these influences are constantly shifting and changing.

This lack of something to hold onto, an object that can be named and categorized, is at the heart of the representational problem of slow violence. Near the beginning of her piece, Taneja compares getting dressed to go out into the street in India to getting dressed anywhere else in the world:

> You know every place wherever you go, it has a, you know, atmosphere. You just have to understand that atmosphere and work according to that. Like if you go to Canada. What

> is the atmosphere of Canada? It's cold. So if it's cold what are you going to do? You're going to wear a sweater. That's it. Why are you going to wear a sweater? So that you don't fall ill. So that you are ok, right? So that you are not sneezing. So if you don't want to catch a cold that's around in the atmosphere, just keep yourself a little warm. That's it. (Taneja, *Thoda Dhyaan Se*)

It is not weather that is causing her to put on so many layers of clothing, but rather a desire to avoid being noticed in the "wrong" way by men on the street. In other words, the clothes become a representation of the constant weight of the male gaze and the body's response to that gaze. They are a way of making the door, and other nearly-invisible instruments of violence against women, physically and emotionally compelling. We see their constant effect on the body. While we have never seen a woman dressed quite like Taneja is by the end of *Thoda Dhyaan Se*, all women are familiar with the constant reminders, spoken and unspoken—both in India and in the United States—to be aware of how much skin one is showing in public and whether it is appropriate for the places through which we will be moving.[8] "Appropriate," of course, is a coded way of suggesting that one dress for the particular (cultural) climate one is entering. Otherwise, the potential is there that a woman might attract attention and that such attention could put her body at risk.

This emphasis on the importance of not standing out is central to Taneja's character's strategy for clothing as well. As she puts it,

> This is for your own good really. If they are not able to say anything about you. You know. If they are not able to know anything about you…that's it, that's all you need. You see basically the point is you don't have to attract too much attention to yourself. Keep your volume low…keep your eyes low, keep everything low…so that you're safe…If

> nobody's able to say anything about you then nobody can do anything to you. If nobody can do anything to you then you're safe. There's a problem solved (Taneja, *Thoda Dhyaan Se*).

This idea that the safest way for women to move through the world is to attract as little attention as possible is part of a theory of rape in which,

> the threat of rape…is a constitutive and sustained moment in the production of the distinctly feminine body. It is the pervasive danger that renders so much public space off-limits, a danger so omnipresent, in fact, that the 'safety zone' women attempt to create rarely exceeds the limits of their own limbs and quite often falls far short of that radius. (Cahill 161)

Women limit their own movement, not just in terms of where they go, but in terms of how big and loud they allow themselves to live. *Thoda Dhyaan Se* concludes with a breathless and smothered-in-clothes Taneja saying, "The point is that at the end of the day…when something does happen to you, then at least you can say it wasn't your fault" (Taneja, *Thoda Dhyaan Se*). This then, is the other arm of slow sexual violence—not only do women face regular small acts of sexual violence like those demonstrated in *YBHH*, but they are also haunted by the constant fear of rape. It affects every move a woman makes, how she physicalizes her own individual personality, and how she understands what it means to be a woman. She may not be conscious of this process, just as the character Taneja plays is not, but she still acts according to its influence. This theory is a hard one to see in action or articulate, particularly because any individual woman may say that she is not afraid of rape, that this theory clearly does not apply to her. However, by ironically comparing the ways in which a woman is careful in order to avoid sexual assault to the ways in which a person might cope with a cold climate, Taneja effectively dismantles this

objection. While some might say that the cold climate does not affect them—and certainly, the cold affects different people to different degrees—all are capable of dying of hypothermia if they stay out too long in below freezing temperatures without the proper protection. The inevitability of sexual violence is an affect that permeates what it means to be a woman, even as it does so in "fractious, multiplicitous, and unpredictable" ways (Stewart 3). The image of Taneja at the end of the performance, every inch of skin covered in multiple layers of clothing, her slender shape completely obscured, is intended to be absurd, a hyperbolic rendering of the affect of the well-intentioned caution, "be a little careful" on women's bodies.

Cahill takes her theory of rape one step farther in terms of the way in which it affects a woman's bodily comportment, arguing that,

> In acquiring the bodily habits that render the subject 'feminine,' habits that are inculcated at a young age and then constantly redefined and maintained, the woman learns to accept her body as dangerous, willful, fragile, and hostile. *It* constantly poses the possibility of threat, and only persistent vigilance can limit the risk at which it places the woman. The production of such a body reflects and supports a status quo that refuses, in the particular case of sexual assault, to consider the victim innocent until proven guilty; rather, the opposite is assumed. (161)

The fear of bodily desire and the fear of the potential harm that could be done to that body—whether because it had desires or for another reason altogether—become mixed up in one another until it is nearly impossible to tease the two apart. The body, itself, becomes not just the site, but the cause of threat. In particular, the *desiring* body becomes the cause of threat. *Thoda Dhyaan Se* captures exactly the affective response to this constant awareness of one's own body as the cause of threat. Rather than look outside herself for danger, Taneja's character polices her

body, taming it under layers and layers of clothing in the hopes of assuaging her own guilt at her body's vulnerability.

One of the things I find most striking about Taneja's piece is the way she plays with her character's inability to articulate her feelings about this sense of responsibility. The audience cannot help but laugh when Taneja starts stumbling over her words, and running out of breath as she discusses the importance of responsibility:

> Now you see these guys? You know they are not taking responsibility for anything. So now if they are not taking responsibility for anything, and then nobody is taking responsibility for the responsibility. So now if no one is going to be responsible, and then you are also not responsible for anything, and they are also not responsible for anything, and nobody in the world is responsible for anything, then what is going to happen to the responsibility that is just flying around in the air? (*Thoda Dhyaan Se*)

In each repetition of responsibility, it means something slightly different, though it sounds like she is just caught in her own repeating loop, unable to move on, finish a sentence, complete a meaning. What are the "guys" meant to take responsibility for? Who is ultimately responsible for making sure that others act responsibly? How is it different for a woman to take on the responsibility herself for making sure that no one sexually assaults her rather than a man taking responsibility for not sexually assaulting someone else? Both are about trying to control one's own body, but the former includes the responsibility for the behavior of other bodies. It's hard to tell what Taneja is talking about as she tries to get this point out, struggling at the same time to pull a dress over her head. Much of the line is muffled as she remains trapped halfway into the dress, her head stuck in its bodice. This sequence always gets a lot of laughs, but I am interested in the desperate attempt to give words to something for which, perhaps, there are no words.

Taneja's character's inarticulateness and looping back over and over to the same idea as she layers clothing over and over the same already-covered skin seems at first to parallel almost exactly the impossibility of articulating trauma. And yet, they are not the same. This is not a call to "break the silence" as Farber's *Nirbhaya* was, or a critique of the fact that victims of sexual assault are expected to "provide clear, exact accounts, failing which their inconsistencies of speech and story are taken as further proof that that which they name does not exist" (S. Mitra 388). There is no objective truth underlying Taneja's character's struggle. Instead, her looping inarticulateness is an attempt to capture an affect that is deeply personal even as it exists as a public feeling, to show in the way a body moves something that operates on a temporal scale that is difficult to fully comprehend. Responsibility for what? By whom? In what circumstances? Taneja's body reveals what her words cannot, providing clarity as to who her character believes is responsible at every level (even as it mocks the ludicrousness of this belief): herself. The irony of Taneja's character's cluelessness cuts deeply, for, on the one hand, the performance helps us to follow this character's beliefs to their logical (and ludicrous) conclusion, but on the other, they are beliefs that permeate much of the national and international discourse on rape.

This is not the only time Taneja emphasizes how difficult it is to use language to describe the "atmosphere" over which she is trying to take some control. Desire is just as hard to put into language. In another section, Taneja has to resort to tone of voice to demonstrate the difference between a stare loaded with sexual menace and an enjoyable glance from a strange man: "I like it when men look at me. I mean um all girls like it, no? But I don't want men to look at me like that. If I want men to look at me, I want men to look at me like *that*." I saw this performance twice live and twice video-taped, twice in Hindi and twice in English, and in every one, this particular line is obvious to everyone who listens to it. We all think we know what she means by

the first "that" versus the second "that": something about identity of the man looking, whether Taneja's character desires him and thus welcomes his look. However, are we picturing the same thing in our heads, substituting the same meaning for each "that" as one another, or does it mean something different to each of us? And how do we begin articulating it? Can we not, then, begin to see Taneja's struggle to articulate the difference between the kind of male gaze she likes and the kind she does not as a micro-enactment of the (impossible to fully articulate) affective force of slow violence? Because she has not been given the language or the permission to talk about what she *does* want, all she can do is react to male desire, either positively or negatively.

Conclusion

Performance allows artists like Janam and Taneja to embody the idea of slow sexual violence, either by pointing to acts that might constitute sexual violence, as in *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai* or by performing the potential effects of sexual violence on a woman's body, as in *Thoda Dhyaan Se.* Both Janam and Taneja, however, are aware that a radical politics that addresses sexual violence as a cultural problem requiring collectively enacted strategies for change must do much more than simply make the crisis ordinariness of sexual violence visible.[9] While I have chosen here to discuss their performances that highlight slow sexual violence in its many forms, they are also deeply invested in works that attempt to change the space of the city on both the level of culture and that of policy. These include Janam's "Saadhe Nau ki Aakhri Bus" (Last Bus at 9:30), a performative protest in which the group organized as many people as possible to meet at one central location and ride the last bus home, singing songs, sharing stories, and engaging other passengers in conversation about the accessibility of public transit, particularly later in the evening; and Taneja's regularly organized twelve hour walks through Delhi, which begin at

midnight. Advertised through Facebook, some of the walks are women-specific and some are not. The point, for Taneja, is to interact with the city differently, to see it from the perspective of someone walking, and at a time when the middle and upper classes are not out in the streets. These projects as well, can be read as a response to the Delhi bus gang rape, calling attention to the ways in which we move through the city, the problems of accessibility, and the privileges certain classes take for granted. For Janam and Taneja both, addressing the problem of slow sexual violence is one part of a many-pronged strategy for social change.

This question of movement, of a right to the city, is one that is hinted at in both the performances I have focused on in this chapter, and it has been central to the reframing of sexual violence discourse since the Nirbhaya event. What rights do women have to the city? What rights *should* they have? How does gender inflect the ways in which we move through the urban space of the Indian city and what happens if we attend to these inflections? In *YBHH* the violence of staring and of stranger rape are experienced by women who have dared—or who have no choice but—to enter public space. In *Thoda Dhyaan Se*, the piece opens with Taneja's character fondly mentioning her father's words whenever she is about to go out: "Ok, beta (child). Have fun! Be careful!" The ambivalence about the role of the city in creating the potential for danger and for pleasure is one that will come up again and again. While slow sexual violence affects women in both public and private space, it is the public that they are traditionally taught to fear and move through as unassumingly as possible.

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[1] This is a topic that will come up in nearly every performance discussed in this dissertation. The intersection of class and gender are crucial to understanding reactions to the Nirbhaya event.
[2] Unless otherwise stated, my quoting and description of the play come from viewing it (and filming it) at Ambedkar University on April 22, 2016. The play was performed in Hindi, and the translations are mine.
[3] For a thorough discussion of "the enabling and constraining conditions of possibility for women who wish to enter not only public consumer spaces but the spaces of education as well"

in contemporary and globalizing Indian urban centers, see Ritty A. Lukose's *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth, and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India*.

[4] Taneja translates the piece as *Be Careful*, but I use *Be a Little Careful* instead, because it is a more literal translation of *Thoda Dhyaan Se*, and because it carries with it the gentleness and concern that often infuses the tone when someone says "thoda dhyaan se."

[5] I provide the rest of the quotes from the performance in English. Taneja has a version of the piece in Hindi (with some English) and in English. This particular performance was primarily in Hindi.

[6] Karnataka's home minister just did this publicly on January 2, 2017, saying "Youngsters were almost like Westerners. They tried to copy the Westerner, not only in their mind-set but even in their dressing. So some disturbance, some girls are harassed, these kinds of things do happen" (Najar).

[7] The Shakti Mills gang rape took place in Mumbai on August 22, 2013. Like the Delhi bus gang rape, it involved a woman and her male companion. He was tied up and she was gang raped by five men outside an abandoned mill. It was one of a number of brutal rapes that captured the attention of a still-furious public who demanded that the rapists be adequately punished for their crimes.

[8] In fact, the first time I traveled to India as part of an academic program, I was given a handout entitled "Information to Prevent and Combat Sexual Harassment," which included the following advice: "One way for a woman to minimize her chances of becoming the target of unwanted attention is to cover her legs, buttocks, and chest fully. The ways she can do this are many. Some women wear a sari, a salvar-kameez, or the 'half-sari' worn by younger girls. Others wear loose-fitting Western style clothes. Many grantees find that the more they adopt the local style of dress for women of their age and class, the less they tend to stand out and receive unwanted attention on buses and trains. Some grantees wear certain clothing in the neighborhood where they reside, but adopt other clothing when they are traveling alone on trains or buses in other parts of India." From the AIIS Manual emailed to the author on April 5, 2007.

[9] In "Testimonial Cultures: An Introduction" Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey discuss the historical links between the feminist agenda and the desire to make sexual trauma more visible. They also warn, however, that, "The desire to tell one's own story can easily support particular neo-liberal or even conservative agendas based on a heroic construction of the individual and of the individuated self" (4). Part of what I want to make clear here is that these performances to make slow sexual violence visible are part of a larger collective strategy to address sexual violence not only as something that we must become more aware of individually, but also something that is woven into the cultural fabric of the Indian city and thus must be addressed intersectionally along with problems of class and caste inequality.

Chapter 5

Women Walking in the Neoliberal Indian City: Performance, Ritual, and Affect

Unseen: An Introduction

When National School of Drama-trained performance artist Kalyanee Mulay and her collaborator/director Vishnupad Barve first began devising a piece for a festival in celebration of 150 years of Rabindranath Tagore, they never imagined it would become a piece about sexual violence. In fact, they were responding to a letter Barve had stumbled upon, written by Tagore when he was in his thirties, in which he had claimed women were both physically and intellectually weaker than men. Tagore, himself, was responding to social reformer Pandita Ramabai's controversial (at the end of the nineteenth century) assertion that women are capable of doing anything that men are—except drinking alcohol. Tagore's sharply patriarchal views as stated in his letter were in stark contrast to the image of Tagore that the rest of the festival would be presenting, the Tagore that Mulay and Barve knew through his plays and later written works: a man who had written some of the most sympathetic and thoughtful female characters in turn-of-the-century Indian literature. They decided to create a solo performance art piece in response to the letter, asking, "is society still like the younger Tagore?" (Nath). The result, *unSEEN*, is a deep and careful exploration of the ways in which patriarchal culture is stamped on the bodies of women—sometimes literally, as in the scene in which Mulay takes out a stamp, dips it in ink, and stamps herself all over, including on her tongue and her breast.

Mulay performs *unSEEN* almost entirely without words, though she does begin the performance by reading Tagore's letter. The result is a surreal soundscape of domesticity, replete with the sounds of a pressure cooker steaming and the clatter of dishes, interspersed with the moans, hums, groans, and breathing of Mulay. Mulay herself is a petite, muscular woman with a charming, dimpled smile (one she rarely employs throughout the performance). Her work is aggressively physical, as she slaps sticky maxi pads all over her body and face, shaves her legs onstage, kisses anything she can lay her hands on (including herself), or stacks bricks onto her hunched-over back in order to play a game of hopscotch. Mulay is dressed in a short, white shift dress, her shoulders and upper back and chest bare. She is barefoot. Her body carries the messy residue of various acts throughout the performance: splotches of shaving cream, the red mark of a smeared sindoor to indicate her married status, water she has dumped over her head, the ink of the stamp she has applied all over her body, and, towards the end, a "bra" made of cook pots that she models as if she is walking a catwalk.

Mulay describes the piece as a "chance to explore the often-blurred line between the public and private nature of being female" (Nath). She first performed it in October 2012 in Goa. Mulay performed *unSEEN* for the second time in January 2013 in Mumbai. Though the piece and its inspiration had changed very little in that time, *something* had changed dramatically between October and January. There is a scene in the section called "Touch" in which Mulay sits balanced on her buttocks with her legs spread wide, her hands gripping her thighs and holding them off the ground, her mouth stretched as wide as it will go. She holds this pose for long enough for it to become uncomfortable and then begins slapping her thighs. When she devised this moment, "This action emerged suddenly, possibly, from a memory of being told as a child, 'Why are you wearing Bermudas' and 'Don't sit with your legs apart.' After I did this, my

director and I didn't speak about it" (Nath). At the time, this moment was intense, uncomfortable, possibly verging on violence, but it was the violence of an abstracted patriarchy enacted upon the body through societal expectation. By the second performance of *unSEEN* in January 2013, that abstract violence had become attached to something much more concrete: "I suddenly realized that the same position had become a depiction of rape" (Mulay, Interview). Her entire piece took on a level of violence that had been unseen before the Delhi bus gang rape in 2012.

I open this chapter with Mulay's performance in order to emphasize the way in which performance, the live encounter of bodies with other bodies, holds particular affective resonance as a response to the Delhi bus gang rape. Even more specifically, this chapter is concerned with how movement of the body becomes inscribed with particular meanings based on cultural context, in response to events both large and small. Mulay's piece demonstrates that even performances that were not intended to be about the Nirbhaya event found certain meanings affixed to them in the wake of it. While Mulay states uncategorically that *unSEEN* is political, feminist, a challenge to patriarchal norms, the way in which its meaning adapted to fit an event that occurred after its creation suggests that the piece's political power is in its ordinary affects. Kathleen Stewart argues that "it's ordinary affects that give things the quality of a *some*thing to inhabit and animate. Politics starts in the animated inhabitation of things, not way downstream in the various dreamboats and horror shows that get moving" (15-16). In the context of contemporary urban India, the Nirbhaya event is the horror show downstream, but the performances I discuss in this chapter are performances of ordinary affects, an animated and invested inhabitation of particular embodiments and ways of moving through the city that seem like they might become something more. While some of these performances are part of a

generation of performance and performative protests that have been labeled as neoliberal feminism, feminism "lite," or middle-class feminism for their refusal to directly critique patriarchy at a structural level, I argue that their embrace of affect as a way of doing politics allows them to critically engage with the daily bodily experience of moving through the city as a woman, the ways in which the city genders bodies, and, critically, offer small embodied changes that may have unpredictably large long-term effects.[1]

Walking in the City

"The ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below,' below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poem in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness. The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other" (de Certeau 93).

"To walk at the edge where fear begins. The place is unknown to me. To help bring in a new normal by doing this simultaneously with others, drawing upon the collective strength" (Action Hero Rutuja, "Akeli Awaara Azaad").

When de Certeau wrote in 1980 about walking in New York City, it is unlikely that he could have imagined how different the experience of walking in contemporary Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, or Bangalore is from what he described. In these Indian megalopolises, walking is both more central and more peripheral to the way in which the city is constantly rearticulated by moving bodies. As Rana Dasgupta writes, walking is the primary means of getting around for these cities' poorest residents, but it is also eschewed as much as possible by the rich, who favor private cars—the fancier the better. Even for the middle class, owning a car is preferred, and

when not possible, walking is interspersed with chaotic auto-rickshaw rides and crowded trips on efficient but limited metro systems (Dasgupta 21).

Unlike New York, one cannot easily get high enough to look down on the contemporary Indian city. While there are a few tall buildings, it is most likely only when flying into or out of the city that one has the option to take it all in from the perspective of an omniscient voyeur. Instead, the act of spectating mostly takes place on the same level as those who are walking, one's body in the midst of the chaos of the street "down below". Dasgupta describes attempting to capture a visual representation of Delhi as follows: "If a painter were to paint this middle-class view, as, for instance, so many nineteenth-century painters tried to paint Paris from the perspective of its new, cosmopolitan boulevards, it would not, accordingly, be smooth or intimate…it would be a strobe-lit succession of unrelated glimpses" (Dasgupta 18). Indian cities are characterized by this sensory overload, so over-stimulating, so full of people and lights and ads and graffiti and traffic and animals and garbage and noise, that taking in a street scene in its entirety is impossible. It's also beside the point; to capture a street scene in an Indian city one would need to capture a moment of affect, a feeling rather than an image.

In some ways, this affective quality of the contemporary Indian city makes it the perfect subject of de Certeau's "Walking in the City." One cannot take a step back, get the distance to be a voyeur. There is no "exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive" in a space in which one's every sense is being continually assaulted: sight, smell, sound, touch, even taste (de Certeau 92). Dasgupta describes the changing division of labor after liberalization in 1991, in which not only the rich but even the middle class when possible avoid this assault by hiding in their homes, in shopping malls, and in cafes, leaving working class people to accomplish the challenging task of mailing a letter or running an errand among the jostling crowds of the street (Dasgupta 163). In

this way, both de Certeau and Dasgupta attend to the role of class and political power in giving the privileged a very different experience of walking in the city. But what neither author seems to address directly is how critical gender is to the act of walking in the city. How gender allows male walkers to believe themselves to be just as powerful "looking down" on women walking among them as the panoptic voyeur looking down on the city. How levels of power and thus voyeurism come not just from elevation in meters but also in status (be it status conferred by class or by gender).

Michel de Certeau is part of a long genealogy of intellectuals considering walking from a normatively male perspective, a genealogy "or fraternity—which includes Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Henry David Thoreau, Andre Breton and Guy Debord" and which has generated, particularly within the field of performance studies, "an orthodoxy of walking, tending towards an implicitly masculinist ideology. This frequently frames and valorizes walking as individualist, heroic, epic and transgressive" (Heddon and Turner 224). Like Heddon and Turner, I am deeply invested in the power of walking—and in the under-theorized specificity of what it means to be a woman walking. As they note, "The invisibility of women in what appears as a canon of walking is conspicuous; where they are included, it is often as an 'exception' to an unstated norm…" (225). But even as they expand the canon by attending to the practices of women walkers, their examples stem almost exclusively from the West: Europe and the United States. They critique contemporary theorizing of walkers in which the walker is read as a "postmodern figure of the rhizomatic nomad," a "remarkably unsocial being—unmarked by the traces of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and geography" (Heddon and Turner 226). By analyzing the body as a space marked by gender, Heddon and Turner challenge men's assumptions about their bodies as unmarked spaces. I want to build on their analysis to consider the specific cultural context of

women walking in neoliberal urban India. How does the city affect women's movements, their choreography of the everyday?

My analysis of women walking in the city will self-consciously attempt to take into account the many ways in which the body begins walking in the city already marked by its identity, the many ways in which that identity changes the experience of walking. I also acknowledge my own subject-position and recognize the limitations it imposes. As a white woman, my body is always-already marked as other in the Indian city. No matter how "traditionally" I dress (often in a salwar kameez with my hair covered by my dupatta), no matter how fluent my Hindi, I am clearly a foreigner. Because I am not always following the typical tourist pathways through the city, I am often the only obviously foreign body visible on the street. Since Western women are often stereotyped in India as being more sexually available, this cannot help but color my analysis of women walking in the neoliberal Indian city in ways that I may be unable to see. As is evident in my description of Mallika Taneja's *Thoda Dhyaan Se* in the previous chapter, Indian women are often hyper-aware of their bodies' visibility in public space in the Indian city, but that awareness is both similar to and significantly different from my own. Like Heddon and Turner, my "project always and consciously treads a difficult line between the risk of essentialism and that of understating the real differences in experience that may be produced by cultural expectations of gender norms. We do not seek to identify a way of walking specific to women; given that there is no singular 'woman', there can be no such practice" (225). At the same time, for this research, I immersed myself in the rhythms of the Indian city, and my intention in this chapter is to capture the affective influences of the city on women's bodies, including my own. My analysis moves from a consideration of various theories of walking in the city to a contextualization of these theories within the specificity of the

neoliberal Indian city before attempting to articulate what is, in its essence, beyond words: the embodiment of the affective influence of the neoliberal Indian city on the women within it.

The importance of women's experiences of walking in the city has become central to feminist performances in response to the Nirbhaya event. Ratna Kapur points to the similarities between the 2011 transnationally-performed SlutWalks (known in India as *besharmi morcha* or shameless protest) and the protests in response to the Delhi bus gang rape, observing that they stemmed from the same causes: "the sheer exhaustion and frustration that women in Delhi and elsewhere have felt in response to being ogled, pawed, and groped from the moment they step into public space…Both protests foregrounded women's desire to be able to move freely in public without experiencing persistent threats to their rights to sexual autonomy and bodily integrity" (Kapur, "Pink Chaddis" 11; Kapur, "Brutalized Bodies" 9-10). In other words, the Nirbhaya event caused the frustration that had already been simmering in women as they moved through urban India to boil over into rage: why couldn't they move through public spaces as easily as men could? Would the price of that freedom always be the looming threat of violent rape or even murder?

But the importance of these performative responses, which focus on women's daily movement in the city, consists of more than just anger over gender inequality. Many of them are attempting to create a shift in affective environment, employing what Sara Ahmed calls "the cultural politics of emotion," the ways in which "emotions work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies," to replace an overwhelming cultural fear at the implied threat of sexual violence with one of trust (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 1; Patheja, Interview). From Blank Noise's September 25, 2016 event "Akeli Awaara Azaad" (Alone, Wandering, Free), to Maya Krishna Rao's performative response to the Delhi bus gang rape of 2012, *Walk* (2013),

many performances and performative protests have been crafted explicitly to address the issue of how and when women can feel supported moving through the city. These include Kolkata's Take Back the Night, which organizes gatherings of women (and men) in public space and Bikerni, a female motorcycle collective in Delhi (Sengupta; Bardi). They also include two performative protests I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter: Mumbai's *Why Loiter* and Delhi's *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Hostel Locks), both intended to fight for women's right to risk their bodies in public spaces. Mallika Taneja, the creator of *Thoda Dhyaan Se*, organizes regular midnight walks through Delhi. At first, these were open to anyone, and Taneja's primary concern was helping people to see the city differently by spending twelve hours walking through the night as opposed to rushing from one place to another in daylight. However, she soon switched to organizing women-only midnight walks. On one such walk, we began in the southwestern neighborhood of Vasant Kunj and walked northeast to Hauz Khas Village along roads empty of anything besides the occasional truck or stray dog. Other examples include The Friday Convent, and the "I Will Go Out" solidarity marches held in seven cities (Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Pune, and Kolkata) on January 21, 2017 in response to the mass groping of women that took place in downtown Bangalore on New Year's Eve (Gupta 162; Sachdev). While the explicit politics of each of these events is important, what I am interested in exploring is the affective resonances such moments create, the choreographic strategies these feminist performers are using to mold the surfaces of the bodies of women (and men) walking in the neoliberal India city in the hopes of changing the underlying gender norms that are enacted through movement.

The Neoliberal Indian City

I have already, in the course of offering various first-person accounts of both performances and daily experiences, narrated some of my own experiences of the Indian city, and I will continue to do so throughout this text. However, recognizing that I am always going to be marked by my own subect-position—in particular my race and gender—as an outsider on the streets of the Indian city, I wish to provide in this section some brief history, data, and observations from other scholars who analyze both the real and imagined Indian city. The neoliberal Indian city remains an undertheorized space within the humanities, and in particular, "work on the contemporary urban everyday remains to this day largely absent from the intellectual history of the Indian Left" (Mazumdar xxvii). While there is a plethora of sociological literature describing the conditions of contemporary urban India, as well as a few ethnographic accounts, the "city as a metaphor, as a space, as a conundrum of diverse human experiences, and as an imaginary landscape of deep psychic dislocations is one of the casualties of what Gyan Prakash has called 'the historicist discourse of the nation' (Prakash 6)." In other words, the city often gets buried beneath discussions and representations of the Indian nation.

One could begin the story of the neoliberal Indian city in 1991 when the Indian finance minister Manmohan Singh announced that India was embarking on a new economic agenda known as liberalization. Up until this point, India was still more or less operating under the Nehruvian principles of the Congress party, namely a democratic, secular, socialist government—the ideals of secularism and socialism were even added to the Indian constitution with the forty-second amendment in 1976, which changed the description of India from a "sovereign democratic republic" to a "sovereign, socialist secular democratic republic" ("Constitution"). So when the new economic agenda of liberalization, "namely the giving over of large areas of the state and social life to the private business sector" took hold, it "produced a

churning of Indian society, with grotesque social consequences" (Armstrong 1). Armstrong describes an intensification of inter-religious and caste conflicts, a dramatic increase in conspicuous consumption, and an epidemic of dowry harassment linked to this new kind of desire for the trappings of wealth. On the cultural front, liberalization meant the beginning of cable television networks, "transforming a two-channel state-run television into a forty-five- to sixty-channel system" (Mazumdar 93). Perhaps most significantly, liberalization created the opportunity for some—mostly in the middle- and upper-class—to profit enormously, while also creating a new precarity, so that "the middle classes who benefitted from that new market freedom often realized only too late that, though their salaries might be high, they lived more vulnerable lives, in many respects, than the poorest members of many another society" (Dasgupta 96). In other words, the temptations of (economic) risk grew exponentially, but so did the sense that one wrong move would result in catastrophe. These political, economic, and cultural changes had marked effects on the practices of everyday life.

But what did this mean specifically for the Indian city? Liberalization created a new crisis in the countryside as it changed the economics of agriculture, "introducing new earning options to farmers which also carried with them much higher levels of risk" (Dasgupta 261). This, in turn, led to more and more people striking out from the village for the city in the hopes of making enough money to help their impoverished families back in the villages. Between 1991 and 2011 the population of Delhi grew by nearly 7 million people, from 9.42 million to 16.35 million, most of whom were poor rural migrants (Dasgupta 262). The perpetrators of the Delhi bus gang rape and murder were among this group. At the same time, the economic opportunities that were opened up by liberalization meant both an expansion of the number of city-dwellers who considered themselves middle-class and a growing number of opportunities for the rich to

become richer. The development of the private sector resulted in, as Ranjani Mazumdar describes it, the onset of an urban delirium:

> India's cities have been overtaken by a frenzy of chaotic construction: flyovers, shopping malls, multiplexes, hotels, and highways. A massive automobile boom has further added to what can be called an urban delirium. Streets and markets are awash with new electronic gadgets, mobile phones, computers, and DVDs, each promoting diverse advertising strategies on walls, on billboards, and on lampposts. New forms of lighting have transformed the experience of the night in commercial areas (Mazumdar xxi).

The neoliberal Indian city is a maelstrom of sights, sounds, smells, and experiences, all highlighting conspicuous consumption.

Depending on how one is measuring, Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata (and its sister city Howrah), and Bangalore have all been ranked among the twenty densest cities in the world, so rich and poor often find themselves living nearly on top of one another ("City Mayors"; Dasgupta 83). At the same time, there has been a massive push for development in cities such as Delhi, and the victims of that push have been the poor migrants technically squatting in semi-permanent settlements. They found their homes periodically destroyed by official orders such as the Land Acquisition Act and the need to display a world-class city for the 2010 Commonwealth Games, a policy so callous that Rana Dasgupta observes that, "Delhi's official urban strategy was to not *see* those millions of people, to treat them as ghosts who periodically contributed their labour to the feast, but who did not themselves require food or shelter or anything else" (Dasgupta 273-5). These migrants were necessary to the economy of the city, but they were also the regular victims of government policies meant to encourage economic growth, regardless of its human cost.

The world of the neoliberal Indian city, then, is one of both immense poverty and overwhelming wealth and grandeur, and while it is possible as a person of means to move by car from walled compound to shopping mall to fancy restaurant, one still must drive on the streets to get from place to place. In other words, the rich must constantly travel past the bodies of the poor, even if they train themselves not to see. The neoliberal Indian city is a world of dramatic extremes. However, most of the artists I discuss throughout this study belong to neither the very rich nor the very poor. They are part of the burgeoning middle-class and thus must traverse the streets by walking, using public transportation such as buses and the metro (where available), open-air auto-rickshaws, taxis, and, more recently, car services like Uber. They navigate the world between the rich and the poor, interacting with both in their daily lives.

While the city is central to the discourse surrounding sexual violence in contemporary India, "one of the key distinctions between the urban experience in India and that in the West is that in South Asia, the urban form has neither been overwhelming nor hegemonic. The city itself is marked, even scarred, by the fuzziness of lines between the 'urban' and the 'rural.' In imaginative terms, the 'village' is never absent from everyday life in the city" (Mazumdar 4). The editors of multiple collections of essays on performance and the city note that the contemporary world is defined by the urban experience, that more than half the population of the world lives in cities, and that this is a relatively new phenomenon, beginning only in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Solga et al. ix,1). However, though India contributes more than 1/7 of the world's population, only 33% of that population currently lives in cities ("Urban Population"). It is striking, then, that the city has come to dominate the discourse on sexual violence in contemporary India. The imagined divide between the culture of the city and the culture of the countryside is monumental. And yet, the proliferation of television and the ready

availability of other forms of entertainment and technology have brought the city to the countryside even as the massive number of migrants from the countryside bring the world of the village into the city. So even though the imagined divide is enormous, the potential for not only representations of the city but the lived experience of it to affect the village and vice versa is also vast. In other words, while the majority of the Indian population lives outside the city, the city and the countryside are linked through a steady exchange and influence of culture.[2]

The story of the *neoliberal* Indian city may have begun with liberalization in 1991, but the story of the role the Indian city played in national consciousness stretches back much further. In the nationalist fight for independence from colonial rule, the city became the symbolic site of industrial capitalism, rampant inequality, and Western excess, while the village was represented as "a site of [cultural] authenticity…and as the source of anticolonial struggle" (Mazumdar xxvi). The romanticization of village life and vilification of city life continued in literature and film produced after independence, and these are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the city to this day (Mazumdar xxiii, 16). Excess and inequality are even more visible in contemporary life, in cities that are increasingly dominated by shopping malls, advertising billboards, and conspicuous consumption. Even before liberalization, the city was a place of danger particularly for the poor—and those dangers were just as likely to come from the state as they were from private individuals. The urbanization policies undertaken during the Emergency period, for instance, treated the city as a space that needed to be cleaned up and tamed—which meant not only displacing the poor but putting them through forced sterilization procedures (Dasgupta 331; Mazumdar xxviii). The city also became the space of political protest during the Emergency (Mazumdar 7).

Unsurprisingly given how visible economic inequality is in the neoliberal Indian city, it is a space of daily—and often unintentional—class violence. This violence is enacted in diverse ways, from the destruction of people's homes, as described above, to the construction of a metro system that has stops almost solely in affluent areas (Dasgupta 250). The poor have no recourse to legal protection, since it seems that the state is either directly responsible for or has approved of these types of everyday violence. In general, Hindu nationalists have used the city as the epicenter of organization and mobilization, targeting dissatisfied populations for recruitment. Urban centers also became a space of deep distrust and communal violence when, shortly after liberalization, the Bombay riots of 1992-93 "saw the slaughter of thousands of Muslims by crowds that included neighbors and former friends" (Mazumdar 30). Dasgupta points to such riots as the cause of the "'compound' feel of Delhi's residential neighborhoods," compounds which have the (perhaps desired) secondary effect of controlling the movements of those who enter and leave their walls (Dasgupta 337). Even after liberalization, the lines between state-sanctioned and non-state-sanctioned violence within the space of the city has been blurry, as evidenced by the widely held belief that Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat at the time and the current Prime Minister of India, initiated and helped to organize the Gujarat riots of 2002 (Murphy 86).

For women, too, the (public) space of the city is a space that constantly threatens violence. This problem has become even more visible as more and more women get jobs outside the household. In particular, those who work the night shift in industries such as the rapidly growing call center industry have found themselves negotiating the politics of respectability and the constant threat of violence that comes with that negotiation. Reena Patel opens her study of women in call centers with a reference to the highly publicized December 13, 2005 rape and

murder of Pratibha Srikanth Murthy on her way to her nighttime call center job in Bangalore, suggesting that such stories demonstrate that society views the night as an unsafe space for women to traverse, even for "respectable" jobs (Patel 1). Rana Dasgupta proposes that such violence is evidence of a "low-level, but widespread, war against women, whose new mobility made them not only the icons of India's social and economic changes but also the scapegoats" (139). One such incident, the January 24, 2009 attack and molestation by a mob of Hindu nationalists from the group *Sri Ram Sena* of young women in a pub in the city of Mangalore inspired the "Pink Chaddi Campaign" protest movement, in which women were encouraged to send pink underwear to the *Sri Ram Sena* headquarters. Even as I write this, reports continue to stream in of a "mass groping" in Bangalore on January 1, 2017 as women tried to leave a New Year's Eve celebration (Sachdev).

The challenges of traversing the city as a woman are revealed in subtler ways as well. Filmmaker Paromita Vohra's 2006 documentary *Q2P* examines the effects of the lack of public toilets for women in Mumbai. The lack of toilets in private homes combined with the expectation that women not relieve themselves in public meant that women often planned their day around finding a bathroom—and often held their urination to the point of giving themselves urinary tract infections. Patel insightfully notes that the fact that men urinate freely on the side of the road in the city—and that women are expected to look away and hurry past—while women must find privacy to urinate demonstrates that "women are treated as an *intrusion* in the male domain of public spaces and they hide themselves as a means to justify their existence outside the household" (6). Even as more and more women join the workforce and find themselves negotiating the public space of the city street on a daily (and nightly) basis, there is still a sense of discomfort, that they are unnatural in that space.

My description of the Indian city may seem as vilifying as any that Gandhi articulated, and a reader may begin to wonder who would want to live in these cities or traverse their streets in the first place. Certainly, the many forms of inequality that contribute to daily experiences of violence for the majority of the city's inhabitants are daunting. But these inequalities exist in every major city around the world, albeit to different degrees. The neoliberal Indian city also holds all the temptations, the dreams that cities around the world do. The poor come in the hopes of supporting themselves and their families. People come to make their fortunes; to imagine a new way of life; to create theater, dance, and art; to get an education; to run away from the stifling confinement of their rural life; to have an adventure. While it is arguable whether this dream of the city as a space of opportunity attaches people to an imagined good life that causes them to make decisions that are, in fact, bad for them, that is an argument for another time.[3] My point is that cities can be both a place of abject, daily violence, and of exciting potential. What makes them so challenging is also what causes their magnetic pull for more than half the world's population.

Up until this point, I have more or less discussed the neoliberal Indian city as if it is one homogeneous space. There is, I believe, something to be said for the idea that urban culture across India has certain characteristics in common. My fieldwork was primarily in the cities of Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, and Bangalore, and each of these cities has its own personality and its own rhythm, colored by each individual's personal relationships to them. For instance, while Delhi is often referred to in the media as the "rape capital" of India, it is also the place where I have lived the longest and have the most contacts, and thus has always felt safer to me (Mandhana and Trivedi). Delhi is also the seat of the national government, known for being fast-paced and somewhat aggressive, and a great place for real estate developers. Mumbai, on the

other hand is referred to in popular literature as the "City of Dreams" (Patel 14). It is the home of the Hindi popular cinema industry, depicted as more cosmopolitan than other Indian cities, and as more friendly to women—at least, professional upper-middle-class women (Patel 16). Bangalore is known as the Silicon Valley of India, a quiet city that is experiencing a boom since much of the tech industry has decided to locate there (Patel 17). It is also generally considered more conservative than the other three cities I discuss. Finally, Kolkata has a history of leftist politics, colonial architecture, and arts and culture that continue to exert their influences on the city today. It has had its own share of brutal and highly publicized incidents of sexual violence, including the gang rape of Suzette Jordan on Park Street, a popular area for going out in Kolkata. Each of these cities has its own unique personality, but they are linked by the similar stories of rape and of the slow sexual violence of the everyday that are happening within them, and by the outpouring of similar performances and performative protests demanding women's rights to inhabit public space as they desire. Together, they form an affective impression of how the Indian neoliberal city acts on, with, and through gendered bodies. It is this affect I will attempt to capture in the following section.

Praatohkrityo: An Urban Ritual

In order to highlight just how much the urban experience itself genders its inhabitants in particular ways as they come into contact with one another and with the larger structures of patriarchy always-already at work in the city the performance I wish to attend to most closely is the dance theater piece *Praatohkrityo* (Morning Ablutions, 2016). As with *unSEEN*, *Praatohkrityo* uses movement to create a critique of patriarchy that is both thoroughly grounded in the specific cultural moment and context in which it was created *and* flexible and prescient in

its ability to speak to ongoing events. The focus on movement, on the disciplines and structures of both dance and theater training, allows these performances to bring affect to the surface of the body, "expos[ing] aesthetic spaces and practices as social and vernacular, as sites where participants actively confront and engage tradition, authority, corporeality, and irreducible difference. The resulting arrangements are processes, not things…" (Hamera 1-2). Dance draws on the physical training of the body in a particular aesthetic form—such as Bharatanatyam or ballet—but it also cannot help but invoke the physical experiences of that body outside of dance training and throughout its lifetime. The two combine with one another in unexpected ways to reveal the politics that animate the collective performance of feminist art. Through a deep, affective description of some of the more memorable moments of *Praatohkrityo*, I hope to reveal the techniques by which it tries to shift our role in the process of city-making from subconscious to conscious participants, calling attention to the many ways our actions reinforce but also challenge gendered ways of moving through the city.

Five women stand on stage as the audience files into the auditorium at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kolkata. The lights are up. Everyone can see everyone else. The women stand perfectly still, clad in tight, white shift dresses that extend only a few scant inches beyond their hips, leaving their muscular legs bare. All five women have their hair down. It falls thick, lustrous, long and black over their shoulders. Their feet are planted firmly beneath them. The stage is raised five feet above the audience. We sit, looking up. The women continue to stand. We look at them and they look impassively back at us. Their expressions do not change. While they can see us, they do not react to us. There is a murmur of conversation; no one is quite sure whether we are supposed to be talking or whether we are supposed to be paying attention. The house lights fade. Ah-ha! This is the start of the show. The women continue to stand. Five

minutes pass. Ten minutes pass. Men slowly trickle out, taking their seats behind an array of instruments spread out along the back of the stage. There is the twang of a guitar string, the jingle of a tambourine as they quietly check their instruments. The women stand. Suddenly the auditorium erupts in sound as the men begin playing a loud, thumping song. Surely, the women on stage cannot help but move to such music. The women stand. The song ends and again there is silence. The women stand.

But then slowly, ever so slowly, they start to lean. Their feet stay planted on the ground but their bodies shift to the right until it looks like they cannot possibly lean farther without falling over. Then slowly, ever so slowly, they bring their bodies back to center, past center, and to the left. They continue this gradual sway back and forth, back and forth, until, suddenly, a single drumbeat and they fall out of the lean and into their first step. As they begin to walk, their steps seem laborious, as if they are wearing leaden shoes. They force themselves to walk in the rhythm of the drumbeats as they get faster and faster. The music stops and the women begin to walk with purpose, upstage and downstage on parallel paths, their feet slapping the ground with force. It soon becomes clear, however, that the paths are not perfectly parallel. Paths begin to cross one another. One woman steps directly into the path of another and they collide, their bodies spinning away from each other with the force until they collect themselves and begin walking a straight path again. The collisions become more frequent and more deliberate—one woman reaches out and violently grabs another around the waist, spinning her off course. Finally, the most delicate-looking of the women is pushed too hard and she falls to the ground. This is the beginning of *Praatohkrityo* (2016), "a dance-theatre production that originates from the urban rituals that lie beneath the surface of everyday life" (PraatohKrityo).[4]

So what are these urban rituals? Perhaps the most affecting one, the one that comes up in almost every feminist performance made in India since 2012, is the ritual of getting from one place to another in a city teeming with millions of people, animals, and vehicles. The stillness at the beginning of Praatohkrityo breaks us out of this ritual. As opposed to the chaos and jostling of the street, we are faced with silence until we think we will not be able to take another second of it. The anticipation, the desire for these women to get moving already builds and builds in us. Unlike Mallika Taneja's opening in *Thoda Dhyaan Se* in which she stands naked until naked becomes unremarkable, the rhythms of the city (and our expectations of what constitutes performance) are so ingrained in our bodies that the dancers' motionlessness only adds to our sense that this is outside of normal. We are not used to doing nothing, watching while nothing happens. Kolkata is known for being less fast-paced, less aggressive than Delhi, but this kind of stillness is still far outside our bodies' vocabularies for daily life. As the women's bodies begin to lean, it seems that they are fighting to hold onto their stillness, even as the rhythm of the city is pushing them into motion.

Over the course of the dance theater piece, the bodies of these five women will move us through their own interpretations of these urban rituals; some are familiar and frustrating in their submission to the expectations of a patriarchal culture while others offer a riotous celebration of rejecting those expectations. Early in the piece, in the first moment of strong unison, the women arch back on one hand, thrusting their hips up toward the ceiling, before standing and strutting upstage and downstage. They toss their hair provocatively as they pivot and then they break out of unison into individual series of poses. The only things these poses have in common is that they feel hypersexual. The women arch their backs and stick their butts in the air. They toss their long, flowing hair again and smirk suggestively. Then they find unison, posing together on their

knees with their legs spread wide and their breasts pushed forward, their hands in their hair to pull it back from their faces. I cannot help but notice in this moment of overtly stereotypical female sexuality that not one of them has shaved her armpits. The hair sticks out, long and bushy and black against the stark white of their costumes. That view of armpit hair partially ruptures our expectations of the ideal feminine beauty of post-liberalization India, "with its diets, gyms and skinny publicity models," its waxed hairless body topped by a head with long, flowing hair (Dasgupta 137). And yet, it does not, quite. These women are young, in their early twenties, toned and fit from hours of rehearsal. They are baring more of their legs than I have seen of some of my Indian housemates' legs. They are, by the measure of these post-liberalization ideals, beautiful—and sexually provocative.

Immediately following this overt display of heteronormative sexuality, they move, still in unison, into a series of what look like kickboxing moves. They jump and kick aggressively over their heads. They spin and throw their arms out in a movement halfway between supplication and accusation. This choreography of sex and violence will be a cycle they repeat at the end of the piece, circling back to the same rhythm, much as one finds the same patterns shaping each new day. Except that by the end they are clearly physically exhausted. They can still kick above their heads, but they are sloppy, their movements out of sync with one another. The kicks no longer feel intimidating in any way, though they have lost none of their violence in repetition. I think about my own days in Kolkata, the way they can wear me down over time, my desperate need some days to hide out in the private space of my own room rather than deal with the seething chaos of the street and the anticipated stares that make me so aware of my own body as an object of potential sex, of desire.

But *Praatohkrityo* does not just criticize the ways in which women are sexualized within the city, whether they want to be or not; it also explores the moments in which they take ownership of their sexuality. This embrace of pleasure, both sexual and otherwise, is a trend Ratna Kapur identifies as having emerged within Indian feminist critique at the same time as the movement for gay and lesbian rights became more vocal ("Pink Chaddis" 8). In its exploration of urban rituals, *Praatohkrityo* attends to this slippage between sex and gender, to the ways in which women's rights to sexual pleasure have often been outside the narrative of mainstream Indian feminism. It is a move that many of the artists I discuss have made, and one that continues to be criticized as "feminism lite" or "neoliberal feminism" (Kapur, "Pink Chaddis"; Gupta). This is a critique I will engage in greater detail in Chapter 6, but for now, it is enough to be aware that performances like this one, which attend to aspects of women's pleasure, are attempting to push back against a certain kind of Indian feminism in which "sex is articulated through the discourse of violence and the careful avoidance of expressions of sexuality as affirmative and pleasurable" (Kapur, "Pink Chaddis" 5). In one beautiful scene, two of the dancers find themselves alone on stage, barely lit by two dim, badly-focused spotlights. They are drawn to each other across the stage, walking toward one another as if in a dream, painfully slow and intimate. When they meet, their bodies lean into one another. A third woman appears and shoves violently between them before striding to the front of the stage, but her violence cannot interrupt this moment. They lean in again. One kneels before the other, as if to worship her, before they both fall to the floor in a tangled embrace. They continue to slowly move with each other. It feels voyeuristic in the extreme to watch this vignette. They are not having sex, but their absorption in and movement with one another feels just as intimate. Their bodies glide over one another, completely in tune with not only the weight of one another but the unique rhythm of one

another's movements. While the rest of the scene involves increasingly forceful efforts on the parts of two other dancers (clearly enacting conservative Hindu norms) to separate them, the genuine and strangely gentle eroticism they have created will linger through the rest of the performance.

A contrasting two-woman scene erases any romanticism I might have been feeling about the general nature of female camaraderie. In this scene, the drumming has picked up, demanding a response from the dancers. They find themselves writhing more and more violently on the floor, throwing their entire bodies into each and every movement. The amount of athleticism required to sustain the pace as they leap and roll and fling themselves about is incredible. They take moments to slow down, but the music does not. It pushes them forward with an urgency that is hard to ignore. It is difficult not to read this as men's attempt to control how women move, to control how we, as spectators, want them to move, for the drumbeats are in our blood as much as they are in the dancers'. I find myself swaying in my seat to their infectious rhythm.

At one point, one dancer slows down, leaning back on the other for support. She is immediately tossed to the floor, abandoned to her own body's violence. As one dancer strides across the stage, she hits herself repeatedly, while the other claps a hand over her mouth, muffling a scream as she yanks at her own hair. The reference to acts of domestic and sexual violence seems unquestionable. Are they performing a self-destructive desire to hurt themselves or echoing some outside violence that the city imposes upon them? How does one separate one from the other? Eventually, they cannot keep up the pace any longer. They stumble and lean desperately into one another in an echo of the earlier, erotic leaning of the first couple I described. This time, however, there is no sense of intimacy in touch, or even of comfort. They simply cannot keep their bodies upright and so they give in to one another's weight without

sharing one another's burdens. It is painful to watch. I want them to help each other, to recognize that the physical struggles they are experiencing might be less overwhelming if they supported each other. But they are so focused on their own needs, their own exhaustion, that they cannot open themselves to another's. The three other dancers re-emerge, fresher after their five-minute rest. They move in perfect unison, swinging their hips and tossing their hair provocatively even as their exhausted compatriots continue to stumble awkwardly around the stage.

The piece lasts another twenty minutes after this. The pace never slows. By the end, I am completely exhausted just from watching. The dancers find it harder and harder to move together, to listen to each other's bodies and find any sort of synchronicity, much less unison. The sections of the piece they repeat get sloppier and sloppier. While there is a brief moment about an hour in where they find their strength and begin to move with the sharp focus and athleticism of the beginning of the piece, they soon flag, and the section ends with them falling to the ground, flat on their backs. A man appears. He has appeared on stage once before to draw the symbols of the lotus and the trishul on the legs of the two women playing Hindu extremists. This time he walks among the prone forms of the women, smoking a cigarette. He is wearing a hooded sweatshirt and dark glasses, and there is a palpable sense of menace emanating from him. When he leaves, the women rise one last time in order to rip a necklace of thread, a symbol of caste hierarchy, from the neck of one of the drummers. Together, they tear it and fling it out into the audience. With this defiant gesture, they leave the stage. The performance is over.

It is easy to find the overtly political moments in my description. I cannot help focusing on some of them, particularly those that play with stereotypical images of female sexuality, with forbidden lesbian desire, with the historic inequality of caste practices and the violence of Hindu extremists. However, these are not exactly the moments I wish to attend to. *Praatohkrityo*, for all

its athletic prowess and its experimentation with the form of dance theater, is clumsy when it comes to these overtly political moments. For instance, it is enjoyable to watch two of the dancers who have trained since childhood in Bharatanatyam, a classical Indian dance technique, displaying their skills as they dance around the erotic scene of the lesbian couple, whose choreography is clearly influenced by contemporary dance forms but not easily classifiable under any particular technique. However, the argument implied by contrasting these two dance styles in this way—that a sense of tradition without room for new ideas and innovation can lead to close-minded bigotry—is not exactly difficult to make in words. It is also not saying anything that members of India's political left have not been saying for years. Similarly, the gesture to breaking down caste hierarchy at the end of the performance is an important one, especially considering that the performance took place in the midst of the protests in response to Dalit student Rohith Vemula's suicide, but the audience that would attend a performance at Kolkata's Academy of Fine Arts is most likely already aware of these protests and of the left's many critiques of caste hierarchy.[5] In other words, while it is a nice moment and a gesture of solidarity, it is not something new or uniquely able to be expressed through the genre of dance theater.

What *is* new and politically radical in this performance is what lies underneath the overtly political, that which de Certeau tells us "eludes legibility": the rhythms of the city. The dancers of *Praatohkrityo* find the rhythms when they stop trying to make a legible political point, and instead just move together. It is in these moments that they tap into something critical to understanding the neoliberal Indian city, a sense of the unconscious knowledge that underlies the female body's anticipation of what it will experience as it moves through the city. In their seminal book on cities, Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift suggest that "much of our knowledge of the city is stored in this 'unconscious' way…[and] the ability of this unconscious knowledge to

translate our experience is much greater than that of conscious knowledge" (85). How does movement allow *Praatohkrityo* to access this unconscious knowledge, to transform it from unconscious to conscious by bringing affect to the surface of the body?

Dance is unique in its ability to transform unconscious movement into conscious thought, and it enacts this transformation partly through the use of technique. In her analysis of ballet technique, Judith Hamera details the ways in which technique becomes a reproducible language, drilled into the body through repetition, until it is an automatic response, an unconscious bodily knowledge of how to reproduce certain movements, exactly as they have been done before both by one's own body and by a multitude of other bodies stretching back into history. Much like clothing, technique "survives the bodies which enact it, even if the enactments themselves are always and inevitably disappearing" (Hamera 8). Technique, then, links bodies together through a set of rules, but it is the bodies themselves that must enact those rules in order for technique to live on. While technique may seem to be a metaphor for superstructure, predetermining one's bodily movements, it is also a space of resistance, partly because it is a set of spoken, acknowledged, embodied rules. This slippage between speech, thought, and movement allows dancers some wiggle room to *change* technique, to rupture formal structures. It is more than a metaphor for superstructure, it is the enactment of one, and it comes with the same opportunities and limitations that any other encounter with a superstructure might provide.

I am not the first to suggest that cities, and specifically contemporary Indian cities, inculcate bodily responses in a similar way to dance technique. One need only look to examples like the Delhi metro to get a sense of this. With the installation and rapid growth of a Metro system in Delhi, beginning in 1998 and continuing to this day, came a written set of rules about

how to use the Metro properly (Butcher 162, 167). In fact, the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) was so concerned about inexperienced users breaking the rules of the system that,

> as the Metro began to stretch further away from what is considered the cosmopolitan heart of the city and into the suburbs, the DMRC used *nukkad nataks* ('street plays') to generate awareness about how to use the Metro. Troupes of performers staged the benefits of 'smart cards,' the use of associated new technologies such as escalators, and the dangers of crossing the yellow markers on platforms or flying kites near Metro lines (Butcher 164).

The DMRC was, in its own way, teaching technique, a technique that those used to living in cities with modern public transit systems were expected to already know, and that those new to the system might disrupt if they were not also taught. It used embodied communication in the form of live performance to teach that technique.

And, as Butcher notes, that technique is in some ways specific to the cultural context of Delhi, even as it is an embodied knowledge carried by the cosmopolitan, urban citizen, for "competence on Delhi's Metro is not related to queuing as much as to speed of entry and ability to slip into a seat" (Butcher 174). I still remember my own overwhelming sense of relief when I returned to Delhi after a five year absence to discover an extensive, clean, modern Metro system that reminded me of systems in other cities all over the world, coupled with my sense of dismay when I realized that the "rules"—techniques—I was used to (such as letting other people off the train before entering) were not universally applicable. Even with my familiarity with urban public transit systems, I had to learn new ones. Critically, these rules, such as no "paan spitting, sitting on the floor, carrying large sacks, eating strong-smelling food…may seem pragmatic exclusions in a crowded city, but they are also the signs of a laboring class in Delhi that is being

removed from public space," or at least from privatized public space: that is, public space that one must pay money in order to access (Butcher 167). In other words, the techniques being taught are disciplining bodies to fit a very specific image of what neoliberal Delhi should be, one that makes the working class invisible.

My point in discussing the example of the Delhi Metro, then, is to demonstrate the ways in which our bodies adapt to technique, taking in both that which is spoken or written down as a "rule"—like not spitting paan—and that which is unspoken—such as not waiting to enter the train until others have gotten off and turning that technique into instinct, so that it feels organic, natural, something that our bodies have always done. In its most brilliant moments, *Praatohkrityo* reveals technique as something that has been trained into the bodies of women moving through the city rather than something that was always-already there. In particular, it pushes back against the typical "feminine bodily comportment…where any given action is undertaken not by the entirety of physical capabilities that could be gathered, but rather only with the necessary minimum" (Cahill 155). The sheer physicality of the performance is, as I have said, exhausting, but it is also a joy to watch these women make use of the entirety of their physical capabilities. Their wildness, their unwillingness to allow technique and ritual to fully control them, is intoxicating.

I want to make clear here that my argument is *not* that *Praatohkrityo* makes visible the politics of gender in the Indian urban landscape. I am deeply aware of the fact that "the binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility is falsifying," and I agree with Peggy Phelan that "there is real power in remaining unmarked; and there are serious limitations to visual representation as a political goal" (Phelan 6). Indeed, this often unquestioning equating of visibility with political power is part of the reason I am so suspicious of the piece's overtly

political moments. *Praatohkrityo* has more power when it seems not to be pushing a specific agenda, because it is in those moments that those who are watching are most open to feeling together with the women on stage. Thus, I am attempting to capture how *Praatohkrityo* communicates through the politics of affect the process by which ritual becomes technique, which in turn becomes rule. Here, it is potentially useful to turn briefly to a cultural materialist analysis of *Praatohkrityo* to illustrate the immense challenges of this task.[6]

I first heard about *Praatohkrityo* through a friend, a fellow academic who had once been part of the Bengali group theater that was producing the dance theater piece, Theatre Formation Paribartak. He posted something on Facebook, which was linked to *Praatohkrityo*'s own Facebook page. I messaged the group, indicating my interest in seeing their show and writing about them, and they invited me to come view a dress rehearsal at their rehearsal space in Howrah. Having never traveled there, I ordered an Uber to pick me up from the place I was staying in Kolkata. Compared to its neighboring city, Kolkata, Howrah feels like a different world. As we cross the bridge over the Hooghly River, Kolkata's wide colonial streets give way to a maze of *galis* (alleys) barely wide enough for a single car to fit through. The lanes get narrower and narrower as my Uber driver navigates deeper into the east-Howrah neighborhood. It is a typical day in April, one of the hottest months of the year in Kolkata. As I step out of the air-conditioned car, I immediately start sweating in my light cotton salwar kameez. It will be at least two more months before the rains of monsoon break the heat, but the humidity in the air is still overwhelming. The rehearsal space is an un-air-conditioned room, open to the air, with a screen up to offer the performers some protection from the prying eyes of the street. There is black marley flooring rolled out for the dancers, a punching bag hanging in the corner, and a tiny kitchen and washroom in the back.

As one of the dancers, Satakshi Nandy, leads me into the space, there are two little girls, three older men, and five young men and one woman in their twenties and thirties lounging on the floor and on couches. The adults smoke cigarettes and gossip among one another. The dancers, I am told, are getting ready. Over the next half hour, one by one, they drift into the studio space and begin stretching and warming up. I cannot help noticing that one of the dancers, Sreejita Mitra, is wearing a shirt that says "Save a Horse, Ride a Cowboy." The shirt is indicative of the kind of feminism the dancers embrace, I will learn as I get to know them: contradictory, cheeky, embracing pleasure and alternative sexualities, global in its awareness of feminist politics and simultaneously suspiciously neoliberal to older feminist activists.

It is striking, then, to watch the radical difference between the female dancers' attitudes and those of the male musicians and backstage staff over the course of the three-hour rehearsal. The women are quiet and serious. After greeting me quickly, their focus turns entirely to their work. As they push their bodies through their own individual stretching and warm-up routines, they seem oblivious to anything else going on in the room. The men, on the other hand, are lounging all over the room, clearly treating this as a time to socialize rather than rehearse. Even once they begin working on specific moments from the show, there are still five men whose roles are unclear; they are not musicians, not directing, not taking notes or even, as far as I can tell, paying any attention to the rehearsal at all. I cannot help wondering whether they notice the irony of their own gendered participation in the creation of a performance that is meant to critique the gendered performances of everyday urban ritual.

Even more troubling to me at the time, the director of the show, Joyraj Bhattacharjee, is male, and not a trained dancer. He is in his thirties and has been working with the same theater group for years, while all five dancers are in their early twenties and somewhat new to the group.

Later, when I ask the women about his role, they will reassure me that he was more of an editor than an author, helping them to shape and clean their work, giving them exercises to spark their creativity and encouraging them to get to know one another both as people and as dancers, but in this moment he seems completely in charge of what is happening on stage. The dancers emphasize to me that they see themselves as a non-hierarchical collective, and in subsequent rehearsals, I will watch them take turns leading exercises, providing constructive criticism for one another, and contributing each of their unique perspectives to the final product, but at this first rehearsal, Bhattacharjee clearly commands the room.

Debarati Sarkar muses that, as the only non-dancer in the group, she comes to the act of devising from a "bourgeois" perspective, moving from theory to practice instead of practice to theory. She brings her training in feminist theory to bear on thinking about how urban rituals might break out of capitalist and patriarchal norms. Each of the other four dancers has a different background both in terms of physical training and socio-economic status. Trained in Bharatanatyam, Shruti Ghosh was the one who originally brought the idea of doing dance theater to the group, after being inspired by a dance theater piece she saw in Australia. Sreejita Mitra also trained in Bharatanatyam from a young age, but as she grew older she developed an interest in martial arts and found that her teachers were unhappy with how it was affecting her technique. Sataakshi Nandy grew up living in economic precarity, never sure how she would fund her next dance or martial arts class—she is trained in the Keralan martial arts form Kalaripayattu among others. She now teaches movement for the theater at Kolkata Creative Arts. Finally, Priya Roy hangs shyly in the background. It is only at our third meeting that she tells me quietly that she is not comfortable speaking in English. Switching back and forth between Hindi and Bengali, we finally start talking with one another about her extensive dance and movement background.

Praatohkrityo was performed a number of times in Kolkata and once in Delhi—though the Delhi performance was almost prohibitively expensive due to the number of musicians, instruments, dancers, and technical staff accompanying the production as it traveled from Kolkata. As a group theater, Theatre Formation Paribartak operates on an extremely limited budget; it does not make a profit from its often-sold out shows. In Kolkata, the show was immensely popular, selling out at one of Kolkata's premier performance venues, the Academy of Fine Arts. Audiences came from Kolkata's intelligentsia who pride themselves on their arts and culture. In Delhi, the show at Kamani Auditorium was well-attended, particularly by the city's queer and feminist intelligentsia, but it did not come anywhere near selling out. The idea of dance theater was perhaps slightly more exciting and new in the traditional Bengali group theater world of Kolkata than it was in the thriving experimental arts scene of Delhi.

Praatohkrityo struck a particular chord for me because of its desire to create a new vocabulary of the everyday, one rooted in what Jasmeen Patheja, the head of the public art group Blank Noise and the organizer of "Akeli Awaara Azaad" (Alone, Wandering, Free), calls a "politics of trust" as opposed to a "politics of fear." In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Peggy Phelan observes that, "while cultural theorists of the colonial subject…have thrown welcome light on the historical pattern of the violence of this encounter [between self and other], we still have relatively little knowledge of the romance nestled within it" (4). While she is not necessarily referring to an actual romantic relationship between two people, her comment brings me back to the two scenes I discussed earlier, which involve two dancers leaning on one another. In the first, the act of leaning on one another becomes a gateway to an intimate encounter with erotic desire, an acknowledgement of alternative sexualities and the pleasure to be found in that acknowledgement. In the second, the act of leaning on one another is just one more way in which

the dancers experience the violence of the world; one cannot support the other, dropping her violently to the ground, because she barely has the energy to support herself. The first is an act that reveals the bit of romance—and the trust required to establish that romance—that can be nestled within the encounter between the self and the other. The opening of the self that allows one to even imagine the other as approachable in the first place. The second repeats the more usual "historical pattern of the violence of this encounter." It shows how easy it is to be afraid and selfish when one is feeling unsafe and exhausted by one's daily routines.

In her discussion of the affective politics of fear, Sara Ahmed writes:

> Fear works to contain bodies within social space through the way it shrinks the body, or constitutes the bodily surface through an expectant withdrawal from a world that might yet present itself as dangerous…Fear of 'the world' as the scene of a future injury works as a form of violence in the present, which shrinks bodies in a state of afraidness, a shrinkage which may involve a refusal to leave the enclosed spaces of home, or a refusal to inhabit what is outside in ways that anticipate injury (walking alone, walking at night and so on). Such feelings of vulnerability and fear hence shape women's bodies as well as how those bodies inhabit space. Vulnerability is not an inherent characteristic of women's bodies; rather, it is an effect that works to secure femininity as a delimitation of movement in the public, and over-inhabitance in the private. (*Cultural Politics* 70)

For "Akeli Awaara Azaad," Patheja asked women from all over the world to chronicle their own journeys of walking alone in places "desired, feared or unknown" at the same time on the same night ("Jasmeen Patheja"). Women were thus forced to confront the ways in which fear of an unidentified other had curtailed their mobility, had constructed them as particularly vulnerable in public space. Though the women walking alone cannot physically lean on one another as they do

in *Praatohkrityo*, the solidarity of their action-in-unison provides them with imaginary support from some others, which in turn allows them to embrace a certain openness to other others that is substantively different from the vulnerability often projected onto the feminine body. "Action heroes"—as Blank Noise designates all its participants—chronicled their emotional and physical experiences, posting them later to Blank Noise's blog, not as proof that there is never anything to fear, but as a demonstration of the violence fear enacts in the way it constantly controls women's bodies in public space.

It is here, then, that *Praatohkrityo* reveals its truth. We cannot see the rhythms of the city, but we can feel them and we can move them. It is, in fact, exactly through the performance of moving bodies that we can start to parse some of the tactics of feminist walkers in the city. This performance and others like it allow us to bring up from the place of our deepest desires and fears the ways in which the city and our interactions with it create a certain way of being, of moving, of encountering the other, of creating the city. They allow us to externalize and begin to make legible these ways in order to make politically-informed decisions about how to move in solidarity. In the moments in which the dancers of *Praatohkrityo* are simply moving together, leaning on one another, and making themselves vulnerable, they have found some of the most profound challenges to and hopes for addressing women's fears of experiencing both ordinary and extraordinary sexual violence in the neoliberal Indian city.

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[1] These critiques are most readily apparent in Ratna Kapur's "Pink Chaddis and SlutWalk Couture: The Postcolonial Politics of Feminism Lite" and Hemangini Gupta's "Taking Action: The Desiring Subjects of Neoliberal Feminism in India," but other scholars have similar concerns about the feminism of Indian millenials.

[2] Nevertheless, it is a limitation of this study that it only considers the urban experience, and it is my hope that future work on both sexual violence and gendered performance will attend to the cultures of the countryside.

[3] See Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* for a detailed analysis of this.

[4] The closest English translation of the Sanskrit *Praatohkrityo* might be "Morning Ablutions" but that translation does not quite possess the sense of disdain the piece's title is meant to convey. One of the performers, Satakshi Nandy, playfully told an interviewer, "if that [praatohkrityo] means shitting, then it means shitting." The interviewer added, "indeed, in Bengali, it usually means shitting," and quoted a reviewer who wrote, "PraatohKrityo shat on patriarchy last night while you weren't looking" (Sathian).

[5] Rohith Vemula was a student at the University of Hyderabad who committed suicide after facing severe caste discrimination. His suicide note inspired nationwide protests against the continued mistreatment of Dalits in both the higher education system and the wider world.

[6] In her introductory text to *Theatre and the City*, Jen Harvie points out that analyses of urban theater practices tend to employ either a cultural materialist analysis, which is most often "used to explore the (repressive) conditions of theatre production" or a performative analysis, which is most often "used to explore the (liberating) effects of more everyday practices or less conventional performances" (68). Up until this point, I have most certainly employed almost exclusively the latter, and I will freely admit to being an idealist when it comes to thinking about the power of performance. However, I find that an examination of the labor of making *Praatohkrityo* and the backstage dynamics reveals just how complicated it is to attempt to translate the rituals of everyday urban life into movement as a feminist practice.

Chapter 6

Why Loiter? as Performative Protest: Pleasure, Neoliberal Feminism and the Politics of Affect

"Can performance make a difference? A performance, whether it inspires love or loathing, often consolidates cultural or subcultural affiliations, and these affiliations might be as regressive as they are progressive. The point is, as soon as performativity comes to rest *on* a performance, questions of embodiment, of social relations, of ideological interpellations, of emotional and political effects, all become discussable…Performance, as I have tried to suggest, is precisely the site in which concealed or dissimulated conventions might be investigated. When performativity materializes as performance in that risky and dangerous negotiation between a doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations), between someone's body and the conventions of embodiment, we have access to cultural meanings and critique." --Elin Diamond, 5

"The overemphasis on danger runs the risk of making speech about sexual pleasure taboo. Feminists are easily intimidated by the charge that their own pleasure is selfish, as in political rhetoric which suggests that no woman is entitled to talk about sexual pleasure while any woman remains in danger—that is—never. Some also believe that sexuality is a privileged topic, important only to affluent groups, so to talk of it betrays bad manners and bad politics on the part of sexual betters toward the deprived, who reputedly are only interested in issues that are concrete, material, and life-saving, as if sexuality were not all of these. The result is that sexual pleasure in whatever form has become a great guilty secret among feminists." –Carol Vance, 7

When I first met the women of Why Loiter, the performative protest group whose methods and ideology form the core of this chapter's argument, I felt that I had never been so inspired by such a minimalist performance. What they were doing—loitering collectively as women in various locations around the city of Mumbai—was a simple act but with potentially radical repercussions. And while the de facto leader of the group, Neha Singh, told me that she had never before considered Why Loiter a form of performance, it was very clear to me that its performative character was what lent Why Loiter such political power. The women of Why Loiter were not loitering only to make themselves more comfortable doing nothing in the public

space of the neoliberal city; they were also loitering for an audience, normalizing the idea of women doing nothing in the public space of the neoliberal city for the host of people moving through the streets who might catch a glimpse of this irregular sight. They were taking pleasure in the city in a fashion women rarely feel that they can do, and they were performing that pleasure in such a way that spectators could not help but take notice of it.

Singh explicitly eschews any visual markers of the political nature of Why Loiter's activities. Unlike other groups that come up in this chapter, such as Blank Noise, *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Hostel Locks), and the Pink Chaddi (Underwear) Campaign, Why Loiter does not loudly announce its presence with songs or chants, fliers or matching t-shirts. Its politics happen through the enactment of the world it hopes to bring into being. As Jill Dolan articulates so effectively in *Utopia in Performance*,

> as a performative, performance itself becomes a 'doing' in linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin's sense of the term, something that in its enunciation *acts*—that is, performs an action as tangible and effective as saying 'I do' in a wedding ceremony. Utopian performatives, in their doings, make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better. (Dolan 5)

This is the beauty of Why Loiter: that by evacuating the more obvious markers of political protest from its actions, it comes at politics from a different direction, using its performance to inspire change at the level of affect. It is a performance outside of a theatrical space, and it blurs the lines even more than a piece of street theater in terms of what is real and what is "only" performance.

At the same time, however, there is a danger in Why Loiter's reliance on affect (and particularly on the affect of taking pleasure), one that had not been as fully explored in academic

scholarship when Dolan and Diamond were writing about how and why performance can make a political difference: the danger of neoliberalism. Neoliberal governmentality takes advantage of exactly the same affective pathways to inculcate a politics of material desire that will result in producing obediently consuming citizens. This chapter, then, arises out of two, intertwined problems, one that has been central to the study of performance for many years and one that has been central to feminist movements across the globe. The first, in the field of performance studies, is the problem of whether and how performance can make a difference. The second, in the field of feminist studies, is the problem of where pleasure fits into an embodied feminist politics. These two problems come together in the aftermath of the Nirbhaya event as feminist performers attempt to create performances that transmit feminist politics through the use of affect and particularly around the notion of women embracing pleasure as a radically feminist tactic in a neoliberal context.

In this chapter, I will explore the potentials and pitfalls of women performing pleasure in anti-consumerist ways in public space. I will do so by first engaging in a close reading of Why Loiter as the exemplar of this performative genre before moving to a discussion of the seductive affective quality of neoliberal feminism. This discussion in turn leads me to define what I call the "problem of affect": that in turning to the politics of affect in feminist performance, one must constantly be on guard against neoliberal governmentality and the seduction of neoliberalism's use of affect to transmit certain values about individual economic success and consumerist desires. I conclude the chapter by considering feminist performance artist Maya Krishna Rao's *Walk*. A one-woman show created in response to the Nirbhaya event and intended to be performed at political protests, *Walk*'s improvised nature and its ability to be continually reworked to address a multitude of systemic injustices and oppressed groups indicates the

intersectional nature of the feminist problem of women's experiences of the public space of the city. Rao comes from a different generation of feminist politics than the majority of artists in my study (in fact, all but Jana Natya Manch belong to a younger generation than Rao), one grounded in the heady, early days of the Indian Women's Movement in the late 1970s and 1980s. By merging the street theater strategies she developed early in her career with her later work as a solo performance artist and the concerns of contemporary feminist activism in urban India, she points the way forward for feminist performances as they continue to capitalize on the power of affect as a means of doing politics.

Why Loiter: Performing Loitering as Feminist Protest

On a hot summer day in 2014, I stood outside one of the mega-malls in Andheri West, an affluent suburb of Mumbai. I was waiting for two women I had never met to pick me up in an auto-rickshaw and take me to a point farther out in the suburb where we had plans to meet up with a group of women to loiter for a few hours at a chai stall. They had graciously offered the mall as a meeting place, knowing how easy it is to get lost in the endless sprawl of Mumbai's northern suburbs. Not sure exactly how long it would take me to get to this mall in the first place, I had left my flat earlier than necessary, and now I had reached the mall nearly an hour ahead of time. As opposed to the collective loitering project I was planning for, I found myself loitering outside the mall alone and feelingly increasingly awkward about standing there appearing to be doing nothing other than waiting. Anyone who has conducted field research in a South Asian city knows that it involves a great deal of "hurry up and wait" in both public and private spaces. Time works differently in urban India, a complex calculus of wandering languorously through the sticky heat of the summer and sitting in an auto-rickshaw (praying for your life) as your driver

darts aggressively in and out of traffic to get you where you're going faster. I have yet to figure it out. Over the course of my own field research, I had learned to carry a book with me anywhere I went, giving myself something to do during the seemingly interminable waiting. Particularly when I was in public space, I found that burying my head in a book made me feel less conspicuous—regardless of whether I actually was.

In *Why Loiter: Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets*, Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade suggest that "being respectable, for women, means demonstrating linkages to private space even when they are in public space" and that "women who are inadequately able to demonstrate this privacy are seen to be the opposite of 'private' women, that is, 'public women' or 'prostitutes'. This binary between the private and the public woman defines all women's presence in, and relationship to, public space" (24, 26). The authors give examples of how women use their bodies to demonstrate their linkages to private space and their discomfort with public space; these women "manufacture purpose through the carrying of large bags, by walking in goal-oriented ways and by waiting in appropriate spaces where their presence cannot be misread" (Phadke et al. 34). Unwittingly, I had become a participant in this private/public binary, my book demonstrating that, while I may have been waiting in public space, I was not a "public woman." Rather, I was a woman who wished to keep herself to herself, who was uninterested in actually engaging with the public space around me.

The women I was waiting for wanted to deliberately trouble this binary by actively taking on a collective project of loitering. I wasn't quite sure what to expect. A few days earlier, I had been talking about my interest in the book *Why Loiter* with a group of actors in the living room of Mahesh Dattani, a famous playwright and director living in Mumbai. One of the actors was excited to hear me mention the book, because a group of her friends had just read it and had

decided to start their own loitering project based on it. We exchanged numbers and now here I was, going to meet this group and loiter with them.

After twenty minutes stuffed into the back of an auto-rickshaw with one too many people in it, we arrived at the chai stall that had been selected for this loitering session. Neha Singh, one of the women who had originally had the idea to start loitering regularly as a group of women, had been frequenting this particular stall regularly and had told the *chaiwallah* (the man who serves the tea) that she would be bringing a group of her friends to sit and sip chai for the afternoon. He was enthusiastically supportive, even offering us free chai by the end of the afternoon. So there we were, a group of eight women, drinking tiny paper cup after tiny paper cup of strong black tea mixed with milk and spices, eating the occasional *pakora*, and lounging in the shade on a stoop in front of a closed-down shop near the chai stall. If we had been men, this would have been a very typical sight for a summer afternoon. Women go to chai stalls as well—particularly in cities like Mumbai—but they tend to be accompanied by men, or they take their tea, gulp it down quickly, and continue on. The act of lazing about on a hot afternoon as a group of women in public is still rarely seen—enough so that when a group of men showed up at the chai stall for their own (less organized) afternoon of loitering, they immediately wanted to know what we were doing there.

It has been nearly three years since that first loitering session, but Neha Singh continues to get questions from people whenever she and her friends loiter. She rarely answers those questions by presenting Why Loiter as political, as a form of protest, or even as organized in any way (the exception being with other women, to whom she will explain the project). Instead, Singh emphasizes the importance of *not* looking like a protest at all. The women don't carry signs, wear identifying gear, or chant slogans. If asked by the police what they are doing out and

about at midnight, they don't answer by explaining their political goals. Instead, they respond: "We're just hanging out with friends." "We wanted to go on a late night ride together." "We're enjoying the park." Thus, the actions they are performing become the protest without any declaration of protest being made. The Why Loiter group, in other words, inhabits the very definition of the performative. They hope that by normalizing the sight of women doing nothing in public space, they will create the potential for women not directly involved in the project to feel comfortable loitering—and for the men already occupying such spaces to find women who are loitering unremarkable. The very invisibility, then, of Why Loiter's politics is what makes their act political, potentially turning the male gaze back upon itself to notice what it perceives as normative and non-normative within public space.

It is no accident that Singh and the majority of her contacts who participate regularly in Why Loiter's projects work in theater. Singh, herself, is an accomplished actress, performing regularly in plays staged at the National Center for the Performing Arts and Prithvi Theater—two of Mumbai's premier live performance venues. Watching her play the worm in a Hindi adaptation of *James and the Giant Peach*, a character who must be both physically present and strangely overlooked in the miniature world of the inside of the peach, I reflected on Singh's striking ability to play with the politics of the false binary of visibility/invisibility even in her acting style. She has a strong sense of bodily awareness and she knows how to make an audience look at her, laugh at her, and look away. And yet, when I suggested to her that Why Loiter should be read as a performance or at the very least a performative protest, she insisted that she had never considered it in those terms. "We're just having fun," Singh is fond of saying, a concept she has adopted from the book form of *Why Loiter*:

> For us 'fun' is also a verbal shorthand for pleasure, a concept that encompasses fun, but is much more than that. Pleasure itself is highly subjective and is inextricably linked to a range of choices including those related to sexuality, dress, matrimony (or not), motherhood (or not), to name some…Pleasure is an unknown quantity, which undermines the very possibility of order and control. This makes it potentially ominous and even threatening to a society whose ideas of propriety are often centred on controlling women's movements…Pleasure or fun is seen as threatening because it fundamentally questions the idea that women's presence in public space is only acceptable when they have a purpose…It is this idea of fun, as non-productive pleasure, as taking risks and loitering, that we will explore…(Phadke et al. 112-114).

Like the book's authors, Singh's group emphasizes the importance of fun as a form of non-productive and non-producing pleasure. Their loitering never involves consumption beyond the costs of bicycle maintenance or borrowing, the inexpensive roadside chai and coffee, and street food. It is very purposefully not only disruptive of one's expectations of where women should be, but also of any sense of pleasure gained through neoliberal forms of consumption in semi-private spaces such as shopping malls, coffee shops, or restaurants. In this way, the project of the Why Loiter group is intended to disrupt gendered ways of being in the city while also interfering in neoliberal conceptions of how people of various class backgrounds should be spending their time. It is a project that intends to be intersectional across class lines—though the majority of participants would be considered middle-class and it is organized through interpersonal connections in which friends tell one another about the project and get more women involved.

Phadke et al. are aware of the ongoing project of upper-class isolation and individuation in which neoliberal feminists, perhaps unwittingly, participate. They describe the pleasures of the

gated community in which "one is lulled into a false sense of actually having access to the public," when in actuality, one is only given access to a privatized public owned and operated by the gated community (166). This means that only specific people are allowed entry to this "public," people of the right class backgrounds, those who are willing to follow rules of dress and behavior within these privatized public spaces. In essence, the gated community becomes an extended harem, in which women are hidden away from the public gaze of the majority. It is a tempting and potentially pleasurable space for women, as well, because it feels simultaneously safe and free. Within the walls, women can wear western clothing, go out in mixed-gender company and not feel morally policed by the people around them (Phadke et al. 164). However, this "freedom" is limited to the world within the walls; this "pleasure" is limited to those who can pay for it. And it can be taken away at a moment's notice if one is no longer able to pay or willing to live by the (just as potentially restrictive) moral codes of neoliberal governmentality. Thus, *Why Loiter* is invested in a much more ambitious project of creating the same sense of freedom, safety, and fun in *truly* public space without the requisite fee.

"We're just having fun." This answer to the question of what they are doing, one Singh and her friends deeply feel, often disarms those who are questioning them, perhaps because it is a rare one to hear from women spending time in public space in the neoliberal Indian city, perhaps because there is something deeply satisfying about seeing how comfortable these women have become in the public spaces they occupy. They have met in public parks (and even slept in them), gone on midnight bicycle rides and nighttime walks. They have explored many chai stalls throughout the city and taken over the mixed gender (read men's) train compartments on the Mumbai local. In one memorable example, I joined a group of women going church-hopping in the Christian district of Bandra on Christmas Eve before going to loiter in one of the church's

cemeteries and telling ghost stories. While I refer to Singh as the leader of the group, she explicitly organizes it to encourage other women to take charge as much as they would like. Anyone can suggest the next meeting time and place, and there are enough participants in the project that individual women can come and go as they please, attending one loitering session while missing another, without affecting the project's continuity.

The Why Loiter group developed its strategies based on careful readings of the book *Why Loiter.* The book was published in 2011, and while it received positive reviews, it did not circulate far outside of feminist academic circles in South Asia. The book considers how India's transition toward neoliberalism affects women's relationships to private and public space. It begins by asking its reader to:

> Imagine an Indian city with street corners full of women: chatting, laughing, breast-feeding, exchanging corporate notes or planning protest meetings. Imagine footpaths spilling over with old and young women watching the world go by as they sip tea, and discuss love, cricket and the latest blockbuster. Imagine women in saris, jeans, salwars and skirts sitting at the *nukkad* reflecting on world politics and dissecting the rising sensex. *If you can imagine this, you're imagining a radically different city.* (Phadke et al. vii)

But how does one move oneself and the world toward that imagined utopia? In particular, the book suggests that women are frequently denied real access to public space by protectionist state and cultural policies that restrict their movements, citing fear for their physical safety and fear of the potential threat to their sexual purity.[1] The solution, the authors claim, is to embrace women's right to risk, to loiter as an embodied argument for the feminist stakes involved in this right.

Singh and the Why Loiter group keep a blog to document their activities. The story the blog tells of how the group started is as follows:

> A Girl, well her name is "Neha Singh", you see the picture, she is the one lazing around. Well, ya, so Neha read this book called "Why loiter", (again please see the picture), recommended to her by her German roommate some six months back, which made a big impact on her, when the rebel in her processed the book, she couldn't resist to not to [*sic*] do anything about it.
>
> What the book says you ask? well, here is the link to that.. go check it out, come back and read the blog…
>
> So coming back, Neha kept thinking about the book and what good could come out of it.
>
> So she called her friend, who also manages this blog for some brain storming and Neha came up with this idea of doing weekly session of why loiter. What to do in these sessions? anything you like, read, write, paint, play board games, anything and loiter. Hmm.. how would that work out, manager of this blog thought.. well lets see.. she said. WhatsApp groups were made, people were called, "love the idea" everybody said. Week 1: 3 people showed up…(Kapoor)

My first experience with the Why Loiter group was Week 3. By then they were up to eight people. But this concern with low turnout led quickly to a difficult question: if your purpose is to normalize women loitering by using your physical body as a performative tool and your group is limited in number, how do you reach a larger audience? Why Loiter's answer has been personal networks and social media. There are four separate Why Loiter facebook groups: one for the book (4486 likes), one for the original group that still meets in Mumbai (1134 friends), one for

an offshoot based in Jaipur (362 members) and one for a second offshoot based in Aligarh (348 likes).[2] They have also partnered with other feminist groups who are active on social media such as Girls at Dhabas (based in Karachi, Pakistan) and Blank Noise (based in Bangalore) to sponsor a variety of women's loitering events. There is a Why Loiter blog with monthly posts written about women's individual experiences of loitering and various loitering efforts by the Why Loiter group. Post titles include "Girl in the Metro," "Period Drama," "Reclaiming the Chai Tapri," and "How I Escaped Rape." There's an active twitter account run by the co-authors of the book (1729 followers). The group Why Loiter has been featured in a number of digital publications including Buzzfeed. They've created and posted videos to youtube about their experiences. There's even a play based on the group (*Loitering*), produced by an expatriate Indian woman living in the United States, which opened in winter 2016 to a full house at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Mumbai. The director of the play, Singh, and the authors of the book have all met and interacted with one another, and though each project is independent, they support one another's various approaches to encouraging more women to loiter in the city. From eight women loitering in Mumbai, Why Loiter has expanded into a still-growing internationally networked project.

Why Loiter is not the only project of its kind. In the wake of the Nirbhaya event, it is part of an expanding network of young, middle-class, feminist political activists taking to the streets to demand their right to the city. Other groups with similar approaches include *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Hostel Locks)—a group of young women in Delhi protesting the imposing of stricter curfews on college-age women living in hostels after December 2012 by wandering the streets at night—Kolkata's Take Back the Night, and Blank Noise—a Bangalore-based group that has organized events such as "Meet to Sleep" in which women met to take naps together in public parks and

"Akeli Awaara Azaad" (Alone, Wandering, Free) in which women simultaneously walked the city at night alone. Each of these groups seems to subscribe to some variation of the belief that, "women accept the current climate of fear surrounding public spaces…and needed to rectify that by asserting their presence in public space" (Gupta 163). The women of groups like Why Loiter, then, are not only loitering as a performative tactic to normalize the sight of women lazing in public space but also to change their own individual relationships to the act of loitering in public space. Like Judith Butler's understanding of gender as a performative action, loitering becomes natural for the women through the repetitive behavior of acting as if it already is. There is no clear distinction between the ideology of the performance and the ideology of the performer. Thus, for the women of Why Loiter, loitering becomes a project of both self-empowerment *and* political change.

Neoliberal Feminism and the Problem of Affect

One of the central tenets of the book *Why Loiter* is a commitment to loitering as an anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist, anti-neoliberal act. Phadke et al specifically critique the new rhetoric of treating shopping malls, coffee shops, restaurants, and movie theaters as public spaces in the city (65). These are privatized recreational spaces that have limited access, require one to look and act a certain way (respectably middle-class), and that expect that one will be spending money, consuming goods and services—not merely loitering. In other words, *Why Loiter* is explicitly engaging the role of neoliberalism in limiting one's right to public space by transforming public spaces into privatized ones that only masquerade as their public predecessors. The specific use of the term "loiter" as opposed to "go out" or "go play" or a host of other actions that one could take in public space appears intentionally provocative. The

Oxford English Dictionary defines the action of loitering as follows: "In early use: To idle, waste one's time in idleness. Now only with more specific meaning: To linger indolently on the way when sent on an errand or when making a journey; to linger idly about a place; to waste time when engaged in some particular task, to dawdle" ("loiter, v."). It also, however, notes that loiter is often incorporated into the legal phrase "to loiter with intent (to commit a felony)" (ibid). Certainly, the use of the term "loiter" often implies that one is up to no good. Loitering is associated with laziness, unlawful acts, the insertion of one's body into a space where it should not be (i.e. "No loitering" signs at grocery stores or gas stations). It implies that one does not have a purpose, and this purposelessness is often considered evidence of criminality. The word "loiter," then, connects doing nothing to not consuming to the potential for illegal activity. It demonstrates how doing nothing is criminalized in a society committed to the neoliberal values of production and consumption above all.

Both the book and the group Why Loiter, then, construct themselves as fundamentally opposed to the central values of neoliberalism. In order to understand how this plays out in practice, however, it is important to get a fuller picture of what exactly "neoliberal" means in the context of feminist activism. In her article "The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism," Catherine Rottenberg suggests that neoliberal feminism "is most clearly articulated in two highly publicized and widely read 'feminist manifestos': Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (a New York Times bestseller) and Anne-Marie Slaughter's 'Why Women Still Can't Have It All' (the most widely read piece in the history of the Atlantic)" (418). These pieces sandwich the Nirbhaya event in time: Slaughter's, on how women's own fears are holding them back from "feminist" success in the workplace, was published in July 2012 and Sandberg's, on the continued challenges for women of creating a work-life balance in March 2013. I argue that this temporal

relationship is no coincidence: the rise of neoliberal feminism is, in many ways, at the heart of the ongoing rhetoric about how to address the contemporary problem of sexual violence and gender equality not only in India but around the world. The Delhi bus gang rape inspired such widespread protests and drew worldwide attention specifically because it felt like an attack on this new neoliberal feminist, the woman who wanted to go out at night to see a movie with her boyfriend, to earn a living for her family. The Nirbhaya event became the perfect example of the clash between traditional and conservative India and modern (and neoliberal feminist) India. Even as the most clearly articulated American manifestos of neoliberal feminism were hitting the shelves, then, the Nirbhaya event was being mobilized to support a strikingly similar set of politicized claims in India.

How do Sandberg and Slaughter exemplify neoliberal feminist subjects? According to Rottenberg,

> Individuated in the extreme, this subject is feminist in the sense that she is distinctly aware of current inequalities between men and women. This same subject is, however, simultaneously neoliberal, not only because she disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality, but also because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care, which is increasingly predicated on crafting a felicitous work-family balance based on a cost-benefit calculus. The neoliberal feminist subject is thus mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair. (420)

In other words, what Sandberg and Slaughter both seem to advocate for in their "feminism" is the individual responsibility each woman must take for her own empowerment. Not only that, but their definition of the empowered woman is both economically and sexually normative: she

is a career woman looking to be as successful and wealthy as possible while also achieving the perfect work-life balance in her nuclear family. In so doing, she will contribute to feminist aims by possessing individualized economic and cultural power—stemming from her perfect job and her perfect life—and providing an example of a successful woman, a woman who can compete with the men—proof that men and women are equals (if only women can lean in a bit more). One of Rottenberg's more troubling critiques of neoliberal feminism suggests that "it not only neutralizes the radical idea of collective uprising by atomizing the revolutionary agents and transferring the site of activity from the public arena to each individual's psyche, but also conceptualizes change as an internal, solipsistic and affective matter" (426). In this analysis, affect appears to be the enemy of liberal feminism, "the node through which liberal feminism is rendered hollow and transmuted into a mode of neoliberal governmentality" (Rottenberg 424). Thus affect is not just the primary site of the neoliberal feminist agenda, but is in fact the means by which neoliberal feminism masks its true purposes and appeals to the collective organizing spirit of liberal feminists.

I use Rottenberg's analysis extensively in this chapter because of her focus on the role of affect in contributing to the rise of neoliberal feminism. It is a concern shared by many feminist scholars working in South Asia as well, though not always put in exactly the same terms. Lata Mani, for instance, cautions that:

> The neoliberal ideal requires us to treat as immaterial the world in which we live and the actual basis upon which we craft our lives. It would have us believe that we can remake ourselves and our surroundings according to our desires, just as it strives to remake societies and economies in accordance with the profit motive (Mani, "Sex" 27).

Her worry that neoliberalism "would have us believe that we can remake ourselves and our surrounds according to our desires" eerily echoes Jill Dolan's argument quoted above, that "utopian performatives, in their doings, make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better" (Dolan 5). Do utopian performatives—and particularly feminist ones—run the risk of implicitly or explicitly aligning themselves with a neoliberal agenda by attempting to remake the world according to women's desires?

Affect is, of course, not always about desire. There is not a singular definition of the term, because affect is nearly as difficult to define as it is to articulate. I use the term "affect" to describe that which operates simultaneously in what we consider internal and external planes. It affects our psyche even as it circulates as a social feeling among people. It operates on the body, in our relationships with one another, and makes our daily choices political precisely because they contribute to both our own internal affect and the shared feelings that populate the world around us. For Berlant, affect is also a creative force; the repetition of it generates the very logic of how our world functions. Finally, and perhaps most critically for the purposes of my argument, affect becomes palpable most easily as a social phenomenon, something in the air around us.

For a group of social scientists considering the affect of risk, affect is "a faint whisper of emotion…the specific quality of 'goodness' or 'badness' (1) experienced as a feeling state (with or without consciousness) and (2) demarcating a positive or negative quality of stimulus. Affective responses occur rapidly and automatically…" (Slovic et al. 312). In their analysis, affect is that thing which makes us feel positively or negatively toward a concept before we have really given much thought to it. Interestingly, affect has an effect on our willingness to take risks. If we feel a good affect toward a specific choice, we are more likely to assume that choice to be

low risk and high reward, whereas if we feel a bad affect, we are more likely to assume that choice to be high risk and low reward (ibid). And this analysis happens before we have spent any time rationally considering the two choices. Whether explaining affect humanistically or scientifically, then, it is that difficult-to-define feeling that gives us almost instinctive responses to certain stimuli. For Rottenberg, affect as employed by Sandberg and Slaughter seems also to encompass the ability to consciously consider and attempt to control those instinctive responses.

And Rottenberg is certainly compelling in her argument that there is something seductive about the idea that we have agential control over our interior spaces and that changing our own feelings and behaviors will have a feminist political effect on the world around us. Who does not want to believe that we have individual agency, that our actions in the world matter? But is she really correct in her assertion that a turn to affect is exactly how liberal feminism is losing its radical quality? And is there a feminism other than liberal or neoliberal feminism that might more accurately capture the affective turn I have been discussing as characteristic of performative responses to the Nirbhaya event? These questions express what I call the problem of affect: that in turning to the politics of affect in feminist performance, one must constantly be on guard against neoliberal governmentality and the seduction of neoliberalism's use of affect to transmit certain values about individual economic success and consumerist desires. What happens if political change is conceived not only but *first* as an affective matter? How can one differentiate between desire or pleasure inculcated by neoliberal governmentality and desire or pleasure that directly contests the inequalities of neoliberalism? All of these questions are part of the problem of affect under neoliberalism, and it is my contention that a close examination of Why Loiter and other similar groups and *Walk* by Maya Krishna Rao explicitly *as performances* can help begin to answer them.

Lata Mani approaches the problem of affect from a different direction. However, her discomfort with neoliberalism generally and neoliberal feminism more specifically stems from a strikingly similar place to Rottenberg's: the slippage between the liberal and the neoliberal that might occur if one believes too deeply in limitless individual agency/choice/freedom. In Mani's analysis,

> the modern sense of freedom is closely tied to the idea of individual self-determination, and given the centrality conferred on sexuality to the notion of self in modernity, to individual *sexual* self-determination…Freedom comes to be represented by the young, desiring, unfettered subject able to choose his or her path, partner and forms of consumption, constrained neither by tradition nor any other material factor. Unrestrained choice and obstacle-free mobility comes to be woven into the very ideal of freedom ("Sex" 26-27).

Though Mani does not use the term "affect" within her five-page critique of this new strand of feminism, her analysis of freedom incorporates it. For Mani, freedom has been interpreted in the contemporary feminist context as unrestrained choice, agency in listening to one's heart—in other words, to the push and pull of pleasure and desire—and the ability to move through the city at will. This distrust of pleasure and desire is where Mani's theorizing intersects the problem of affect, for if one cannot trust one's own mind about what is pleasurable, if the space of pleasure is always already co-opted by neoliberal governmentality, then what could it possibly mean to imagine performing an action like loitering merely for pleasure? This action is made even more complicated by the fact that it requires individual women to confront their own affective response to loitering in public space and overcome it, essentially "leaning in" to "create effective ways of overcoming their fears" much as Sandberg suggests in her neoliberal feminist manifesto

(Rottenberg 425). Though Sandberg is writing of overcoming the fears "of being too outspoken, aggressive, or more powerful than men," while *Why Loiter* is writing of overcoming the fear of violence, the parallels between the two are troubling (ibid).

Both Mani and Rottenberg are concerned that an emphasis on women listening to their own desires, particularly without an awareness of the structural oppression that influences those desires, too easily becomes aligned with exactly those who would continue to oppress women. It places all potential for political change on changing affect, makes women responsible for that change, and prioritizes individual desire over collective solidarity. They are not the only ones who share this concern. Geeta Patel identifies the same strands of neoliberal governmentality in her analysis of a discussion of insurance and risk in a self-help column: "your fears, the authors assure you, are not encapsulated in the financial regime outside; they are encapsulated in the daily management of yourself" (40). Rather than addressing the very real risks of the financial market the self-help column advocates an embrace of those risks, a letting go of fear, because the danger of not letting go of that fear, of not investing, are worse. How diametrically opposed such analyses seem to Phadke et al's claim that "the seeking of pleasure, the succumbing to the seduction of risk, are, *when performed as acts of inclusion*, profoundly feminist acts with potentially radical implications" (xiii). In one narrative—that of Mani, Rottenberg, and Patel, among others—the citizen becomes attached to the right to risk and pleasure even though the claiming of that "right" undergirds a neoliberal structure and centers responsibility for the citizen's oppression on her own affect and behavior. In the other—that of Why Loiter, Blank Noise, and Pinjra Tod, among others—demanding risk as a right that belongs to the individual is a radically feminist embrace of a politics of trust, a willingness to encounter others of diverse class and caste backgrounds, and a means of normalizing the sight of women in public space. Is

it possible to resolve these two narratives with one another? Can women's claiming of the right to risk have both potentially neoliberal and potentially radical feminist implications?

And how much control do we really have over whether our actions support neoliberal governmentality? Mani uses the metaphor of "the signal-free corridor indifferent to the multiple, criss-crossing currents of human and vehicular traffic" to indicate what happens when feminist politics becomes only about sexual pleasure and free choice ("Sex" 27). The signal-free corridor, after all, is empty of signals, but it is not evacuated of power relationships. For instance, the car or the bus will, in most situations, have right of way over the pedestrian, because the pedestrian will be injured if he or she does not get out of the way fast enough. This, then, is the problem of attending only to pleasure and desire: one must also consider how structures of oppression influence pleasure and desire in the first place. In her article on SlutWalk, Kathy Miriam puts it this way: "The issue is not the absence or presence of agency, but the *power* to determine the 'rules' of the game. Two teams are playing but only one invents the rules; the other is allowed only to maneuver within these rules. Such maneuvering may be female agency but it is not female freedom" (Miram 263-4). The danger of neoliberal feminism lies in its promise that attending to one's own desires results in freedom of choice, when, in fact, the choices have already been limited before one has the chance to consider them. Somehow, in order to avoid this trap, performances such as Why Loiter must address these limits as part of their project of taking pleasure in loitering, and it is to this challenge I will turn in the next section.

Performative Feminist Protests and the Politics of Affect

Why Loiter and performative protests like it have been labeled by or implicated in the production of neoliberal feminism in contemporary South Asia by a number of scholars.

Hemangini Gupta writes, "The current fragmented landscape of individuals connecting on social media, through hashtags and via blogs is what I call 'neoliberal feminism' and it has been produced—and deeply shaped by—contemporary forms of marketization that link rights to consumption with feminist freedom" (155). Here, she is referring specifically to three feminist protests: the Pink *Chaddi* Campaign, a number of actions by Blank Noise, and Bangalore-based The Friday Convent. However, she indicates that these protests are "*representative* of a particular neoliberal moment of feminism in India" (155). In other words, in Gupta's analysis, all three of these protests are ideologically linked to the term "neoliberal" because of the way they network individual women through social media and rally them around a call for the right to consume as a critical aspect of women's liberation. But what are each of these three protests actually asking for?

The Pink Chaddi Campaign was a protest against an attack perpetrated by the Hindu extremist group the *Sri Rama Sena* (Army of Lord Rama) on a group of women at a pub in Mangalore and a promise by the *Sri Rama Sena* of future violence if women dared to go out to pubs for Valentine's Day (Susan). It began as a Facebook group under the name, "The Consortium, of Pub-Going, Loose, and Forward Women." Within days the group had attracted 34,000 members and made plans to inundate the *Sri Rama Sena* headquarters with pink underwear on Valentine's Day (Dhawani). One of the founding members said of the group that "many members are not fans of conspicuous consumption or pubs. What we have in common is that we dislike the ease with which right-wing groups have been infringing on fundamental rights" (Susan). The Pink Chaddi Campaign, then, was asking for people to come together to challenge right wing groups' sense of entitlement, that their way of living was the right way, and that they could violently attack those who were living "wrongly," without fear of state or

individual repercussions. Simultaneously, the Pink Chaddi Campaign was asking that women's rights to go out if they chose—in this case, for Valentine's Day—be seen and respected as fundamental.

The Pink Chaddi Campaign is also the focus of an article by Ratna Kapur in which she describes both their actions and those of SlutWalk—an international campaign that took place in 2011—as "a space clearing gesture, a form of feminism 'lite,' rather than offering a transformative or revolutionary politics, and thus enables the possibility of feminist theoretical positions in a postcolonial context that have hitherto been marginalized or ignored in feminist legal advocacy in India to emerge" ("Pink Chaddis" 1). For Kapur, then, what is missing from protests like the Pink Chaddi Campaign is a sense of revolution, that the status quo is unacceptable and must be fought at the level of challenging the dominance of patriarchy. Rather than critiquing the underlying structures of culture and governance that have created gender inequality, the Pink Chaddi Campaign is only challenging a specific result of that inequality—the fact that men can spend time in pubs without being considered loose, forward, or dishonorable. It thus becomes, in Kapur's analysis, an example of "feminism lite"; it draws attention to an aspect of feminism that is often overlooked by feminists thinking about protest only in terms of challenges to the state's legal and political mechanisms: individual pleasure. And while Kapur may not consider the fight for women's rights to pleasure central to a politics of feminism, she does argue forcefully that protests such as the Pink Chaddi Campaign turn a critical eye on feminism itself and demand that the movement question its own motives and political foundations moving forward. In other words, these protests perform a crucial—though not a radical—role in contemporary Indian feminism.

Blank Noise serves as Gupta's second example of neoliberal feminism, primarily because of the group's "emphasis on inviting individual reflection on women's experiences of the city and their dreams for its future," which Gupta reads "as an example of how neoliberal agency is asserted and articulated" (159). Based in Bangalore, Blank Noise has organized a multitude of performative protests or politically engaged public art since its founding in 2003. These include amongst others: "Meet to Sleep" in which women met in a large group to take a daytime nap in a public park; "Moments of a Long Pause," a set of filmed interviews of men and women on the streets of various cities about how men treat women in public space; "Akeli Awaara Azaad," a project in which women walked alone at night in spaces they had always been afraid of and documented the experience; "I Never Ask for It," a project to collect clothes women had been wearing when they experienced sexual violence and display them in art galleries around the world ; "Hahaha Sangha," a weekly community meeting in a public park to laugh together; "Talk to Me," in which young women invited one-on-one conversations with strangers walking past; and "Safe City Pledge," in which participants were invited to photograph themselves making a specific pledge about their interaction with the city such as "I pledge to visit parks often, to take the last metro, to wear the red lipstick and smile at everyone who passes by" (Patheja; "Safe City").

What Gupta has interpreted as individual reflection, I see as attempts to create a form of collective solidarity grounded in the notion of prefigurative politics but successful only to the degree to which it performs. Prefigurative politics are not a new idea in leftist and feminist organizing. Defined by Wini Breines in the 1980s in her discussion of the New Left, "the crux of prefigurative politics imposed substantial tasks, the central one being to create and sustain within the live practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that 'prefigured' and

embodied the desired society" (Breines 421). Prefigurative politics support the notion that it is not enough to protest against current political problems; one must also embody in one's daily life the practices one wishes to see in the future of society. However, embodying change, making personal decisions that reinforce one's belief in a different future society, is not enough on its own. This, I believe, is the sticking point for many of the critiques of groups such as Blank Noise and Why Loiter. These women are not merely making different personal decisions based on their own desires; they are publicly performing different personal decisions as a means of transforming affect as the "nervous system of the world" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 4). They are encouraging others both consciously and unconsciously to question cultural expectations. In other words, these women are expressing their desires in such publicly performative ways precisely for the purpose of circulating different affective norms. Patheja treats the work of Blank Noise as explicitly performative public art; thus, it is not only for the women involved but also for the general viewing public. Blank Noise calls its participants Action Heroes, which Gupta interprets as an "emphasis on the successes and heroism of participants [which] lends the campaign an individualist bent that resonates with neoliberalism's emphasis on cultivating entrepreneurial selves who take responsibility for themselves" (160). Once again, however, the use of the term "Action Heroes" has radically different meanings depending on whether one treats Blank Noise's actions as performances or not. As a performance, the Action Heroes are enacting utopian behaviors that may not seem possible in our actual daily lives. Like superheroes, what they are doing seems to defy the laws of the world as we know it, but also gives us examples to aspire toward. They normalize what might at first seem superhuman for women to do in public space.

The final protest Gupta describes is the most compelling as an example of neoliberal feminism precisely because it fails to emphasize performativity. Though it sounds similar in terms of its actions—going to loiter outside a women's college at 8 pm in Bangalore—it fails to capture the sense of collective solidarity that the other groups I have discussed have at the core of their missions. Rather, the rhetoric of the Friday Convent, according to the leader of the group, is focused on the right "just to claim (my) space: for me the change has to come from within…this whole 'victim' role that Indian women have started playing in the last few years…centuries…I have a huge problem with that and I saw myself playing that a few times…so, self-reflection, therefore correction" (Gupta 162-63).

It is one thing to face one's fears as a means of confronting an overarching cultural politics of fear, an affective climate of fear in which women are taught to be afraid of what might happen to them in public space as a means of performing a different kind of patriarchal violence, that of protectionism. It is another to face one's fears as a means only of changing oneself and to stop there. The former has the potential to be radically feminist, while the latter is unquestionably neoliberal feminism in its belief that women can overcome their internal limitations, lean in, and thus transform their own circumstances. In some ways, then, we've come full circle from the first chapter. The question of why performance is central to the feminist response to the Nirbhaya event is answered by looking at Why Loiter and other groups like it as performances, not merely political protests. Performance turns what could otherwise be construed as a claim to individual pleasure, to free choice in a consumer-driven market—essentially, to neoliberal feminism—into a collective struggle for a different kind of access and acceptance in the public sphere of the neoliberal city. It uses affect as a political tool, part of a feminist aesthetic that normalizes gender, sexuality, caste and class diversity in any given

space—and the rights of these groups, regardless of identity, to have access to pleasure and desire. This argument about performativity, however, does not address the problem of intersectionality, of the fact that the vast majority of women involved in these performative protests are middle-class, Hindu, upper-caste, and educated. It is for this reason that I turn in my final section to a discussion of Maya Krishna Rao and the intentional performativity and intersectionality at the center of *Walk*.

Maya Krisha Rao's Walk and the Importance of Intersectionality

As a performance explicitly crafted to be performed as part of a protest or political demonstration, Maya Krishna Rao's *Walk* takes the notion of performative protest one step further. When the Delhi bus gang rape happened on December 18th, 2012, Rao was rehearsing for a comedy show she was planning to perform at the National School of Drama's annual festival later in the winter. She found herself deeply affected and unable to rehearse. Finally, on December 30th, her rehearsal team suggested that she create something in response to the Nirbhaya event and place it at the end of *Non Stop Feel Good Show* (2013). At the same moment, she was invited to perform at a protest against the Delhi bus gang rape, which would take place at midnight on December 31st, 2012 on the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) campus (Rao).

In her article on *Walk*, Bishnupriya Dutt describes the experience of being at that first performance as the clock struck midnight to begin a new year:

> Clad in black jacket and trousers, Rao metaphorically continued Jyothi's unfinished walk to recovery and empowerment. As she walked there was a sense that she was walking for Jyothi, together with and also for the enthusiastic audience all round her…Her gestures

> followed [her] text, her arms raised over her head in an agitational style and evoking a collective response. As an interlude to her text she would walk a few steps with big strides, full of force and robustness. The text, gestures, and steps came one after the other, each with a different intent. Speaking as one who participated, I found the experience of collective walking mesmerizing. With a music track in the background, Rao set a pace for the rhythm of the walk and we all moved together to that rhythm. (Dutt 377-78)

Watching filmed versions of *Walk* on youtube, I too am struck by the rhythm of the music, the way it drives the pace of the piece forward, its heavy electronic beats and simple piano melody moving my body in unison with Rao's. Though I am sitting in a chair at my laptop, in my head I am walking with everyone else who has been a participant in this performance. Since the December 31st 2012 performance, Maya Krishna Rao has performed *Walk* in a multitude of places and contexts. She incorporated it into the end of her *Non Stop Feel Good Show* at the National School of Drama festival in January 2013. She performed it at the Jaipur Literature Festival later that year. She has performed it at colleges around India, at various protests at JNU and Jantar Mantar, a central, government-sanctioned protest location in Delhi, and even at New York University. A faculty member at the University of Capetown had seen her performance online and created a response performance to *Walk* in South Africa. As of 2016, Rao was still being invited to perform *Walk* at various locations.

However, crucially, *Walk* has transformed over time, from a performance specifically about the Delhi bus gang rape to one that embraces intersectionality and the many connections between various forms of oppression. Rao has performed *Walk* at LGBTQ rights rallies in protest of Section 377, the rule in the Indian Penal Code that outlaws homosexuality (among other acts). She performed it at a demonstration after the suicide of Rohith Vemula for Dalit rights. Because

the words and movements of *Walk* are largely improvised, Rao shifts the central text as necessary to address the population for whom she is performing. What connect each performance are the music, the numbers she speaks aloud and which drive the performance forward just as much as the music—12 midnight, 6 convictions for the Delhi bus gang rapists, 377 reasons why homosexuality should be legalized, etc.—Rao's powerful presence as a body and a voice, and the desire to walk together, think together, and express one's sexuality without fear and *with* consent. It is not, however, merely the improvised nature of *Walk* that makes it so easily applicable to various oppressed groups; there is something about its performative claim to the collective embrace of risk and pleasure that calls affectively to each of them. As she expresses her desires, she asks her audience, "Can I? Will I? Should I?" and it is left to them to consider what these desires mean in the context of their own lives.

In the very first performance of *Walk*, Rao commands boldly:

Walk, walk, walk. . .. I want to. . .

Can I? Will I? Should I?

. . .I want to walk. . .not five, not six, not seven, not eight, not eleven. . .

But at 12 midnight. . .

I want to walk the streets. . .

At two, at three, at four. . .

I want to walk the streets, ride a bus

Lie on a bench in the park. . .

I try not to be afraid of the dark. . .

Will you walk with me?. . .

I will walk with you. . .

Will you walk with me? (Dutt 378)

One of the critiques of groups such as Why Loiter is about their foregrounding of the language of "rights" and the "right" to risk. According to this critique, "when we argue against vigilantism solely on the basis of a rights discourse we naturalise sexual desire. We imply that sex merely needs to be rescued from the repressive regime of a feudal patriarchy; that no inquiry is necessary as to how we have come to understand and experience it today" (Mani 28). This critique is referring once again to the incident that provoked the Pink Chaddi Campaign. The "vigilantism" was performed by members of the *Sri Ram Sena* against women who were out at a pub in Mangalore. What does it mean to claim in response to such an attack that these women have the "right" to go out to a pub? Among other problems, it invokes state action to enforce these rights, and given the current political power of the Hindu right, this is not an invocation that has much traction. Not only that, but "in responding primarily in the language of 'rights,' we bracket vital issues signaled in the alienation felt by those excluded from this new elite, whether on account of their social, cultural, class, caste or linguistic background" (Mani 29). Thus, Mani argues, by foregrounding going to a pub as a right, the many fundamental human rights that are not available to large swathes of India's population may be devalued. While I believe deeply that there is space for both a dialog about women's rights to pleasure and to such basic necessities as food, water, and shelter, Mani's concerns are not without merit: "Any strategy that focuses exclusively or predominantly on one goal while ignoring the other will fail. To encourage a mindless expansion of sexual options, without critiquing the sexist structure in which sexuality is enacted and reducing the dangers women face, only exposes women to more danger" (Vance xvi-xvii). A demand for the right to enjoy going out to a pub without an accompanying analysis

of where that desire comes from, how it might ultimately contribute to a sexist structure, and *who* is allowed to express that desire in the first place is unquestionably problematic.[3]

This is exactly why, even though she is improvising, it is so crucial to attend to the exact words that Rao is using. Rao puts her articulation of risk in the language of praxis and of desire instead of rights: "I want to walk the streets…" "I try not to be afraid of the dark…" She cannot be successful in either of these actions without structural and affective political changes. She cannot be successful without the collective solidarity of those she is speaking to. And, because of the fluid nature of *Walk*'s topic, the mass demonstrations in response to the Delhi bus gang rape, Rao's "performances do not stand alone as performances. The protests, their coverage in the media, public demand for legal reform, the circulation of additional literature, and large number of performances created a wider and more inclusive dispersal of the issues. Rao's performance strategy could only realize its radical potential because of this common public space" (Dutt 385). The Nirbhaya event is a unique moment in the history of the Indian feminist movement, one that lends itself to performance as a means of rethinking the everyday, of transmitting politics through affect, and of imagining collective solidarity built on an embrace of pleasure for women and other oppressed populations.

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[1] This protectionism has come to the forefront of public discourse in the aftermath of the brutal Delhi bus gang rape of 2012.
[2] These numbers are as of April 1, 2017.
[3] Crucially, Singh's Why Loiter group does not foreground loitering in terms of their "rights." They do not expect the state or the law to necessarily support their project (hence, the reason they do not discuss it with police officers who question them). While the book *Why Loiter* does discuss loitering in terms of the right to risk, I would argue that Singh's acting out of loitering is employing a strategy that attempts to leave the state out of the conversation altogether.

Chapter 7

Epilogue, or Where Do We Go From Here?

The Nirbhaya event brought to the surface issues that had been simmering for years around the problem of sexual violence, of globalization and neoliberalism's differing treatment of and effects on lower- and upper-class urban India, and of women's movements through public space. The history of the Indian Women's Movement is one that emphasizes a contentious but close relationship between feminists and the law and a belief that agitating for better laws and better enforcement of the laws that already exist is the way to ensure future gender equality. However, feminist responses to the Nirbhaya event revealed a distrust of the Indian state's ability, regardless of legal reforms, to ever create a more just society for women. This had existed along India's borders for years but had rarely been seen at the center. While large portions of the mainstream—including Jyoti Singh Pandey's parents—called for the justice system to "hang the rapists," feminist responses were more concerned with emphasizing women's rights to move through the city without fearing for their lives. Performance gave feminist activists and artists a means to explore embodied responses to the Nirbhaya event, responses that took into account their own personal experiences of sexual violence large and small while also turning the conversation outward to explore as a community how people might make public spaces safer and more welcoming for women without limiting their freedom in order to do so. These performances, by emphasizing the slow sexual violence that women experience throughout their daily lives, reframed the national and international conversation about sexual violence around the small performative actions that make women feel unsafe and

fear more physically violent acts and adjust their behavior accordingly, essentially policing and oppressing their own bodies.

The conversation about slow sexual violence is *not* a new one in feminist theory and activism; however, the choice to place slow sexual violence at the center of activist responses to a traumatic incident of sexual violence, to prioritize that conversation over others, *is* new. For instance, the 1990 article "'Nothing Really Happened': the Invalidation of Women's Experiences of Sexual Violence" by Liz Kelly and Jill Radford explores the ways in which women are socialized to minimize their experiences of sexual violence, essentially turning what may have, in fact, been a traumatic experience into an incident of slow sexual violence. Their emphasis, though, is on the idea that these incidents should be considered trauma. What most of the performances in my study are arguing is the exact opposite: these incidents should not be considered trauma, but we should be talking about what it means that they are considered normal, unremarkable, that it takes a woman being gang-raped and murdered to call popular attention to the undercurrent of fear nearly every woman has been socialized to feel moving through public space. In other words, by refocusing our attention on slow sexual violence these performances are asking us to treat sexual violence as part of a culture in which we all participate rather than a crime committed by deviants. When Maya Krishna Rao tells us that she wants to walk the streets at midnight and then both asks if we will walk with her and offers to walk with us, she is not only suggesting but actually performing the ethical responsibility we have to ourselves and one another to participate in creating a new culture, one that recognizes and fights back against the ways in which women are socialized through slow sexual violence to be afraid for their safety in public space.

The way in which sexual violence is intertwined in culture and feminist activism addressing sexual violence as a cultural problem is not only happening in India. This is a worldwide phenomenon, and further study must be done of these global conversations, their cultural specificity and their general appeal across cultural boundaries. In particular, using a performance studies methodology seems to me to be a critical part of understanding the kinds of feminist activism that so-called "millenials" are embracing, an activism that focuses on women's experiences of pleasure and desire, on their right to risk, and on a notion of consent that has moved far beyond questions of legality and into the many "grey areas" that the law cannot adequately address. Many older feminists are concerned about the nature of a movement that has its roots in social media and critical of what seems to them to be a narcissistic focus on individual pleasure instead of structural change. I have argued throughout that performance allows us to consider the political ramifications of a feminist discourse of risk and pleasure, but I have chosen to focus on clearly theatrical examples of this. Further study should pursue how a performance studies lens could be applied to trending hashtags and posts on Facebook. I am not suggesting that there isn't a certain element of narcissism in young feminists' use of social media, but there is also something happening because of feminist activism in digital space, and performance might help us to grasp the practical and theoretical implications more clearly.

The move to talk about sexual violence as part of women's everyday experiences and to insist on pleasure as a part of this conversation is not isolated to India. In the five years since I began the research on this project, the U.S. has undergone its own event that has forced a reframing of sexual violence discourse in the form of the ongoing revelations about male celebrities and Hollywood tycoons and the accompanying social media campaign #MeToo. The similarities between #MeToo and the Nirbhaya event are striking. After what seemed at first to

be another disturbing story of sexual violence that no one paid any attention to, a groundswell of protesting elevated the story of Harvey Weinstein's abuse of his power in the movie industry in order to sexually assault young women into an international news event. One story led to more stories, until it seemed that nearly every woman working in Hollywood had at some point been sexually assaulted by a man in her workplace. Like with the Nirbhaya event, each of these stories referred back to the Weinstein incident as a touchstone, but many of them were about far more everyday interactions than the man who could make or break a woman's career isolating her in his hotel room and then stripping and asking for a naked massage. The conversation quickly shifted from one about one man's sexually predatory habits to one about an unspoken rape culture throughout Hollywood and then throughout the United States.

As the MeToo hashtag continued trending, I found myself thinking about the ways in which the Nirbhaya event anticipated what is now happening in the U.S. Had feminist strategies in South Asia had influenced what was happening halfway across the world? How did the similarities and differences between these two cultural moments provide rich material for analysis of contemporary postcolonial feminisms? In the future, I hope to trace the transnational movement and implications of both live and mediatized South Asian feminist performances. For instance, Maya Krishna Rao's walk has been performed in U.S. and South Africa to great acclaim, and when I showed it to a class of undergraduate students in upstate New York, they strongly identified with its performative power and message. Jasmeen Patheja's project *I Never Ask For It* was displayed at an art gallery in New York City in summer 2017. The piece displays clothes people were wearing when they were sexually assaulted, and Patheja's goal is to collect ten thousand garments from around the world by 2022 to display in public locations. What happens when these Indian women perform their work in a western context? Do the after-effects

of colonialism result in an audience reception that imagines India to be more "backwards", more ravaged by sexual violence and inequality? Certainly when performed for a European audience, both Yael Farber's *Nirbhaya* and Mallika Taneja's *Thoda Dhyaan Se* received some commentary about India's poor treatment of women, as if sexual violence was a problem particular to India and not worldwide. A transnational study of how such work circulates would help to elaborate on how questions of race, class, urban vs. rural, religion, sexuality, and postcoloniality interact with the problem of sexual violence.

There is, without a doubt, more work to be done on these budding movements to identify and put a stop to slow sexual violence. I do not know where these movements will go, nor can I guarantee that all the changes they bring will be positive, but I am excited to see the progress that has been made around the world in recognizing the patriarchal violence at the heart of everyday gendered interactions and the renewed emphasis on prioritizing fun and pleasure as feminist political goals.

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