Intermediality in Contemporary Indian Theatre

By

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I examine specific performances by contemporary practitioners of Indian theatre that employ an intermedial form. Within theatre studies, intermediality has been defined in terms of the effect of digital technology on theatre. In the context of Indian theatre, I identify new forms of intermediality by studying linguistic, formal, sensory, and transmedial interactions through theatre within the work of contemporary practitioners. These practitioners employ a collaborative and devised process of creation with people from diverse artistic and cultural backgrounds. Practices of intermediality in Indian theatre include the combination of multiple languages and forms of performance, communication through multiple sensory modalities, incorporating digital technology on stage, and combining theatre with other artistic and non-artistic disciplines. Narratives and forms travel and transform between multilingual theatre and film in India, demonstrating transmedial connections between these forms.

In my introductory chapter, I contextualize the practices of intermediality within the history of Indian theatre by discussing specific practitioners and performances. I explore how these practitioners employ intermediality to stage political interventions, challenging hierarchies that structure artistic practice in India. In Chapter 2, I discuss performances by Habib Tanvir and Naya Theatre, a group based in Bhopal, who use an intermedial form that combines diverse languages and forms to stage interventions against mechanisms of precarization such as industrial pollution and right-wing censorship. I focus on the performances *Zehreeli hawa* (Poisonous Wind, 2002), a trilingual adaptation of Rahul Varma's *Bhopal* (2003), and *Ponga pandit* (Idiot Pandit, 1992), a *nacha* performance that satirizes casteism and religious fundamentalism. My third chapter examines transmedial connections between multilingual theatre and film. I discuss Indianostrum's performance *Chandala, the Impure* (2018), the

documentary film *Janani's Juliet* (2019) by Pankaj Rishi Kumar, and Pa Ranjith's Tamil film *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* (A Star Shoots Across the Sky, 2022), all of which were created at Indianostrum theatre in Pondicherry. These works embed folk performances, reflect on practices of theatre and film-making, and illustrate the transformation of narratives across different media, showcasing both continuity and contradiction in interpretations of caste. In Chapter 4, I examine intermediality within the performances of The Company, Chandigarh, directed by Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, that communicate through the multiplication and innovative combination of sense perceptions. I analyze Chowdhry's recent performance *Trunk Tales* (2022) through the lens of Sarah Ahmed's framework of queer phenomenology to reveal how the performance foregrounds trunks as objects that evoke specters of the Partition of 1947. My final chapter discusses the varying intermedial forms of Zuleikha Chaudhari's performances that combine artistic and non-artistic disciplines. I focus on her series of performances *Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case* (2014-2018) and *Landscape as Evidence: Artist as Witness* (2017-2023), which lie at the intersection of theatre and law and activate audiences' capacity for aesthetic judgment.

The performances that I discuss in this dissertation use an intermedial form to challenge accepted perceptions and provide a new way of looking at specific issues. These performances employ linguistic, cultural, formal, and technological forms of intermediality to disrupt hierarchies that structure aesthetic forms in India, including caste, language, location, religion, and media type. By examining intermediality in the works of contemporary Indian theatre practitioners, this study proposes new frameworks for understanding linguistic, formal, sensorial, and transmedial interactions within theatre. I argue for an expansive definition of intermediality

that can be an effective framework for studying innovative and experimental artforms in diverse multilingual and multicultural contexts.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Practices of Intermediality in Contemporary Indian Theatre

In this dissertation, I examine the ways in which contemporary practitioners of Indian theatre employ intermediality to enact a "politics of perception" (Rancière 17). Employing an intermedial form, these performances emphasize acts of mediation that structure our perception of reality and expose hierarchies that structure what is seen and what is made imperceptible through media. Within theatre studies, intermediality has primarily been used to refer to the staging of digital technology through theatre. Intermediality has also been defined as the blending of art forms to create newer forms of art, the representation of one medium within another, and the movement of narratives and artistic practices from one medium to another. Scholars have characterized intermediality as an effect on perception and a "resensibilization of the senses" caused by the destabilization of aesthetic conventions and communication through the interaction of semiotic and sensory modalities (Boenisch 104, Kattenbelt 35, Higgins).

In the context of Indian theatre, I redefine intermediality to refer to performances that are multilingual and constituted through acts of translation and adaptation; incorporate the staging, combination, and juxtaposition of folk and modern forms of performance; stage digital technology; travel and transform across medial boundaries; communicate through the interaction of semiotic and perceptual systems; or combine theatre with other disciplines. These performances are created through collaborative and devised processes that include performers from various artistic and cultural backgrounds and use an intermedial form to address contemporary social and political issues and interrogate discourses embedded in theatrical representation. Specifically, I discuss the work of Habib Tanvir and Naya Theatre (Chhattisgarh), Indianostrum Theatre (Pondicherry), Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry (Chandigarh),

and Zuleikha Chaudhari (Delhi) to show how these practitioners address caste and gender-based violence and discrimination, food and water insecurity faced by migrant labor, citizenship, and ecological issues such as air toxicity, industrial pollution, and the impact of large scale developmental projects on local inhabitants, through their innovative and intermedial repertoire of performances.

In this introductory chapter, I examine relevant historical forms and extant theatrical practices to contextualize my examination of intermediality within contemporary theatre in India. First, I refer to definitions of intermediality within theatre studies and references to intermediality within scholarship to identify practices of intermediality in Indian theatre. Second, I provide a historical overview of these practices of intermediality to situate the contemporary practitioners that I examine in my chapters. Third, I discuss what constitutes a "politics of perception" within Indian theatre, and how practitioners employ intermedial forms of performance to provide alternative perspectives about contemporary sociopolitical issues by foregrounding excluded points of view and imagining new possibilities.

Redefining Intermediality for Indian Theatre

Intermediality refers to the combination or juxtaposition of multiple media within theatre. Klaus Bruhn Jensen premises intermediality on the interconnectedness of modern media and delineates three ways in which it functions within theatre: on the sensory level, as communication through multiple sensory modalities simultaneously, such as in shows that use light and sound; on the level of media artifacts, as the combination and adaptation of distinct media, such as in multimedia shows; and on the institutional level, as interrelations within medial institutions in society, such as theatre, literature, and film (Nelson 16). Mediums come together

in various ways in intermedial artwork, such as collision, juxtaposition, imbrication, and adaptation, among others, to produce a "a new cultural way of seeing, feeling, and being" (Nelson 18). Lars Elleström suggests that a "both-and" approach characterizes intermediality rather than the notion of "in between," and advances an understanding of the concept "as a bridge between medial differences that is founded on medial similarities" (Nelson 15).

Scholars have reflected upon the implication of digital culture on theatre in terms of intermediality. The mediatization of society has not only led to the proliferation of digital technologies on stage but also questioned theatrical conventions, leading to new virtual and interactive forms of theatre. Digital technologies have enhanced theatre's capacity to integrate sound, visuals, live performance, and recorded media to create different kinds of multimodal performances, demonstrating the interconnectedness of modern media (Nelson 14). In mediatized society, mass media have real effects and reality has transformed into a "hyperreality of simulations and simulacra" (Kattenbelt 34). The remediation of digital media through theatre or "staging media" through theatre alters relationships between media, leading to corporeal effects and a resensibilized perception (35).

For Jensen, intermediality works through "multiple modalities of experience" that work together to challenge established perceptions and conventions. Intermedial performances elicit "a politics of spectating" by drawing attention to experiences of spectatorship, unsettling theatrical conventions and artistic boundaries. By "play[ing] with or explicitly deconstruct[ing] perceptual expectations," intermedial performances disorient audiences through surprise or confusion, or "uncanny" experiences of "dislocation, displacement, or alienation" (Groot Nibbelink and Merx 219). By disorienting audiences through a proliferation of contradictory sense impressions,

intermedial performances cause a “blurring of realities,” and a “critical awareness of the process of perception itself” (Groot Nibbelink and Merx 227).

While digitally mediated forms are at the center of many conceptualizations of intermediality, scholars have defined forms of intermediality that are independent of digital technology. Hannah B. Higgins’s definition of intermediality revives Fluxus artist Dick Higgins’s conception of intermedia as art that makes use of “structural continuities” between different forms of art, such as sound poems or Happenings, “theatre with musical and painterly elements” (Higgins). By mobilizing overlapping aesthetics between the arts, intermedia art questions restrictive conceptions and categorization of the arts by demonstrating the fluidity and variability of artistic boundaries. Intermedia art employs a cross-modal aesthetic that works with perceptions produced through simultaneously physiological and cultural frameworks. Sense perceptions received through the interactions of hearing, touch, smell, sight, and taste interact with cultural memory and experiences of observers, illustrating the interdependence of the senses in intermedia art. Sense perceptions converge and collide in unexpected ways that are non-hierarchical and mutually reinforcing, within intermedial art forms, questioning the predominance of certain senses over others in forms of art, reversing conventional hierarchies produced by artistic codification, and reorienting audiences through unusual correlations between senses.

Boenisch’s theorization situates intermediality within the perception of observers and as an effect triggered by performance. While digital technologies can provide one way of evoking an intermedial effect, theatre combines text, sounds, visuals, bodies, language, imagery, and other sign systems to create new intermedial performances without the staging of technology. Boenisch demonstrates how intermedial performances intervene in digital processes of

replication by reinforcing the materiality of actor's bodies, objects, and media, leaving them unchanged, but transforming them into signs (113). Characteristics of digital data processing, such as linearity, hierarchical ordering of information, cause and effect, homogeneity and uniformity, self-identity, infinite repeatability, the primacy of the visual medium, encoded languages, and passive distanced consumption, are challenged within intermedial performances to foreground processes of mediation that structure our existence within digitally controlled worlds (Boenisch 108).

Intermediality is a central characteristic of avant-garde and postdramatic art forms. Theatre practitioners of the historical avantgarde drew heavily from other forms of art to affect a radical shift in aesthetics (Cardullo 2). Cardullo writes that in Europe, theatre practitioners associated with movements such as Expressionism and the Bauhaus in Germany (1919-1933) and Futurism in Italy (founded in 1909) created theatrical works inspired by film and filmmaking practices. In the Futurists' *sintesi teatrali* (theatrical syntheses), movement, sound, light, and gesture were placed on the same level as text, and combined within *attimi* (moments) to express emotions and events directly to audiences using intensified actions (10). Futurists, Dadaists, and Surrealists sought to violently break with established art forms and cultural institutions, creating freeform performance art that borrowed generously from poetry, dance, music, literature, sculpture, cinema, architecture, drama, and painting (38).

Kattenbelt writes that intermediality can be associated with Kandinsky's concept of Bühnenkompositionen (stage compositions) (1912/1923) rather than Richard Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk (1850). While Wagner advocated a reunification of the arts, Kandinsky's compositions worked with the interplay between different artistic forms and synesthetic effects generated from this interaction ("Intermediality in Theatre and Performance" 26). Intermediality

can also be found in the "interruption techniques," of filmmakers, theatre practitioners, and artists such as Sergei Eisenstein, Bertolt Brecht, Robert Wilson, Alain Platel, Gerardjan Rijnders, and Jan Lauwers, who aimed for disruption and fragmentation instead of integration, overturning conventions of genre and form in their respective regions (26).

Intermediality is a characteristic of postdramatic theatre as defined by Hans-Thies Lehmann. Postdramatic theatre refers to performances that interrogate the rules and text-centered practice of dramatic theatre. The dramatic illusions of the fictive cosmos, a cohesive plot, the unities of space and time, and a centralized focus are questioned. Instead, the performance foregrounds its own materiality, theatricality, and liveness. Rather than a centralized focus, the performance space evokes "evenly hovering attention" by the simultaneous staging of "states" and "scenically dynamic formations" (Lehmann 68). Postdramatic theatre mixes live and digital performing bodies, text and performance, addresses multiple sense perceptions, and brings unconventional objects, events, and performers on stage. The political and disciplinary interventions made by postdramatic theatre emerge from its intermediality and innovative mixing of art forms. Lehmann writes that postdramatic theatre rejects synthesis for an aesthetic of deconstruction resulting in "ambiguity, polyvalence and simultaneity" (83). Within postdramatic theatre, intermediality signals "the theatrical realization of freedom – freedom from subjection to hierarchies, freedom from the demand for coherency" (83).

Within scholarship on Indian theatre, intermediality has been used to refer to theatre that stages digital technology. In *Postdramatic Theatre and India*, Ashis Sengupta includes "formalistic and intermedial hybridity" as a characteristic of postdramatic theatre in India that makes use of video projections, monitors, and technological effects on stage (17). Questioning ideas of presence, liveness, and immediacy within dramatic theatre, postdramatic theatre

complicates ideas of reality and representation using digital technologies. For Sengupta, intermediality brought on by the entry of electronic and digital media into the stage has expanded "the meaning and scope of intertextuality and hybridity" (49). Shayoni Mitra writes about the blurred lines between forms of Indian theatre in the present, and the formation of "new Indian avant-garde" performances by women directors such as Anamika Haskar, Anuradha Kapur, Maya Rao, and Zuleikha Chaudhari that integrate live performance with technology (80). She writes that the usage of technology refutes older entrenched theatrical conventions in India, making the presence of technology in the work of women directors an avant-garde characteristic. Such incorporation of technology also brings a "whole new range of semiotic possibilities" to Indian theatre, creating revolutionary new languages (Mitra 83).

Aesthetics across Cultures: Intertextuality, Intermediality and Interculturality, edited by Rosy Singh, collects articles about intersections and interactions in languages and form between the arts including multilingual literature, film, philosophy, religion, architecture, paintings, woodcut, masks, performances, and other forms. Anuradha Ghosh's "Rhythms of the "Third" Across Cultures – A Study of Performance," is a cross-cultural comparative study of definitions of the term "Third" in theatre, literature, and film from the Global North and the Global South. Referring to the theatre of Badal Sircar and Kalakshetra, Manipur, along with the films of Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen (India), Tareque Masud and Tanvir Mokammel (Bangladesh), and Fernando Solanos and Octavio Getino (Argentina) and the theatre of Augusto Boal, Ghosh concludes that discourses on the "third" emanating from the Global South see it in terms of experimentation with indigenous cultures and traditional forms of performance that are "radically realigned to inspire critical action" (200).

In the context of Indian theatre, intermediality can be defined in more expansive terms by considering additional interactions between multiple languages, cultural forms, and media. As Aparna Dharwadker writes, modern Indian theatre was formed from the "complex fusion of intrinsic and extrinsic elements bringing together three contradictory forces" – Europeanized modernity in the form of a new dramatic canon, theatrical forms, new technologies, and print culture; Classical Sanskrit drama revived by European Orientalists; and modern Indian languages, rather than English, as the media for new plays, translations, and performances using indigenous cultural forms (*Poetics* xlvii). Theatre in multiple languages coexists in India, and translation and adaptation are central to the inception, circulation, and production of multiple linguistic theatre in India. Sengupta also discusses hybridity, intertextuality, and the interleaving of different kinds of cultural forms as an inherent characteristic of Indian theatre, leading to formalistic and intermedial hybridity (Sengupta 17).

In "Intermediality in Theatre and Performance: Definitions, Perceptions and Medial Relationships," Chiel Kattenbelt discusses three different kinds of media interaction - multimediality, transmediality, and intermediality. Multimediality refers to the combination of different disciplines or institutionalized practices of media (literature, theatre, film, television, video, internet) rather than the combination of various sign systems (word, image, sound) within the same media object. Transmediality is used to understand the transformation from one medium to another, including changes in content (the narratives or story) and form (aesthetic conventions, stylistic choices, and principles of construction) (23). By imitating the representational strategies of another medium, transmedial objects may emphasize their reference to another medium as a nostalgic tribute or completely replace another medium making it absent or even obsolete. Intermediality, in Kattenbelt's conception, refers to the interplay

between different media "that result in a redefinition of the media that are influencing each other, which in turn leads to a refreshed perception" (26). The three kinds of media interactions are distinct from one another but do not exclude each other and can exist within the same media artifact.

Within Indian theatre, new forms of intermediality can be defined by looking at performances that are multilingual, created through processes of translation and adaptation, and mix folk and modern forms of performance. These performances communicate through the interaction of semiotic and perceptual systems, combine theatre with other disciplines and art forms, or transform as they travel across medial boundaries. The different kinds of media interactions within Indian theatre, in relation to language, media type, form of performance, and content, result in interrelated literary, performative, filmic interpretations of narratives and forms. I discuss intermedial performances that juxtapose, combine, stage, embed, and mediate multiple narratives and forms of performance, drawing inspiration from local and transnational resources, and exhibiting processes of multimediality, intermediality, and transmediality.

While social hierarchies structure the location and practice of cultural forms in India, many performers transcend imposed boundaries and mix different categories of performance and artistic disciplines to create intermedial performances. Narratives, performance practices, and forms travel between literature, theatre, television, and film in multiple Indian languages transforming as they move across medial boundaries. Besides transregional collaborations, Indian artists also respond to international phenomena, collaborate with artists outside India, and create work for international audiences in collaboration with local artists. In the next section, I discuss historical practices of Indian theatre that demonstrate these additional forms of intermediality. I structure my discussion by focusing on four practices of intermediality within

Indian theatre: the combining of multiple languages and forms of performance, communication through multiple sensory modalities, staging digital technology, and the traveling and transformation of narratives and performance practices between media.

Combining Multiple Languages and Forms of Performance

In India, theatre practitioners have created political and non-political forms of intermedial performance by combining folk and modern forms in multiple languages and using collaborative and improvisatory processes with performers from different artistic and cultural backgrounds. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), which started in 1943 as the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India, influenced the practice of adapting local folk forms to create performances that address contemporary political issues. The IPTA was a nationwide progressive theatre movement, had a rhizomatic structure and functioned as a non-hierarchical network, and in each region, artists used regional languages and local folk forms, such as *burrakatha* in Andhra Pradesh, *tamasha* in Maharashtra, *nacha* in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and *jatra* in Bengal, to reach the largest number of people. To create a people's theatre, the IPTA adapted stories of anti-fascist struggles from around the world into multiple regional languages and combined folk forms with other forms of music, dance, martial art, folklore, and performance "to portray vividly and memorably" the struggles of peasants and workers ("First" 159). As a cultural organization affiliated with the Progressive Writers Association that sought to organize artists against the injustices perpetrated by colonial and fascist governments, the IPTA attracted various artists including actors, writers, dancers, musicians, poets, filmmakers, and folk singers (Sehgal 32). Along with the Drama Squad, the IPTA included a Cultural Squad, with musicians and dancers, and a Film Squad, resulting in transmedial connections between these forms.

By translating plays into different languages, the IPTA instilled anticolonial and antifascist sentiments within diverse audiences through "linguistic diversification," and by experimenting with an "amalgamation of theatre forms," drawing from regional, national, and international sources, the IPTA created an innovative intermedial form for performing socially and politically committed theatre (Bhatia 93). The intermediality of the IPTA intervened in theatrical conventions in multiple ways. By turning to folk performance instead of classical Sanskrit sources, the IPTA's performances questioned the hierarchy of forms within contemporary ideas of urban theatre, and their emphasis on regional languages for political performances resisted the imposition of national languages and maintained the multilingualism of performers and audiences. The networked structure of the IPTA, collaboration between its different branches, and the movement of narratives and performance practices between languages and media facilitated by its workings intervened into hierarchies between rural/urban and folk/modern within Indian theatre.

As the performance practices of the IPTA demonstrate, intermedial performances seek to make interventions within hierarchies of caste, religion, language, class, and region that structure performance practices in India. As Brahma Prakash writes, "caste mediates language, space, and bodies of performance" and structures the production, distribution, reception, visibility, and appreciation of cultural forms in India (23). The cultural repertoire of folk performances, including their form, content, rhythm, language, songs, music, space, musical instruments, characters, and musical patterns, is hierarchically organized by caste. For folk performers, performance is simultaneously a leisure and labor activity, and they regularly contend with exploitative working conditions with little or no pay, humiliation and segregation, and a constraint on their creativity because of the inability to modify their practice (Prakash 28).

However, folk performances are inherently subversive and counter-hegemonic. They are against official religious cultures and offend civic notions of morality and propriety with their corporeality. Folk forms are repositories of knowledge, memories, and experiences of Dalit communities, and they contain ideas and experiences that mainstream culture "neglects, undervalues, opposes, represses," or fails to recognize (43). The exploitative conditions under which folk performers practice their art can be converted into "emancipatory projects" by subaltern performers (24).

The politically radical practice of Dalit theatre employs folk forms of performance to exhort audiences to recognize Dalit contributions that have been elided by mainstream cultural practices, and makes visible Dalit oppression. One of the beginnings of Dalit performance can be attributed to Jyotiba Phule's Satyashodhak *jalsa* (gathering) that began in 1873 and the play *Trutiya Ratna*, written by Phule in 1855. With the launching of Ambedkar's anti-caste movement in 1923, artists began to disseminate Ambedkar's philosophy through the Ambedkari *jalsa*. Inspired by the *jalsas* and beginning in 1927, the year in which Ambedkar undertook the Mahad Satyagraha, Dalit *shahirs* (singers) engaged in the "performative act of singing a story," making visible the caste oppression that permeates institutions, cultural practices, and other forms of social organization (Maitreya). Singing in Marathi, *shahirs* have been instrumental in creating the anti-caste movement in Maharashtra and resulted in the burgeoning of other forms of Dalit performance. Dalit performers of the Ambedkari *jalsa* combine folk forms of performance such as *powada*, *lavani*, and *tamasha*, using music, comedy, and dialogue to disseminate the teachings of Ambedkar. The plays of Anna Bhau Sathe (1920–1969) combined realism with musical forms, such as *powada* and *tamasha,* to create *loknatya* (popular theatre). Sathe turned to literature when *tamasha* was prohibited by the state. Folk forms of performance have been

instrumental in asserting Dalit resistance in the works of numerous artists. In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Gaddar's revolutionary performances with Jana Natya Mandali, composed of "songs, movement, and political argument," created a new kind of political performance (Mangai 41).

Folk performers are rarely owners of cultural capital, and they collaborate with others who possess cultural influence to transform their conditions and practice into performances of mobilization (Prakash 37). Intermedial performances can be one way in which folk performers can transform their cultural labor into cultural capital. As performances created through collaborative processes with people from different artistic and cultural backgrounds, intermedial performance groups and spaces become an arena for the exchange of ideas, forms, practices, stories, experiences, and materials, leading to new forms of performance that emerge from this collaboration. Intermedial forms developed by the IPTA created a legacy of political theatre in India that future practitioners of Indian theatre continue to draw upon.

Practitioners such as Habib Tanvir (1923-2009) and Utpal Dutt (1929-1993) created different kinds of intermedial performances that combined regional folk and modern forms of performance and were explicitly political. In Naya Theatre, located in Bhopal, Chhattisgarh, Habib Tanvir (1923-2009) developed a process for creating performances collaboratively with local actors and folk performers, drawing upon the Chhattisgarhi language and *nacha* form of performance, among other regional languages and performance forms. The group uses regional languages and forms of performance; processes of translation and adaptation; and techniques, narratives, histories, and experiences of folk performers, bringing these forms and narratives into the arena of mainstream performances that circulate within wider national and international circles of spectatorship. Naya Theatre collaborates with performers from other regions in India

and abroad, and the group improvises using the workshop format, enabling diverse performers to bring their own styles and experiences to the collectively-created performance. Folk performance forms are presented not as ornamental objects or archives of premodern performance practices but in the form of modern theatre that addresses contemporary issues relevant to performers and audiences.

Utpal Dutt combined techniques from *jatra*, an intermediary form of performance from Bengal, with stories of historical, subaltern, indigenous, and international revolutions, relevant to contemporary political struggles to create an intermedial form of revolutionary theatre that entertains and inspires the audience to revolt against the oppressive state machinery. Using practices from *jatra* along with video clips, historical information, and revolutionary tactics, Dutt created a form of documentary theatre that was radical, melodramatic, and inspirational, directly attacking the state for its crimes. Intermediality works within Utpal Dutt's revolutionary theatre through resonances between different senses and thematic correlations between historic and contemporary contexts. Employing multiple sensory modalities and art forms to heighten emotionality, intermediality within Dutt's theatre affects audiences through the "sensational use of suffering as a theatrical device" (Bharucha *Revolution* 66).

Dutt's *Barricade* (1973) depicts the Nazi occupation of Germany in 1933 and centers around the incarceration of a Communist organization by a corrupt government, judiciary, and press. A performance of *Barricade* that I watched in Kolkata in December 2022 employed video projections, spectacular light and sound effects, shadow work, puppetry, and written titles, and emotionally depicted the politicization of a mother who joins her communist son to avenge her husband's murder. I was also struck by the relevance of the play in the contemporary context, particularly in the hostile silencing of the press by fascists, and in the depiction of a biased

judiciary that cooperates with a criminal state. In this performance, the different sensory modalities complemented one another to enhance the emotionality of the performance, and performers made pointed references that made the contemporary relevance of fascist oppression explicit to audiences.

Practitioners of Indian theatre aimed to revitalize indigenous forms of performance by bringing them before newer audiences. B. V. Karanth (1929-2002) popularized the practice of working with folk forms of performance and developed the workshop method for collaborating with folk performers. As director of the National School of Drama (1977-1981) and Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal (1981-1988), and founder of the acclaimed theatre repertories Rangmandal (Bhopal) and Rangayana (Mysore), Karanth's emphasis on folk performance forms encouraged numerous collaborative endeavors between artists from diverse backgrounds. Playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008), Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016), and Girish Karnad (1938-2019) experimented with folk forms and folk narratives in their plays. Inspired by ideas of cultural nationalism and rejecting Western influences within theatre, directors such as Ratan Thiyam (b.1948), K.N. Panikkar (1928-2016), and Chandrashekhar Kambar (b. 1937), associated with the Theatre of Roots movement,[1] developed performance practices that adapted indigenous forms of performance into modern theatre in a move to decolonize Indian theatre. However, many of these adaptations were uncritical and transformed folk forms into archaic ornamental artifacts to be consumed by the West. Other practitioners and groups were able to mobilize the subversive potential of folk performances through effective practices of collaboration.

The relevance of Brecht's epic theatre to Indian folk forms led to numerous adaptations of Brecht's plays localized to various historical and cultural contexts. In an interview with Carlo Coppola in 1975, Ebrahim Alkazi surmises that practices such as the combination of music,

dance, speech, and song; the simple and direct style; the use of montage; discontinuous and episodic action; and the distancing of spectators from the action on stage and of actors from their roles are already a part of Indian traditional and folk forms, leading to Brecht's easy adaptations into a number of folk forms (Alkazi 292). Prominent directors such as Alkazi, Amal Allana, Ajitesh Bandhopadhyay, Fritz Benewitz, P. L. Deshpande, Balwant Gargi, Safdar Hashmi, B. V. Karanth, Vijaya Mehta, Jabbar Patel, M. S. Sathyu, Rudraprasad Sengupta, Richard Schechner, Habib Tanvir, and Carl Weber, among numerous others, have adapted Brecht's plays for regional audiences in different ways. While some of these performances of Brecht's work are depoliticized recreations, other practitioners draw on Brecht's theoretical framework to conceptualize their own versions of political theatre (Dharwadker *Independence* 368). Habib Tanvir frequently mentioned that Brecht taught him to return to his roots and to the folk forms of Chhattisgarh.

Within intermedial performances, folk forms are removed from their local contexts, recontextualized, and combined with or embedded within other forms to address social and political issues that may differ from their original themes, topics, and concerns. Intermedial performances may or may not intend to make particular social and political interventions. However, the collaborative process of creation, the staging of folk forms that are inherently subversive, and the innovative combining of folk and modern forms endow such performances with the potential to make social and political interventions. Despite this potential, hierarchies still structure groups that create intermedial performances. Differences of caste, class, religion, language, and region are deeply ingrained within individuals who collaborate in groups, and folk performers who participate in collaborative performances may continue to face exploitation, less pay, seasonal and uncertain work, financial dependency, humiliation, and exclusion.

Nevertheless, intermedial performance practices harbor the potential for transformation. They challenge caste-based hierarchies between forms of performance and question the exclusion of folk forms from urban theatre spaces. They share cultural capital with folk performers by bringing folk forms before national and international audiences. Through a collaborative process of creation, the subversion inherent in folk forms is recontextualized and mobilized to address issues relevant audiences and performers.

In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, on Naya Theatre and Habib Tanvir (Chhattisgarh), Indianostrum Theatre (Pondicherry), and Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry and The Company (Chandigarh), I discuss intermedial forms of performance that combine multiple languages and folk and modern forms of performance. As I have mentioned in this section, Naya Theatre, founded by Habib and Monika Tanvir in 1959 in Bhopal, centers the Chhattisgarhi language and *nacha* form of performance from the region, among other folk forms and regional languages. Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry is the artistic director of The Company in Chandigarh – a group that she established in 1984. Chowdhry uses collaborative and devised processes to create intermedial performances with Naqqals, folk performers of Punjab who employ female impersonation in their socially subversive performances, and urban actors, adapting texts from around the world into Punjabi and other regional languages. Indianostrum Theatre, founded by Koumarane Valvane in Pondicherry in 2007, strives to revitalize local forms of performance in Tamil Nadu by hosting local performers in their rehearsal and performance space and creating collaborative performances with folk performers and people from all over the world.

These intermedial performance practices are collaborative and work with folk performers, not just folk performance forms. Facilitated by an artistic director, the performance practices center regional languages and local forms of art, and performers come together within a

specific rehearsal and performance space. In my discussions of these contemporary forms of intermedial performance, I demonstrate how these performance practices intervene in perceptions that marginalize regional languages and folk forms of performance by creating collaborative performances that address social and political issues that are relevant to performers and other participants.

Communicating Through Multiple Sensory Modalities

The Naxalbari Uprising in 1967 and its violent suppression by the state, followed by the Emergency instituted by Indira Gandhi between 1975 and 1977 led to the politicization of cultural practice in India in the 1970s and 1980s and the emergence of several new forms of activist theatre. Drawing upon international political movements and combining local and international theatrical forms, theatre practitioners in India created new, intermedial forms of street, protest, and feminist theatre. In the 1970s, Badal Sircar (1925-2011) theorized and practiced a form of body-centered, minimalist, free, and progressive theatre that he named Third Theatre – different from but drawing upon indigenous folk performances and Western-inspired modern conventions of theatre. With Satabdi, the theatre group that he founded in 1967 in Calcutta, Sircar sought to minimize the distance between performers and audiences in order to directly communicate to them social and political issues impacting the urban and rural working classes, exposing the ignorance of the middle classes and their complicity with systems of oppression.

Drawing from his exposure to the work of Grotowski, Schechner's Performance Group, Joan MacIntosh, and the Living Theater of Beck and Molina, Sircar developed a collaborative workshop process to constitute his non-dramatic performances and performed for small

audiences in unconventional spaces, such as in *Anganmancha*, a room above an auditorium, and in outdoor spaces. Within Badal Sircar's Third Theatre, intermediality works via the performer's body, through movement and language, in the ironic juxtaposition of images and sounds to convey an idea. Gathered from many sources and collectively devised, Satabdi's performances combined everyday experiences, multiple narratives, archetypal characters, newspaper headlines, sights and sounds of the city, songs and slogans, political satire, facts, and statistics, among other performative artifacts, communicating socially and politically relevant ideas to audiences.

In *Michhil* (Procession, 1974), the audience is seated in blocks around the performance space, and the performance weaves its way around these blocks like a procession. The performance has an episodic structure and employs archetypal characters, such as a chorus representing the urban middle class, a boy who is murdered repeatedly, an old man who has lost his way, and others. Using rhythmic speech, alliteration and repetition, montage, and political satire, *Michhil* confronts audiences about their ignorance of and complicity with political corruption and state-sponsored murders and their imbrication within capitalist exploitation and coercive cultural nationalism. The intermedial effect lies in the juxtaposition of contradictory images and reenactments that disrupt everyday reality with instances of the invisible or quickly forgotten violence that maintains its repetitiveness. The group embarked on *gram parikramas* (village circumambulations) carrying their performances to rural audiences in an effort to bridge the divide between urban and rural audiences. Sircar also conducted workshops with diverse groups of people in multiple regions in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Laos, and the UK. His methods influenced many future practices of intermediality within non-dramatic, experimental, alternative, and postdramatic theatre in India, including proponents of street theatre, and feminist theatre.

One such group includes Kalakshetra, Manipur, started in 1969 by Heisnam and Sabitri Kanhailal. Kalakshetra's performances express intermediality through the performer's body, movement, and language. The non-textual, body-centered, minimalist, performance style is devised by performers, and draws from multiple traditions of "body culture" – movement, vocabulary, martial arts, yoga, dance, myths, and legends from Manipuri storytelling, performance, and movement traditions; performances from other regions in India such as *terukkuttu* (Tamil Nadu), *chhau* (Odisha), and *oja pali*, *devadhwani*, and *bhaona* (Assam); and performances from Southeast Asia, including shamanic practices from Malaysia and performance practices from Java and Bali in Indonesia (Kanhailal "Ritual" 36). Performers create using the memory of the body, inherited from their cultural environment, oral traditions, and folklore, and express the pervasiveness of death in Manipur through bodies that can "incarnate resistance" by expressing joy in the midst of terror (Bharucha *Pebet* 39). Kalakshetra's performances enact a "ritual of suffering," which Kanhailal relates to Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty,[2] in order to make audiences "alert and deeply disturbed at the sensory level," interfering into processes of perception (Kanhailal "Ritual" 34).

Kalakshetra's *Pebet* (1975) adapts a Manipuri folktale about a mother bird's struggle to free her children from the clutches of a cat, using the language Meitei, nonsensical phrases, body movements, gestures, and sounds. The folktale, drawn from *phunga wari* or fireside stories, portrays the mother bird successfully resisting the cat. Kanhailal adds an additional nightmare sequence into the performance, in which the mother bird visualizes her children being captured and converted into Sanskritized "Cat-culture," making the performance an allegory for the Sanskritization and homogenization of Meitei cultures. By "subverting the familiar," Kalakshetra's performance presents a new interpretation of the story and highlights its relevance

to contemporary reality, enabling audiences to perceive the story in a new light (Bharucha *Pebet* 33).

Street theatre groups devise performances collectively and employ an intermedial form, by combining folk, classical, and Western dramatic and performance forms with political pamphlets, wall posters, agitational speeches, and political demonstrations, to address themes directly relevant to their audiences. Drawing from the practices of the IPTA and global agitprop street theatre movements, street theatre groups such as the Praja Natya Mandali, the Andhra Pradesh branch of the IPTA (founded in 1943), and the Kerala People's Arts Club (founded in 1951), created forms of theatre accessible to working classes and performed wherever the group found an audience. Jana Natya Mancha (JANAM), founded by student activists from Delhi University in 1973, in affiliation with the IPTA, popularized street theatre as a form of political campaigning and protest in India. Allied with the CPI(M) and trade unions, JANAM regularly performs plays about workers' exploitation, patriarchal oppression, violence against women, unemployment, inflation, caste and class-based discrimination, precarious housing conditions, deindustrialization, sexual abuse, and nationalization of education among numerous other issues.

In Karnataka, the street theatre group Samudaya was formed by Prasanna, a National School of Drama (NSD) graduate, in 1975 as a reaction to the Emergency. The group and its units included prominent practitioners such as B.V Karanth and M.S Sathyu, and the group performed *jathas*, street plays, seminars, and patriotic songs, traveling across Karnataka, about problems of farmers, caste and class-based discrimination, and *sati* among other issues. Groups such as Veedhi Natakam Iyyakam (Street Theatre Movement) and Chennai Kalai Kuzhu in Chennai and Nija Nataka Iyyakam in Madurai performed street theatre on such topics as literacy and sexual assault in regions of Tamil Nadu. The state-sponsored Kerala Shastra Sahitya

Parishad performed *jathas* around Kerala in the mid-1980s in order to raise awareness about the importance of literacy. Street theatre uses an intermedial form to entertain unsuspecting audiences and "reveal the contradictions of class society," so that people are able to better understand their position and change their situation (Deshpande 471). A. Mangai characterizes street theatre as "theatre for social change" that spreads awareness about events, similar to a newspaper, and evokes immediate action (39).

The 1980s saw the intensification of the women's movement and public protests against gender discrimination and violence against women, rallying around issues such as the increasing number of dowry murders, violence against women in state and police custody, inflation on household products, and economic injustices in trade unions. Women's organizations, both independent and affiliated with political organizations, such as Theatre Union (with Maya Rao, Anuradha Kapoor, Urvashi Butalia, and Rati Bartholomew) in Delhi, and Sakthi (with A. Mangai) in Chennai, started to "enunciate their own politics" (Mangai 45). Practitioners such as Anamika Haskar, Anuradha Kapur, Maya Rao, Amal Allana, A. Mangai, Kirti Jain, Tripurari Sharma, Moloyashree Hashmi, Anita Desai, and Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, among others, employed songs, storytelling, folk performances, and theatre as "sites of activism" (Mangai 42). Feminist performances of the 1970s and 1980s were collectively devised, employed non-professional actors and flexible casts, and expressed a pluralist politics in which "meaning was forged in and through the creative tension that exists between activists and those who see theatre as activism" (Mangai 45).

Sengupta categorizes performances by women directors in the early 1990s as "non-dramatic theatre," which he considers a prelude to the postdramatic turn in Indian theatre in the early 2000s. Non-dramatic performances directed by women demonstrated the liberation of the

theatrical form from the dominance of the word and mimetic representation, and strategies of adaptation, rewriting, hybridity, and performativity. In these performances, material from one medium, artistic or non-artistic, is transferred into the medium of theatre accompanied by transformations in content and style, making them intermedial in form (Sengupta 49). Through corporeal and self-reflexive performances that questioned ideas of gender in India, intermedial performances by women created new aesthetic forms that questioned established conventions of Indian theatre.

Anamika Haskar's *Antaryatra* (1993) was one of the first non-dramatic performances that exemplified a new woman's language in Indian theatre. Based on the Tamil epic *Shilappadikaram*,[3] the performance views the epic from the point of view of Kannagi, its female protagonist. The performance uses a non-linear structure and storytelling in the form of monologues over action and dialogue and narrates a woman's quest for herself using a fragmented narrative. The unconventional performance space consisted of a domed structure extending into a field, reflecting the epic proportions of the narrative. The psychological state of Kannagi materializes in the performance space as the set, objects, props, movements, and *kolam* (floor drawings). As Sengupta writes, *Antaryatra* "signals a transition from authorship to collaboration, dramatic text to lyrical adaptation or devising, dialogic communication to a new scenography and choreography, and from mimetic representation to fluidity of performance," signaling new kinds of intermedial performance (50).

Female impersonation has been a recurring motif in the work of women directors in India and a way for them to contend with hierarchies of gender that have structured both historical and contemporary performance practices. Directors and performers including Amal Allana, Anuradha Kapur, Veenapani Chawla, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, and Maya Rao, experiment

with practices of female impersonation and drag in their performances in different ways. Anuradha Kapur's *Sundari: An Actor Prepares* (1997), based on the autobiography of Jaishankar Sundari (1889-1975), a well-known actor, director, and female impersonator who worked with Parsi and Gujarati commercial theatre companies, explores the process of gendering by recreating the theatrical conventions of Parsi theatre that influenced sociocultural ideas of gender. Three actors enacting Sundari's memories and experiences from his autobiography *Thoda ansu, thoda phul* (Some Tears Some Flowers, 1980) are placed within a set that stylistically cites "different registers of painted language" – elements from Ravi Varma's paintings that exhibit reciprocity with design elements within Parsi theatre, ornately designed Parsi theatre sets and drop curtains, contemporary styles of billboard painting, and the individual styles of artists Nilima Sheikh and Bhupen Khakhar (Brochure for *Sundari*). Using motifs such as dressing and undressing and narrating the act of becoming a female character, the performance is a "serious and critical meta-theatrical exploration of the practice of female impersonation" situated within the history of Indian theatre that also unravels processes of reification of gender roles affecting contemporary perceptions of gender (Mangai 172).

Performances directed by women use collaborative and improvisatory processes and unconventional spaces in intimate, layered, non-naturalistic, and non-linear formats. Built around performativity rather than textuality, these performances oppose gendered practices of mainstream theatre in their departure from the tenets of realism that dominated Indian theatre until the 1980s. By portraying the fracturing and disruption of the gendered body, these performances express the political through "the unfolding of female subjectivity," and evoke a transformative and experiential response rather than rational understanding (Mangai 45).

Using objects, costumes, and a cross-modal aesthetic that affects multiple sense perceptions, performances by women directors from the 1990s onwards questioned established conventions of Indian theatre at the time, producing new intermedial forms of theatre. These intermedial performances inaugurated innovations in form and content within Indian theatre, such as fragmented forms of storytelling and layering of narratives, and dismantling plot and theatrical structure through a body-oriented aesthetic that interrogates stereotypes and conventions in both gender and in theatre. In Chapter 4, I explore this sort of intermediality in the performances of Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry that functions through interactions between semiotic and perceptual systems. Using objects, actors, costumes, and evocative sets, and a collaborative process of creation with interdisciplinary artists, performances directed by Chowdhry disorient audiences through unexpected juxtapositions and movement-based enactments, highlighting mechanisms of orientation such as gender, class, caste, and sexuality.

Staging Digital Technology

Ashis Sengupta marks the 1990s as a distinct phase in the history of Indian theatre with its "new turn to performance" and emphasis on non-textuality (Sengupta 19). The ubiquity of digital technology since the late 1990s and early 2000s led to its entry into the stage space, creating unprecedented forms of intermediality within Indian theatre. Sengupta conceptualizes an Indian postdramatic by building on Hans-Thies Lehmann's concept of postdramatic theatre as forms of performance that move beyond the dramatic tradition – those that function outside the realms of text, action, and plot. Such performances interweave reality and appearance, move from representation to a fragmented "poetics of failure" that emphasizes performativity and theatricality, and are characterized by formalistic and intermedial hybridity (Sengupta

Postdramatic 16). Performers of postdramatic theatre in India question established conventions of Indian theatre, including realism, a cohesive plot and narrative, and adherence to models of "national" and "regional" culture. Sengupta characterizes this new phase by referring to works such as the solo performances of Maya Rao; the documentary theatre of Anuradha Kapur, Ein Lall, and Amitesh Grover; cinematic theatre and theatre as media reportage of Abhilash Pillai; scenographic theatre by Deepan Sivaraman; and the performance installations of Zuleikha Chaudhari and Anamika Haskar. Shayoni Mitra characterizes this theatre as "the new Indian avant-garde," including "fragmentary, disjunctive, nonlinear, non-narrative, technological, multi-perspectival" performances that often integrate digital technology into performances, using video projections, monitors, and cameras (Mitra 82).

Maya Rao's solo performances combine cabaret, dance, song, video, sound, comedy, and theatre, and are composed in non-linear episodes that perform social and political satire. Trained in Kathakali as a performer of male roles, Rao's performances play with codes of gender and sexuality and employ comedy to entertain audiences and offer a different perspective of contemporary reality. In *Ravanama* (2010), Rao draws from the Kathakali portrayal of Ravana as an enlightened and complex character with a streak of evil, and weaves in several myths and stories surrounding Ravana, many of which contradict each other. The tension between the classical forms and contemporary gestures – the intermedial form of the performance – firmly places the classical form and myth within the here and now, creating resonance with contemporary discourses concerning Ravana and Ram. The name *Ravanama*, Rao says, echoes the *Baburnama*, the memoirs of Babur, during whose reign (16th century) the Babri Masjid was built, connecting the performance to the Hindutva brigade's control of the Babri Masjid narrative in the present (Rao and Bala 78). The performance enables the audience to see Ravana in a new

light and the performance's focus on Ravana, instead of Ram and Sita, gives a new perspective to the story of *Ramayana*.

Postdramatic performances in India are created through processes of devising in order to layer performances. They exhibit self-referentiality, use multiple modalities simultaneously to disrupt a singular view, and blur boundaries between fiction and reality. Performative strategies include: the use of video projections, audience interaction, improvisatory and monologic styles, and disrupting text and digital media with live performance (Sengupta 27). The political potential of postdramatic theatre emerges from its intermediality, which it deploys to emphasize the disruption of reality and interrogate accepted perceptions of social discourses and constructions. The disruption of the formal characteristics of theatre critiques accepted conventions of form, and by employing intermediality to foreground the tension between "the social and the aesthetic," postdramatic theatre in India reveals "in the act of performance how form is both constituted by and constitutive of social formations" (Sengupta 10).

These new forms of postdramatic theatre combine live performance with other kinds of media and varied real-time experiences, creating new, radical, politically engaged aesthetic forms that enable a politics of perception through intermediality. In Chapter 5, I examine intermediality in the trial performances of Zuleikha Chaudhari. Chaudhari's performances take diverse forms depending on context and collaborators – from light installations to one-person performances within a designed space, a theatrical set to rehearsals in which spectators can participate – and can be called performance installations. Trained in lighting design, Chaudhari uses performance, rehearsal, acting, and theatrical design as frameworks to question experiences and ideas that structure real life.

Interrelations Between Media: Traveling Narratives and Performance Practices

Transmedial relationships between different media institutions, particularly interrelations between theatre and film, have influenced film and theatre in multiple languages in India. Film industries in different parts of India emerged from commercial forms of theatre influenced by Parsi theatre companies. Playwrights, actors, musicians, designers, scripts, sets, and costumes of many Parsi theatre companies shifted into the medium of film after the advent of silent films in 1913 and talkies in 1931. The IPTA used film, along with theatre and dance, to spread political awareness, and their film *Dharti ke laal* (Children of the Earth, 1946) was adapted from two plays by Bijon Bhattacharya, *Nabanna* (Harvest, 1944) and *Jabanbandi* (Confessions, 1944), and *Annadata* (The Giver of Grain, 1946) a short story by Krishan Chander. Numerous artists associated with the IPTA worked with both the mediums of theatre and film in varying capacities. They include Habib Tanvir, Utpal Dutt, Prithviraj Kapoor, Bijon Bhattacharya, Bhisham Sahni, Balraj Sahni, Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, A. K. Hangal, Zohra Sehgal, Dina Pathak, Sahir Ludhianvi, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Kaifi Azmi, Salil Choudhury, David, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Shailendra, Bimal Roy, and Ali Sardar Jafri, among numerous others (Dharwadker *Poetics* lxxxiv).

Artists who work both in theatre and film have led to thematic and formal exchanges between these two mediums in multiple languages, creating new forms of film and theatre. Many of these artists trained at the National School of Drama and have sustained transmedial connections between theatre and film in their performances in both mediums. In Chapter 3, I discuss the movement and transformation of narratives across theatre, documentary film, and fictional film – from Indianostrum's play *Chandala, the Impure* (2018) to the multilingual documentary film, *Janani's Juliet* (2019), directed by Pankaj Rishi Kumar to Pa. Ranjith's Tamil

film *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* (A Star Shoots Across the Sky, 2022). I discuss how real experiences, folk performances, and narratives of caste are newly staged through theatre and film. The exploration of theatre through film and film through theatre results in self-reflexive performances and films that interrogate practices of theatre and film making and spectatorship.

A Politics of Perception within Indian Theatre

As my contextualization of intermediality within the history of Indian theatre indicates, performers of political theatre in India have employed intermediality to address local issues, reach larger audiences, challenge social and aesthetic conventions, criticize the state, and foreground underrepresented perspectives. The relationship between theatre workers and political parties has been intensely contestatory. On 1 January 1989, Safdar Hashmi, the founder of Jana Natya Manch and Ram Bahadur, a worker, were murdered by Congress Party goons in the outskirts of Delhi during a performance of their play *Halla bol* (Raise your Voice) about the rights of factory workers. This horrific incident created a ripple effect, inspiring the creation of other street theatre groups across the nation in protest of this violent suppression of politically subversive performances. In Chapter 2, I discuss the precarization of dissent imposed by right-wing cultural nationalists on Habib Tanvir and Naya Theatre's resolve to perform in the face of this censorship.

The rise of Hindutva nationalism since the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the Gujrat Pogroms of 2002, and its intensification with the re-election of the right-wing government and the illegal construction of the temple at Ayodhya in 2024, has prompted theatre artists to address the rhetoric of discrimination promoted by the right-wing government. Zuleikha Chaudhari, whose performances I discuss in Chapter 5, says in a 2020 interview with Frank

Hentschker that politics has become performative, and everyone is required to publicly perform their support for the right-wing government. Those who refuse to comply are singled out by the public as anti-nationals and outliers. In such a "moment of exception," Chaudhari surmises, art needs to reveal the performativity of politics and facilitate a shift in perception, such that audiences are able to understand the real dangers of right-wing political performativity (Chaudhari "Segaltalks").

According to Rancière, the aesthetic regime is structured by "the distribution of the sensible" – the structures, boundaries, and categories that determine the visibility and audibility of our perception of reality (2). Specific laws govern who can participate in and who is excluded from aesthetic practices, and this determines "aesthetic divisions between the visible and the invisible, the audible and inaudible, and the sayable and unsayable" (3). For Rancière, artistic practices are "political" when they intervene into mechanisms that structure our perception and "interrupt the distribution of the sensible" to include perspectives of those who are excluded from the aesthetic regime. Rancière argues that it is in the "interface between mediums" that newness forms and it is here, in the process of transformation from one modality to another, that political interventions can be made (16).

Intermediality within theatre works in the contradiction between what can be said and what has been excluded by established conventions of saying it, resulting in disruption and disorientation and a re-sensibilization of senses. Through processes such as disruption, contradiction, and fragmentation, new modes of sense perception are evoked through "a material rearrangement of signs" (Rancière 39). This creates "uncertain communities" and "enunciative collectives" who challenge existing distributions of the sensible and the hierarchical arrangement of "roles, territories, and languages" leading to new forms of "political subjectivity" (Rancière

40). While such interventions are emancipatory, they do not guarantee the elimination of all social hierarchies, but merely the potential of transformation through the inclusion of previously excluded perspectives. About theatre, Rancière advocates for a form where "different kinds of performances would be translated into one another" creating an emancipated "community of storytellers and translators" ("The Emancipated" 280).

Translation, movement across categories and forms of performance, and formal innovation are central processes within Indian theatre. In the context of Indian theater, intermedial forms of performance question hierarchies that structure aesthetic experience in India, such as caste, language, categorization of performances, form of media, religion, and location, in addition to other hierarchies that structure the aesthetic regime. In "But We Will Not Give Up the Categories," Brahma Prakash criticizes the reification of formal categories such as dance, music, theatre, and temporal classifications such as traditional, modern, historical, and contemporary in scholarship on Indian theater and performance. Prakash criticizes the tendency of scholars to think in terms of binary oppositions such as rural or urban, sacred or secular, ritual or theatre, and oral or textual and impose spatial and temporal hierarchies of taste and aesthetic value ("But We").

Through naming and categorization, artists who do not conform to aesthetic conventions and scholars' ideas about proper art are left out of critical conversations. Prakash examines the work of Kabir Kala Manch and Samta Kala Manch (Maharashtra) to demonstrate how their performances blur boundaries and transcend categories of genre, space, text, language, and performance. Radical performances move across categories to access wider audiences, spread their political message, and sustain their own performance practice ("But We"). The mobilization of folk forms to reach wider audiences through new media and new issues brought on by

modernization and globalization makes it difficult to distinguish between traditional/modern, ritual/secular, and historic/contemporary. Prakash argues for a framework that can accurately address the fluidity between genres and forms exhibited by radical performances by emphasizing borders, margins, and transition.

I contend that intermediality works as a useful concept within Indian theatre in this context. By emphasizing transformations across languages, forms, and media, intermediality can be applied to different forms of performance in India that enable specific forms of political activism by combining, juxtaposing, or incorporating different languages, forms of performance, and mediums of transmission. Different kinds of linguistic, cultural, formal, and technological forms of intermediality demonstrate the exchange and interdependence between languages, cultures, forms, and artistic disciplines within the work of specific practitioners of Indian theatre. These intermedial performances are political and emancipatory in that they question the hierarchy of artistic forms within the aesthetic regime by supplementing it with new people, new perspectives, and new forms of art that can express underrepresented perspectives.

Material and Organization

By studying practices of intermediality within the work of contemporary theatre practitioners in India, this dissertation conceptualizes a theoretical framework for forms of performance in India that transcend extant categories by combining different languages, forms, sense perceptions, and media. Each chapter of this dissertation focuses on a single practitioner or theatre group and analyzes the working of intermediality within specific performances created by them. I discuss the work of Habib Tanvir and Naya Theatre, Indianostrum Theatre, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry and The Company, and Zuleikha Chaudhari. My chapters address two

primary questions about the work of each theatre practitioner or group: How does intermediality function within the work of these practitioners of Indian theatre? What does intermedial theatre *do* to the audience, and how does it make specific political interventions?

I focus on contemporary theatre because the work of these theatre practitioners is under-researched, and the performances I discuss in my chapter have not been studied previously. The performances reflect contemporary social and political issues that affect the collaborators, performers, and spectators of Indian theatre. They reflect new forms of intermediality that are not included within the use of the term "intermedial" within scholarship on Indian theatre. While scholarship on forms of intermediality in Euro-American theatre centers on digital technology and its effect on theatre, this dissertation argues, by examining practices of intermediality within contemporary Indian theatre, for a more expansive definition of intermediality that addresses interactions between languages, forms, sense perceptions, and media within theatre.

The forms of theatre I address in this dissertation are practiced in 2024, but they emerged at different times and in different places in India. Naya Theatre, started by Habib Tanvir in Bhopal in 1959, and The Company, started by Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry in Chandigarh in 1984, continue to practice their collaborative forms of theatre with people from diverse backgrounds but with different casts and collaborators. Indianostrum Theatre is relatively recent and was founded by Koumarane Valvane in 2007. Zuleikha Chaudhari has worked as a lighting designer and theatre director with different theatre groups, artists, and performers since the 1990s. Performances by Indianostrum Theatre and Zuleikha Chaudhari are created out of collaborations with different individuals and groups, resulting in widely varying forms, themes, and situations of performance. The intermedial performance practices that I discuss in this dissertation are dependent on the specific context of collaboration, and the practitioners that I

discuss work with flexible casts, different collaborators, and diverse working processes that lead to changing forms of performance and variability within their repertoires. Consequently, it is difficult to categorize these intermedial performance practices temporally and in relation to participants. They are contemporary because they belong to the transformations of the last thirty-five years.

The theatre practitioners I discuss are based in different cities and towns in India and intensely connected to local languages, performers, forms of performance, and audiences. Naya Theatre, The Company, and Indianostrum Theatre share their cultural capital and performance space with local performers in Bhopal, Chandigarh, and Pondicherry, respectively, through their collaborative performances. Local and folk performance forms are recontextualized within their performances and reach different non-local audiences. Intermedial performance practices are not merely extractive but invested in learning from and revitalizing local performers and folk forms of performance. Zuleikha Chaudhari is based in Delhi, but her performances embed the work of interdisciplinary artists, and are frequently site-specific, addressing historical and contemporary social, political, and ecological issues affecting the people of the city or town in which the performance is taking place. Despite this local connection, practitioners of intermedial performances travel extensively, bringing underrepresented forms of artistic expression before worldwide audiences and collaborating with artists from diverse backgrounds.

My chapters focus on the workings of intermediality within specific performances. Since intermedial performance practices are mutable and flexible, my chapters contextualize performance analyses with a discussion of forms of intermediality within other performances by the practitioner or group under discussion. I discuss people who are involved in the creation of performances, the process that the group uses, and the performances themselves. In my analysis

of performances, I reach across linguistic, media, and disciplinary boundaries to locate references drawn from literature, film, and other artistic and non-artistic disciplines to make intermedial connections. By locating instances of intermedial interaction, I attempt to understand the kinds of enunciative possibilities that these interactions open up. As Nibbelink and Merx state, intermedial performances generate their own concepts, evoked by "instances of thought embodied in the artistic discourse of theatre" (219). I use a different analytical framework to approach the work of each theatre practitioner or group, depending on the context and emphasis of the performances.

In Chapter 2, entitled "The Politics of Precarity in the Theatre of Habib Tanvir and Naya Theatre: An Exploration Through *Zehreeli hawa* (Poisonous Wind) (2002) and *Ponga pandit* (1992)," I examine the political interventions made by two performances of Naya Theatre, directed by Habib Tanvir – *Zehreeli hawa*, a trilingual adaptation of Indian-Canadian playwright and director Rahul Varma's play *Bhopal* (2005) about the Bhopal gas disaster of December 1984, and *Ponga pandit*, a satire *nacha* performance about caste-based discrimination that has garnered right-wing protests in a number of locations since 2002. I examine the ways in which Naya Theatre's performances use an intermedial form that incorporates multiple languages, regional myth and folklore, and folk forms to expose the ongoing precarization of the residents of Bhopal due to industrial pollution and the caste and religion-based discrimination perpetrated by the right-wing state and its supporters.

Chapter 3, "Flowers of Love: Intermediality in *Chandala, the Impure* (2018), *Janani's Juliet* (2019), and *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* (A Star Shoots Across the Sky) (2022)," discusses the ways in which intermediality works within and across Indianostrum's performance *Chandala*, the documentary film *Janani's Juliet* by Pankaj Rishi Kumar, and Pa. Ranjith's film

Natchathiram nagargiradhu to address issues of caste-based violence and discrimination. Real-life stories transform across medial boundaries to reach different audiences through theatre and film by incorporating CCTV footage as evidence of caste-based discrimination, contextualized through performance. The staging of folk forms within theatre and film addresses the cultural labor surrounding these forms and reflects the experiences, stories, and practices of mourning of Dalit performers, interrogating the absence of these forms from urban theatre spaces. The reciprocal incorporation of theatre and film in this intermedial collection of performances self-consciously addresses caste-based discrimination within theatre and filmmaking.

In Chapter 4, "Intermediality and the Work of Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry: A Queer Phenomenology of *Trunk Tales* (2022)" I examine the work of Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry with The Company, Chandigarh, and her recent production, *Trunk Tales*, through the lens of queer phenomenology. I show how Chowdhry's performances unsettle theatrical conventions by using a multi-sensorial, intermedial style, composed of actors, objects, and costumes, that disorients audiences, highlighting mechanisms of orientation such as caste, class, gender, and sexuality. A queer phenomenological reading of *Trunk Tales* foregrounds trunks as objects that evoke specters of the Partition of 1947.

Chapter 5, "Rehearsing Judgment: Intermediality in the Trial Performances of Zuleikha Chaudhari," looks at Zuleikha Chaudhari's series of performances *Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case* (2014-2018) and *Landscape as Evidence: Artist as Witness* (2017-2023) that lie at the intersection of theatre and law. Through an intermedial form that restages historical trials using archives of legal evidence to reflect on contemporary questions and stages extralegal tribunals that use art as evidence to address contemporary ecological issues, Chaudhari's

performances activate audiences' capacity for aesthetic judgment and enable them to interrogate state policies, the law, and the role of art in society.

An interest in the constructedness of reality leads practitioners of intermedial performances to play with the blurriness of reality and fiction to make specific political interventions. The intermedial performances I discuss in this dissertation combine fictional interpretations with retellings of real incidents. The performances bring up real issues, such as industrial disasters from the recent past and contemporary incidents of caste and gender-based violence. They are critical of state policies that affect the real lives of participants, addressing issues such as citizenship, air toxicity, and the construction of large-scale development projects, using a fictional framework to interpret archived legal proceedings of historical cases and artwork produced by contemporary artists. Reality and fiction are imbricated in complex ways in all the intermedial performances that I discuss, and documentary materials, such as photographs, CCTV footage, testimony, interviews, and folk forms, are used to draw correlations between reality and fiction.

In "Bodies of Evidence," Carol Martin defines documentary theatre as theatre "created from a specific body of archived material: interviews, documents, hearings, records, video, film, photographs, etc.," and differentiates this form of theatre from historical fiction (9). The process of "selection, editing, organization, and presentation" leads to the specific form that documentary theatre takes (9). The performances of Naya Theatre and Indianostrum can be categorized as historical fictions because they create fictional accounts based on historical events. However, the performances embed documentary materials, such as CCTV footage, photographs, and folk forms of performance. Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry's performances are based on testimony and autobiographical texts. The Company's use of props, including real objects, food, and costumes

can be seen as a practice related to documentary theatre, and the materiality of these objects are foregrounded to make specific interventions in performance.

Zuleikha Chaudhari's trial performances are more closely aligned with established definitions of documentary theatre – specifically Erwin Piscator's documentary trial plays. Piscator's plays re-performed legal proceedings of historical trials within an aesthetic framework, enhancing the theatrical experience to highlight matters of urgent sociopolitical importance in postwar Berlin (until 1931) and New York (1939 onwards). Piscator directed *The Burning Bush* (New York Dramatic Workshop, 1949), written by Heinz Herald and Geza Herczeg, based on court transcripts of an 1882 case from a Northern Hungarian village about the disappearance of a young girl and the discriminatory accusations against Jewish men for her murder. The performance correlated the historical case to rising racism, bigotry, and anti-Semitism in postwar Germany and the United States. Piscator's interpretation of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (Bühnen der Stadt Essen, 1958), a play about the Salem witch trials, presents the events of the play within a larger history of accusatory trials and murders, moving between multiple spatial and temporal frames. In his direction of Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* (Freie Volksbühne Berlin, 1965), about the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt, Piscator intensified the theatricality of the trials but withheld catharsis from audiences, making the performance disorienting to watch (Arjomand "Erwin Piscator" 61). Similar to Piscator's methodology, Chaudhari's trial performances play with the theatricality of law by re-performing archived legal proceedings to derive contemporary meanings from it. Using the trial form in a different way, her other performances adjudicate the value of art in relation to contemporary ecological issues by interrogating artists in a recreated court of law.

The precarity disseminated by the state is foregrounded and questioned in many of the performances that I discuss in this dissertation. Neoliberal policies that promote industrialization and large-scale urbanization are exposed as unsupportive of the lives of local inhabitants. The state is questioned about historical incidents of industrial pollution, such as the Bhopal gas disaster and the present condition of air toxicity that is the effect of the continuation of economic policies supporting neoliberal capitalists rather than the health and wellbeing of locals. The judicial apparatus of the state is questioned by critically examining historical judgments within an aesthetic framework in relation to contemporary questions of citizenship and caste. Real incidents of caste violence are referenced within fictionalized reenactments to foreground the district and high courts' biased judgements on legal cases of caste violence. Theatrical performance becomes one way for performers to resist the casteist, neoliberal, patriarchal, and religion-based mechanisms of precarization instituted by the state. Intermediality, in these political performances, becomes a mechanism by which performers disrupt the audience's experiences and expectations to affect a shift in perception.

To conclude my discussion of intermediality within contemporary theatre in India, I point out some of the convergences and divergences between the performances I discuss in this dissertation. I draw a correlation between the performances by pointing out the oppositional stance that the performances take to state policies and accepted perceptions. The performances that I discuss also blur boundaries of reality and fiction and draw attention to the constructedness of reality. Despite these similarities, the performances display variations in their relationship to narrative frameworks and emerge at different times in different places in India. I end by pointing out some of the future avenues for research on intermediality in theatre in multilingual and multicultural locations.

Notes

1. Theatre practitioners associated with the Threatre of Roots movement in the 1970s in India drew inspiration from traditional forms of theatre to create modern theatre. The term "theatre of roots" was coined by Suresh Awasthi, and he attributes the return to tradition in the forms associated with the movement to a search for identity and drive to decolonize modern Indian theatre. Awasthi notes the work of directors such as Ratan Thiyam, K. N. Panikkar, Habib Tanvir, and B. V. Karanth, who draw inspiration from regional and classical forms of performance, as belonging to this movement. The Theatre of Roots movement has been criticized for commodifying traditional artforms and appropriating them for ornamental and apolitical purposes.

2. Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), French dramatist, poet, actor, and writer, conceived of a hyper affective form of theatre that he named Theatre of Cruelty. This form of theatre was spectacular, replete with passionate sentiments, and capable to shocking spectators with cruelty and terror. Plays were multisensorial with violent themes and images and used an immersive form to overwhelm spectators with emotion.

3. *Shilappadikaram* (The Ankle Bracelet, ca. 4th–6th centuries) is a Tamil epic poem written by Prince Ilango Adigal. The narrative is a love story about Kannagi (also Kannaki) and her marriage to Kovalan, a merchant.

Chapter 2

The Politics of Precarity in the Theatre of Habib Tanvir and Naya Theatre: An Exploration Through *Zehreeli hawa* (Poisonous Wind, 2002) and *Ponga pandit* (Idiot Pandit, 1992)

A few months after Habib Tanvir's passing on 8 June 2009, the BJP (Bhartiya Janta Party)-run Chhattisgarh state banned his most popular play *Charandas chor* (Charandas, the Thief, 1974). Newspapers cite that the reason for banning the play was a letter from the *satnami*[1] guru Baldas who said that the play maligned the *satnami* guru Ghasidas by suggesting that he had been a dacoit ("Chhattisgarh Bans"). Numerous statements by artists and activists condemning the ban poured in from all over India and were published by newspapers. These statements underscore the fact that the play had been made in collaboration with *satnami panthi* dancers and viewed by *satnami* audiences numerous times without any accusations of disrespect. A statement by Pranay Krishnan, published in the Communist Party of India Liberation Archive, asks that if *Charandas chor* was based on an old folktale, then why is it that the state found it so threatening in the present? Krishnan suggests perhaps it is the questions that *Charandas chor* incites audiences to ask. Could the play expose the state's privileging of corporate interests over Adivasi lives? How would audiences then view the jailing of Dr. Binayak Sen,[2] who protested the state's neglect of Adivasis? "Is this play, by any chance, giving voice to the anti-establishment values and aspirations buried in the subconscious of readers and audience," and had it begun reflecting the present conflicts between the Chhattisgarhi state and the people (Krishnan)?

Habib Tanvir's plays use an intermedial form to redirect audience perception and raise questions about the social and political conditions of people's lives. In this chapter, I discuss the

political interventions made by Naya Theatre's performances and collaborative performance practice. In the first section, I discuss the ways in which Naya Theatre's intermedial and collaborative form of theatre creates a performance practice that is sensitive to and can address mechanisms of precarization. Intermediality in Naya Theatre's performances exists in multilingualism, and the embedding of folk forms, primarily the Chhattisgarhi language and the *nacha* form, within their performances. Second, I focus on Habib Tanvir's trilingual play *Zehreeli hawa* (Poisonous Wind, 2002), an adaptation of Rahul Varma's *Bhopal*. I examine how the play uses an intermedial form to demystify, perform, and resist the ongoing precarization of Bhopal set in motion by the Bhopal gas disaster of December 1984, and expose the destruction wrought by the neoliberalization of the Indian economy. In the third and final section of the chapter, I discuss the censorship of Naya Theatre's *Ponga pandit* (Idiot Pandit, 1992) by the right-wing, and the methods employed by Habib Tanvir to counter the silencing of their performances. I argue that by creating a transregional collaborative performance practice, using multiple languages on stage and in the process of creation, and blending folk and modern forms, Naya Theatre creates intermedial forms of performance. Through intermediality, Naya Theatre's performances recontextualize the subversive potential of *nacha* and other regional folk forms of performance. By addressing contemporary issues that affect local inhabitants of Bhopal using an intermedial form and performing in protest of right-wing censorship, Habib Tanvir and Naya Theatre's performances perform political interventions against these mechanisms of precarization.

From Politics to Method to Form to Politics

Habib Tanvir and his theatre group Naya Theatre are most closely associated with the Chhattisgarhi language and the regional folk performance forms of Chhattisgarh, primarily *nacha*,[3] that the group incorporates into their performances. However, their theatre cannot be called folk theatre. As Udayram, a Naya Theatre performer says, "Some say that Naya theatre is 'folk' stuff. I wouldn't say that. Sure, we actors are village folk, but our stories are the same as anybody else's" (Kamath 9:50). Tanvir stresses that he was not interested in "folk forms, as such at all, but only went after folk performers, who brought their own forms and styles with them," and that he collaborated with folk performers to harness their performance forms as "a vehicle and make them yield new, contemporary meanings, and to produce a theatre which has a touch of the soil about it" (qtd. in Malick 171). Scholars have described Naya Theatre's form as an "incisive blend of tradition and contemporaneity, folk creativity and modern critical consciousness" (Javed Malick), as "urban folk" theatre (Aparna Dharwadker), and as "an inclusive theatre" (Anjum Katyal)[4]. Scholars have also highlighted the politics of Tanvir's performative practices that articulate "the voice of common folk," embody "passion as resistance," exemplify a regionalized version of Brechtian theatre (Prateek), and "forge an alternative resistant theatre" drawing on Brecht (Vasudha Dalmia)[5].

While the Chhattisgarhi language and Chhattisgarhi actors have remained central to Naya Theatre, their theatre does not exclusively adapt folk forms. Habib Tanvir also collaborated with urban performers and playwrights in India and abroad, and performers of folk forms from other regions, such as Rajasthan, Odisha, and Haryana. In plays such as *Zehreeli hawa*, an adaptation of Indian-Canadian playwright Rahul Varma's *Bhopal*; and Asghar Wajahat's *Jis lahore nai dekhya o jamyai nai* (One Who Has Not Seen Lahore Has Not Been Born), among others, Naya

theatre uses folk-inspired realistic acting styles combined with songs, poetry, and commentary to create proscenium style theatre with Brechtian elements.

Tanvir's collaboration with folk performers was influenced from his days working with the IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association), and cannot be called a superficial attraction to folk performance forms, or a revivalist search for "authentic" Indian traditions in the vein of those practitioners associated with the Theatre of Roots movement of the 1960s. Tanvir worked with the IPTA in the 1940s where he learnt the efficacy of folk forms in imparting social and political messages to audiences from artists such as Balraj Sahni, Sombhu Mitra, and Dina Pathak, and got acquainted with the works of Brecht. Later, during his travels in Europe from 1955-58, Tanvir spent eight months watching rehearsals and performances at the Berliner Ensemble. He reached the conclusion that while Brecht adapted "international influences he received from medieval European theatre, China, Tibet, Burma, India, and from American jazz and African blues, he remained German to the core" (qtd. in Mehrotra 215). This persuaded Tanvir to find an "Indian core" for his theatre and he turned to the folk songs of Chhattisgarh that he had heard in his childhood. Tanvir was also working on *Mrichchhakatikam*[6] at this time and realized that the demolition of the unities of time and space and the "open and epic" nature of Sanskrit drama could be found in Chhattisgarhi *nacha* performances as well.

Writing in 1962, Tanvir advocates a conscious attempt to use "dying folk cultures and feudal classical cultures as well as assimilated ideas from the experience of other countries in the making of a new urban culture where none as yet really exists" (Tanvir "Waiting" 217). Tanvir underscores in the documentary film *Tanvir ka safarnama*: "*mein Chhattisgarh – apna watan – pahuncha hoon Europe ke raastey*" (I have reached Chhattisgarh – my country – via Europe). Thus, it is Tanvir's progressive political outlook, gained from his experiences with the IPTA and

his travels in Europe, that led him to collaborate with Chhattisgarhi and other regional performers, and it is Naya Theatre's collaborative theatre practice involving Chhattisgarhi performers, urban actors, and performers of other regional folk forms that leads to the varied intermedial forms of Naya Theatre's performances.

Naya Theatre's people-centered collaborative methods are reflected in the socially and politically conscious themes of their performances that intervene into mechanisms of precarization – those mechanisms that result in the unequal distribution of conditions that are required to sustain life and a "differential allocation of recognizability" which determines that some people are more legible in the public sphere and in the realm of appearances than others. Judith Butler writes: "precarious life characterizes such lives who do not qualify as recognizable, readable, or grievable," and denotes a condition of "maximized vulnerability and exposure" induced by forms of violence enacted by the state or by other forms of violence against which the state fails to offer protection (Butler x, ii). Resistance to mechanisms of precarization is performative, public, visible, and translatory, and entails the exposure of mechanisms that invisibilize and silence certain groups of people. Naya Theatre's theatrical practice and performances exemplify this sort of resistance to those mechanisms of precarization that affect the performers and collaborators. In the remainder of this section, I discuss some of the forms that Naya Theatre's performances take, and the improvisatory methods Tanvir uses to collaboratively create performances with Chhattisgarhi and other performers to create a translatory, intermedial, and politically conscious performance practice.

Naya Theatre achieved national and international visibility with *Charandas chor* (1974), which announced the arrival of Chhattisgarhi *nacha* actors and the Chhattisgarhi language on the Delhi stage. The story is based on a Rajasthani folktale that Tanvir had heard from the writer and

folklorist Vijaydan Detha, and the performance evolved out of improvisations by *nacha* performers in a month-long workshop in Bhilai in 1974. Tanvir was inspired by the centrality of truth in *satnami* beliefs and involved *satnami panthi* dancers who improvised songs and dances with the performers (Katyal 65). Folk poets Swaran Kumar Sahu and Ganga Ram Sakhet wrote the songs, based on Tanvir's requirements, and tunes were derived from traditional Chhattisgarhi songs. With its "eclectic fusion of folklore, postclassical religious thought and practice, regional music and dance forms, improvised dialogue, and topical political allusion," *Charandas chor* became an instant hit (Dharwadker *Independence* 346).

The workshop method employed in *Charandas chor* is just one of the ways in which Tanvir remediates folk performances. Others include staging folk forms with "minimal intervention" for the purpose of making them more visible for wider, primarily urban, audiences (*Arjun ka sarthi* [Arjun's Charioteer,1970], *Ponga pandit* [1990]); making "creative interventions" in content, form, costumes, music, etc., to recuperate traditions such as *khyal* (*Thakur pritipal singh* [1974]) and *chandaini* (*Sone sagar* [1981]); workshop methods in which urban and rural performers exchange knowledge of theatrical techniques, such as costumes, lights, makeup, and music, leading to a syncretic, improvisatory, and blended performance (such as in *Charandas chor* and *Gaon ke naon sasural mor naon damad* [1973]); and finally, Naya theatre productions based on Chhattisgarhi histories and folk tales (*Hirma ki amar kahani* [The Immortal Tale of Hirma, 1985], *Bahadur kalarin* [Brave Kalarin, 1978]) (Katyal 110).

In addition to folk performances, Tanvir has reworked a wide range of sources through improvisatory techniques with the performers of Naya Theatre. Adaptations of Sanskrit drama include plays such as *Mitti ki gadi* (1978) from Sudraka's *Mrichchhakatikam* (The Little Clay Cart, 100 – 300 CE), *Duryodhan* (1978) from Bhasa's *Urubhangam* (Shattered Thighs, 2nd – 3rd

century CE), Vishakhadatta's *Mudrarakshasa* (1996) (The Signet of the Minister, originally written 4th – 8th century CE), and Narayan Bhatta's *Veni samhaar* (2001). Plays derived from Indian literature include *Moteram ka satyagrah* (Moteram's Satyagraha, 1988) from Premchand's stories about the character Moteram (written 1923-1934), *Rustom-o-Sohrab* (1960) by Agha Hashr Kashmiri (originally written in 1929), Asghar Wajahat's *Jis lahore nai dekhya o jamyai nai* (1990) (originally written in 1980), Sisir Das's *Bagh* (1992) (Tiger, published in 1996), *Nand raja mast hai* (King Nand is Having Fun, 1984) from *Rajdarshan* (An Encounter With Royalty, 1982) by Manoj Mitra, and *Rajrakta* (Royal Blood, 2006), from Tagore's *Visarjan* (Sacrifice, 1890) and *Rajarshi* (The Royal Sage, 1887). Tanvir also created performances based on world literature and theatre in *Shajapur ki shantibai* (Shajapur's Shantibai, 1978) from Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1941), Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1593) as *Kamdev ka apna basant ritu ka sapna* (Kamdev's Very Own Spring Dream, 1993), *Dekh rahe hain nain* (The Eyes are Watching, 1992) from Stephen Zweig's short story "The Eyes of my Undying Brother" (1922), *Shah badshah* (King Emperor, 1980) from Gogol's *The Inspector General* (1842), and *Mirza shohrat beg* (1955), later renamed *Lala shohrat rai* (1981), from Moliere's *The Bourgeois Gentleman* (1670) (Katyal 89).

Besides his work with Naya Theatre, Tanvir conducted workshops and collaborated in productions with theatre groups and educational institutions in Delhi and Kolkata, such as Jana Natya Manch (JANAM) in *Moteram ka satyagraha* (1988), an adaptation of Premchand's stories by Safdar Hashmi and Habib Tanvir; *Ek aurat hipetia bhi thi* (There Was a Woman Named Hipatia, 1999), and *Dushman* (Enemy, 1989), Hashmi's adaptation of Maxim Gorky's *Enemies*, with the National School of Drama (NSD) repertory company; *Mujhe amrita chahiye* (I Want Amrita, 2003) with students of Lady Shriram College; and *Visarjan* (Sacrifice, 2005), an

adaptation of Tagore's play of the same name, with Usha Ganguly's group Rangakarmee in Kolkata.

Improvisation is central to the construction of Naya Theatre's performances. Speaking about their process, in the documentary film *Gaon ke naon theatre, mor naon habib*, Deepak Tiwary, a Naya Theatre performer, explains:

> *Lagbhag nacha jaisa kuchh nikalwate hain. Kahaani samjha dete hain - ki ye hain - aur usko apne dhang se le ke aao. Usme jo cheezen pasand nahi hain, wo cut karke - nahi isko itna hi rakho, aur kuchh isme karo. Toh actor jo hai uska* confidence *badhta hai ki mein jo kar raha hoon wo sthapit ho raha hai*. (He evokes something like *nacha*. He explains the story to us and asks us to do it in our own way. He cuts what he doesn't like and says keep this much and do something else. The actor feels more confident that what I am doing is getting established.) (6:50)

Ramcharan says, "The stories are made by Habib Tanvir but great performers like Thakur Ram and Madan Lal brought their own material which Habib *sahab* didn't know. He would enjoy that" (7:00). Poonam, who worked with Naya Theatre since she was a child, says the same. She says, "*Unka kaam karne ka tarika yeh bhi hai, ki actor jo hai woh apni marzi se jitna nikal sakta hai woh nikale*. (The way he works is also like this – that of their own accord, the actors should bring up everything they can from within themselves)" (Farooqui 11:01). Tanvir "freezes" improvisations that work with the larger themes of the play and structures the final play, adding intermediary scenes, songs, dances, and rituals to highlight political undertones at crucial junctures.

Naya Theatre's intermedial form and collaborative theatrical process perform acts of cultural translation. By employing the languages of folk performers such as Chhattisgarhi,

Rajasthani, Odia, and Haryanvi, along with Hindi, Hindustani, Urdu, and English, often within the same performance, Naya Theatre performs, what Spivak calls, an act of "cultural translation" – a "performative exercise" that articulates an "alliance in difference," a non-assimilation into monolingualism, and a way of producing "another kind of 'we'" that can never "produce a linguistic unity" (qtd. in Butler x). By performing in regional languages, Naya Theatre refuses to adjust to one majority language or perceptions of a national language, and by performing in multiple languages, they embody acts of translation on stage. In both cases, the audience is required to make the effort to translate the performance for themselves or be cognizant of their ignorance of the language of performance, even though they can comprehend the physical humor and body centered language of Naya Theatre. Poised somewhere between comprehensibility and non-coherence, regional, national, and international audiences are compelled to extend themselves to understand Naya Theatre's multilingual and intermedial performances.

Moving beyond just language, Naya Theatre's form of performance, which blends folk, regional, urban, and modern theatrical conventions, staging practices, content, and style, and their process of collaborative and improvisatory workshops enables performers to express themselves in contrast to a hierarchical imposition of the director's or playwright's ideas. Folk performers and performance forms are newly staged through the medium of modern urban proscenium style theatre in Naya Theatre's performances, drawing attention to the unusual nature of the collaboration and the presence of folk performers who not only sing, dance, and play musical instruments but also speak a language that the audience can understand. To address this additional interaction between media and forms, in addition to language, I use the term intermedial to describe Naya Theatre's form. While the moniker 'intermedial' has primarily been employed to discuss the convergence of theatre and digital technologies and the staging of

theatrical narratives through multiple media simultaneously, in the context of Indian theatre, I argue that syncretic forms of performance, such as the work of Naya Theatre, that combine and remediate other forms of performance can also be understood as intermedial. Intermediality in theatre works to expose the effects of mediation and "derails the message by communicating gaps, splits, and fissures," perforating meaning with "heterogeneous splits" and "alternative fragmentations" (Boenisch 115).

Similarly, in Butler and Spivak's theoretical framework, public performative translatory acts interfere with mechanisms of precarization by causing a "sudden visibility and audibility of those people who are supposed to remain invisible and inaudible" (Butler v). Such acts expose and oppose "modes of exclusion" by means of which institutional frameworks (state, public institutions, nation, region, religion, linguistic polity, and others) "imagine and force their own unity" (Butler v, vi). The multilingual, intermedial performances of Naya Theatre expose the erasures that constitute the field of urban theatre in India by imparting visibility and audibility to folk performers, folk and regional forms of performance, methods, stories, humor, languages, music and dance, worldviews, stylistic choices, and political and social issues that impact performers' lives. The collaborative method of creating performances also adds to Naya Theatre's ability to embody a people-centered, progressive political outlook sensitive to mechanisms of precarization and the unequal distribution of precarity.

It is Naya Theatre's translatory, intermedial, and transregional forms and collaborative practices that make their performances the perfect medium to address themes of inequality, marginalization, discrimination, and precarization. By adapting features of folk theatre, such as its questioning of hierarchies of class, caste, religion, gender, and sexuality, among other hierarchies; the "rejection of textual authority" and by extension social and political codes; the

absence of a linear structure and Aristotelian unities; stories, song, and dance that center the community rather than the individual; and "anti-realistic representation," Naya Theatre's form of performance is inherently anti-establishment--"a symbolic gesture of protest and a rejection of authority" (Dharwadker 350). In addition, Tanvir's adaptation of folk forms to address contemporary social and political concerns emphasizes and reframes their subversive potential.

Subjects, stories, and experiences that Naya Theatre's performances address reflect the group's egalitarian, people-centric process and form. *Charandas chor* (1975) features a "subaltern trickster figure" who hoodwinks authority figures such as *havaldars* (policemen), priests, his guru, and the *munim* (government official), exposing the greed and corruption rampant in public institutions such as the law, landlords and moneylenders, religion, and kingship (Katyal 72). *Hirma ki amar kahani* (1985) (The Immortal Tale of Hirma) depicts a historical conflict between the Adivasi state of Titur Basna and the Indian nation-state, addressing the precarization of Adivasis by modernization and progress. *Rajrakta* (2006), based on Rabindrananth Tagore's *Visarjan* (1890) and *Rajarshi* (1887), deliberates on the conflict between religion and state. *Jis lahore nai dekhya* (1990), written by Asghar Wajahat in 1980, depicts the sustenance of interreligious friendships and familial relationships in the midst of widespread communalism during the Partition.

The adoption of plays with socio-political subjects and themes that are attentive to experiences of precarity reflect Tanvir's own progressivism and leftist outlook, which also determine the intermedial and translatory form and collaborative processes by means of which Naya Theatre's performances are constituted. In an interview with Rajiv Mehrotra, Tanvir says that

> Reality reflected in theatre must be critically reflected. And that critical reflection is neither preachy nor loaded with some message but has a certain slant which might stimulate you to find the answer. If we can produce the kind of questions normally not asked about things taken mostly for granted…if that question is sharply posed and stimulates the *darshak* (spectator) to discover the answer himself, then justice is done to that particular theme…. [Theatre] must profoundly disturb the audience. They should not go back and sleep over it [sic.] but the images should haunt him a bit and pose the question. (Mehrotra 213)

Tanvir's intermedial and translatory dramaturgy, then, seeks to intervene in the perception of audiences and invoke questions that can disturb them out of their complacency and their participation in mechanisms that cause the unequal distribution of precarity. Tanvir's plays evoke a critical reflection of reality and an insight into the conditions that perhaps sustain the audience's own lives but not of others. Unlike other forms of progressive theatre, such as street theatre, that pose questions directly, Tanvir's dramaturgy stimulates audiences to ask questions about their own reality. Tanvir creates a "theatre without schooling" which acts upon audiences through "allusion, suggestion, and inference," such that while enjoying the play, audiences are prompted to interpret their realities from their own political positions (Menon 36). Combined with the intermedial, translatory, and collaborative form and method of Tanvir's dramaturgy, the social and political themes and subjects of Naya Theatre's performances exemplify a theatrical practice that can intervene into mechanisms of precarization and publicly perform the experiences of those rendered more precarious than others. In the next section, I analyze Habib Tanvir's *Zehreeli hawa*, a collaboration between Naya Theatre and Indian-Canadian playwright

and director, Rahul Varma, and elaborate on the ways in which *Zehreeli hawa* resists the precarity disseminated by neoliberal capitalism.

Mourning and Protest: Remembering the Bhopal Gas Disaster through *Zehreeli hawa*

Zehreeli hawa (2002) dramatizes the horrors of the Bhopal gas disaster. On December 2 and 3, 1984, methyl isocyanate (MIC) leaked from the Union Carbide plant manufacturing pesticides in Bhopal, causing the deaths of 30,000 people instantaneously, and leading to diseases related to genetic mutations and inherited conditions in about 50,000 other people who had been exposed to the gas. Bhopal was the "world's worst industrial disaster in human memory," and yet the ongoing trauma of survivors has not been rightfully acknowledged by the Indian state, by legal processes that denied survivors rightful compensation, and by Dow Chemicals, which bought the UCIL (Union Carbide India Limited) plant in Bhopal but refuses to accept responsibility for cleaning up the areas contaminated by the plant (Nayar xiii). In this section, I discuss Habib Tanvir's *Zehreeli hawa*. I demonstrate how the play remembers, acknowledges, and mourns the lives lost in the Bhopal gas disaster and reflects the ongoing trauma of survivors. Using an intermedial form that uses multiple languages and embeds folk forms within realistic proscenium-based theatre, *Zehreeli hawa* exposes the unequal distribution of precarity brought on by neoliberal capitalism as the cause of the Bhopal gas disaster and exhorts audiences to critically reflect on their own imbrication within the global in the neoliberal present.

The play is a trilingual adaptation of Rahul Varma's English play *Bhopal* by Tanvir in Chhattisgarhi, Hindi, and English. Varma had shared a one-page synopsis of a play about the Bhopal gas disaster during a workshop involving Tanvir and local actors in Montreal, and in

Varma's words, Tanvir "transformed the entire workshop to the needs of the play – heightening the tension, sharpening the questions, adding global power equations, and most importantly, giving me new questions to ponder" (Varma and Gupta 87). Varma completed the play and sent it to Tanvir, who informed Varma that he had begun translating the play. The Canada Council for the Arts supported the translation, and *Zehreeli hawa* was first performed in December 2003 at Bharat Bhawan, Bhopal, to commemorate the disaster.

The wide spectrum of characters who are able to address the experiences of the diverse actors involved in and affected by a globally induced disaster such as Bhopal is an outcome of the transnational collaboration between Habib Tanvir, Naya Theatre, Rahul Varma, and Teesri Duniya (Third World), the Montreal-based group that Varma founded along with Rana Bose. The play depicts the prefiguration, event, and aftermath of the Bhopal gas disaster and views the real traumatic event of the Bhopal disaster through a fictional frame – besides Warren Anderson, the CEO of Karbide International (the fictionalized Union Carbide) the characters and the events of the play are fictional representations that closely follow the real events of the disaster.

The disaster disproportionately affects women and the poor – Izzat, representing abject Bhopalis, and Madiha, who works at Karbide International, are gravely injured, while Sonya, a Canadian doctor who was treating women and children affected with Karbide poisoning, loses her life. Zarina, Izzat's daughter who was affected by Karbide's toxic waste, dies, and Madiha has a miscarriage after she is exposed to MIC. On the other hand, the world of men – Devraj, the returned NRI (non-resident Indian) factory manager; Jaganlal, the corrupt politician; and Warren Anderson, the CEO of Karbide – face no threat to their lives. They face, instead, public scrutiny and temporary house arrest despite being responsible for furthering policies and ignoring the warning signs that ultimately lead to the disaster. By dramatizing the ways in which the people

who are the least benefited by a system are the most affected by it through characterization, character motivations, and conflicts, *Zehreeli hawa* ultimately exhorts audiences to recognize the disastrous effects of neoliberal capitalism. Women are also shown to be disproportionately affected by the disaster as a reflection of the continuing effect of MIC exposure on women's reproductive health and the health of those born after the disaster.

The use of three languages in *Zehreeli hawa* maintains the multilingualism of Bhopal. Izzat speaks in Chhattisgarhi; Madiha, Devraj, and Jaganlal speak in Hindi inflected with English; while Sonya, Suave, and Anderson speak in English and in Hindi. Characters also speak different languages to each other within scenes and switch between languages when required. Thus, Jaganlal speaks to Izzat in Chhattisgarhi when he pretends to sympathize with her for media attention and to gain her trust. Linguistic misunderstandings, such as those between Sonya and Izzat, reveal their inability to communicate effectively with each other. Other kinds of languages make an appearance in *Zehreeli hawa*, such as the terse legal language, symbolized by the proliferation of "forms" requiring attestation, and the opaque, exploitative, and capitalistic medical system, symbolized by the "Pentagon doctor" Hans Weill. Izzat does not comprehend these languages and is exploited by the corporation – her thumbprint is illegally attached to a document charging Sonya with kidnapping her, and Hans Weill gives her fake pills. These linguistic disruptions signal the disjuncture brought on by neoliberal capitalism. The multilingualism, in performance, prompts audiences to participate by translating along with characters, or fish for clues to comprehend the action when they do not understand the language.

The play is structured in episodic scenes, chronologically depicting the onset, event, and aftermath of the gas disaster. Flashbacks in time are used to clarify the progression of events and multiple locations are depicted on stage simultaneously. The collation of space and time on

stage, a part of Tanvir's dramaturgical style, also indicates the imbrication of the global within the local within Karbide's PPZ (People's Progress Zone) in Bhopal. In the climactic scenes depicting the gas disaster, several places appear on stage as Jaganlal and Anderson are made aware of the disaster. The documentary film *Gaon ke naon theatre, mor naon habib* shows the stage design that Habib Tanvir had conceptualized for the performance, with three separate vertical screens depicting the slums, the factory, and Canada placed as backdrops denoting different locations for the scenes (Figures 2.1 and 2.2).

Figure 2.1: A rehearsal of *Zehreeli hawa* showing the set. Tanvir is sitting to the right. Screenshot from *Gaon ke naon theatre,* 2013.

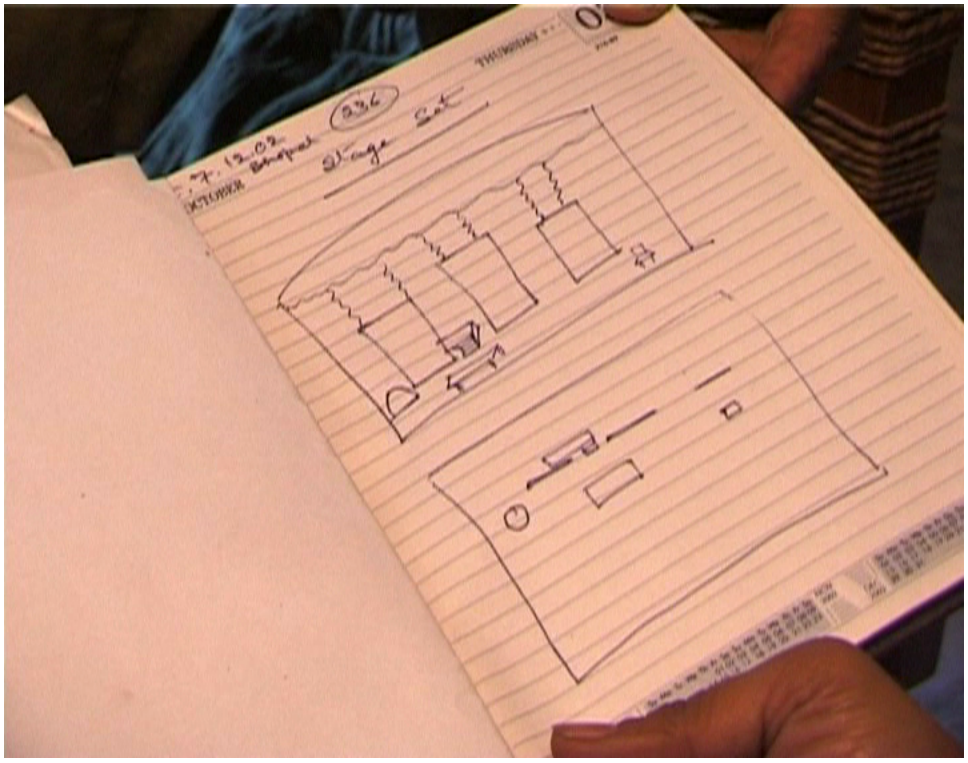

Figure 2.2: Tanvir's notebook with a diagrammatic representation of the stage set for *Zehreeli hawa*. Screenshot from *Gaon ke naon theatre,* 2013.

Besides speaking in Chhattisgarhi, Izzat narrates a Gond story named "*Aise kihis bhagwan*" (This is What God Said) in Scene 16 to distract Madiha and other people who are injured and in pain. Tanvir adapted this story from a Gond myth of creation, which he updates to address the onset of the disaster. Izzat narrates a story of the creation of the world: *Bhagwan* (God), sitting on a leaf, rubs his hands together to produce dirt from which he makes a crow. He tells the crow to find some land for him. The crow goes to the spider and crab, and together the three of them squeeze the turtle. The turtle spits out land. Spinning on top of the water, the spider spins a web, on top of which she places the land carefully. *Bhagwan* tears some of his hair and throws it on top of the land, creating trees. The trees are cut down to fashion agricultural implements that are dragged across the land to produce crops. The living creatures make merry and harvest the grain, which they store in the termite's nest. Izzat's audience eggs her on, asking

"what happened next" – in the manner of folk storytelling performances. Izzat improvises by adapting their current situation into the Gond story. She narrates that the harvested grain was stricken with pests, and men searched for a cure. It is their cure that killed her daughter, Zarina.

Izzat's adapted story tells Madiha the truth and implants a seed of doubt in her mind such that her unwavering faith in Devraj is questioned, prefiguring a moment of reversal. Madiha hears from Izzat that it was Karbide's toxic waste that had killed her daughter, not poverty, and that Sonya's research was not concocted. She begins to question everything that Devraj had told her, and realizes his duplicitousness, but at the end of the scene she tragically has a miscarriage. It is Izzat's storytelling, embedded within the play, that results in the reversal of Madiha's affection for Devraj.

The story also shows that Izzat may be unschooled[7] and oblivious of legal and medical jargon, but she knows how Karbide had wronged her and is not afraid to tell everyone what had happened. The story functions as a *mise-en-abyme* that includes a gist of Izzat and Zarina's reality, and is an encapsulation of the whole play. While the living creatures were able to create a world with *Bhagwan's* help, it is men who cause its destruction: a comment on the humanly wrought destruction of the environment. Reading the play in 2022, Izzat's remediation of the Gond myth resonates with the resettlement of Gond Adivasis, and the felling of the Hasdeo forests by the Parsa East and Kanta Basan coal mines constructed by the Adani Group and encouraged by the Modi government. Interestingly, Izzat's story is also one of collaboration and reflects the intermedial processes that created the performance itself.

The song "Zehreeli hawa," written by Tanvir, functions as a similar device, making the ideological imperatives of the play clearer. The song acknowledges the death and grief that was brought on by the "poisonous breeze" that emanated from the UCIL plant by bringing up images

of silent screams, unnamed lives, blistered hearts, and waves of blood. Sung at the beginning of the performance, the song foreshadows the onset of the disaster, and returns as a haunting refrain at significant moments in the play. The song plays for a second time when Izzat shows Sonya the pills that Hans Weill had given to her. Sonya exclaims that these are fake, revealing the exploitation that Izzat had faced at the hands of the company doctor. The refrain comes in describing the poisonous wind as suffocating and blinding, underscoring the precarity that Izzat faces because of the corporation that deems her life disposable. The refrain comes in a third time in the last scene when Jaganlal is giving his speech at the Montreal conference. He says that "there is no love left in Bhopal," but it is "useless" for them to grieve for those who had died there, and he has full faith that for each child who had died, other children will be born. He has no time to grieve because he must think of their future (Tanvir *Zehreeli* 115). The song comes in after Jaganlal's insensitive speech, drawing attention to the apocalyptic nature of the disaster and the way that the poisonous wind muddled land and sky, smoke and fog. The contrast between Jaganlal's insensitivity and the tragedy embedded in the song throws into sharp relief the state's refusal to heed the warnings posed by the Bhopal gas disaster, and its failure to acknowledge the lives lost in Bhopal at the hands of Union Carbide.

In fact, the very system that is designed to improve the lives of Bhopalis is the one that ultimately causes their destruction. Through the rhetoric of the People's Progress Zone (PPZ) that Devraj and Jaganlal disseminate through their speeches, Bhopalis are made to believe that their "biggest environmental hazard is poverty," and that the PPZ – a zone of deregulation and efficient production – will help in the alleviation of their poverty (Tanvir *Zehreeli* 47). The pesticides manufactured by Karbide International are advertised as marvels of modernization that will attack pests in crops and improve agricultural production. The PPZ is a fictionalization of

the real SEZ (Special Economic Zones), which are a consequence of the liberalization of the Indian economy that began in the 1970s, and that continue to exist as zones that reduce state interference and import-export duties thus catering to corporate interests. In reality, the building of the factory within a densely populated area in Bhopal results in the degradation of the land and the environment that sustains living beings, making Bhopali lives disposable to the state in the interest of economic development and industrial progress.

Jaganlal promises permanent houses to Izzat and to those who live in temporary slums, giving them pictures of the houses they would be receiving within the PPZ. However, the picture remains a sign without a referent, the simulacrum exponentially intensified by the media taking pictures of a picture. Similarly, the Animal Charity Fund that Devraj institutes as a public service that buys and disposes of dead animals is a cover up for the poisoning of animals by Karbide's toxic waste. Dr. Hans Weill, the company's "Pentagon" doctor, is just a corrupt official dispensing fake medicines who helps Karbide to cover up its crimes. Foreign investment and the merger of local and global interests in the PPZ, and Karbide International's pretense of corporate social responsibility lauded by the state is predicated on a rhetoric of underdevelopment and alleviation of poverty that is revealed to be disingenuous, destructive, and criminal, exposing the threats of neoliberal capitalism. Sonya articulates this duplicitousness of neoliberalism when she tells Izzat that "the monster was born in the company's poison," and that it was Karbide that had killed Zarina. They had given Izzat a meager amount of money for Zarina's dead body, and Izzat thought that the company had done her a favor (Tanvir *Zehreeli* 66).

Even before the disaster, Izzat's life had been made precarious within Karbide's People's Progress Zone. The accelerated development and progress had degraded the environment and failed to sustain Izzat's life, prefiguring the disaster. Karbide's factory renders Izzat homeless

and the structures that purportedly support Izzat's life – the state, the legal system, medicine, and multinational corporations, even her own hut – cause Izzat grievous injury and murder Zarina. While Sonya's research and treatment might be helpful for Izzat and Zarina, her research methods are painful for Izzat who is grieving for her own child. Even though she was the one who was the most affected by Karbide poisoning her environment, Izzat has no wish to fight Karbide and expose their criminality. Izzat is grieving for Zarina, and Sonya puts her hands around her shoulder in a gesture of empathy. In this, the scene self-reflexively complicates notions of addressing a traumatic past, raises questions about the intentionality of extending support to others, and enables audiences to witness a gesture of empathy – one that was perhaps never really extended to the survivors of Bhopal by the state and the neoliberal corporation.

After the disaster, Karbide is barely concerned about the people who have been injured. Anderson and Devraj discuss numbers – depreciating stocks and financial losses that Karbide faces, accurate numbers of dead and injured people, and monetary compensation to survivors. They try to cover their own tracks by finding out who to blame for the disaster, and Anderson questions Devraj about the safety protocols that were being followed, blaming him for negligence. Jaganlal appears to be arguing for the survivors at first and asks Anderson why the disaster didn't occur in America if their plant was identical to Karbide's American plant. Devraj and Anderson have nothing to say and the long silence that follows Jaganlal's question highlights this question to the audience (Tanvir *Zehreeli* 104). Anderson replies that this was an accident, and when Jaganlal brings up compensation to survivors, diverts attention to the legal problems that the company was facing. When Jaganlal threatens to present Sonya's research to the court, Anderson suggests that they could perhaps come to some sort of an arrangement. While the audience cannot hear what they are saying, it is quite clear that Jaganlal will turn his back on

Bhopalis once again. This outcome mirrors the extreme lack of responsibility on Union Carbide's part, who denied all involvement in the Bhopal gas disaster, tried to blame UCIL, and even tried to concoct stories of sabotage. In 1989, Union Carbide accepted responsibility for the disaster and paid the Indian government $470 million, but it took a long time for this amount to reach survivors of the disaster, and many have still not received any settlement. Illnesses borne out of MIC poisoning continue to affect those Bhopalis and their descendants who were exposed to the gas.

Anderson's speech towards the end of the play places the blame for the Bhopal gas disaster completely on Devraj. His speech almost humanizes Karbide-the-corporation and, compared with the real humans who had lost their lives in the Bhopal gas disaster, Anderson's plea for the dying Karbide appears insensitive and ignorant of the experiences of those who survived Karbide. Similarly, Jaganlal's last speech refuses to mourn those who died in the Bhopal gas disaster. Despite the disaster, India continued to follow the path to economic liberalization, greater foreign investment, and industrialization at the risk of public health, violations of Adivasi land rights, and environmental degradation. *Zehreeli hawa* emphasizes the ongoing precarization caused by the Bhopal gas disaster, pointing to the dangers of multinational corporations that disseminate precarity by placing profits over human lives and emphasizing the dangers of instituting factories producing dangerous chemicals within developing countries, exposing the double standards of multinational corporations.

At the end of the play, Izzat is haunted by the ghost of Zarina and grieves for Sonya, asking her daughter's spirit why she hadn't brought Sonya with her. Madiha emerges as the subliminal protagonist who goes from supporting Devraj and trusting him blindly to leaving him to join Izzat, exhorting audiences to make better alliances than her. The play ends with both

women joining forces centerstage, with expressions of resolute defiance on their faces. The audience is left at the beginning of another movement, but one which, from the standpoint of the present, has not yielded the results that Izzat and Madiha had hoped for. UCIL, now owned by Dow Chemicals, which bought Union Carbide, has refused to clean up the contaminated factory site and toxic waste continues to leak into drinking water sources in Bhopal. Survivors, families of those who lost their lives in the Bhopal gas disaster, and other supporters of the movement continue to struggle for compensation and medical support, and against environmental erosion by multinational corporations.

With its intermedial form, the incorporation of the Gond myth of creation in Izzat's story, and songs, *Zehreeli hawa* exemplifies Tanvir's intermedial style that highlights the Chhattisgarhi language, embodies acts of translation on stage, and reworks regional myth and folklore to address contemporary issues, transporting them to wider audiences. The depiction of a wide range of characters, including marginalized Bhopalis and other women who are more well-off but nevertheless affected by the Bhopal gas disaster, contrasted with the masculine corporate and state infrastructure, who are exploitative and powerful, demystify the differential power relations between these groups, and expose the unequal distribution of precarity brought on by neoliberal capitalism. Through the depiction of the PPZ (People's Progress Zone) – the system designed to improve Bhopali lives that ends up killing them – the play critiques the neoliberalization of the Indian economy and the institution of Special Economic Zones (SEZ). By examining the motivations behind characters' interests in helping Izzat, the play raises questions about the rhetoric of underdevelopment and poverty that is used to justify neoliberal exploitation, and by staging the precarization of Bhopal brought on by industrialization, it asks the audience to

consider the costs, in terms of human lives, of industrial progress and the growth of the economy.

By staging the mechanisms by means of which the sustenance of human lives is made impossible by corporate greed, corruption, and self-interest, prefiguring the Bhopal gas disaster, *Zehreeli hawa* exposes neoliberal capitalism as one mechanism by means of which precarity is disseminated. *Zehreeli hawa*'s dramatization of the Bhopal gas disaster acknowledges the ongoing trauma faced by Bhopalis, and names its perpetrators to audiences who witness the crimes of Karbide International, the thinly veiled Union Carbide, and its CEO, Warren Anderson. Terry Allen, who played Dr. Sonya Labonte in Naya Theatre's production of *Zehreeli hawa*, says that "healing" is not what the play does. The constant barrage of bad news is inundating to most people, blinding us to other people's traumatic experiences. A play like *Zehreeli hawa* allows audiences to sit in a darkened theatre and watch feelings being expressed and captured by the performers, enabling them to freely express, feel, and internalize their own emotions (Maharishi and Deshpande 63:40). By performing gestures of empathy and understanding, *Zehreeli hawa* creates a time and space for remembering and mourning those lives who were lost to the Bhopal gas disaster and other industrial disasters orchestrated by neoliberal capitalism.

***Ponga pandit*, Censorship, and Performing in Protest**

On account of the social and political commentary that Habib Tanvir integrates into Naya Theatre's performances, they frequently face censorship, particularly from right-wing political parties. Beginning in Gwalior in 1992, at a conference protesting the demolition of the Babri Masjid, Tanvir has been a target of the right-wing. More recently, since August 2003 in Gwalior,

Tanvir and Naya Theatre have been attacked for their play *Ponga pandit* (1977) by activists affiliated with the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal, and the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), who have branded the play anti-Hindu. In this section, I discuss intermediality within Naya Theatre's *Ponga pandit*, which restages a *nacha* performance to address religious fundamentalism. I discuss how Naya Theatre's acts of performing *Ponga pandit* in the face of widespread censorship resists the precarity disseminated by the right-wing by overturning attempts to silence them. What was it about *Ponga pandit* that incensed the right-wing to ban the play and publicly protest its performances? And what does the right-wing's problem with *Ponga pandit* reveal about their own politics?

Ponga pandit is a *nacha* performance composed by performers Sukhram and Sitaram in the 1930s, has been performed by several generations of *nacha* performers, and has been popular with Chhattisgarhi audiences since then. Performed by the *nacha* actors of Naya Theatre, the play was adapted into their repertoire with minimal modification as *Jamadarin* (Sweeper Woman) in 1977, and has been enjoyed, since then, by regional and national audiences without any accusations of offending Hindu religious sentiments. In the wake of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, Naya Theatre revived *Jamadarin* as *Ponga pandit* and performed it along with Asghar Wajahat's *Jis lahore nai dekhya*. Both plays address religion-based discrimination and dismantle notions of religious fundamentalism in different ways, and responded to heightened communalist tensions since 1992. The plays were revived for performances a second time following the anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat in 2002.

Ponga pandit is a hilarious farce about a Jamadarin (a word meaning sweeper woman that is used as a pejorative caste-based slur) who tricks a Pandit (priest) into giving her all his *puja samagri* (instruments of worship), including his *bhagwan* (idol of God), by touching these

things, which the Pandit immediately discards as defiled and unusable. The Pandit is accompanied by a Chela, the disciple whose house he is performing *puja* in, whose hilarious antics such as wearing shoes during the *puja*, lighting a *beedi* (local cigarette) instead of *agarbatti* (incense stick), and doing *hawan* (fanning of the idol) incorrectly, satirize illogical religious customs. At the end of the play, the Pandit faints because he had been fasting for the *puja*. When the Chela gives him water from the Jamadarin's pot, all notions of untouchability are exploded. In another version of the play, the Jamadarin dumps a basket of waste on the Pandit's head, mocking him for berating her. The Pandit had been castigating the Chela for touching the Jamadarin earlier, telling him that he would have to go to Gangasagar[8] to get purified. Now that the Pandit has consumed water from the Jamadarin's pot, he is at a loss as to what he can do to purify himself. The Chela suggests that he can perhaps go to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Through the course of the play, the Jamadarin touches the Pandit's implements, innocently asking after their use. Finally, armed with all the Pandit's worshiping wares, the Jamadarin provides the punchline of the play – now that she has his God and worshipping implements, she can pray to God on her own and does not need the Pandit anymore.

Ponga pandit is usually performed with *Jis lahore nai dekhya,* written by Asghar Wajahat, which tells the story of a Muslim family who move into a house in Lahore that had been vacated by a Hindu family. An old woman who had refused to move with her family is left behind in the house, and the Muslim family forms a bond with her, making her a part of their family. When the old woman dies, the family decides to perform her last rites following Hindu customs, igniting the ire of Muslim fundamentalists, who kill the *maulvi* who had agreed to perform her last rites. Tanvir added a chorus to Wajahat's play, who sang poetry by Rahi

Masoom Raza, Sahir Ludhianvi, and Amrita Pritam, reflecting on anti-communalism and the Partition (Deshpande 3621).

In 2003, Naya Theatre was commissioned to perform *Ponga pandit* and *Jis lahore nai dekhya* by the Department of Culture, Government of Madhya Pradesh, all over the region. On August 16, right-wing activists disrupted performances at Gwalior, and, thereafter, at Hoshangabad on August 18, Seoni on August 19, Balaghat on August 20, and Mandla on August 21 – all cities in Madhya Pradesh. At Narsinghpur, the performances were canceled, and stones were thrown by right-wingers at intellectuals, artists, and other organizations, who were protesting the cancellation of the performances. In Hoshangabad, right-wing activists, led by BJP MLA Sitasharan Sharma, threw chairs and rotten eggs onstage after *Ponga pandit* concluded. Some of the *sanghis* (right-wing activists) even physically cut the wires supplying electricity to the auditorium. At Gwalior, they shouted slogans, despite the presence of the district collector and the superintendent of police, and had to be driven back by the police (Deshpande 3620).

Gaon ke naon theatre documents protests against Naya Theatre performing *Ponga pandit* in Vidisha in 2003. The documentary portrays Naya Theatre traveling under police protection through throngs of sloganing *sanghis* chanting "*Jai Shree Ram*."[9]As they weave through the crowd, the activists chant, "Tanvir Ahmad *wapas jao*" (Tanvir Ahmad, go back!). Nageen Tanvir, a Naya Theatre performer and Tanvir's daughter, comments that in Seoni, too, the right-wingers were berating Tanvir Ahmed and that they didn't even know Habib Tanvir's correct name. Moneeka Tanvir, his long-term collaborator and wife, comments that wherever they went the protestors stood outside the door, shouted "*Jai shree Ram,*" and gave *gaalis* (pejoratives) to Habib Tanvir.

The documentary interviews some of the protesters, asking them what they found objectionable about the play. Kumar from the Bajrang Dal says that he had heard that *Ponga pandit* insults Hindu gods and goddesses and they were here to protest it. When asked if he had seen the play, Kumar says that he hadn't because this was the first time the play was being performed in Vidisha, and others had told him about the play. Tirath Pratap, from the BJP, also says that their feelings have been hurt by the derogatory portrayal of Hindu gods and goddesses in *Ponga pandit*. Kumar reiterates, "we will not allow Hindu gods and goddesses to be insulted on Vidisha's soil" (33:30).

At other cities in Madhya Pradesh, as well, *sanghis* saw the play as a slight on their *sanskriti* (culture), without actually seeing it. Kaptan Singh Solanki, a BJP organizing general secretary from Madhya Pradesh, said he had problems with the play showing scenes of a man entering a temple with shoes on, and of a *jamadarin* striking a *brahman*, and saw this as a "direct attack on our *sanskriti*." Gauri Shankar Shejwar, former leader of the opposition, had a problem with the name of the play, and said, "*Panditon ko ponga nahi kehna chahiye*" (Pandits should not be called idiotic[10]), and that the play "shows a desire to drive a wedge based on caste." S. C. Sharma, who led protests against the performance, said that the audience objected when Tanvir said that "*kattarwadi rajneta*" (extremist political leaders) were responsible for the communal riots in Madhya Pradesh in 1992. The BJP state office attributed the origin of the objections to Yogendra Sanger, a member of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha in Gwalior, who said that he found the use of a *beedi* (local cigarette) by the Chela when the Pandit cannot find *agarbatti* (incense stick) during his *puja* problematic (Deshpande 3620). It is important to note that none of these dissenters, save perhaps the last, had actually seen the play.

By showing the consequences of the Jamadarin touching the Pandit's implements and drawing humor from the Pandit's overreactions, *Ponga pandit* overturns the caste hierarchy. At the end of the play, the Jamadarin quotes from the Pandit's own "*Shastras"* saying: "*Karma pradhan vishwa rachi rakha/ Jo jas karai so tas fal chakha."* (Karma is the most important thing that sustains the world/ What you do determines the fruit you will taste.) She reiterates that the caste system has no meaning if this proposition were true, and that now that she had everything that she needed to do *puja* on her own, she did not need the Pandit anymore. By making the Pandit superfluous to her own worshiping practices, the Jamadarin makes the Pandit's livelihood defunct and exposes his own precarious position. The Pandit is left to wonder what his new profession could be. The Chela suggests he could perhaps learn to drive a *rickshaw*, and he says he is too old for physical labor. It is the Jamadarin's act of making the Pandit's vocation precarious that irks right-wing audiences. The caste-privileged are confronted with the realization of their own precarity should other real-life Jamadarins announce other Pandits' superfluity, and this makes them anxious, leading them to attempt to silence *Ponga pandit*.

In *Gaon ke naon theatre,* Chaitram, a Naya Theatre performer suggests that the right-wing protestors should perhaps see the play and try to understand the story. The play was in the *nacha* style that was known for such satirical critiques of religion and was a comedy. Tanvir highlights that *shastriya natak* (classical plays) are full of parodical privileged characters such as the idiotic brahman, and there was nothing new about *Ponga pandit*. Moreover, he had not even written, created, or directed this play. Moneeka Tanvir clarifies that the play is not anti-Hindu, it is anti-ritual, and it shows that rituals have no meaning and are not connected to faith in God. Deshpande is of the same opinion and says that *Ponga pandit* "does not attack the spiritual or philosophical aspects of Hinduism. What it does attack is the caste system, superstition,

priestcraft, *brahmanism*, and untouchability. To claim that the play attacks the Hindu faith, as the Sangh *parivar* does, is to argue that all this is what constitutes Hinduism" (3620). Thus, attacks against the play simply confirm the *sanghi*'s own intolerance. While the reasons that the *sanghis* give for finding the play problematic betray an anxiety about the Jamadarin's reversal of the caste hierarchy, they were really attacking Habib Tanvir because he bore a Muslim name.

Gaon ke naon portrays Tanvir as he speaks to the audience who have assembled to watch *Ponga pandit* in Vidisha. He tells this audience that after their performance of *Lahore* at another location the day before, he had asked that audience if they would like to see *Ponga pandit*, and the audience had really enjoyed the play and even asked for their autographs. Similarly, he wanted to ask this audience if they wanted to see the play. An audience member heckles Tanvir, saying "We definitely don't want to see the play" (42:39). Tanvir pauses and ignores the comment, saying that he wanted to ask the students if they wanted to see the play. Meanwhile, the police remove the disruptive audience member, and he tells the police that *they* (meaning right-wing protestors who had been planted in the audience of students) had been assured that the performance would not take place. As he leaves, his posse forces the rest of the audience to get up and leave, and the police seem to help the audience leave (Figure 2.3). As this drama unfolds on stage, state officials surreptitiously work to convince actors not to perform *Ponga pandit* backstage (Maharishi and Deshpande *A Day* 16:57).

Figure 2.3: The police remove disruptive audience members along with everyone else. Screenshot from *Gaon ke naon theatre,* 2013.

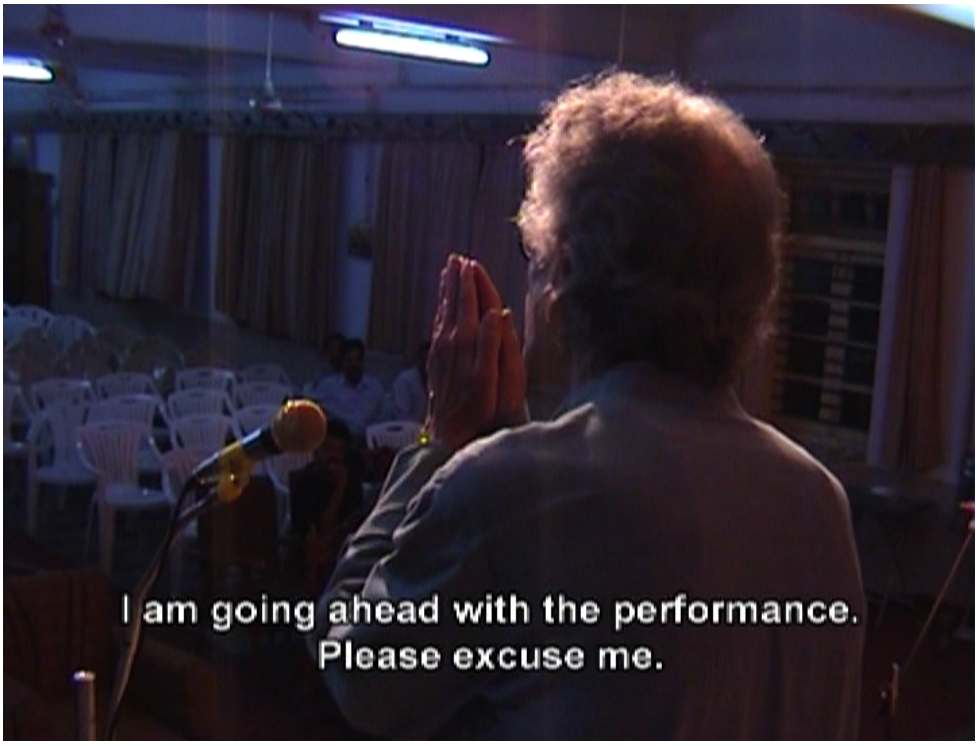

Figure 2.4: Tanvir decides to go ahead with the performance despite the disruption. Screenshot from *Gaon ke naon theatre,* 2013.

Tanvir announces that he does not know about any police assurance but wants the audience's assurance for them to perform. Gradually, the hall is emptied. Incensed, Tanvir says that they will continue on with the performance for the benefit of the policemen and the few people left behind. He says, "*mujhe maf kijiye*" (Please excuse me), he had spoken to the Chief Minister, and they had come to perform (Figure 2.4). Each and every member of the audience had left, and Tanvir says that he did not believe that all members of the audience were affiliated with the hecklers. Naya Theatre had shown this play numerous times to different kinds of audiences, and he did not believe that this audience left of their own free will. They still had an audience – the police, the superintendent of police, the district superintendent, friends from Delhi who were shooting a film, Sanjay and Sudhanva, and several drivers – and they were going to start their performance of *Ponga pandit* peacefully. As the performance plays onstage, the camera looks at the stage across a hall full of empty seats and pans to the door where an audience crowds right outside (Figures 2.5 and 2.6).

Figure 2.5: The camera captures the performance across a hall full of empty seats.

Screenshot from *Gaon ke naon theatre,* 2013.

Figure 2.6: The audience stands right outside the door. Screenshot from *Gaon ke naon theatre,* 2013.

Even without an audience, Tanvir insisted that Naya Theatre exercise their right to perform their play *Ponga pandit* in the face of dissenters who attempted to invisibilize them. By performing in the face of censorship, Naya Theatre refused to conform to the wishes of the right-wing. While the police seem to be protecting Naya Theatre and ensuring that the performance takes place, as the documentary film *A Day in the Life of Ponga Pandit* shows, state officials attempt to dissuade Tanvir from performing before and even during the performance. Along with the hecklers, the police seem to be telling audience members to leave. The state machinery ends up supporting the right-wing dissenters and aids their attempt to suppress any criticism of Hindu rituals and of the caste system.

The intermedial form of Naya Theatre's performance places a *Ponga pandit*, a *nacha* performance satirizing the caste system, alongside *Jis lahore nai dekhya*, a play about sectarian violence during the Partition, highlighting different types of religious fundamentalism. By performing *nacha* in the face of dissent, Naya Theatre place themselves in danger and assert their right to be visible and audible in the face of repression – disrupting the processes of precarization of dissent that right-wing censorship attempts to institute. Sanjay Maharishi and Sudhanva Pandey's documentary film, *A Day in the Life of Ponga Pandit,* highlights the precarious position that the performers of Naya Theatre place themselves in by posing the question, "How do unarmed artists confront extra-legal authority when the legal authority, armed to the teeth, runs scared?" (21:05).

The performance of *Ponga pandit* in Vidisha that hardly anyone saw becomes a disruption and an exciting event that makes its way into several documentary films, news reports,

and encourages artists and activists to draft numerous public statements condemning the repression of the arts by the right-wing. Instead of canceling a performance, the right-wing's attempt to silence Naya Theatre backfires and this performance without an audience becomes more popular than it otherwise would have been. *A Day in the Life of Ponga Pandit* records the entire incident at Vidisha, and concludes by highlighting the dangers of right-wing censorship. The narrator says:

> No one objected when *Lahore* was performed. Why? Because it is a play against Muslim fundamentalism. Why does a play against untouchability become anti-Hindu? Only because a man named Habib Tanvir is doing it? Then what about Chaitram, Udayram, Dhanno, and Amardas? What about their right to perform the play? And what about our right – your and my right, as spectators – to watch the play? (24:35)

Tanvir himself narrates similar incidents at the beginning of performances of *Ponga pandit* at other places, highlighting the right-wing's failure to silence Naya Theatre, and deliberating on the reasons behind their attempts. *Gaon ke naon* portrays Tanvir telling one such audience, "*Ezra Pound ne kaha tha "*Beware of the tyranny of the unimaginative*" – unimaginative log jinke paas ek sense of humor nahi hain – bas ek politics – ek jhoot ko hazaar bar dohrao toh woh sach ho jayega.*" (Ezra Pound had said "Beware of the tyranny of the unimaginative." Unimaginative people who do not have a sense of humor – only a politics – [believe that] if they repeat one lie a thousand times, it will become the truth.) (33:56). Similarly, other recorded performances of *Ponga pandit* show Tanvir prefacing the performance with humorous anecdotes of Naya Theatre's resistance to right-wing censorship, such as attempts to silence Naya Theatre in London and in Glasgow by members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad that were overturned by the organizers of the Haymarket Festival, highlighting the absurdity of the

censorship that they were facing. By contextualizing performances of *Ponga pandit* in this way, Tanvir exposes the repressive politics of the right-wing, other people's reactions to the situation, and ultimately, the right-wing's failure to silence Naya Theatre. Instead of being censored, by performing *Ponga pandit* and prefacing their performances with stories of their censorship, Naya Theatre and Habib Tanvir perform resistance to right-wing censorship and expose the repressive politics of the right-wing. At a time when right-wing cancel-culture and state support for their antics has made the voicing of dissent precarious, Habib Tanvir's resolve to perform in the face of right-wing protests directly resists the precarization of political theatre, activism, and dissent due to right-wing cultural nationalism.

Conclusion: A Theatre to Address the Precarious Present

The intermediality of Naya Theatre's theatrical practice is exhibited in their improvisatory and collaborative method of constituting performances with people from various backgrounds, their use of multiple languages, and the staging of *nacha* and other folk forms within their performances. Naya Theatre's collaborative process is a consequence of Habib Tanvir's left-oriented progressive political outlook and his goal to create a socially and politically conscious Indian form of modern theatre. As public, performative, and translatory acts, Naya Theatre's performances are able to address precarity and the mechanisms of precarization by exposing and opposing the modes of exclusion by means of which the state constitutes itself. Their performances enable audiences to ask questions and think critically about their own reality, evoking a shifting in perceptions, and a recognition of the modes of exclusion that unequally sustain some lives over others.

Habib Tanvir's adaptation *Zehreeli hawa*, in collaboration with Rahul Varma, remembers the Bhopal gas disaster to expose the precarity disseminated by neoliberal capitalism, enables audiences to witness the ongoing trauma of survivors, and extends a gesture of empathy and support in their continuing struggle for survival and justice. The performance uses multiple languages and adapts regional myth and folklore to address a contemporary ecological, social, and political concern that impacts the residents of Bhopal. Naya Theatre's performance of *Ponga pandit* in the face of censorship and physical attacks by right-wing activists exposes the repressive politics of the right-wing. *Ponga pandit* reverses the precarization of casteist repression to make the Pandit's profession precarious. The intermedial form of the performance juxtaposes a satirical *nacha* performance about caste with *Jis lahore,* a tragic play about sectarian violence during the Partition to enable audiences to make correlations between different forms of religious fundamentalism. Through their intermedial performances, collaborative process, socially and politically relevant themes reacting to contemporary realities, and acts of performing in the face of censorship, Naya Theatre's theatrical practice intervenes into those mechanisms that cause the unequal distribution of precarity.

Notes

1. *Satnamis* are a religious sect founded by Ghasidas and are influenced by the teachings of Ravidas. Tanvir was inspired by the centrality of truth in *satnami* beliefs and adapted their performance practices into *Charandas Chor*.

2. Dr. Binayak Sen is a pediatrician, public health specialist, and human rights activist. His sentencing and arrest on accusations of cooperating with Naxalites by the Chhattisgarhi state has been widely condemned.

3. *Nacha* is a Chhattisgarhi form of folk performance that includes song, dance, musical accompaniment, and play. Skits are improvised extemporaneously by actors on topical subjects and combined with songs and dances in a flexible format. The performance is usually held outdoors with the audience surrounding performers on three sides. Female impersonators play women's roles and performance styles, content, and roles are handed down through familial affiliations.

4. See: Malick, Javed. *Diverse Pursuits: Essays on Drama and Theatre*. Routledge, 2021; Dharwadker, Aparna. *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India Since 1947.* U. of Iowa P., 2005; and Katyal, Anjum. *Habib Tanvir: Towards an Inclusive Theatre*. Sage, 2012.

5. See: Prateek, "Reinterpreting Passion: A Study of Habib Tanvir's Theatre." *Australasian Drama Studies*, vol. 68, April 2016; and Dalmia, Vasudha. '"To be More Brechtian is to be More Indian": On the Theatre of Habib Tanvir" *Poetics, Plays, and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre*. Oxford U P, 2006.

6. Tanvir received support from Begum Qudsia Zaidi for his training in Europe and he promised her that he would produce plays for her when he returned. They started with

Mrichchakatikam but parted ways when Begum Zaidi was not too happy about Tanvir's decision to include folk performers in *Mitti ki Gadi*.

7. Tanvir has drawn a distinction between education and schooling in several of his interviews and speeches. He says that folk performers are unschooled i.e., they have not attended the modern schooling system but are not uneducated i.e., they know what is happening in the world and have the knowledge that is required for their lives.

8. Located at the point where the river Ganga meets the Bay of Bengal, Gangasagar is a place of pilgrimage for Hindus. During Makar Sankranti, millions of Hindus gather at Gangasagar to take a holy dip in the Ganga. The festival Makar Sankranti remembers the day the river Ganga descended to earth from the skies, according to mythology.

9. Followers of right-wing ideology in India are motivated by the idea of creating a nation for Hindus or *Ram rajya* (the kingdom of Ram). During the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992, Hindus were mobilized by the BJP using the slogan "Jai Shree Ram," reinforcing their belief that the Babri Masjid was built over a temple dedicated to Ram, and groups chanted the phrase as they tore down the mosque. The BJP has used the phrase to mobilize Hindu voters through the spreading of anti-Muslim sentiments. In the right-wing state, the phrase "Jai Shree Ram" frequently accompanies atrocities committed by the right-wing, such attacks on Muslims, students, activists, and protestors by cow vigilantes and right-wing mobs.

10. The word "ponga" means idiotic. Ponga pandit is used to refer to a brahmin man who does not follow the caste-based restrictions sanctioned for him and consequently is less of a brahmin than others who follow caste rules.

Chapter 3

Flowers of Love: Intermediality in *Chandala, the Impure* (2018), *Janani's Juliet* (2019), and *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* (A Star Shoots Across the Sky, 2022)

Oh, my dear people
We sacrifice our sons and daughters
To your deceitful spite
You chop my head off!
Do you not hear
My screams of agony?
Have you shut your ears?
The brave man that I loved
He will bloom as a flower
He will fill the world with his perfume.
- Muthammal in *Natchathiram nagargiradhu*

In this *oppari* (song of lament), embedded within Pa. Ranjith's 2022 Tamil film *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* (A Star Shoots Across the Sky), Muthammal embodies and remembers victims of caste-based murders, accusing listeners of their complicity in these murders by refusing to perceive the cyclic violence that enables the continuation of such acts. *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* is a fictional depiction of the theatre group Indianostrum devising and performing a play on the politics of love – one of two films depicting this theatre group. In 2018, disturbed by an increasing number of caste-based murders, widely known as "honor killings," in Tamil Nadu, Indianostrum, a real theatre group based in Pondicherry, created *Chandala, The Impure*, a performance addressing the issue of caste-based violence faced by intercaste couples in India. *Chandala, the Impure* (2018) transposes Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to Tamil Nadu and places the lovers Jack and Janani in Villupuram, a village stratified by caste. In keeping with Indianostrum's collaborative process and style, *Chandala* is intermedial in form – combining testimony, CCTV footage, folk forms of performance, film clips, and

puppetry; and draws inspiration from a real incident – the caste-based violence inflicted upon the intercaste couple Kausalya and Shankar in Udumalpet, Tamil Nadu, in 2016.

Pankaj Rishi Kumar's 2019 documentary film *Janani's Juliet* documents Indianostrum as they devise and rehearse *Chandala*, centering Kausalya's testimony in the process. The documentary film shadows members of Indianostrum as they speak to Kausalya and adapt her experiences into theatrical performance and provides an inside look into Indianostrum's process of devising and rehearsing *Chandala*. Using theatrical creation and rehearsals as a narrative framework, the documentary film explores the realities of caste-based violence and discrimination in Tamil Nadu. Pa. Ranjith's film *Natchathiram nagargiradhu*, shot at Indianostrum theatre in Pondicherry, fictionalizes the premise of *Janani's Juliet*. Pa. Ranjith's film depicts the experiences of a fictional theatre group creating a performance about caste violence in Pondicherry, and some of the characters in the film visibly resemble members of Indianostrum who feature within *Janani's Juliet*. The film focuses on the dynamics of the theatre group and the experiences of the protagonist, Rene, who vocally resists casteist biases within the group, as they create a performance about caste-based discrimination and violence.

All three performances and films are critically acclaimed and have circulated amongst national and international audiences. *Chandala* was commissioned by *Le festivals des francophonies en Limousin* (The Francophone Theatre Festival in Limousin) in France and has been performed in theatre spaces and festivals across India and Europe in Tamil. The group revived the performance with a new cast for another tour in France in November 2023. *Janani's Juliet* was India's entry to the Oscars in 2019 and has won accolades in film festivals across India, and *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* was released on Netflix in 2022 and is accessible to a wide variety of audiences worldwide.

In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which intermediality works within and across *Chandala*, *Janani's Juliet*, and *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* to address issues of caste-based violence and discrimination. Narratives of caste spill out of medial frameworks in this collection of performances and films, and each performance combines, in turn, a number of other forms, such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, testimony, CCTV footage, folk performances, song, dance, puppetry, theatre, and film. While *Chandala* stages film clips and demonstrates the ways in which caste-based stratification impacts film spectatorship, the films, *Janani's Juliet* and *Natchathiram nagargiradhu*, embed theatre and theatre-making. I argue that by incorporating references to real incidents within the fictional frame of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Chandala* performs postmemories of caste-based violence, and by staging real and fictional representations of Indianostrum devising a play about caste, *Janani's Juliet* and *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* (*Natchathiram* henceforth) contribute to the transmission of these postmemories. By citing real and fictionalized incidents of caste-based violence, this transmedial collection of a performance and two films perform acts of mourning by remembering those who died as a result of such violence, implicating audiences as witnesses to the crimes of the brahmanical state and its institutions, and interrogating those individuals and institutions that uphold the caste hierarchy and result in the continuation of caste-based violence and murders.

By including folk forms of performance that are performed by Dalit and caste-oppressed communities, *Chandala*, *Janani's Juliet*, and *Natchathiram*, interrogate the exclusion of these forms from mainstream avenues of performance, enabling certain local forms of performance to access their cultural capital. While folk forms of performance are removed from their local context, they are not included uncritically, and *Chandala* and *Natchathiram* include enactments that expose the conditions of performance and performers, or in Brahma Prakash's coinage, their

"cultural labor" (Prakash). The embedding of film within *Chandala* and of theatre within *Janani's Juliet* and *Natchathiram* enables audiences to perceive the affective relationship within performers, within spectators, and between performers and spectators of theatre and film as they deal with a topic as divisive as caste. Exhibiting both continuity and contradiction, the intermediality of the three performances and films demonstrates a blurring of boundaries and a collation of categories that is simultaneously a characteristic of postmemorial acts of transmission and that of political performance practices in India.

Postmemory and the Cyclic Violence of Caste-Based Murders

In Marianne Hirsch's conception, postmemorial work "strives to reactivate and reembody more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression" to explain structures of oppression to those who are removed and less directly affected by them (Hirsch 111). Postmemory denotes "acts of transmission" of someone else's memories, and are representations of memories inherited by the descendants of those who witnessed or survived genocide, violence, and collective trauma. As "traumatic recall at a generational remove," postmemory is mediated by "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" in order to make sense of traumatic experiences that "defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension" (107). Representations of postmemory are shaped by inheritors' sense of responsibility, a need to repair, and the knowledge that many people in the same situation as them did not survive the traumatic events of the past.

Recollections re-embodied in performances of postmemory are mediated by "a shared archive of stories and images that inflect the transmission of individual and familial

remembrance" (Hirsch114). These stories and images are drawn from the world of the performers and enable them to narrate traumatic experiences to others. In *Chandala*, the performers of Indianostrum employ Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as a frame of reference in order to narrate the story of Jack and Janani, an intercaste couple whose love story is made impossible by the caste-based conflict between their families. Shakespeare's widely known narrative framework enables the performers of Indianostrum to embed stories devised from real experiences of caste-based violence into the narrative, enabling different kinds of audiences who are unaware, oblivious, or in denial of the violence of caste to perceive and understand its workings. In a metanarrativistic act of postmemorial transmission, the films, *Janani's Juliet* and *Natchathiram* embed real and fictional representations of the theatre group Indianostrum as they devise a performance that addresses caste-based violence, enabling different kinds of audiences to witness stories of caste in a new format.

Indianostrum's performance *Chandala* and Pankaj Rishi Kumar's documentary film *Janani's Juliet* center a particular incident of caste-based murder – the violence faced by Kausalya and Shankar in Udumalpet, Tamil Nadu. On 12 March 2016, Kausalya and Shankar, a couple who were in an intercaste marriage, were attacked while they were shopping in Udumalpet by six men hired by Kausalya's family. Shankar was Dalit and Kausalya had eloped with him against her family's wishes. Shankar was killed but Kausalya survived the attack and went on to sue her parents for the hate crime in the Tirupur Sessions Court.

On December 12, 2017, Kausalya's father along with five others were sentenced to death, two of the group were given life imprisonment, and Kausalya's mother and uncle were acquitted. Kausalya appealed against the acquittal of her mother and uncle in the Madras High Court. On June 22, 2020, the Madras High Court reversed the previous judgment, acquitted Kausalya's

father, mother, and uncle, reduced the death penalty of five others to life imprisonment, and acquitted those who had received life imprisonment for lack of evidence. The CCTV footage that had captured the attack and that was presented as evidence of the crime along with Kausalya's statement were found inadequate proof of her father, mother, and uncle's involvement in the conspiracy to murder the couple.

Kausalya attributes the reversed judgment in the High Court to the state's negligence in pursuing the case (Shaji). The judgment of the High Court was forwarded to the Supreme Court in 2020 but the case is still pending. Kausalya has become an anti-caste activist and frequently gives speeches and interviews about her experiences and the violence of caste. She runs a foundation – the Shankar Social Justice Trust – that helps intercaste couples and those who are affected by caste-based violence, and has helped many women from attacks by their own families. She is also an entrepreneur, and opened a beauty salon, Zha, in Vellalur, Coimbatore in 2022, since her previous government job did not support her anti-caste activism (Balakrishnan).

The denial of justice to Kausalya is not an exceptional case but one instance in the systemic problem of what is widely known as "honor killings." Honor killings refer to instances of violence, with an intent to murder, against people who do not conform to normative heterosexual relationships, exhibit gender nonconforming behavior, or decide to choose a partner against the wishes of their families. In this chapter, I prefer to use the term "caste-based murders" instead of "honor killings" for these incidents because the term "honor killing" emphasizes the notion of honor in caste-based murders, replicating ideas of brahmanical patriarchy. In addition, violence and murder that is perpetrated by individuals, couples, or groups of people because of the transgression of the social conventions related to family and community may concern gender, religion, caste, class, language, ethnicity, nationality, and numerous other

factors. Couples who are in inter-religious relationships and marriages face increasing levels of policing and public violence from right-wing mobs in the present. In this chapter, I limit my discussion to the representation of caste-based murder and violence in particular performances and films in India.

A report entitled *Crimes in the Name of Honour: A National Shame*, published by the Dalit Human Rights Defenders Network (DHRDNet), in collaboration with the National Council for Women Leaders (NCWL), analyzes twenty-four cases of caste-based murders among intercaste couples from eight Indian states – Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh – between 2012 and 2021. A majority of the murders were of Dalit men and were committed by family members of the woman in the intercaste couple who belonged to a dominant caste community. In addition, the murder was preceded by violence and intimidation by the woman's family in which they attempted to force her to leave her partner, abducted and imprisoned her, and prevented her from attending school, college, or university. Women were also grievously injured or murdered by their own families. In most of the cases investigated, the intercaste couple were students or had received higher education and were exercising their right to choose their partners with the specific intent of opposing the caste system (Kumar and Subbiah 10). The transgression of caste boundaries by the dominant-caste woman, combined with the threat of upward social mobility of the oppressed-caste man, threatened dominant-caste families, leading them to violently sever the intercaste alliance.

As Sharmila Rege writes, women in India are subject to the controls of brahmanical patriarchy – the violent policing of women's sexuality due to the hierarchical organization of society based on caste. While women from dominant caste families face violent controls on their

sexuality and freedom, women from oppressed caste and Dalit families are perceived as sexually available by dominant caste people, and face rape, sexual assault, and public violence (Rege "Brahmanical" 103). Communities organized on the basis of caste seek to maintain their hold over property and assets, and this controlling of land and finances is encoded and perceived in terms of honor. Since dominant caste women are perceived as the bearers of "family honor," their decision to marry someone outside of their community is seen as a violation of family honor and caste pride (Paik 75). Thus, it is by restricting women's sexuality that caste boundaries are maintained and violently policed by dominant caste families. In many cases, the violence that intercaste couples face takes place in a public place and the perpetrators, most often the dominant caste woman's family members, publicly announce their involvement in the crime.

Most cases of violence upon intercaste couples are not reported since the perpetrators and victims of such violence often belong to the same family. When cases of caste-based murder reach local courts, caste-ordained networks, family connections, and the absence of legal provisions to address issues specific to caste-based violence on intercaste couples result in judgments that favor dominant-caste perpetrators of violence. The National Crime Records Bureau records 20 cases of "honor killings" or caste-based murders in 2019 and 1 each in 2018 and 2017. However, Evidence, an NGO, reported that there were 195 incidents of "honor killings" in Tamil Nadu itself between 2016-2020, and *India Today* reports over 145 caste-based murders between 2017 and 2019 in India, with over 50 in Jharkhand between these years (Sharma, Press Trust). The fluctuations between reported cases and the indeterminacy of actual numbers of caste-based murders reveals the large number of cases that go unreported.

Despite the prevalence of caste-based murders, India does not have a specific law dedicated to addressing caste-based murders and other crimes associated with "honor," and such

crimes are tried as murder cases or under the SC/ST or non-SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Acts (Sections 300 and 302 of the Indian Penal Code). In 2012, "The Prohibition of Interference with the Freedom of Matrimonial Alliances Bill" was drafted on recommendations from the Law Commission of India, but the bill has not been presented in Parliament. In 2019, the State Government of Rajasthan introduced the "Rajasthan Prohibition of Interference with the Freedom of Matrimonial Alliances in the Name of Honour and Tradition Act," which was passed by the Rajasthan assembly. However, the bill's provisions apply to intercaste and interfaith couples who are married and does not address the rights of unmarried couples. It also does not explain the usage of "tradition." The bill also advocates the death penalty for violators while keeping fines low, and does not include provisions for legal aid, support, or counseling for survivors of caste-based violence (Kumar and Subbiah 8).

It is this paradoxical characteristic of overwhelming presence but perceptive absence in the eyes of the law, other institutions of the state, and individuals blinded by caste privilege that Indianostrum seeks to interrogate through their performance of postmemory in *Chandala*. By performing enactments devised from Kausalya's testimony in performance, the performers of Indianostrum re-embody her traumatic memories of caste violence. Through *Chandala*, real and fictionalized postmemories of caste-based violence and survival reach the films *Janani's Juliet* and *Natchathiram*, transforming into new, and often contradictory, interpretations. Along with enactments derived from other incidents of caste violence, Kausalya's testimony is fictionalized and placed within well-known narrative frameworks, widely used tropes, and generic conventions of theatre and film in India. This enables audiences removed from or ignorant of the realities of caste to perceive its real and contemporary nature and fathom the consequences of the brahmanical state's negligence of the issue of caste-based violence.

Hirsch's concept of postmemory is based on second-generation fictional representations of experiences of the Holocaust created by the descendants of survivors and witnesses of this specific collective trauma in history. To apply this conceptual framework to caste-based violence in India, certain qualifications need to be made. First, postmemories of caste-based violence address not historical trauma but a real and contemporary form of cyclic violence that is invisibilized, denied, unacknowledged, or forgotten by caste-based society and the brahmanical state and its institutions. Second, the violence of caste defies narrative construction similar to other incidents of historical trauma, but this void also stems from the devaluation of testimony and evidence of caste-based violence by institutions shaped by the caste-privileged. Postmemories of caste-based violence attempt to resist the official forgetting of caste by highlighting contemporary caste-based crimes supported by the state and reverse the invisibilization of caste in spaces and interactions that are characterized by the obfuscation and invisibility of social repression. The real incidents of caste-based violence referenced within *Chandala*, *Janani's Juliet*, and *Natchathiram* occur in the present and are rendered invisible or implausible by the brahmanical patriarchal state and caste privileged individuals who deny the contemporaneity of caste and justice to survivors of caste-based violence.

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss specificities of the interactions between narratives and forms in *Chandala*, *Janani's Juliet*, and *Natchathiram nagargiradhu*. First, I discuss the evolution of stories and combination of forms across these three performances and films that reference real incidents of caste-based violence. Next, I examine the ways in which intermediality enables *Chandala*, *Janani's Juliet*, and *Natchathiram* to perform acts of postmemorial transmission. Particularly, I examine the use of testimony and CCTV footage, the

embedding of folk forms of performance, and the reciprocal incorporation of theatre and film in this transmedial collection of narratives and forms.

Continuities and Contradictions: The Evolution of the Story

An increase in the number of caste-based murders, particularly the viral CCTV footage of the public violence on the intercaste couple Shankar and Kausalya in Udumalpet, Tamil Nadu, in 2018, inspired Koumarane Valvane and the collaborators of Indianostrum Theatre to create a play about intercaste relationships and caste-based murders when they were commissioned by *Le festivals des francophonies en Limousin* in France to adapt one of Shakespeare's plays. In an interview with me in June 2023, Valvane said that his previous experiences of living in France had opened his eyes to the reality of exclusion. In France he was a "black man," and without this experience, he would never be able to understand the reality of exclusion. This experience led him to create a theatrical production that would interrogate his own biases related to caste (Valvane).

The collaborators were brought together by Valvane – he invited actors from all over India and held workshops to assemble the cast. As is usual for most of Indianostrum's performances, the collaborators for *Chandala* came from various caste, class, linguistic, regional, and religious backgrounds. While listening to an interview with Kausalya, Valvane realized that her story resonated with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Valvane saw the connection between Shankar, Kausalya's lover, and Romeo – both of them had transformed into "angels" because of the love they felt for their partners. Another similarity that struck him was Kausalya's mother's reaction – as in *Romeo and Juliet*, Kausalya's mother, like Juliet's, was a patriarchal agent and enforced restrictions on who Kausalya could marry, while her father was disapprovingly silent

(Valvane). These similarities led Valvane to select *Romeo and Juliet* as a framework that was widely known and that would enable Indianostrum to re-create the story of an intercaste couple, Janani and Jack, based on Kausalya and Shankar's experiences.

Chandala follows the plot of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, with some modifications designed to Indianize the play and address the caste system. While Shakespeare attributes the hatred that existed between the Montague and the Capulet families to an "ancient grudge," in *Chandala* it is the caste system that the couple has to fight against (Shakespeare). Jack in *Chandala*, draws on Romeo, and, along with his friends Mas and Gana, all of whom are funeral dancers, also embodies the discrimination faced by Dalit men. In the play, Jack and Janani meet in a cinema hall, kiss unexpectedly, and fall in love. Aided by Janani's *aayah* (nurse) and Jack's *mama* (uncle) they elope. Following his marriage with Janani, Jack and his friends get into a conflict over seats in a cinema hall, during which Mas is killed by Deena, Janani's cousin. Distraught, Jack attempts suicide and, after being revived by the *aayah*, avenges Mas's death by killing Deena. The plot of *Chandala* completely deviates from *Romeo and Juliet* after this point and draws from Kausalya's story. When Janani's parents find out about her marriage with Jack and that *aayah* had helped them, they send hired goons to kill the couple in their home, and *aayah* mysteriously falls and dies in their garden. The play ends with Jack's *mama*, dressed as the goddess Kali for a performance of *karinkaliyattam*, discovering the massacre.

In their process of adaptation, Indianostrum attempted to find equivalents for the characters in *Romeo and Juliet* and included the play's emblematic scenes in their performance. Valvane says that audiences would be waiting for scenes such as the ball where Romeo and Juliet first meet, the balcony scene, and the death scene at the end, and these were part of our "common collective consciousness" (Valvane). Thus, it was necessary to include them and adapt

them in an interesting way. Characters such as the friar who helps Romeo and Juliet's nurse are transposed into *Chandala* as Jack's *mama* and Janani's *aayah*. The character of Kama, the cupid-like character who acts as a *sutradhar* in sections of *Chandala*, was Indianostrum's innovative addition to the narrative. Valvane says that Shakespeare had adapted the story of *Romeo and Juliet* from an Italian source putting his own spin on the narrative.[1] Similarly, Indianostrum had added Kama to add a measure of lightness and magic to an otherwise tragic story. Through Kama, the performers wanted to emphasize that love is not a Western concept, and questioned the Hindutva brigade's perception that love is irreconcilable with "Indian culture" to justify their attacks on interfaith and intercaste couples.

Valvane says that the women in the group were dissatisfied with the incomplete exploration of Juliet in Shakespeare's play. In order to understand her better, Indianostrum traveled to meet Kausalya and hear about her experiences from her directly. The performers embodied Kausalya's testimony within their performance to create Janani's narrative within the play. Pankaj Rishi Kumar's documentary film *Janani's Juliet* records this process of the actors of Indianostrum theatre devising their play based on Kausalya's testimony and experiences. The documentary follows the theatre group as the director and performers attempt to understand Janani by meeting Kausalya, listening to her experiences, and re-performing her experiences as Janani's story. Processes of devising parts of the play are intercut with performers listening to Kausalya narrating her own experiences. Kausalya's testimony is overlaid with the embodiment of these events on stage, revealing the way in which Kausalya's story lives on through Indianostrum's performance. In revealing how Indianostrum adapts Kausalya's story through theatre, *Janani's Juliet* ultimately centers Kausalya as the protagonist of Indianostrum's play and, through her testimony, shows audiences how the caste system impacts the freedom of

women, irrespective of caste, and directly results in the furtherance of oppressive ideas and, ultimately, murder.

Pa. Ranjith's 2022 Tamil film *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* builds on this narrative. The film is a fictionalized depiction of a fictionalized Indianostrum devising a musical theatre piece on the politics of love. It is filmed on location at Indianostrum theatre in Pondicherry, and many characters in the film visibly resemble many of the participants of Indianostrum's performance of *Chandala* in 2018. The fictional Indianostrum is an ensemble of diverse characters, many of whom are in non-heteronormative and non-traditional relationships, depicting gay, lesbian, transgender, intercaste, and interfaith love. The film centers on Rene, a strong, outspoken, and fearless woman, who is from a caste-oppressed community, and reveals the caste-based discrimination that she faces in different kinds of interpersonal relationships. Despite being part of a progressive theatre group in Pondicherry, some members of the group have internalized caste-based biases, which are revealed and interrogated throughout the film. Towards the end, a performance of the play addressing caste-based violence that the fictional Indianostrum creates is violently disrupted by a right-wing agent, igniting a fight between the group and the agent. The film ends with members of the fictional Indianostrum recuperating on the beach after the attack, and suddenly noticing a star shooting across the sky.

While the play-within-the-film that the fictionalized Indianostrum performs looks very different from *Chandala*, the real Indianostrum's play, a few tropes make their way into the fictionalized play as well. In our interview, Valvane also mentions that *Chandala* was one of the toughest projects he had been involved with so far, and in the process of working on a play about caste with a diverse group of actors, some of the actors had to deal with their own internalized biases. Taken together, *Chandala*, *Janani's Juliet*, and *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* form a

transmedial collection of stories that explore different facets of caste in contemporary life. In other words, the films and performances evoke and converse with each other, such that the real experiences that they address move into newer medial frameworks to give rise to newer interpretations and stories that address other experiences of caste-based violence. By enabling these transformed stories to reach different kinds of local and non-local audiences by traveling, circulating in festival circuits, and via OTT platforms, the performances and films intervene into the invisibilization of caste-based violence and discrimination by individuals and institutions, such as the state, law enforcement, the judicial system, and different forms of media.

Transforming across Borders: Intermediality in Form

In "But We Will Not Give Up the Categories! (De)valuing Categories in South Asian Performance Traditions," Brahma Prakash argues for the need to decolonize the study of South Asian theatre and performance cultures by interrogating strategies of formal categorization, such as dance, music, and theatre, and temporal categorization, such as modern, contemporary, and traditional, in order to correct the devaluation and abjection of certain kinds of South Asian performances. Prakash writes, "naming and categorization are some basic ideas through which others are pushed aside" ("But We"). Examining the performances of Kabir Kala Manch and Samta Kala Manch, Prakash argues for a framework that can capture the interconnectedness and fluidity of genres and forms in their performances. By mixing ethnography and theatre in devising performances, and mixing song, dance, theatre, and comedic skits in performances, the performers of Kabir Kala Manch blur boundaries between genres, moving from oral to textual to digital forms. Prakash sees this strategy of the mixing of genres and forms as a strategy of radical performances that "move through the channels created by the blurring of these categories to find

a wider audience and maintain their own survival" ("But We").

While *Chandala*, *Janani's Juliet*, and *Natchathiram* are performed in very different kinds of circles than the radical performances of Kabir Kala Manch and Samta Kala Manch, they also exhibit the kind of blurring of genres and forms that Prakash describes. Similar to other kinds of political performances in India, Indianostrum employs intermediality to raise awareness of the violence of caste to audiences in India and abroad. Intermediality enables Indianostrum to bring a collection of stories and embodied experiences of caste-based violence into the purview of different kinds of audiences, and through Indianostrum's performance *Chandala* these stories and forms enter into film, transforming as per generic conventions and resulting in a significantly wider circulation of narratives of caste.

In addition to the connectivity across media that *Chandala*, *Janani's Juliet*, and *Natchathiram* exhibit, all three also incorporate a number of different forms of artistic expression. *Chandala* combines forms on several different levels. At the level of narrative, the performance combines testimonies and real incidents of caste-based violence with the narrative framework of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The performance also weaves in folk forms of performance, music, and puppetry, such as *karinkaliyattam*, *dappankuthu* or funeral dancing, the playing of the *parai* drum, and *kattabommalattam* puppets. Film and film spectatorship occupy a central place in *Chandala* as an intermediary space where people from different social backgrounds interact with each other. Consequently, the performance space incorporates a large movie screen that enables performers to interrogate caste relations that stratify a cinema hall. The scenes that are set in the cinema hall are played before the imposing screen playing clips from advertisements, gory warnings against smoking that usually appear before films begins, clips from adult films featuring Shakeela, and trailers from blockbusters starring Rajnikant.

The combination of forms in *Chandala* also reflects the rehearsal space that the performance was created within. Located in Pondicherry, Indianostrum theatre was founded by Koumarane Valvane in 2007 for the purpose of reviving the folk and traditional artforms of Tamil Nadu, particularly *therukoothu* performance and *kattabommalattam* puppetry, by creating collaborative performances with folk artists and urban actors. While collaborators come and go, the group rehearses and performs within the Indianostrum theatre, a converted colonial cinema hall – the Pathe Cina Familia, which faces the beach and is owned by the Our Lady of Angels Church. On Valvane's request Reverend Father Michael John agreed to rent the space for Indianostrum's rehearsals and performances in 2010.

Speaking about the transformations he made to turn a colonial-era cinema hall into a theatre space, Valvane says, "I had to completely renovate this old theatre; close the sides, build a kitchen, office space and toilets. Where the screen existed, I built a gallery for audience and on the opposite side, the stage was built. Today, anyone can stage their plays here free of cost," (qtd. in Anantharam 3). Historically, buildings built for theatrical performances were converted into cinema halls during the advent of film in India. The story of Indianostrum's existence reverses this narrative, and besides devising and performing their own plays, the group also hosts performers of folk forms, puppet shows, music, dance, and storytelling performances in their space. The intermediality of Indianostrum's performance *Chandala* reflects the variety of forms that collaborators encounter at the performance space in addition to their connection to the cinema hall.

Conversely, the films – *Janani's Juliet* and *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* – embed theatre, specifically the theatre group Indianostrum, and the rehearsal and performance space of Indianostrum theatre within their narratives. Both films are shot in the cinema-hall-turned

rehearsal and performance space that Indianostrum theatre is located in, and both films explore the ways in which theatre artists and theatre as a medium can address the politics of caste and love. Concerning intermediality, a number of elements from Indianostrum's performance *Chandala*, that inspired both these films, makes their way into the film and are incorporated in new ways, such as *kattabommalattam* puppets in *Janani's Juliet*, and the inclusion of an *oppari* by Muthammal in *Natchathiram*. Performances that are passed down through generations and historically performed by marginalized communities constitute an embodied repertoire of memories of the community's experiences. By staging folk forms within their performance *Chandala*, Indianostrum performs these experiences as postmemory.

Testimony and video recordings that provide evidence of caste-based atrocities are important devices that resist the forgetting of caste-based violence, and consequently, all three texts – *Chandala*, *Janani's Juliet*, and *Natchathiram* – incorporate testimony and CCTV footage of casteist violence. *Chandala* and *Janani's Juliet* focus on Kausalya and Shankar's story while *Natchathiram* includes the testimony of multiple survivors, along with a montage of CCTV footage of caste-based murders, emphasizing the enormity of caste violence. Photographic evidence and the testimony of survivors of collective trauma are important devices of postmemorial fiction within Hirsch's conceptual framework, and the three performances and films interlace survivor's testimony and photographic evidence in the form of CCTV footage, with various other narratives and forms to create intermedial performances of postmemory.

Hirsch writes that fictional representations of postmemory are characterized by formal hybridity, and incorporate a mixture of media that elicit multiple responses and an "uneasy oscillation" between reading and looking, creating a "resistant textuality" for the viewer (106). The intermediality arising from the interaction between narratives and forms within each of the

texts – *Chandala*, *Janani's Juliet*, and *Natchathiram* – creates this sort of a "resistant textuality," or dissonance enabling audiences to understand the way in which caste structures everyday life, relationships, social and performance practices, and existence in caste-based societies.

Through the interaction between forms – juxtaposition, collision, disruption, and resonance – *Chandala*, *Janani's Juliet*, and *Natchathiram* perform postmemories of caste-based violence as a gesture of mourning for those who died as a result of such violence and to interrogate the official forgetting of caste by institutions of the state. In the remainder of this chapter, I examine the interaction between different media in *Chandala*, *Janani's Juliet*, and *Natchathiram nagargiradhu*. Particularly, I discuss the combining of testimony and CCTV footage, the inclusion of folk forms of performance, and the reciprocal incorporation of theatre and film in the three texts to look at the ways in which they perform gestures of mourning that interrogate the absence of caste in discourse and in representation.

Creating Audience-Witnesses Through Testimony and CCTV Footage

Sharmila Rege points to the importance of *testimonios* or narratives of Dalit women's lives, and writes:

> The entire debate on whether the hateful past should be written and brought into the present suggests the complex relationship between official forgetting, memory and identity. Dalit life narratives cannot be accused of bringing an undesired past into the present, for they are one of the most direct and accessible ways in which the silence and misrepresentation of Dalits has been countered. My argument here is that Dalit life narratives are in fact *testimonios*, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official

> forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, struggles, and resistance. (Rege "Dalit Women's" 132)

Thus, the idea that Dalit testimony brings a "hateful past" into the present is a symptom of the "official forgetting" of caste, and Dalit testimony is one of the ways in which this can be countered. The specific interplay of caste and gender within Dalit women's *testimonios* "inscribes into history" overlooked aspects of the discrimination that Dalit women face within institutions and practices that claim to be publicly accessible but are marked with an intersection of caste and gender-based restrictions (134).

The traumatic memories of caste-based violence and discrimination expressed via testimony in Dalit life narratives become performances of postmemory by someone else reading, listening to, or witnessing them, and when they are embodied performatively in fictional representation. The creation of audience-witnesses in such performances directly resists the devaluation of Dalit testimony and the ignorance of issues that impact Dalit lives by the state, in public institutions, and in modes of representation. Both *Chandala* and *Janani's Juliet* include Kausalya's testimony and incorporate this in different ways. In *Chandala*, Kausalya and Shankar's story is first employed as a warning from the upper-caste Deena, Shakti's brother and Janani's cousin, to Jack, a Dalit man who had expressed an interest in her. In the next scene, Mas asks Gana about the incident, and Gana shows him the viral CCTV footage of the attack on Kausalya and Shankar. The CCTV footage is projected on the screen and a disembodied voice (of actor Anjana Balaji who plays Janani) contextualizes the video by narrating the violence that Shankar and Kausalya faced, in English using the first-person voice. Kausalya's "voice" returns a second time at the end of the performance. After Jack's *mama* discovers the massacre inside Jack and Janani's home, an image of Kausalya is projected on the screen as her "voice" narrates

the ways in which Kausalya survived her family's horrific attempt to murder her, the high court's acquittal of her mother, and the humiliation and hardships she has been facing in her struggles for justice.

Foregrounding Kausalya's testimony by translating her words, her picture, and the CCTV footage of the violence that she faced along with Shankar, *Chandala* draws connections between the fictionalized story of Jack and Janani and Kausalya's testimony, attesting to the real and contemporary nature of caste-based violence. The way in which Deena employs Kausalya and Shankar's story as a warning for justifying his attacks on Dalit people in Villupuram exposes caste-based violence as a structural problem of entrenched casteist discrimination between communities rather than an isolated case of violence within the family.

Towards the beginning of the play, when Shakti and Jack are speaking on the phone, Deena snatches the phone away from her and asks him where he lives. When Jack says he lives in Ambedkar colony, Deena humiliates him for daring to call Shakti, saying: "If you want to succeed, work hard. Don't try to get ahead by seducing a girl from our community…. You heard what happened to Shankar and Kausalya? The same will happen to you" (*Chandala* 10:20). Deena's discriminatory attitude reveals real consequences of the repeated denial of justice to survivors of caste-based violence. The absence of any real repercussions for perpetrators of caste-based violence leads to the recurrence of public acts of violence against intercaste couples, caste-oppressed people, and communities.

At the end of her testimony included in the play *Chandala*, Kausalya's "voice" says: "Some ask me, "how could you condemn your own mother?" I say, "What about her? How could she send killers to kill her own daughter?" She keeps talking about honor, caste, family, but she never wanted to listen to my heart" (Part 2, 1:05:00). In Hirsch's conceptualization of

postmemory, tropes of maternal abandonment and maternal recognition become a significant focus in postmemorial fiction about the Holocaust, and this is a way in which writers and artists enable audiences to understand inexplicable collective trauma through the lens of family. The reference to the mother-daughter relationship in Kausalya's testimony performs a similar function but in a disjunctive way. Audiences listening to Kausalya's testimony embedded within the performance *Chandala* become cognizant of the deep-rooted nature of casteism and brahmanical patriarchy that fractures the relationship between a mother and her daughter, leading to, in Hirsch's terminology, maternal abandonment. Through Kausalya's testimony, *Chandala* exposes the upper-caste mother as an agent of brahmanical patriarchy who would rather kill her daughter than allow her to marry a Dalit man.

Janani's Juliet delves deeper into Kausalya's experiences and documents the way in which Kausalya's testimony is adapted into performance by members of Indianostrum. Near the beginning of the film, an actor says that Juliet's subjectivity is hardly explored in *Romeo and Juliet*. It is precisely to understand Janani that the theatre group embarks on a journey to meet the real-life Juliet. Kausalya narrates her experiences of being in love with Shankar, of the freedom she felt outside her upper-caste home, of the harassment she faced from her parents once she had married Shankar, and finally of the violence she faced at their hands. These experiences are reperformed within the play by the performers who embody Janani onstage, and *Janani's Juliet* portrays the reality embedded within these dramatizations.

Within *Janani's Juliet*, Kausalya's extended testimony reveals the ways in which "brahmanical patriarchy is structurally integrated into the caste system" (Rege *Writing* 73). Kausalya speaks about the restrictions that she faced as an upper-caste woman and the rules and expectations that married women of her community had to follow. She says that her parents

made the choice to kill her along with Shankar because if she was pregnant the purity of their caste would be lost. Thus, the purity of caste is based on women's behavior and women's oppression is imbricated within casteist oppression. In his writings on women, Ambedkar similarly emphasized that "the absence of intermarriage or endogamy is the one characteristic that can be called the essence of castes" and understanding the ways in which endogamy is used to maintain caste hierarchy is "the key to understanding the caste system" (qtd. in Rege 58). Kausalya's experience confirms Ambedkar's thesis. It is Kausalya's act of intercaste marriage that threatened the preservation of the caste hierarchy and that led her parents to attempt to end their own daughter's existence.

Kausalya's testimony narrates how her own family humiliates her because she transgressed the boundaries of caste. In one instance, *Janani's Juliet* overlays Kausalya's voice narrating an incident at a police station, in which her mother had asked her to return everything that they had given to her including the clothes and slippers she was wearing, with the dramatization of this incident in a staged rehearsal of the scene. While narrating the incident in *Janani's Juliet,* Kausalya says that her mother even bit and tore her slippers before leaving with all her clothes.

In her testimony included in the DHRDNet report, Kausalya narrates this experience including additional details.

> In the police station, my family surrounded me and said, "Aren't you ashamed to bear the Thali tied by a Pallar guy? You better come with us or we will kill you." One of my aunts said, "You married a boy from a lower caste because you didn't want any boy from our own caste, right? Now remove all the gold jewellery we gave you." I removed my chain, bangles, anklets, sari and slippers, and changed into the clothes that my husband had

> bought for me. In a room at the police station where I was removing the clothes given by my family, I sensed the depravity of caste and the insult I had to undergo because of it. (Kumar and Subiah 28)

Kausalya's aunts ask her to return her gold jewelry since her act of marrying Shankar instead of agreeing to an endogamous marriage ostracizes her from her family and her caste. Her mother's demand that she returns all her clothes, including her slippers, echoes the numerous instances of public stripping of Dalit men and women who transgress the boundaries of caste. By demanding that she return her clothes right there at the police station, Kausalya's mother demands the public stripping of her own daughter, sexualizing her. Even though Kausalya has a private room in the police station in which she can change into another set of clothes, she senses the humiliation that her family directs at her on account of being a Dalit man's wife.

The dramatization of this incident in *Chandala* emphasizes the correlation between caste and sexuality, and the deep-rooted nature of caste that can make fathers and mothers humiliate and murder their own daughters. Towards the end of the play, Janani's parents visit her to try to convince her to return home with them. When she refuses, goes inside her house, and shuts the door, Janani's parents get angry and start berating her. Her mom asks, "How much do you charge per hour? Are you sleeping with Jack only or also with his friends?" implying that by marrying Jack and becoming a Dalit woman, Janani's sexuality is now publicly accessible (Part 2, 47:21). She demands that Janani return all her clothes, and one-by-one Janani throws out all her garments and slippers from inside the house. Her mother collects all her clothes and announces, "You are a slut now!" before storming off the stage. Janani peeps out from behind the door of her house and resolutely exclaims, "No!" (Part 2, 49:52). By implying that Janani has

become a sex worker by marrying Shankar, the mother figure in *Chandala* reveals the discriminatory dominant-caste correlation between Dalit women and compulsory sexualization.

In *Janani's Juliet*, the correlation between Kausalya's testimony and the scene clarifies the casteism embedded in Kausalya's mother's demand that she returns her clothes, enabling the audience to understand why the experience was humiliating for Kausalya. While the performance *Chandala* embodies this integration of caste and gender-based violence in dialogues and in Janani's experiences, *Janani's Juliet* frames the story in relation to Kausalya's theoretical speculations on the oppression that she faced, clarifying the intersectionality of caste and gender in Kausalya's experiences, and showing how women's oppression is a consequence of the caste system.

The inclusion of the CCTV footage of the attack along with Kausalya's testimony within the play *Chandala* and the film *Janani's Juliet* implicates audiences as witnesses to Shankar's murder. While the footage of the murder is unclear, it acquires significance because caste-based violence premeditated by families of the targeted individuals is rarely acknowledged and courts frequently side with the dominant-caste perpetrators of violence. The CCTV footage is contextualized with Kausalya's testimony of the evidence, intensifying its truth claims, and the pixelated nature of the image, a formal convention of hidden cameras that claims to capture reality, adds to its credibility.

The photograph that reveals the contradictions of present versions of the past is an important instrument of postmemorial recovery in Hirsch's conception. In *Chandala* and *Janani's Juliet*, the CCTV footage of the attack on Kausalya and Shankar functions as such a device – a punctum that reanimates the past and reveals the contradictions of official versions of history. Even though the CCTV footage was dismissed as inadequate evidence to prove

Kausalya's parents' involvement in the murder in the Madras High Court, in the play and the film it cements the reality of Kausalya's story placed in the context of her testimony and its dramatization. Despite its connection to reality, the CCTV footage is unclear, such that Kausalya, Shankar, and the murderers cannot be identified or distinguished from the rest of the crowd. Without the use of a distinguishing strategy, such as emphasizing Shankar's murder using an indicative circle, the act of violence cannot be interpreted (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1: The circle distinguishes the murder from the surrounding chaos. CCTV footage of the attack on Shankar and Kausalya. Screenshot from *Janani's Juliet*, 2019.

It is the embodiment of Kausalya's testimony through the performance *Chandala*, and the reinvestment of the narrative with Kausalya's testimony through *Janani's Juliet*, that re-codes it as reality and intensifies its truth claim, in opposition to the state's dismissal of the footage as evidence of casteist violence. Placed within the narratives of *Chandala* and *Janani's Juliet*, the archived video uncovers the incommensurability of the court's decision and what happened, revealing the state's complicity with brahmanical patriarchy.

Natchathiram shifts the focus from Kausalya and Shankar's story to address caste-based violence and discrimination as a systemic problem, its working within everyday practices and spaces, and its representation through theatre. The film also includes a montage of CCTV footage of caste-based violence, one of which is the video of the attack on Shankar and Kausalya. The montaged collection of CCTV footage is intercut with a rehearsal of the fictional Indianostrum's play-within-the-film. In the rehearsal, performers listen to testimonies of survivors of caste-based violence along with an *oppari* performance by Muthammal – a performance I will discuss in greater detail in the following section. The performers of the fictional Indianostrum draw inspiration from this intermedial combination of testimony, CCTV footage, and *oppari*, to devise a scene about the violence of caste within their play. Many of the performers, particularly Arjun who had displayed internalized caste biases earlier in the film, are visibly shaken by these intermedial practices of storytelling within the fictional framework of the film.

In response to the stories of caste-based violence that they hear, the performers of the fictional Indianostrum within *Natchathiram* devise a scene that portrays violence on Dalit bodies. The stage is lit in red, and a multitude of puppets hang on trees in the background resembling lynched bodies, as a long line of people await execution by upper-caste men (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2: The fictional Indianostrum devising the scene based on testimonies and *oppari*. Screenshot from *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* (1:44:25), 2022.

When Rene's character within the play is about to be executed, Arjun, still affected by the testimonies and *oppari* performance, interrupts the enactment of violence on Rene's character, tearfully asking: "why should I kill my own daughter?" prompting a discussion on the affect created by the portrayal of caste-based violence (1:44:49). While many in the group argue that "honor killings" are a reality and portraying a transformation in the dominant-caste-father character in their play would only give the audience "false hope," others think that a change of heart in the father character within their play could perhaps prompt a similar response from caste-privileged members of their audience. Based on Rene's suggestion, the group ultimately decides to show a transformation in one dominant-caste character – the father.

This staged rehearsal questions and contradicts the portrayal of dominant-caste violence on Dalit people in *Chandala*. Deriving their narrative from Kausalya's experiences and *Romeo and Juliet*, in *Chandala*, the father character does not change and, despite the fact that Kausalya survived her parents' attack, both Jack and Janani are murdered by goons hired by Janani's

father. *Janani's Juliet* shows the real Indianostrum having a debate about a similar issue – "Should Jack and Janani be alive at the end of the play?" they debate.[2] While the transformation of the father character in the play within *Natchathiram* parallels the transformation of the dominant-caste performer Arjun, there is no such hope of transformation in *Chandala* and *Janani's Juliet*. The generic conventions of Tamil cinema that often evoke a strong identification with protagonists require the portrayal of a transformation within dominant-caste characters, while theatre and documentary film's portrayal of caste-based violence aims to reflect reality and interrogate the forgetting of narratives of caste-based violence while distancing the viewer using an intermedial form. There is both continuity and disjunction in the transformation of images and narratives of caste-based violence from testimony to real theatre to documentary film and, finally, to fictional theatre embedded within fictional film.

In "Performativity: Public and Hidden Transcripts in the Play of *Reshma-Chuharmal*," Brahma Prakash analyzes performances of the heroic tale of Reshma, the daughter of a feudal landlord, who falls in love with Chuharmal, a Dalit man from the Dusadh caste, to foreground "the inherent contradictions of folk performances" (207). Different versions of this story are performed by different communities – while some versions end with the couple facing an *agni pariksha* (trial by fire) and the death of Reshma, in others Reshma and Chuharmal run away and get married or get caught and are killed by Reshma's family (Prakash "Performativity" 229). Since genre is connected to caste identity in caste-based society, different generic interpretations of the story put forward views that are in the interests of the performers, audience, and the particular context of the performance. The story of *Reshma-Chuharmal* carries a particularly strong affect, and performances by oppressed-caste communities have led to caste atrocities and caste wars in Bihar. By analyzing different reiterations of the story of *Reshma-Chuharmal*,

Prakash concludes that subaltern performances are full of contradictions of genre and identity, and that this is a performance strategy tied to questions of survival within an oppressive system. In folk performance, "cult images have some continuity" and images and narratives transform across time, genre and context of usage (239).

While the three interconnected texts – *Chandala, Janani's Juliet, and Natchathiram nagargiradhu* – exist in very different kinds of performance cultures in India, also crossing paths with some folk forms of performance, they exhibit contradictions and transformations across genre, similar to those in folk performances surrounding *Reshma-Chuharmal*, in their varying interpretations of stories of caste-based violence. As in *Reshma-Chuharmal*, the contradictions and transformations mythicize Kausalya- Shankar's story of intercaste love and caste-based violence, creating different kinds of interpretations and intermedial postmemorial fictions. Examined together, *Chandala, Janani's Juliet,* and *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* exhibit a continuity of images and forms in the use of testimony and CCTV footage but demonstrate different attitudes to the portrayal of caste-based violence. By incorporating survivors' testimony and CCTV footage of caste-based violence into theatre and film in different ways, the three texts perform postmemorial acts of transmission that emphasize the real and contemporary nature of caste, the cyclic nature of caste violence due to the absence of repercussions for perpetrators, the imbrication of caste and gender in the experience of women, and the workings of brahmanical patriarchy through the institutions of the state.

Staging Folk Forms of Performance

In keeping with their aims to revitalize local forms of performance, Indianostrum Theatre facilitates collaborations between local and urban artists from around India, and its performance

and rehearsal space hosts performances, interactions, workshops, and educational sessions with performers of folk forms. This collaborative endeavor is reflected in the polyphonic and intermedial inclusion of folk forms of performances in many of Indianostrum's own performances. *Chandala* incorporates several Dalit folk forms of performance, including *dappankuthu* (funeral dancing) and *karinkaliyattam*, a form of *theyyam* from northern Kerala, *gana* songs, the playing of the *parai* drum, and *kattabommalattam* puppets. Jack and his friends, Mas and Gana, are funeral dancers, and Gana is a singer of *gana* songs and plays the *parai* drum. Jack's mama is a dancer of *karinkaliyattam*, and *kattabommalattam* puppets make an appearance in Jack and Janani's lovemaking scene towards the end of the performance. These forms of performance are not included uncritically, but performers of *dappankuthu*, *gana* songs, and *karinkaliyattam* deliberate on the conditions of performing these forms. The *kattabommalattam* puppets are transformed into postmemorial artifacts symbolizing intercaste love in the way that they are incorporated into the performance, and make their way into the films *Janani's Juliet* and *Natchathiram* as well. In *Natchathiram*, performers listen to an *oppari* by Muthammal in a rehearsal session of the fictional Indianostrum.

Writing about different forms of folk performance, Brahma Prakash defines cultural labor as the "cultural expression of labouring bodies" (*Cultural* 16). In a caste-based society, caste structures practices, genres, characters, participants, songs, musical instruments, and numerous other aspects of performance, functioning as a cultural repertoire of practices. To interrogate the false separation of culture and labor in research and public opinion, Prakash defines cultural labor as "the affective relationship between culture and labour" (8). Prakash writes that it is the brahmanical disgust for manual labor that has led to the disparagement of performances that are performed by laboring classes in India, resulting in the marginalization, humiliation, and

exploitation that subaltern performers face. For folk performers, who are bound in conditions of compulsory labour tied to their survival, performances of cultural labour may be alienating, oppressive, and exhaustive. Yet, oppressive conditions and symbols can be transformed by subaltern communities for an "emancipatory project," as in the performances of Gaddar,[3] the activist performer from Telangana, and his group Jana Natya Mandali (24).

The staging of folk forms within *Chandala* removes folk forms from the context of their performance, but places them within discussions of cultural labor surrounding performers' practice of the form, portraying them as "simultaneously leisure and labour activities" (Prakash *Cultural* 27). As funeral dancers Jack, Mas, and Gana deliberate on the oppressive conditions surrounding funeral dancing:

> Jack: I do not like the work we are doing.
>
> Gana: You don't like the work? These are high caste funerals. They pay us well and we get alcohol too. What else do you want?
>
> Jack: They fed the deceased ten times. We were playing since morning, when we requested for some water to drink…
>
> Mas: When someone is alive, there will be thousands of people around him. Once dead, no one! Not even his family members will stay. Who else! We the gravediggers… Only we will accompany the body singing and dancing. We should be proud of our work. (1:12:14)

Jack is incensed that despite performing the important work of accompanying the dead to their graves when even their families had abandoned them, Jack, Mas, and Gana were routinely humiliated, degraded, and disgraced for their profession. Mas disagrees with Jack and says that his ancestors danced at funerals and so will his descendants, and says: "This is my God," and

that they didn't know how to do anything besides dancing and singing (1:12:59). Jack, Mas, and Gana's discussion exposes the conditions of labor in performances of *dappankuthu*, and how performing, even in oppressive conditions, was tied to their survival.

Jack suggests that perhaps they could try to do something with what they knew, like starting a music band. Gana is excited by this idea and suggests that they upload *gana* songs to YouTube and that this could make them famous. Jack names their band "Romeo Music Squad" in a tribute to all the lovers, and Gana immediately improvises a song about friendship on Mas's request. Jack, Mas, and Gana's exchange in the staging of *dappankuthu* and *gana* demonstrates the capacity for the transformation of folk performances under oppressive conditions to "emancipatory projects" by the conversion of cultural labour into cultural capital, and reflects the popularity and critical acclaim of Dalit youth performances, that include rap, *gana*, *koothu* (street theatre), and other genres.

The staging of folk performances within *Chandala* brings the connection between manual labour and performance to the forefront. Jack's *mama* (uncle) is a performer of *karinkaliyattam*, and he is also a manual scavenger. When Jack arrives to tell him that he is in love with Janani from Vaishnava Nagar, *mama* is cleaning a septic tank placed in the center of the stage, and makes fun of him, saying that he should go and unclog his lover's toilet. When Jack replies that this would seriously dampen his "prestige," mama laughs and says that their community has no "prestige," except on the one day of the year when he dresses up as Kali. On this day, the hierarchy is reversed, and even the upper castes bow down, touch his feet, and worship him. Jack's *mama's* temporary deification as Kali reverses the caste hierarchy on one day, but he still carries the caste-based stigma associated with his profession the rest of the year. In addition, in the staging of the cultural labor that surrounds folk forms of performance, *Chandala* places,

along with the performers, the materials that the forms are connected to, such as the *parai* drum, the funeral throne, and the septic tank, on stage. (Figure 3.3)

Figure 3.3: Jack and Gana dancing *Dappankuthu* and playing the *parai* drum during Mas's funeral. Screenshot from a recorded performance of *Chandala, the Impure,* 2017.

At the end of the play, after Jack and Janani are murdered inside their home by goons hired by Janani's father, it is *mama* dressed as Kali who discovers the massacre. His hands stained with their blood, he falls down and begins singing a mournful dirge:

My songs have been forgotten

Music and beats have already left me

I cannot stop myself from singing

If we give up our beats

We will also end up like this fragmented land

I cannot resist playing my beats, *theyee*

Theyee, sing as we do not want to perish. (Part 2, 56:44)

Mourning can become a site of radical solidarity, particularly when it is for those who died as a result of injustice. The fear of solidarity and mobilization around injustices that have caused death prompt state authorities to defer and disrupt rituals and practices of mourning. In such situations, rituals of mourning become acts of solidarity, and mourning becomes a radical act. Death as a result of caste-based violence is routinely suppressed by the casteist state, including the deferral of rituals of mourning – Shankar's family was not able to bury him in accordance with the customs of their community because he was forcibly cremated by the police (Express News). In this context, *mama's* song stresses the importance of remembrance and initiates a gesture of mourning for those who died as a result of caste-based violence. The song functions as a synecdoche of the whole play – a performance of postmemory against the forgetting of stories of caste-based violence, a gesture that remembers the people who died, and the embodiment of the memories of survivors of caste-based violence in performances.

Placed within a rehearsal of the fictional Indianostrum, Muthammal's *oppari* in *Natchathiram* performs a similar gesture of mourning. She sings about the sheer magnitude of violence on intercaste couples, and castigates the audience for their "deceitful spite," and ignoring their "screams of agony" (1:41:47). She directly accuses her listeners of being complicit with violence as "slaves of pride and arrogance," and names Pappathi and Enamuthu, an intercaste couple who were "chopped to pieces" by "discriminators of love." She warns listeners that "he will bloom as a flower" and "fill the world with his perfume," meaning that stories of their violence on intercaste couples will not be forgotten. Combined with testimonies of survivors of caste-based violence, Muthammal's *oppari* evokes an exposure of upper-caste guilt and initiates a transformation in members of the fictional theatre group. These emotions are transmitted to spectators of the film *Natchathiram,* initiating a collective solidarity in mourning,

making the staging of the *oppari* "a potential site of an act of political resistance" (Prakash "Mourning" 38).

The intercaste love that was made impossible by casteist violence is emphasized through the use of *kattabommalattam* puppets in *Chandala* and the scene is replayed in *Janani's Juliet*. Jack and Janani's act of lovemaking is aesthetically dramatized through the staged unclothing of the *kattabommalattam* puppets by the couple, an enactment that also reveals the intricacies of the puppet's construction and emphasizes its materiality. In *Chandala*, the unclothed puppets, symbolic embodiments of Jack and Janani's love, remain on stage, front and center, throughout the climactic scenes of the performance, as the violence instigated by their act of lovemaking plays out behind the puppets (Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4: The *kattabommalattam* puppets remain front and center as *mama* sings behind them. Screenshot from a recorded performance of *Chandala, the Impure*, 2017.

In *Janani's Juliet*, the unclothing of the puppets by Jack and Janani is set to a haunting melody that emphasizes the vulnerability of the lovers and alternates with Kausalya's voice

narrating the loss of freedom she experienced growing up in an upper-caste family. She was only able to be truly free when she fell in love with Shankar and could be with him.

In the way that the puppets are carefully handled by the performers in *Janani's Juliet*, they accrue meaning as symbols of the performers of Indianostrum who, like the puppets, are embodying Kausalya's voice. In both *Chandala* and *Janani's Juliet*, the puppets reveal the dire consequences of the caste system on two young people and the denial of their freedom to love. In reverting to a form of embodiment outside their human counterparts, the audience perceives a layering of Kausalya's and Shankar's narratives, employing puppets, characters, and real people, all significations of the ways in which stories that are denied plausibility in the real world are invested with a belated significance, making them postmemorial agents of recovery, in opposition to their institutionalized forgetting by a casteist state. The puppets reappear in a similar but altered usage in the rehearsal space and staged scenes in *Natchathiram*, becoming postmemorial symbols of the lynched, murdered, and disappeared bodies of those who perished as a result of caste-based violence (as seen in Figure 3.2).

Performances of subaltern communities function as a "repository of memories and history of a particular caste," functioning as an embodied archive of stories of their oppression, struggles, and creative imagination (Prakash *Cultural Labour* 22). The staging of folk forms within the intermedial form of *Chandala*, *Janani's Juliet*, and *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* transforms these into performances of postmemory that transmit memories of Dalit oppression and struggle, made perceptible to audiences by narrativizing the context of performance. In addition to performing *dappankuthu* and *karinkaliyattam*, Jack, Mas, Gana, and Jack's *mama* deliberate on the cultural labour of the forms. The song of lament that *mama*/Kali sings, and Muthammal's *oppari* within *Natchathiram,* initiate processes of collective mourning. The

kattabommalattam puppets are invested with postmemorial significance in performance as they come to symbolize those who died as a result of caste-based violence. Finally, by staging these folk forms, the three performances and films share space and cultural capital with local performers, bringing regional performers and performances into the purview of national and international audiences, and interrogating the caste-based marginalization of these forms.

Conclusion: The Reciprocal Incorporation of Theatre and Film

As *Janani's Juliet* demonstrates, film and processes of filmmaking were central to Indianostrum's process of making *Chandala*. The large projection screen that covers the background in *Chandala* reflects Indianostrum's rehearsal space, which used to be a cinema hall and includes such a screen. The performance also explores how caste stratifies public places by adapting the conflict between the families in *Romeo and Juliet* into a caste-motivated conflict set within a cinema hall. When Jack, Mas, and Gana buy first class tickets and are about to sit on the seats instead of the floor, Deena castigates them, saying that they are Dalits, and "always their place is on the floor" (41:14). Mas reacts to the casteist remark but Jack quiets him down fearing violent repercussions. Later, outside the cinema hall, the conflict escalates, leading to Mas's murder at the hands of Deena and his right-wing gang. This incident remembers and references an incident of caste-based violence – years of social and economic boycotts of the Dalit community in Chunduru, Andhra Pradesh, culminating in the massacre of thirteen Dalit men on 6 August 1991. The inciting incident was that a Dalit graduate student, Govatota Ravi, bought a chair class ticket and sat on a seat instead of on the floor in accordance with the casteist social norms.

In addition, films clips juxtaposed with climactic scenes in *Chandala*, remind audiences of the affective relationship that characters share with their counterparts on the big screen. Film clips from adult films featuring Shakeela play in the background of Jack and Janani's first kiss, and, as the caste-motivated conflict between Mas and Deena escalates into violence, Rajnikant's larger-than-life aggressively masculine characters inspire Mas and Jack to "never give up" (Part 2, 6:24). Yet, the assertion of Mas's dignity in the public space of the cinema hall and Jack and Janani's relationship results in their murders and the escalation of intercaste conflict, exposing the violence of hierarchical structuring of public spaces in caste-based society.

While *Chandala* embeds film clips and stages caste relations in the context of film spectatorship, the films – *Janani's Juliet* and *Natchathiram* – center theatre and theatre-making. In *Janani's Juliet*, the juxtaposition of Kausalya's story and its embodiment in performance is mediated by performers listening, watching, discussing, imagining, and understanding Kausalya's story. (Figures 3.5 and 3.6)

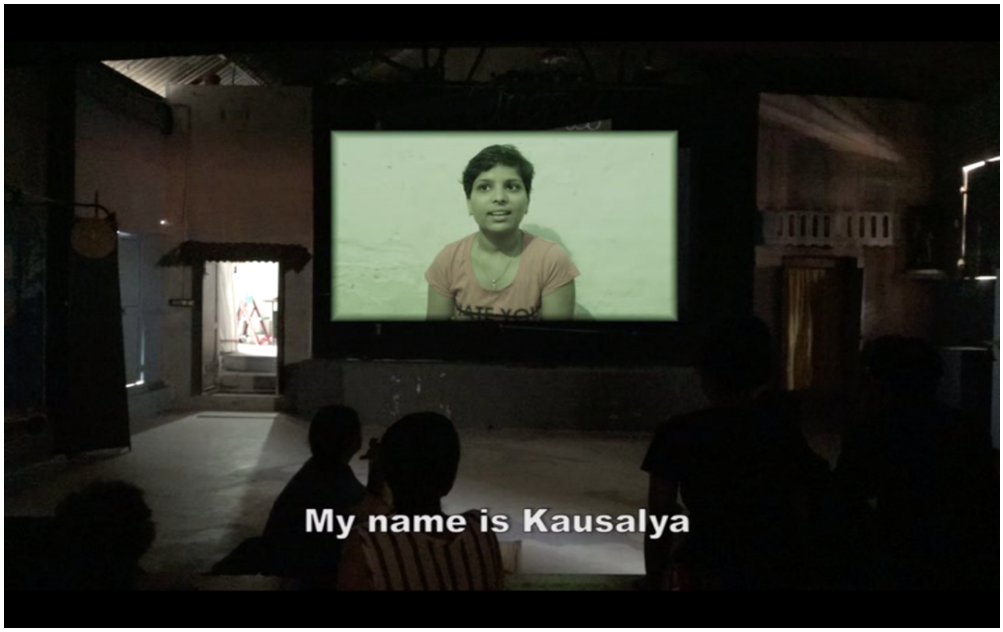

Figure 3.5: Performers of Indianostrum listen to Kausalya's recorded testimony during rehearsals. Screenshot from *Janani's Juliet*, 2019.

Figure 3.6: Performers listen to Kausalya's testimony over the phone. Screenshot from *Janani's Juliet*, 2019.

Instead of sensationalizing Kausalya's experiences of caste-based violence, the theatrical frame distances that violence on intercaste couples and enables audiences to understand how caste destroys romantic and familial relationships. The reinvestment of Kausalya's testimony, with the filmed footage of Indianostrum's interactions with Kausalya, enables audiences to perceive the intersection of caste and gender-based oppression in women's experiences, and demonstrates the fearlessness of Kausalya – a survivor of caste-based violence testifying to her parent's crimes of murdering her lover Shankar.

By performing postmemories of caste-based violence, *Chandala*, *Janani's Juliet*, and *Natchathiram* initiate gestures of "collective mourning," creating "potential site(s) of act(s) of political resistance." (Prakash "Mourning" 38). Performances of cultural labor, such as folk forms, produce various social and cultural values by means of their performance, but performers are made abject by casteist ideas and cannot generate enough cultural capital unless the "order is subverted and challenged," or they collaborate with the owners of cultural capital (Prakash

Cultural 36). Indianostrum's aim to revitalize local folk forms of performance by hosting performers of these forms in their space, collaborating with performers in their own performances, and including folk forms in their performances lends its cultural capital to folk forms and supports the sustainability of these forms. While only some practitioners of particular folk forms are benefited in collaborations with Indianostrum, and the staging of folk forms removes them from their context of performance, it also increases the visibility of these forms before national and international audiences.

The inclusion of forms interrogates the invisibility of these forms from the urban theatre space, and "reveals the precariousness of the many other village artists who do not have such relationships with urban cultural producers and audiences" (Pillai et al. 151). However, as Pillai et al. demonstrate, even experimental and internationally-connected theatre groups such as Indianostrum have no state sponsorship, no policies that support performing arts, and no support from bodies promoting social welfare or tourism; they have to secure their own funding through connections facilitated via digital technology and social media, corporate responsibility initiatives, private foundations, and cultural diplomacy funding from European Embassies, exhibiting a precarious economic existence (Pillai et al. 149). In this context, the transmission of folk performances, testimony, stories, memories, and experiences of caste-based violence through Indianostrum's performances into the medium of film introduces alternative routes of transmission and ensures their continuance in other forms.

The evolution of the story – from Kausalya's experiences and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in Indianostrum's *Chandala* to Pankaj Rishi Kumar's *Janani's Juliet* and Pa. Ranjith's film *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* – foregrounds a multitude of stories of caste-based discrimination, revealing the systemic nature of caste-based violence. In the face of legal

frameworks that deny justice to survivors of caste-based violence, dominant caste individuals who routinely deny the contemporary and real nature of caste-based violence, and practices that reinforce caste boundaries in the name of tradition, these stories reveal how caste structures all kinds of social relations in India, is inherent in many socially-accepted dominant-caste practices, and stratifies public spaces where people from different caste backgrounds coexist in close proximity. Even within their fictional frames, the plays and films embed citations to real-stories of caste-based violence that re-perform the stories of those who were murdered to ensure their presence in collective memory. The title *Natchathiram nagargiradhu*, for instance, reminds me of Rohith Vemula's last letter in which he says, "If there is anything at all I believe, I believe that I can travel to the stars."

Notes

1. According to Britannica Encyclopedia: “Shakespeare’s principal source for the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* was *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, a long narrative poem written in 1562 by the English poet Arthur Brooke, who had based his poem on a French translation of a tale by the Italian writer Matteo Bandello.” This story had been around for a while, and according to Royal Shakespeare Company: “Italian versions, written in the 1530s by Luigi da Porta and in the 1550s by Matteo Bandello, told the story of Romeo and Giuletta and the feuding families of Montecchi and Capelletti, with the details of the secret wooing and marriage, the helpful Nurse, Romeo's escape from the punishment of murder, the Friar's potion, the lost message and the suicides in the tomb.”

2. The end of *Chandala* can be seen as open-ended as it does not make it very clear if anyone in the couple has survived the attack, but in our interview Koumarane mentioned that both Jack and Janani are murdered at the end of *Chandala*.

3. Gaddar (1949-2023) was a revolutionary poet and singer of Telangana. Performing, singing, speaking to audiences, and playing musical instruments, Gaddar’s unique performances with Jana Natya Mandali (People’s Theatre Group) employed folk forms and tunes to inspire revolutionary sentiments in audiences.

Chapter 4

Intermediality and the Work of Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry: A Queer Phenomenology of *Trunk Tales* (2022)

"What lines, we might ask, will cover the page when the woman philosopher inhabits the space by the writing table and takes up her pen?" asks Sara Ahmed in conceptualizing a queer phenomenology to think about divergent orientations (63). Within Indian theatre, the work of women directors of the 1980s and after created innovative, non-realistic, and intermedial forms of theatre that interrogated those theatrical conventions that had, until then, defined the practice, form, and canons of modern Indian theatre. Scholars such as Anuradha Kapur, A. Mangai, Shayoni Mitra, and Ashis Sengupta have written about new forms of feminist, avant-garde, and postdramatic performance practices that emerged out of the post-1968 women's movements protesting violence against women and gender discrimination, and forms of street and activist theatre that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s.[1] Sengupta writes about the hybridity and intertextuality of non-dramatic performances directed by women, made increasingly intermedial by the mediatization of India, since the 1980s (25). Shayoni Mitra, similarly, points to the "layered, adaptive, and contingent" performances by women that integrate live performance with representational technology, such as the use of video projections, monitors, and CCTV cameras along with performing bodies (81).

As Sengupta and Mitra's usage indicates, within scholarship on Indian theatre the term intermedial is used to denote forms that use technology to layer live performance through video projections and other digital audiovisual effects. Mitra writes that the usage of technology refutes older entrenched theatrical conventions in India, making the presence of technology in the work of women directors an avant-garde characteristic. Such an incorporation of technology also

brings a "whole new range of semiotic possibilities" to Indian theatre, creating revolutionary new languages (83). Similarly, Sengupta notes that "intermedial hybridity" in the work of women theatre practitioners evokes varying responses from audiences by juxtaposing live performance and simulation, resulting in flexible and open forms of performance (16).

In this chapter, I want to expand upon the notion of intermediality within Indian theatre by centering performances directed by Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry. Known for her non-linear and multisensorial performances, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry has worked for over thirty-five years in Chandigarh with the group that she founded in 1984 – The Company (short for The Centre of Music and Performing Arts, Natya Yatris). Rehearsing within her home, The Company serves as a space of collaboration for Naqqals, folk performers of Punjab, and urban actors, who are trained in local drama schools. Besides actors, Chowdhry has also had long-term collaborations with Punjabi poet Surjit Patar for playwriting, the late B. V. Karanth for music, scenographer Deepan Sivaraman, and Daulat Ram Vaid for lighting.

Adapted by Patar into Punjabi, Chowdhry's performances have drawn upon writers from different backgrounds, and include Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* (1991, 2004, 2014) and *Hayavadana* (2023); the works of Saadat Hasan Manto in *Bitter Fruit* (2015) and *Naked Voices* (2016) with students from the National School of Drama, and *The License* (2014) and *Dark Borders* (2017) with The Company; Federico Garcia Lorca's *Yerma* (1993) and *Blood Wedding* (2010); *Sheher mere di pagal aurat* (1995) from *The Madwoman of Chaillot* (1943) by Jean Giraudoux; *Fida* (1996) from *Phaedra* (1677) by Jean Racine; *The Suit* (2009) from a short-story by South African writer Can Themba; *Kitchen katha* (2003) combining Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989), and *Aphrodite* (1996) by Isabele Allende; and *Gumm hai* (2019) devised from several testimonies in Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman's *7 Stages of Grieving*

(1996), among others. Chowdhry has traveled extensively along with The Company, performing in national and international festivals, and collaborating with artists and performers from different locations.[2] Adapted into Punjabi and other Indian languages, and improvised upon by actors, performances directed by Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry exhibit an intermedial form that uses actor's bodies and objects to communicate to audiences through multiple sensory modalities without the staging of technology.

As Hannah B. Higgins writes, the present understanding of intermediality that is based on the incorporation of technological media, considers only visual and auditory stimuli. In contrast, the conception of intermedia art developed and practiced by Fluxus artists in the 1960s in the US is built on interactions between sensory modes, including those that are tactile, kinesthetic, olfactory, and gustatory, besides the visual and auditory. Current definitions of intermediality, including those within Indian theatre, consider the multiplication of media categories rather than the interaction between sensory modalities, collapsing the term "interactive mixed media" into "intermedia," and divesting the word of its original definition based on communication strategies that employ the interaction of multiple human sense experiences (Higgins).

Emerging out of a collaborative and improvisational process, performances of The Company consist of a series of enactments, in which objects, bodies, sound patterns, and other sensory elements are combined to communicate to audiences through the interaction of sensory modalities, producing a disorienting effect. In this chapter, I analyze the use of cross-modal aesthetics and overlaps between artistic forms in performances of The Company to show how the performances create an intermedial effect through the interaction of semiotic and perceptual systems. First, I examine intermediality within the work of Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry by analyzing enactments from The Company's performances. Next, by referring to Sara Ahmed's

concept of queer phenomenology, I show how the use of gendered costumes and real, domestic objects in The Company's performances produces a queer effect by unsettling theatrical conventions and infusing everyday costumes and objects with symbolic, semiotic, and sensorial significance. I focus on The Company's *Trunk Tales* (2022) and discuss the functioning of intermediality in this performance. Finally, I undertake a queer reading of *Trunk Tales* to show how the performance foregrounds trunks as objects that evoke specters of the Partition of 1947.

Blurring Lines, Crossing Boundaries: Intermediality in The Company's Theatre

Arguing against the tendency to equate intermediality with theatre that uses digital technology, in "Intermedial Perception or Fluxing Across the Sensory," Hannah B. Higgins revisits Fluxus artist Dick Higgin's definition of intermedia as artistic practices that work with "structural continuities between the arts," such as visual poetry, sound poetry, or Happenings, "theatre with musical and painterly elements" (Higgins). As art that works with "structural homologies," rather than additive mixtures in which distinct media types function independently of each other (as in multimedia art), intermedia works against restrictive formal categorizations of the arts, interrogating both formal and cultural mandates associated with particular artforms. Inhabiting the liminal space between artistic disciplines, intermedia art is characterized by fluidity between medial categories, and parallels the cross-modality of the physiological basis of the production of aesthetic experience. Thus, the aesthetics of intermedia art is produced and experienced through the interaction between different sensory systems. Intermediality works "between media categories and perceptual categories," and understanding intermedial artistic practices requires "a simultaneously cultural and physiological framework" of interpretation, and

"a cross-modal aesthetics of all senses as based in the interactions of hearing, touch, smell, taste and sight" (Higgins).

Chowdhry's process of creating performances results in multiple overlaps between artistic forms, disciplines, and categories in India. Working with the Naqqals, itinerant folk performers of Punjab, and local actors trained in drama schools, Chowdhry has developed a collaborative process of training and devising The Company's performances. In working with the Naqqals, Chowdhry was not interested in incorporating their material or using their practice as "an exotic leitmotif," but wanted to formalize a process of artistic collaboration between groups of people from separate worlds (Chowdhry "On Navigating"). By bringing together Naqqals, who had the memory of folk traditions, and actors trained in Western theatre techniques from the drama schools, mostly in Chandigarh and Delhi, Chowdhry created a "precarious, unstable meeting of the urban and the rural," dissolving such distinctions within the rehearsal space and experimenting with forms that would arise out of this interaction (Chowdhry "On Production").

Chowdhry's intermedial process of creating performances has been influenced by the "inexorable mix of cultures" that characterizes her journey within the field of theatre in India (Ahuja 43). Chowdhry graduated from the National School of Drama (NSD) in 1975, where she studied acting. Training at NSD under Ebrahim Alkazi exposed Chowdhry to a new world and a new way of looking at material, sound, training, mythology, voice, and artistic sensibility. By observing Alkazi's working methods, Chowdhry developed her intricately crafted style, characterized by choreographed scenes, precisely detailed sets, group compositions, and synchronized movements. After NSD, Chowdhry moved to Mumbai (then Bombay), and worked in children's theatre with Pearl Padamsee, along with assisting with costumes and backstage

work with fellow-NSD alumni Nasseruddin Shah, Om Puri and Rohini Hattangadi in the theatre group Majma. In 1979, Chowdhry moved to Bhopal and worked with B. V. Karanth at the newly formed Bharat Bhavan, performing a variety of peripheral roles, such as designing costumes, organizing workshops, and hosting nationally and internationally renowned artists and theatre practitioners. Chowdhry also worked with Karanth and other artists in the theatre repertory, Rangmandal, for which they developed a training program that brought together performers of folk forms and actors trained in local drama schools. This collaborative space that combined folk and modern forms of theatre pedagogy and practice was significant in the formation of Chowdhry's intermedial style. It was while working at Bharat Bhavan that Chowdhry directed her first performance, *Jasma Odan* (1980), drawing upon the *bhavai* folk form from Gujarat.

In 1984, Chowdhry moved to Chandigarh, and founded The Company as a space for collaboration between folk performers of Punjab and local actors. On Karanth's advice, she searched for local and regional forms to adapt texts from around the world into Punjabi for a local audience. She came across the Naqqals in the course of her research and was mesmerized by the connection that they had with their audiences, and the energy that the audience and the performers exchanged during the course of a performance. In an interview, Chowdhry says: "My creative journey into Punjab, formalizing a process of training, and creating performances through translation and collaboration between cultures and regions, and even across genders, became my challenge" (Nanda). The intermediality of The Company's performances emerges from this collaborative process between people with different social, regional, linguistic, cultural, and gender-based affiliations.

Besides Naqqals and local actors, Chowdhry's long-term collaborations with Punjabi poet Surjit Patar, theatre artist B.V. Karanth on music, Deepan Sivaraman on scenography, and

Daulat Ram Vaid on lights have contributed to intermediality within The Company's performances. As specialists in their respective fields, these artists have brought the full force of their artistic disciplines into The Company's performances, resulting in the addition of literary-performative, sound-based, and painterly elements. In collaboration with Patar, Chowdhry regionalizes national and international texts, and nationalizes regional performance idioms of Punjab (Chowdhry "Unpeeling" 21). Working through literary and cultural overlaps, The Company's performances adapt, refract, combine, and re-encode texts from all over the world, reinterpreting them using the Punjabi language and a regional and local performance idiom. With the late B. V. Karanth as sound designer, many of The Company's performances continue to incorporate a "sound-centric language of theatre," using "sound patterns," conglomerations of folk and classical music, and everyday songs, sounds, and noises, to communicate linguistically and enhance the effect of enactments, emphasize the sonic qualities of words, and to create a soundscape that evokes local, everyday experiences (Sahai 81).

Performances of The Company are devised collectively by actors. In adaptations, the text is interpreted performatively by actors who respond to the social, political, aesthetic, and psychological affects of the text through improvisations, based on Chowdhry's prompts and ideas. The other elements of the performance, such as imagery, objects, characters, and scenography emerge during rehearsals with actors, musicians, scenographers, and the director. Creating the final performance is akin to a process of orchestration in which Chowdhry layers and arranges whatever is relevant to the overall performance from the enactments devised by actors. Through this process of devising, the text is refracted in performance and embedded with citations from different forms of artistic practice – literature, art, film, poetry, photography – along with experiences and memories of performers. Exploding the dramatic form, The

Company's performances treat theatre as "the site of a narrative act," within which storytelling becomes more important than the story that is being told, exhibiting postdramatic aesthetics (Sengupta 56). The collaborative process and distributed authorship of The Company's performances, thus, emerges from, what Sara Ahmed calls, a space of "mixed orientations," exhibiting overlaps between different artistic disciplines and forms of performance in India.

Adapted by Surjit Patar, The Company's performances transport texts from different parts of the world to Punjab by weaving in references to Punjabi sounds, cultural history, imagery, emotions, smells, politics, humor, *gaalis* (pejoratives) and popular turns of phrase, among numerous everyday forms of expression. Speaking about their adaptation of Federico Garcia Lorca's *Yerma*, Chowdhry says, "When you do Lorca in Punjabi, *Lorca ban jata hai* Punjabi playwright" (Lorca becomes a Punjabi playwright) ("Dr. Neelam" 39:41). The similarities between Lorca's Granada and Punjab, such as the centrality of agriculture to both communities, the prevalence of patriarchy, misogyny, and the encoding of women's bodies with values of honor, resulted in a close resonance between Lorca's Spanish and Patar's Punjabi, and there was no need to adapt the text. "Even Yerma sounded like a Punjabi name," Chowdhry says, highlighting their overlapping aesthetics (Lokadharmi).

Emerging from this collective process of authorship, The Company's intermedial performances are composed of a series of enactments, composed out of bodies and objects, that communicate to audiences through interactions between different senses, through a cross-modal sensory aesthetic. Adapting from the Naqqals practices of embodying characters externally, actors switch between narrating the story and embodying multiple characters within enactments, within which symbolic acts are combined with polyphonic monologues. Through gestures,

movements, and actions, and by manipulating objects, actors produce sensory effects that reinforce or contradict their speech in revealing ways.

In an interview with Anjum Katyal in *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, Chowdhry mentions the "great creative bond" that she shares with Patar, and the way that his translations evoke a unique emotive and performative response from actors. Within The Company's *Fida*, for instance, Patar translated the phrase "The first time I saw him I blushed, I trembled" from Racine's *Phaedra*, into Punjabi as: "*Main pehli waar osnoon dekhya jad, mere saah ruk gaye, larzaa gayee main; main kambi, kamb ke pathhra gayee main*." (The first time I saw her, my breath stopped, I became bashful; I trembled, trembling, I became stupefied). Using alliteration and rhythm, Patar's Punjabi rendering emphasizes the sensory and performative qualities of the phrase (Chowdhry "Unpeeling" 27).

During rehearsals, actors are provided with objects lying around the domestic space that become an extension of the characters they develop. In developing the performance collectively, the whole group takes a journey in which different forms, bits and pieces emerge and finally collapse and coalesce into one another to create something unexpected. Improvisations are often based on personal memories, stories, and experiences but, through rehearsals and collective improvisation, single stories multiply and become part of the collective. Everyday objects from the domestic space gather on stage and are brought to life by actors in innovative ways. Speech, sound patterns, enactments, objects, movement, scenery, costumes, and natural elements are combined and juxtaposed in innovative ways to externalize and physicalize subliminal ideas, concepts, experiences, power structures, and other thoughts.

In many performances, actors use movements to visually represent emotional states, equating kinesthetic sensations with emotions. Devised with students at the National School of

Drama, *Naked Voices* (2016), one of Chowdhry's performances based on the work of Saadat Hasan Manto, combines several of Manto's short stories about the Partition of 1947, juxtaposing and interlacing them through multisensorial enactments. One of Manto's stories included within *Naked Voices* is "Sau candle power ka bulb" (The Hundred Candlepower Bulb, 1980) about a sex worker who is exhausted and unable to sleep because of the continuous stream of customers that her pimp brings to her doorstep. When the pimp refuses to heed her demands for sleep, she kills him with a stone, falling asleep beside his corpse. In the enactment of this story within *Naked Voices*, the actor depicts the sleep-deprived sex worker by repeatedly letting go of her body and falling towards the floor. Her co-actor re-positions himself and catches the actor before she falls to the floor. Manto's story is narrated by the two actors as they perform this gesture repeatedly. The actor props herself up against the wall when she is forced by her pimp to get ready for the next customer. To symbolically murder the pimp, the actor squeezes red paint onto her co-actor. The kinesthetic sensation of repeatedly falling over, being caught, and forced back up mirrors the repeated disruptions of the sex worker's body from resting and enables the actors to experience their speech while performing it. Imagery from Manto's story is simultaneously narrated and reinterpreted sensorially through bodies, objects, movement, action, and color.

The cross-modal aesthetic of The Company's intermedial performances works through interactions between semiotic and perceptual systems and communicates to audiences not only through visual and auditory stimuli but also using tactile, kinesthetic, gustatory, and olfactory sensations. Within enactments, actor's manipulate objects and natural elements, enabling their own bodies to experience tactile, kinesthetic, gustatory, or olfactory sensations, which are then transformed into visual, auditory, and other sensations for the audience. These sensations are

juxtaposed with the actor's speech to reveal subliminal ideas, emotional states, and reflect on human experience, among other things.

In The Company's cine-play (a filmed performance) *Black Box* (2020), for instance, actor Vansh Bhardwaj transforms ordinary plastic bags into rain clouds and creates the sound pattern of rain, using objects. Bhardwaj ties two translucent plastic bags to a wooden beam, fills them with water from a kettle, and pokes holes in them with a pin. The water dripping onto the metal chair and tray that Bhardwaj places underneath this contraption makes pitter-patter sounds reminiscent of rain, and Bhardwaj sits "in the rain," drinking rainwater from a cup (Figure 4.1). The camera intensifies the sensation of rain by focusing on the drops of water hitting the chair, dripping from Bhardwaj's wiggling bare toes, making dark circular patches on his black coat and getting absorbed into the fabric, falling into his cup, and tracing trails of water down his eyebrows and ears. Ordinary objects, such as plastic bags, water, and a chair are used in an innovative way to create the auditory and tactile sensation of rain for the actor, and for the audience, to evoke memories and feelings associated with a rainy day through auditory and visual sensations.

Figure 4.1: The actor, Vansh Bhardwaj, sits "in the rain" drinking from a cup in *Black Box*. Screenshot from a recorded performance of *Black Box*, 2020.

The "mixed orientations" and improvisatory process of The Company's performances leads to the innovative ways in which cross-modal aesthetics are employed in their performances. Actors use movement to visually represent emotional states. Real objects from the kitchen and the garden, such as food, spices, fruits and vegetables, flowers, leaves, and natural elements, among other things, are used to stimulate audience's senses of taste and smell, senses that are conventionally neglected within Indian theatre. In *Kitchen katha* (The Saga of the Kitchen, 1999), performers cook *jalebis* (a sweet) and *pakoras* (fritters) for the audience and share them with the audience at the end, as they sing and play musical instruments. Set in a

community kitchen, the performance tells the story of the protagonist Tara's grandmother, Chand, who had seduced her lover Mangal by cooking for him, adapting sections from Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* and Isabel Allende's *Aphrodite*. Tara narrates and sings her grandmother's recipes from her notebook, dances as she symbolically cooks for and eats with the audience, transforms into her aunt by changing costumes, and converses with her own mirrored image as if she is speaking to her grandmother. The songs in this play, written by Surjit Patar in Punjabi, are recipes, and the music, composed by B. V. Karanth, includes sound patterns from the kitchen, such as the pounding of wheat, the grinding of spices, and the frying of *jalebis* and *pakoras* in oil. In *Kitchen katha*, not just food but cooking is staged, and the performance of cooking stimulates multiple senses of the audience – not just the visual and auditory, but also the tactile and olfactory. By experiencing the taste and smell of the songs, stories, and recipes they listen to, the audience experiences *Kitchen katha* through a cross-modal interaction of the senses.

The interactivity between sensory modalities and the overlapping of art forms in intermedia art, in the conception of artists associated with Fluxus, is located "between the general idea of art media and those of life media" (Higgins). While Fluxus artists sought to explore everyday activities as performative Events, they maintained that everyday activities and objects cannot return to everyday life, unchanged, from the realm of performance. The intermediality of The Company's theatrical practices, evidenced in the use of cross-modal aesthetics and interdisciplinary processes and forms in their performances, also stages everyday objects, costumes, and sound patterns within theatrical performances. Everyday objects from Chowdhry's home, within which The Company's rehearsal space is located, enter the performance space. Sound patterns, reminiscent of everyday experiences, enhance the theatricality of speech in symbolic and sensorial ways. Costumes, conventionally used to

supplement characterization through acting, transform into symbolic representations of characters, and actors become mediums who channel multiple characters. Objects transcend their attributed usages during rehearsals and transform into something else in performance. In the next section, I refer to Sara Ahmed's concept of queer phenomenology to show how The Company's performances "queer" the stage space by dismantling conventions of Indian theatre, and with the proliferation of domestic objects on stage.

Queering the Stage with a Gathering of Queer Objects

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed begins by redirecting our attention toward "different objects, those that are 'less proximate' or even those that deviate or are deviant" (3). Ahmed's concept of queer phenomenology offers a "model of how bodies become orientated by how they take up time and space" (5). It is in moments of disorientation that we become aware of our surroundings and the orientations that we are missing at that moment. To become "orientated," we must experience disorientation, and in re-orientating ourselves, we become aware of the very process of orientation. Ahmed writes, "it is by understanding how we become orientated in moments of disorientation that we might learn what it means to be orientated in the first place" (6).

It is by means of "straightening devices" that things that are out of place are "aligned" or "brought in line" with others, reproducing repetitive patterns of behavior, and conventional ways of doing things. Ahmed highlights that by repeating patterns "in line" with others, we erase the lines from which we emerge, and paradoxically this performative repetition etches deep lines of thought, direction, and motion in social life (15). Queer subjects fail to act in conventional ways, disrupting patterns of activity and resulting in disorientation. Gender, race, and sexuality include

some of the straightening devices by means of which deviant others are made to feel out of place or made to feel disoriented. Ahmed draws on Fanon's phenomenology to show how racism inhibits black bodies from co-inhabiting spaces through disorientation, such that "they cease to know where to find things—reduced as they are to things among things," and how race-based orientation dictates the racialization of the body and social space (111). Similarly, the compulsory enforcement of heterosexuality, and the expectation that children will produce grandchildren who will inherit familial possessions, makes queer orientations deviant. Ahmed concludes that gender is orientated, and within a straight culture, the queer subject "deviates and is made socially present as a deviant," affecting disorientation (20).

The work of women directors in India that created a new "woman's language in theatre" could be seen as affecting such mechanisms of disorientation within realism-based forms of Indian theatre (Kapur 5). The performances of Anuradha Kapur, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, Kirti Jain, Maya Rao, and Anamika Haskar, among others, deviated from both realist forms of performance, and the cultural nationalism of the theatre of roots movement. Their work resulted in a "de-hierarchization of theatrical structure and language," by bringing in collaborative processes of theatre making, within which the primacy of the text is dismantled by other elements of theatrical productions, such as light, sound, movement, objects, painterly elements, and silence, among other features (Sengupta 50). Employing interdisciplinarity and intermediality, the work of women directors combines presentational and representational strategies, animating the interplay between physicality, sensuality, materiality, and simulation (Sengupta 50-51). Emerging out of improvisational processes, the innovative theatrical forms developed by women inaugurated innovations in form and content, such as fragmented forms of storytelling and layering of narratives, and dismantling plot and theatrical structure through a

body-oriented aesthetic that interrogates stereotypes and conventions in both gender and in theatre.

Female impersonation has been a recurring preoccupation in the work of women within Indian theatre. The historical correlation between caste, gender, and performance led to the practice of men performing women's roles in a variety of performance forms in India, resulting in political and aesthetic gender roles and stereotypes that were enforced on women in public contexts and spaces (Mangai 164). By evoking the history of female impersonation and exploring the practice through narrative, performance, philosophy, casting choices, symbolic costumes, dressing and undressing, and in other ways, the performances of theatre practitioners such as Anuradha Kapur, Amal Allana, Veenapani Chawla, and Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry explore how gender is orientated within Indian theatre, performance, society, and cultures. The theatrical work of these directors, then, begins from a place of "mixed orientations" that "unfolds from the gap between reception and possession" and allows us to notice the things that were made invisible by social practices of gendering in India (Ahmed 152).

Actors of The Company draw upon the Naqqal practices of female impersonation to embody different characters in performances by externalizing the conditions of embodiment and alternating between presentational and representational modes. Performances of the Naqqals are collagistic, consisting of non-realistic short skits that are improvised using stock characters, reacting to contemporary social and political issues. Naqqal performances juxtapose and combine folk, religious, and contemporary forms, and perform plays based on extant myths in Punjab, such as *Heer Ranjha*, *Keema Malki*, and *Sohni Mahiwal*, using female impersonation, folk instruments, dancing, and singing (Chowdhry "The Naqqals" 35). Performed solely by men, female impersonation is a central aspect of Naqqal performances, and all Naqqal actors begin by

learning the art of female impersonation. Unlike many classical forms of performance, such as Kathakali, the Naqqals transform into women abruptly and with no ceremony in their performances. By wearing extravagant costumes, and painting their faces with white powder, with "elongated eyebrows, a vermillion painted mouth, and eyes like deep inkwells," Naqqals "create a hyper-femininity," signifying an idealized woman in performance (Chowdhry "Naqqals" 208). The exaggeration of feminine stereotypes through performance and outward appearance is made deliberately queer on the male body, and in catering to male desires, conventions of masculinity and femininity are "affirmed and mocked, celebrated and critiqued" in Naqqal performances, creating, in Chowdhry's words, "an ambiguity," or disorientation (210). Their humor, which juxtaposes the sacred with the profane and the mundane with the mystical, and their use of human and mythological characters demystifies traditions, provides ironic commentary on contemporary issues, and challenges established perceptions.

By collaborating with Naqqals over an extended period, The Company has created a "new dramatic vocabulary" and a "new way of looking at performance, history, space, image, text" (Chowdhry and Elkunchwar 39). Chowdhry says:

> Through this encounter new systems were invented, enabling me to explore a multiplicity of styles. I found, during the course of my work, a willingness in both urban and rural actors to shed the skin of separateness and enter into the terrains of each other's lives. Our inherited set of values went through a shredding machine and I saw how working with female impersonators made the actors not only realign their concepts towards femininity on stage, but also the way masculinity was perceived and constructed for performance. (39)

Thus, in the collaboration between Naqqals and urban actors, the opportunity to view the world from each other's queer and mixed orientations enabled participants to perceive and re-perform gendering and other inherited practices. In addition to devising, many of The Company's performances showcase the music of the Naqqals, but, as A. Mangai points out, the central roles that involve a lot of speech are performed by urban actors (210). Besides performance, in devising performances with Naqqals, actors of The Company have adopted some of the sophisticated tools and techniques that the Naqqals employ, such as their unrealistic and eclectic style, the incorporation of animated objects and talking animals into their performances, and costumes as personifications and indicators of characters. Across The Company's performances, costumes emerge as a mechanism through which gender is orientated, acquiring symbolic significance.

In *The Suit* (2009), based on the eponymous short story published in 1963 by South African writer Can Themba, a suit left behind by Mina's lover becomes, for her husband, Bunty, a symbol of her adulterous relationship. Bunty insists that the suit be treated as an honored guest, taking the suit along wherever they went, and even humiliates Mina at a party by bringing the suit out. When the guests leave, embarrassed, Bunty orders Mina to make love to the suit. She accepts her punishment, hesitant at first, but, to Bunty's dismay, quickly embraces the suit as her second skin. The suit, transformed from a costume into a titular character, becomes a personified symbol of the lover's absent presence.

The original story by Themba, set in Sophiatown, Johannesburg, ends with the death of Matilda, and her husband Philemon's cry of anguish. The story portrays the effect of Apartheid on personal relationships and the destructive potential of intolerance and revenge. Chowdhry's interpretation extracts the story from its political moorings in Sophiatown and transforms it into a

performance that interrogates sexual orientation, particularly the gendered expectations that ground marital relationships. In embracing her desire as her second skin, Mina presents a challenge to the patriarchal controlling of her desire in her performance of lovemaking with the suit. As her second skin and the object of her desire, the masculine suit, disorients Bunty's expectations and queers Mina.

Objects are central to Ahmed's notion of queer phenomenology in that objects govern the movement of our bodies through space by affecting our actions and "orientating" us in specific ways. By facing certain objects and relegating others to the background, we "reveal the direction we have taken in life" (32). Objects, produced through the labor of other bodies, gather in our homes, arriving by means of different routes and vehicles. Within our homes, unfamiliar objects are made familiar with our co-presence, changed to suit our tastes, or stashed away somewhere, hidden from our purview. Quoting Husserl, Ahmed writes that it is only when an object fails to perform its intended function, that we perceive it for what it is, and judge it for being useless. Ahmed reconceptualizes this inference as a relationship between bodies and objects in which the "tool is used by a body for which it was not intended, or a body uses a tool that does not extend its capacity for action," positing it as a matter of "failed orientations" (51). Since conventions dictate the movement of bodies towards some objects more than others, gendering "is an effect of how bodies take up objects, which involves how they occupy space by being occupied in one way or another" (59). Thus, a "queer effect" is created when one extends towards unlikely, far away objects, producing a gathering of mixed orientations, or uses objects in an unexpected way that conflicts with their intended usage.

Everyday objects and costumes are actants as much as human actors in The Company's performances. An object is not static but can go through transformations in the same way that

actors embody multiple characters and varying emotional, physical, and psychological states during the performance. Props accompany actors through the entire process of improvisation and rehearsal and enable actors to embody multiple characters in performance. Through their sensorial attributes, props and costumes are converted into complex symbols, and personified as characters. In many performances, actors use objects for sensory effect divesting it of any symbolic meaning. In other performances, the connection between an object and the way that it is used onstage is based on personal memories, derived from illogical references, or completely random. In the way that objects are manipulated in performance, they acquire additional symbolic meanings, transforming them from ordinary everyday objects that escape our notice to deviant objects.

In The Company's 2010 performance of Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* in New Delhi, a long length of black and shiny cloth is used to represent a snake. By coiling the piece of cloth around his neck, actor Vansh Bhardwaj transforms from Appanna to Naga. The coils of black and shiny cloth mimic the visual and tactile qualities of a king cobra, a snake that can take human form within *Nagamandala*, and upon wearing it, Bharadwaj uses fluid, snake-like, creeping movements to embody the character. Towards the end of the play, Rani puts her hand into the snake's nest and the snake slithers onto her neck and shoulders, instead of biting her, as proof of her honesty. Ramanjit, one of two actors playing Rani, wears the black and shiny cloth as a sari, coiling it around her body, shoulders, neck, and head, in the performance of this act. By visually representing the sensorial and tactile qualities of the snake, the long, black, and shiny costume functions simultaneously as a phenomenal object and a complex symbol that initiates transformations in both actors and characters. In eschewing a realistic representation of the snake, the unusual use of the *sari*, and its wearing by Rani in the end, further equates the

expression of sexual desire with femininity, drawing attention to women's sexuality. From this inference then, the human form of Naga, who looks like Appanna but seduces Rani unlike him, is a queered version of Appanna, who wears the *sari* around his neck as he fulfills Rani's desire for love.

By replacing fake props with recognizable everyday objects, The Company's performances confound theatrical convention with the onstage presence of real objects from the domestic space. Real things, such as fruits, vegetables, food, and other condiments from the kitchen; leaves, flowers, garden ornaments, utensils, other everyday objects from domestic spaces; and natural elements, such as water, earth, fire, and air, surprise audiences, drawing attention to their own hyperrealism. As the examples from The Company's performances illustrate, objects from domestic spaces, most often from the kitchen and the garden, appear onstage in unexpected places, and are used by actors in innovative sensory ways.

In *Gumm Hai* (Missing), an actor, whose entire face is covered with a white cloth, stuffs threshed wheat into his mouth, as another actor offers him rice placed on a tray and surrounded by a miniature fence of barbed wire (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: An actor offers “fenced rice” to his co-actor in *Gumm Hai*. Screenshot from a recorded performance of *Gumm Hai,* 2019.

The actor offering the “fenced rice” to his co-actor begins narrating a story about the inheritance of land within his family, transforming ordinary rice into a complex symbol of food insecurity resulting from dislocation, and the inheritance of land under conditions of occupation, capitalism, and family dynamics. Staged by actors in symbolic ways, real objects are made queer by infusing them with metaphoric meaning within The Company’s performances.

Contrarily, in other performances of The Company objects are used sensorially, and symbolic associations are random, personal, or not made evident in performance. The setting of *Kitchen katha* in a community kitchen, for instance, is derived from Chowdhry’s childhood memories of *langar* in her family’s Gurudwara. The setting includes a small pumpkin on a swing, and, in an interview with Prakash Belawadi, Chowdhry mentions that there was no logical reason for this choice but that the image popped into her mind. Years later, when she was in Pondicherry, she saw such pumpkins on swings outside shops, placed there for good luck

(Belawadi). In an enactment within *Kitchen katha*, the actor, Ramanjit, breaks into a pomegranate to signify lovemaking, and this reference stems from the Song of Solomon in the Bible (6:7-13). In another, Ramanjit turns white, covered with *atta* (flour) that is sieved over her head by another actor, as she re-enacts her grandmother Chand's heartbreak. This image draws upon an old Hindi film in which the actor turned into a marble statue awaiting her lover. The unusual usage of objects in these enactments foreground the sensory qualities of household objects, such that audiences take notice of the unusual and creative ways in which they are used. Things that we eat, wear, or see every day are made to communicate in a way that enhances the object's materiality and sensory qualities in unexpected ways, such that we notice their color, taste, smell, or shape in a way that we had never considered before, making them queer objects.

Domestic objects play a central role within Ahmed's concept of "queer phenomenology." By queering phenomenology itself by looking "behind it," Ahmed focuses on the objects that escape our notice due to "acts of relegation" that foreground particular "important" things over others (31). Domestic spaces are intensely gendered, and women's writing foregrounds the domestic space where dramatic things happen. In addition, Ahmed points out that men's work is sustained by the work of women, and feminist scholarship about the politics of housework illustrates "the ways in which women, as wives and servants, do the work required to keep such spaces available for men and the work they do" (30). At the back of the house, lies unnoticed "the feminine space dedicated to the work of care, cleaning, and reproduction," and women are torn between caring for others and finding time and space for themselves to think or to do their own work. She asks, "To what extent does philosophy depend on the concealment of domestic labor and of the labor time that it takes to reproduce the very "materials" of home?" (31).

It is my contention that in The Company's performances, the staging of domestic objects draws attention to not just their materiality and sensorial qualities, but also their domesticity. By drawing attention to objects that usually escape our notice or are not even handled in their original form by many, The Company's performances queer domestic objects by enabling audiences to see them in a new light. Domestic objects are infused with symbolic, metaphorical, or sensorial queer attributes, such that they are haunted by these additional meanings. Even after the performance has concluded, these queer objects exude these meanings and continue to disorient us in our encounters with them in everyday life.

Kitchen katha, for instance, queers its setting within a community kitchen. As Ashis Sengupta writes, the kitchen is transformed into another space and reflects "a network of social relations that include cooking, feeding and the 'in-process' performance," where one can "practice what is prohibited" (Sengupta 60). However, Sengupta is critical of the performance's correlation of women with the kitchen and writes:

> By situating a woman's story entirely in the kitchen, traditionally a confined space for females, Chowdhry's work may, nevertheless, be accused of returning the female subject to the trivialities of domesticity. Critiquing such marginalization, seldom experienced by males in an androcentric society, there are productions by other theatre-makers that have the audience experience the risk and toil of the women who work there life-long to feed the family. (59)

As Sengupta argues, Chowdhry's work transforms the kitchen from a trivial, domestic space to a community kitchen where people, irrespective of gender, work together, and where dramatic things happen. The kitchen, in Sengupta's analysis, becomes more than it was otherwise. I would add that Chowdhry's work queers the kitchen space in order to draw attention

to it, and in returning to the "trivialities of domesticity," not only *Kitchen katha*, but most of Chowdhry's performances queer what is considered trivial by drawing attention to its symbolic, metaphorical, sensorial, and other attributes. It is not that Chowdhry's performances stage trivial objects and spaces, the queer effect that accompanies the staging of domestic objects draws attention to perceptions that view the domestic as trivial, part of a woman's world, or furthering the oppression and objectification of women. These perceptions are materialized through semiotic and perceptual sensations and experiences, and queer objects and costumes in The Company's performances disorient audiences by providing a new way of looking at ordinary things, particularly those that have gender-based associations with women.

This foregrounding of women's objects, spaces, and experiences in Chowdhry's work makes significant interventions in the very form and practice of Indian theatre, as in the feminist theatre of practitioners such as Anuradha Kapoor, Anamika Haksar, and Maya Rao, among others. The Company's intermedial aesthetic and form deconstructs text and questions the primacy of the literary medium in theatrical representation. The fictive cosmos of theatrical narrative, to use Hans-Thies Lehman's terminology, is disrupted by alternating between presentational and representational modes, and self-evident characters are fragmented, combined, or ejected from the narrative altogether. Instead of embodying one character, actors switch between narrating and embodying multiple characters, and are placed on the same level as objects, costumes, sound, and scenery. Instead of fake props, real objects from the domestic space, real food, fruits, and vegetables, enter the stage space, drawing attention to their hyperreality and domesticity, and taking on a life of their own. Music, movement, sounds, and dance do not merely play a supplementary role, or emphasize the affect of words and dialogues, but transform into sensory-semiotic messages to be decoded by the audience. Finally, authorship

and creation are distributed through a collaborative and improvisatory process, interrogating the hierarchy of roles within theatrical practice in India. In the next section, I undertake a performance analysis of *Trunk Tales* (2022), a solo performance by Vansh Bhardwaj directed by Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, using Sara Ahmed's framework of queer phenomenology.

Multisensory Storytelling: Intermediality in The Company's *Trunk Tales*

Stitched together from improvisations based on memories, experiences, references, and everyday observations, *Trunk Tales* is composed of four distinct stories that chronicle the experiences of "nowhere people – people who don't really fit in" (Chowdhry qtd. in Khosla). The performance was funded by the Goethe-Institut and Rangashankara, Bengaluru, and filmed into a cine-play by Chowdhry's son, Kabir Singh Chowdhry, in response to the logistical restrictions of the pandemic. Restrictions due to the pandemic also facilitated the minimalistic style of the performance, with the absence of the music of the Naqqals, and Chowdhry's solo collaboration with Vansh Bhardwaj in this production.

The stories emerge out of trunks (metal boxes used for storing objects) to address the politics of caste, gender, and class in contemporary society, centering experiences that are overlooked by audiences. Through enactments that involve the actor's body, water, and everyday objects, the performance communicates simultaneously through semiotic and perceptual registers, exhibiting intermediality in its overlapping of artforms and use of cross-modal aesthetics. Emphasizing the materiality of objects, enactments expose the concealed labor and historicity of domestic objects, infusing them with symbolic and sensorial meanings, and enabling audiences to view the objects in a new light. A queer phenomenological reading of

Trunk Tales centers the trunks as titular characters and an "orientating device" that evoke specters of the Partition of 1947.

In *Trunk Tales*, Bhardwaj enters the stage with a stack of trunks, circumambulating with them around an arrangement of shallow water-filled trays set on the floor (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3: Bhardwaj wheeling trunks around the arrangement of water. Screenshot from a recorded performance of *Trunk Tales*, 2022.

By changing into different costumes that Bhardwaj retrieves from each trunk, he re-enacts four different stories that highlight underrepresented perspectives, switching between narrating and embodying characters within the story. For the purpose of analysis, I have added representative titles to each of the stories. The first story, "Bottle," raises questions about our accessibility to drinking water by exploring the experience of a migrant worker who is thirsty and wants to drink water. Drawn from "Invasion Poem" within Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman's *7 Stages of*

Grieving, in the second story, "Angel," Bhardwaj tells a traumatic story of sexual violence, re-animating a ceramic fish as his co-actor, and switching between narrating and embodying characters within the story. Next, in "Justice," Bhardwaj interrogates the concept of "justice of eating," from the perspective of caste by juxtaposing different experiences of eating. The last story, "Skirt," is about Vikas, a young man who is running away from home, and his mother's black skirt. By wearing his mother's black skirt, Vikas finds himself, but because he chooses to wear this garment he is ostracized from his home, his family, and his circle of friends.

The arrangement of water on the floor reminds me of fragmented farmlands that one frequently sees outside cities, particularly during train journeys in different parts of India. The sound of the wheels grating on the surface of the stage recalls the sound of trains and intensifies this correlation. Used by Bhardwaj in different ways during the performance, the water transforms into rivers, lakes, ponds, and someone's home. Through enactments, Bhardwaj animates, sensorially, the symbolic associations of water with memory. By associating water with rituals of death, mourning, and worship through performance, *Trunk Tales* further explores water's capacity to remember. Water is also transformed into blood, sweat, and tears, making visible inequalities in access to drinking water and turning into audiovisual representations of exhaustion and pain.

Drinking water is the subject of the enactment, "Bottle," and the materialization of labor as sweat reveals the concealed labor that determines one's access to drinking water. Through the actor's embodiment of a migrant worker who is thirsty, the enactment looks at a bottle of drinking water from the point of view of a person whose access to drinking water is restricted. Chanting the lines, "water, water everywhere, not a drop to drink," Bhardwaj changes into a *lungi* (a skirt-like garment), places the trunk on his back, and wears a plastic bag on his head.

From the water, he removes a drenched piece of white cloth, and places the cloth over the plastic bag. He holds a metal *thali* (a large plate used for eating) in his hand and begins walking in circles around the arrangement of water, chanting tables of two in Punjabi (Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4: The actor squeezes out water into the metal *thali*. Screenshot from a recorded performance of *Trunk Tales*, 2022.

Water drips onto the *thali*, making a loud drumming sound, reminiscent of heavy rain on a tin roof. The enactment transforms the actor into a migrant worker who is carrying heavy objects across large distances in the rain. The dripping water visually and aurally intensifies the experience of sweat dripping from the worker's head. Centerstage, the worker stops, exhausted, and squeezes out the water from the white cloth on his head. Materialized as sweat, the dripping water becomes a symbol for the unrecognized labor that produces something that we use every day – a bottle of water.

Downstage left, the worker puts his trunk down, and retrieves a plastic bottle of water and a glass tumbler from it. He covers the trunk with a white crocheted tablecloth, places the tumbler on it, and pours water into the tumbler. Using his right hand, he pours the water loudly, from as great a height and distance as possible. His left hand touches his right elbow, palms facing upwards. Once the tumbler is full, he moves back several steps, his hands joined in veneration. Many audience members would recognize the caste-based gestures associated with the laboring person in this enactment. In addition, the uncharacteristically loud sound created by water falling into the tumbler from a large height and distance draws attention to the gap between the person who bears the load and labor of bringing the water and the person who will drink this water. The tumbler of water on the trunk faces the audience, implicating the audience in this caste-based position of power – the person for whom the water has been poured.

The actor begins shifting from one foot to another with labored breathing. Gradually intensifying his movements that approximate actions such as digging or farming, he begins chanting the relations of production that govern his existence. He tells the audience that the stove is made from mud from the pond, which belongs to the *zamindar* (landowner), and while the hands that plow the fields are his, the land, fields, harvest, plough, animals, wells, rivers, and houses all belong to the *zamindar*. He asks the audience, "Then what is ours? The village? The city? The nation?" (14:32). Out of breath, he points to himself asking the audience if his exhausted body still belonged to him. Through movements, gestures, and sound patterns, the actor re-enacts the kinesthetic experience of laboring, and as he narrates his abjection from all spaces including his own body, he performs the exhaustion that sustains this whole enterprise.

Noticing the glass of water still intact on the table, the actor asks the audience if he could have some water to drink. When no one responds, he goes to the water-filled trays, treating it as

a pond or any other public source of water. He attempts to drink from it but is unable to scoop up clean water to drink. Signaling the glass of water, he asks the audience, “Whose water is this? Mine, yours, or the rivers?” (16:05). He picks up the glass of water and drinks it with great relish, swallowing audibly. Juxtaposed with an enactment of the production and satiation of thirst, the worker’s questions about the ownership of natural resources such as water are disorienting. Caste-based notions of accessibility to water continue to be violently enforced in many places in India, and result in murders of Dalit people, including children. The allocation of river water to nations and states has been a contentious issue in the Indian subcontinent, including during the Partition. In experiencing thirst by performing exhaustion, followed by a moment of uncertainty about drinking the water in the tumbler, the actor performs acts of disorientation that foreground the experience of an everyday activity such as drinking water. By queering a bottle of water, “Bottle” highlights the inequalities that predicate the survival of migrant workers, and by creating a caste-based relationship with the audience through the bottle of water through gestures, the enactment draws attention to mechanisms of caste and class that govern accessibility to drinking water.

In a similar vein, “Justice” interrogates the plausibility of notions of food equality by juxtaposing contrasting experiences of eating food. The actor extracts a suit from the second trunk, a costume haunted with symbolic significance to audiences familiar with Chowdhry’s performances. As he wears the suit, he channels a character who tells the audience about a dream he has, called “A Justice of Eating.” The character dreams about instituting a “national table,” with a clean, crisp, white tablecloth, crockery, flowers, and food from every village and city (27:54). In his dream, everyone sits at this table and eats together, irrespective of class, caste, religion, and gender. From the same trunk, the actor extracts a *thali*, containing real food and

covered with plastic wrap. The *thali* contains an elaborate meal – rice and multiple bowls containing *dal* (lentils) and *sabzi* (vegetables). The actor displays the food to the audience, sits down on the trunk, and begins eating the food with a fork (Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5: The character eats real food from the *thali* with a fork. Screenshot from a recorded performance of *Trunk Tales*, 2022.

As he speaks to the audience, the actor progressively transfers his leftovers into smaller and smaller plates – a metal quarter plate, a paper plate, and finally a newspaper – and washes his hands with water on the remaining scraps. Along with the food, the actor changes costumes – removes his blazer and shoes, rolls up the sleeves of his shirt, and finally removes his shirt and pants to reveal plain black clothes. The actor, in this enactment, turns into a medium, channeling characters belonging to different social backgrounds through his costume – in the way that he wears his costume, his posture, sitting position, and gestures. Similarly, while the real

components of the food that the actor eats remain the same, the amount and variety of food, the utensils that the actor uses to consume the food, and its freshness, denote different states in which people consume food. Performed by the same actor eating the same food, the differences in comportment are highlighted, making the enactment disconcerting to watch.

Towards the end of the enactment, the actor embodies a man tormented by hunger, who gladly accepts someone else's discarded food as his meal. The actor embodies the experience of hunger, and recreates it with movement and gesture, describing the feeling as "burning," "piercing," and "like a cold fire" as he enacts it (35:02). Turning his back on the audience, looking back with furtive glances, the character chokes on his food as he eats someone else's leftovers. He asks the audience, "Whose food is this? Mine, yours, or destiny's?" (36:40). Breaking character abruptly, he turns back into the first character and asks the audience if his dream of "A Justice of Eating" is worth keeping alive.

By juxtaposing different experiences with food to highlight the gap between them, the enactment creates a queer effect by unsettling universalist notions of justice and equality in relation to food. The use of real food surprises audiences by its unexpected presence, intensifying both its symbolism and the enactment's connection with everyday experiences. While forcing the audience to reckon with their own experiences with and privileges of food, Bhardwaj and Chowdhry's improvisation removes the enactment from its political moorings in Ambedkarite resistance in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, and the Dalit character is turned into a tragic figure to highlight the inequalities that characterize the eating of food, particularly in India. The performance of hunger through movement and gesture creates a visual representation of an experience that is overlooked by many. By using real food to foreground the act of eating

leftovers, the enactment forces audiences to confront the practice of the relegation of leftovers to other people, perhaps even within their own homes, queering the notion of "A Justice of Eating."

In addition to food, in *Trunk Tales*, water is used to provide the actor with tactile and thermal sensory cues that enables him to experience his enactments. Behaving as more than an actorial aid, water becomes Bhardwaj's co-actor by helping him to translate a multi-sensorial experience into visual and aural sensations for the audience. In "Angel," the actor animates a ceramic fish, by placing it in a water-filled plastic bag, to show the fish his own world – the vast expanses of land, the blue sky, and the birds that lived in the sky (20:15). At the beginning of the performance, the actor had retrieved two *laddoos* (a sweet) from the first trunk, and biting into the first one, had remembered his grandma. Placing pieces of the *laddoo* in the water, as if it is a river, the actor had mourned Angel – "a happy child," who loved to swim like "a fish in water" (5:23). Within this enactment, the actor's gustatory experience evokes memories of his grandma, whose absence is associated with Angel's absence, and the actor performs rituals of mourning for their departed souls.

In "Angel," continuing with the reference to the fish, the actor removes the fish out of the water, and as he crosses the threshold of his home, he begins narrating a traumatic experience from the past. Embodying Angel, he narrates and enacts how two men in black suits and boots had entered her home, smiling, and carrying gifts, and sexually abused her. Re-enacting the incident and remembering the pain, the actor bites into the water-filled plastic bag, letting the water out (Figure 4.6). The water chokes Angel as she screams and pours out audibly into the water-filled tray as she narrates how "they washed their faces with my blood and their black boots trampled my body" (22:50). The mechanosensory cues provided by water enable the actor to externalize a semblance of the flowing of blood and tears, simultaneously providing

audiovisual effects to the audience. The performance of pain, intensified with sensory cues, narrates the violence to audiences from the perspective of someone who was murdered and does not exist because of it.

Figure 4.6: Water pours from the torn bag as the actor narrates a traumatic story. Screenshot from a recorded performance of *Trunk Tales*, 2022.

Traumatized, the actor realizes that the fish inside the plastic bag is out of water. He attempts to resuscitate the ceramic fish by blowing into its mouth, but it is too late, and the actor clutches the fish to his heart singing it a familiar lullaby. He wraps the fish in white cloth, returns it to the trunk, and places the trunk in the river. Manipulated by the actor, the water-filled plastic bag becomes a precarious home for someone who cannot breathe outside water. The ceramic fish is transformed into the lifeless body of Angel, and the actor's gestures of mourning remember

her innocence. Emphasizing the tragedy of this heinous act, childhood songs become songs of warning and mourning, disorienting audiences with their tragic associations.

Memory also plays a central role in “Skirt,” in which the actor embodies Vikas, who runs around the water arrangement with a trunk bundled up in white cloth, panting and looking back in fear. He is in the middle of running away from home. Removing a package bundled up in newspaper from the trunk, he attempts to throw it into the river, but when it does not flow away, he opens the package and removes a black skirt from it. He displays the skirt to the audience, telling them that it belonged to his mother. She is wearing this skirt in a black-and-white photo on their dressing table, and he was told that she was also wearing this very skirt the day that he was born. Vikas drenches his mother’s skirt in water and wears it meditatively, paying attention to its folds and gathers, glistening with water (Figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7: Vikas wears the drenched skirt meditatively as he narrates his memories. Screenshot from a recorded performance of *Trunk Tales*, 2022.

By drenching the skirt, the actor symbolically expresses its memory-infused state, and his tactile experiences performing with the skirt are externalized through its wetness and weight. His movements, swishing around, extending, and slapping the wet skirt around his body create auditory effects that provide a sensory environment for his memories.

Wearing the memory-infused skirt, the actor narrates his memories to the audience. When he wore the skirt at thirteen, his friends laughed at him. At eighteen, when his father caught him wearing this skirt and looking at himself in the mirror, he beat him with a stick. Striking a pose, the actor recreates his punishment and strikes the water-infused skirt with his left hand, making a loud sound. He shows the audience his bare skin, where the stick had broken into his body, resulting in fourteen stitches and a lifelong scar. The "straightening device" of heteronormative gendering leaves a permanent mark on Vikas's skin, etching the pain into his memory. Using water and wearing his skirt, the actor uses a combination of movements, and auditory and visual effects to narrate Vikas's story. By wearing the drenched skirt, Vikas embodies his queerness as he remembers the violence that forced him to leave home.

Caressing himself, he tells the audience that it had been nine years since he had worn that skirt, and every time he looked in the mirror, he felt like the reflection belonged to someone else. He smashed the mirror and threw the shards into the river, but when he assembled the shattered glass, he noticed that each of its pieces reflected a different image but all of them were him, and he wanted to be himself. Vikas dances on the water, and from a plastic bag on the ground, retrieves make-up products – face-powder, lipstick, and a *bindi*. Wearing the plastic bag over his face, he puts on make-up, kisses his own palm, animating it with fish-like movements. Dancing

with fluid movements, he plays *Kith-Kith* (a hopscotch-like children's game) on the grid-like arrangement of water, jumping over the lines on one leg. Dancing, swishing his memory-infused skirt around, and swaying with feminine movements, Vikas dances out of the stage, free to be himself at last. By performing the violence of heteronormative gendering, "Skirt" maintains the tension between the social and sexual registers of meanings of the term "queer" in Sara Ahmed's formulation – between queer as specific sexual practices and non-normative sexualities, and as something that is oblique or out of line with this world. In embracing his queer identity, Vikas revels in the many-sidedness of his personality, embracing the humiliation and pain that he had faced. Between home and a new world, Vikas finds his queer self by wearing his mother's skirt.

As my analysis of the different stories indicates, the cross-modal aesthetic of *Trunk Tales* communicates to audiences through the interaction between semiotic and perceptual systems, making it intermedial in form. Through movements, sound, visuals, and words, the audience experiences a multi-layered performance, fragmented into four distinct stories that emerge from trunks. The actor is transformed into a medium who embodies different characters by changing costumes. He uses water and objects to create experiential worlds through tactile, mechanosensory, olfactory, gustatory, kinesthetic, auditory, and visual sensations, transporting them to audiences through audiovisual and movement-based enactments. The multiple sensory and semiotic stimuli reinforce or contradict each other, disorienting audiences, and in figuring out the meaning of enactments, audiences are confronted with mechanisms of orientation, including inequality in access to food and water, gender, sexuality, caste, and class.

The improvisations that form *Trunk Tales* draw from multiple sources displaying an intermedial and interdisciplinary overlapping of artforms. In an interview published in the *Hindustan Times*, Chowdhry mentions some of the literary sources: "poems penned by

Omprakash Valmiki, Sudeep Sen, Nandita Haksar, Pablo Neruda, and fragments from Nandita Haksar's *Flavours of Nationalism: Recipes for Love, Hate and Friendship* and Nandini Krishnan's *Invisible Men*. They have been interspersed with our own experiences, memories and understanding" (Khosla). I found portions of "Skirt" similar to Arjie's story in "Pigs Can't Fly," part of Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*.[3] As I've mentioned earlier, "Angel" is an adaptation of "Invasion Poem" from the play *7 Stages of Grieving* by Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman and was also a part of The Company's 2019 production *Gumm Hai*.

Conclusion: Specters of Partition in *Trunk Tales*

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed queers phenomenology by focusing on the table as the background on which the theoretical work of phenomenology is done. By looking behind phenomenology at "the things that have been relegated to the back," she reveals the table to be an "orientating device" (28). She raises questions about the table, such as: who has time to sit at a writing table and who needs to work from the kitchen table, and what happens when the table is occupied by someone who does not usually have access to it? How might the table appear differently in moments of deviation (31)?

As a surface on which women tend to do their work, the kitchen table "supports domestic work to do political work," and is a reorientation device. Ahmed draws on Arendt to show that tables are "located between those who sit around it" and supports acts of "passing things around," facilitating a gathering of people and objects (80). Questions such as who made the table, who sits around it, what is on the table, and where has the table come from become, for Ahmed, phenomenological ways to investigate how we sense the world around us. By "turning

the tables" on phenomenology to turn toward other kinds of tables, Ahmed provides a way to look at objects as something to think "with" as well as "on" (61).

In *Trunk Tales*, it is the trunk that becomes this sort of a re-orientation device. Placed strategically in the background of the stage, the trunk is the object that the stories emerge from, connecting them. The trunk is a recurring object in Chowdhry's performances, particularly in the performances devised from the works of Saadat Hasan Manto about the Partition of 1947. For many people in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, the trunk is connected in collective memory to migration, particularly the Partition. Pervaded by silences, the memory and postmemory of Partition emanates from objects locked away in trunks that migrated with people and persist as material memory, too painful and horrific to remember and articulate. With the trunk centered as an archive and brought into focus, other ghostly traces of the Partition emerge from *Trunk Tales*.

The trunk has reappeared in The Company's performances such as *Nagamandala* (2010)*, Bitter Fruit* (2015)*, Naked Voices* (2016)*, Gumm Hai* (2020)*, Black Box* (2021)*, and Trunk Tales*. Across all these usages, the trunk is used when characters are migrating and as a container for valuable inherited objects, recipes, and clothes, among other things. In the last enactment of *Naked Voices*, actors circle the stage with trunks and sit down at different places. One actor opens his trunk and takes out a bowl and a doll. He says this was his grandfather's safe and he had hidden his sister's doll in it while they were playing. Now they belong to him. Another takes out a jar of earth from his trunk and says that this was soil from his home, and it smelled like home. He liked to make footprints in this soil. Another takes out a red dress and says that these are her mother's clothes. She says they've become old and soiled now and asks the audience, "can you imagine how beautiful they must have been earlier?" (1:20:20). Another takes out old letters and says that the words have faded, much like his memories. The last actor says that his

box is empty. He could not carry anything with him because he had to leave in a hurry. Infused with memories of a life left behind hurriedly, unwillingly, or by force, the objects extend a queer effect by foregrounding their own alienation and state of disrepair. They reveal disorientations in notions of home, self, and the future that persist as the aftereffects of the Partition.

Through an examination of the material remains of the Partition, *Trunk Tales* appears to build upon this enactment by devising stories based on objects that remain locked away in trunks. While the stories do not reference the Partition directly, they embed hints and portents that remind audiences of the looming shadow of this collective trauma as a schism that continues to create lines of division and effect violence in the present. The enactments contain references to questions of ownership, such as when characters ask, "whose water is this?" or "whose land is this?" and foreground experiences of migrants who have arrived with nothing. The geometric lines that divide the water into fragments morph into lines that divide people based on caste, class, and gender.

In "Justice," the actor compares the moon to a *roti*, saying that a portion of the *roti*-like moon, along with a portion of *sabzi*-like stars should be in everyone's destiny. The comparison brings to mind the revolutionary poet Sukanta Bhattacharya's frequently quoted lines in "*He mohajibon*" (O Great Life): "*Kshudar rajye prithibi godyomoy/Purnima-chaand jeno jholshano ruti*" (In hunger's kingdom, the world is prosaic/The full moon appears to be a scorched *roti*) (Bhattacharya, my translation). The juxtaposition of a utopian notion of "Justice of Eating" with hunger in *Trunk Tales* recreates the correlation between poetry and prose in Bhattacharya's poem, as it conjures up the context of the Bengal Famine of 1943. The minimalist, stark, and direct style of *Trunk Tales*, similarly, avoids ornamentation and frivolity, queering the prosaic to effect disorientation. Finally, the characters that the actor embodies in the other stories are all

dislocated in different ways – Vikas in "Skirt," is running away from home; the ceramic fish, who later embodies Angel, is removed from her watery home; and the worker migrates across distances and everything that he has belongs to the *zamindar*. The actor and the characters live in in-between spaces, disorienting audiences with their divergent and othered experiences that do not directly reference but build on the spectral remains of the Partition.

In *Trunk Tales*, Chowdhry creates a strange world onstage in which everyday objects come to life. Old trunks are reopened and objects that have gathered inside the trunks are taken out and examined. Each trunk contains a few symbolic objects and is otherwise empty. Other than the few objects that they hold, the trunks enclose empty spaces. Veena Das writes about such a "zone of silence" around women's experiences of the Partition, recollections which use general and metaphoric language and are unspecific about events (Das 54). While recollections of the Partition in *Trunk Tales* are spectral, it nevertheless asks audiences to unearth those objects, locked away in trunks in their own homes, that might evoke stories of their migrations and enable them to reorient themselves to acknowledge the unequal relations that characterize the present. Watching stories and objects from trunks come alive on stage, audiences are reminded of objects in trunks in their own homes, animating conversations about these objects and the memories associated with them (Singh).

Curiously, in writing about the "hybridity of the home," created by gatherings of objects, Sara Ahmed writes about an old, battered set of Shakespeare's plays, "with their ripped covers and failed bindings" that arrived in a trunk from Pakistan to her home in England (150-151). The books had been left behind in Model Town, Lahore in the house that her family moved into after "a hard and painful" journey from India to Pakistan during the Partition. The books had been handed down to Ahmed through her father's father. She points out how odd it is that this object

pointed to England, and she followed that point to English words, culture, and history (152). It is, similarly, odd or queer how the books connect to Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry's *Trunk Tales*, a performance that evokes the Partition of the Indian subcontinent.

Notes

1. See: Kapur, Anuradha. “A Wandering Word, an Unstable Subject…” *Theatre India*, vol. 3, 2001, pp. 5–12; Mitra, Shayoni. “Dispatches from the Margins: Theatre in India since the 1990s,” *Mapping South Asia through Contemporary Theatre: Essays on the Theatres of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka*, Edited by Ashis Sengupta, Palgrave Macmillian, 2014, pp. 64-102; and Sengupta, Ashis. *Postdramatic Theatre and India: Theatre-Making Since the 1990s*. Methuen Drama, 2022, pp 29-32.

2. The Company has performed in festivals including: “National School of Drama Festival (Delhi), Voicing Silences (Chennai), Nandikar Festival (Kolkata), Sangeet Natak Academi (Delhi), South Pacific Basin Festival (Japan), Zannani Festival (Pakistan), Laokoon Festival (Germany), Festival d’Avignon (France)” (Sahapedia). Other festivals in which The Company has performed are the London International Festival of Theatre, Uzbekistan Festival of Theatre, the Singapore Arts Festival, the Japan Foundation for the Arts in Tokyo and Kyoto, Festival of Perth (Chowdhry and Elkunchwar 38). In 2014, Chowdhry was invited to direct an opera, Chilean-American playwright Ariel Dorfman’s *Naciketa*, with the Opera Circus Company in London.

3. Chowdhry had conducted workshops with actors of a 2020 film based on Selvadurai’s novel *Funny Boy*, directed by Deepa Mehta, who is Chowdhry’s close friend.

Chapter 5

Rehearsing Judgment: Intermediality in the Trial Performances of Zuleikha Chaudhari

The law is theatrical in that it is through the law that ideas and propositions are made manifest and adjudicated into reality. Justice must "be seen to be done" and, through trials, the law "reveals itself in action" before an audience, judges, and the jury (Read 9). Both trials and theatre are structured as events within a circumscribed time and space, involve performing and spectating, and allow audiences to process experiences (12). Like actors, judges and lawyers wear symbolic costumes that establish their roles within legal proceedings and, rather than affirming, efface their individuality, establishing "the singular face of the law" (20). Conversely, utterances proclaimed within the court take on an added dimension of affectivity and have real consequences. In taking an oath to speak the truth, witnesses use performative utterances and gestures to swear to forgo theatricality within their testimonies. Through the process of interrogation, lawyers attempt to reveal the performativity of legal testimony to convince the judge of the truth of their positions. Clifford Geertz's proposition of law as a "distinct manner of imagining the real" can be used to describe theatre as well, but unlike theatre, the law invokes prior judgments to effect real consequences (36).

Performances that feature legal processes offer a way of dealing with issues through storytelling and discussion rather than plot and action. Restaging a trial within theatre can enable audiences to reflect on the performativity of the law and legal proceedings, the constructedness of legal truth, and the production of narratives about everyday life. In *Staged: Show Trials, Political Theater, and the Aesthetics of Judgment*, Minou Arjomand discusses trial plays that were performed in Germany and America between 1918 and 1968 and writes that courts employ

theatricality not only to do justice but also to show that justice has been done (4). Reviewing, within the realm of art, trials that extend beyond their immediate concerns to address positions taken by the state provides an opportunity to reveal inconsistencies within the law and injustices perpetrated by the state. The restaging of trials before a theatre audience allows for the consideration of testimony and evidence that would have been inadmissible in court, extending "the process of judgment beyond both the physical and discursive boundaries of the courtroom" (6). Referring to Hannah Arendt's democratic theory of judgment, Arjomand sees the theatre as a space that can create publics and support the co-existence of multiple perspectives. Based on this inference, Arjomand defines a political form of theatre based on reception, in which audience members judge issues within the performance "in the company of others," enabling aesthetic judgment (179).

Within Indian theatre, trials have been featured within plays such as Vijay Tendulkar's *Shantata! court chalu ahe* (*Silence! The Court is in Session*, 1967) and Utpal Dutt's *Barricade* (1972) and *Manusher adhikare (Rights of Man,* 1968), among numerous others. Tendulkar's *Shantata* stages a fictional improvised trial, within the world of the play, in which a theatre group is waiting to perform in a village. The fictional trial ends up having real consequences for the actor who is playing the role of the accused, and the rebuttal and arguments interrogate gender roles within Indian society. In *Manusher adhikare*, Utpal Dutt restages portions of the Scottsboro Trials of 1931, combined with fictionalized sections, to create revolutionary agitprop theatre. In Dutt's *Barricade*, a fixed hearing with a corrupt judge is staged within the depiction of the rise of fascism in 1933 Germany to reflect on political oppression in 1970s Calcutta and the Emergency of 1975.

In contemporary Indian theatre, Zuleikha Chaudhari's trial performances combine theatre with legal proceedings to reflect on the performativity of the law. Unlike earlier trial performances that placed legal proceedings within a fictional narrative framework, Chaudhari's performances stage legal proceedings as real-time experiences and performance events. This intermedial form that combines theatre and law is one of the diverse forms of performance created by Chaudhari in collaboration with interdisciplinary artists. Chaudhari's performance practice is flexible, context-dependent, and iterative in nature, and, in this chapter, I discuss the evolution of Chaudhari's intermedial style to contextualize my analysis of her trial performances.

By restaging historical trials, recreated through documentary evidence, and staging extralegal tribunals dealing with contemporary ecological issues, Chaudhari's performances place the state and the law on trial before an audience. The trial is recreated with real judges and lawyers and judgment is given anew to be re-examined by an audience within an aesthetic framework. *Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case* (2014-2018), a series of performances re-enacting testimony and drawing on photographs from archived evidence of the historic Bhawal Court case, restages excerpts from the trial to reflect on contemporary practices of using documents to prove one's citizenship. Chaudhari's series *Landscape as Evidence: Artist as Witness* (2017-2023) takes the form of staged extralegal tribunals that hear petitions concerning contemporary ecological concerns, with artists serving as witnesses and using their artwork as evidence. In both trial performances, the intermedial form that replicates the courtroom within the performance space enables audiences to exercise and rehearse their capacity for aesthetic judgment.

In this chapter, I examine the workings of intermediality within the trial performances of Zuleikha Chaudhari. First, I trace the evolution of Chaudhari's performance practice and analyze

intermediality within the multiple forms that Chaudhari's performance installations take. Second, I examine intermediality within Chaudhari's series of trial performances, *Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case* and *Landscape as Evidence: Artist as Witness,* to show how the performances reflect the performativity of the law and address contemporary questions related to citizenship and identity and the role of the artist in relation to political and ecological concerns. I conclude with an analysis of the ways in which Chaudhari's trial performances, through an intermedial form that combines theatre and law, activate the audience's sense of aesthetic judgment.

In-Between Spaces: Intermediality in Zuleikha Chaudhari's Performance Installations

Zuleikha Chaudhari, theatre director and lighting designer, looks at contemporary art as existing beyond disciplinary boundaries, and, in her own practice, animates the tension in "these blurred spaces between theatre, visual art, music/sound, video and design" by creating performance installations and other intermedial forms of performance ("Zuleikha Chaudhari"). Moving outside the proscenium stage, Chaudhari creates performances that fit into other spaces, such as the art gallery and other public spaces, in collaboration with multimedia artists and art collectives in India and abroad, resulting in innovative, intermedial forms of performance.

Chaudhari's intermedial performances initiate discussion about the very form of theatre and the nature of theatrical experience by disrupting expected conventions. Performances take various forms depending on the space, context, and subject of performance, and are flexible and iterative in nature, building upon previous theoretical and theatrical preoccupations. In many performances, the experience of spectatorship extends into the participatory realm, with audiences required to do things, such as move across the performance space in response to the

performance, figure things out by combining sense perceptions, create narratives based on the experience of spectatorship, converse with actors or the director, or play the role of a jury and judge things for themselves. In this section, I describe the evolution of Chaudhari's performance practice to contextualize my analysis of her trial performances. Taking diverse intermedial forms, Chaudhari's performance practice demonstrates a preoccupation with theatrical form and meaning and with using performance as a method to explore real life experiences.

Trained in theatre directing and lighting design at Bennington College, Vermont and thereafter in London, Chaudhari currently works out of New Delhi and Mumbai and is the director of the Alkazi Theatre Archives at the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts. She won a Charles Wallace Trust Award in 2001 and the Sangeet Natak Academy Yuva Puraskar in 2007. She has also been Visiting Faculty at the Dramatic Art and Design Academy in New Delhi and is a Distinguished Scholar with the Initiative on Political Conflict, Gender and People's Rights at the Center for Race and Gender at the University of California, Berkeley. Chaudhari has worked with several arts residencies in India and abroad, including Khoj Artists' Association (henceforth Khoj) and Raqs Media Collective in Delhi, DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst) Artists-in-Berlin Program-Berliner Künstlerprogramm (2019), and the School of Law, Birkbeck, University of London (2017), among others.

Zuleikha Chaudhari's parents are Amal and Nissar Allana, who are well known names within Indian theatre. Amal Allana is an illustrious director and former chairperson of the National School of Drama and Nissar Allana is a lighting designer and Director of the Dramatic Art and Design Academy (DADA), Mumbai. Her grandfather is the iconic Ebrahim Alkazi, who made invaluable contributions to theatre and theatre pedagogy in India. Chaudhari says, in interviews, that being from a family with a background in theatre has influenced her to question

and critique theatrical conventions. Her focus on design and dramaturgy and its relationship to theatre spectatorship was inspired by her conversations with her parents, while her grandfather encouraged her to think about the relationship between form, content, and meaning (Nath "Arclights" 2).

Starting out in theatre as a lighting designer, Chaudhari designed lights for productions such as *Sundari: An Actor Prepares* by Anuradha Kapoor, *Fida* by Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, *Khol do* by Maya Krishna Rao, and *The Spider's Dream*, a mime performance by the Mexican artist Eughania Cana Puga at the Women's Theatre Workshop ("Gender"). Chaudhari was part of the group Performers at Work, formed in 1997, and worked on productions such as *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse, *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf, and *The Mahabharata Project* that were concerned with the visual representation of texts. Her initial work includes *Description of a Picture* (2005), a light installation based on texts by Heiner Muller and commissioned by the British Council.

As a director, Chaudhari is part of a group of contemporary, experimental theatre-makers who create performances in unconventional spaces, centering scenography in their productions and creating a "new visual language" in Indian theatre (Sengupta 82). In collaborating with visual artists and arts collectives, Chaudhari has developed an intermedial form, the performance installation, that lies between performance and art installation (23). *Arabian Night*, based on a text by Roland Schimmelpfennig, was Chaudhari's first major site-specific performance installation, supported by Max Mueller Bhavan and Khoj. The performance premiered at Khoj Studios (2006) and traveled to the Seoul Performing Arts Festival (2007). While the performance installation is narrative based, it nevertheless subverts the Orientalism of Roland Schimmelpfennig's *Arabian Night* through formal elements, such as space, movement, and set

design. Placed within an art gallery with actors moving with intentionality within the set, the performance blurs the distinction between performance and installation. The physical and non-naturalistic choreography involves actors smearing mud on a white set through their movements as the performance progresses, communicating through visual and auditory elements.

Chaudhari's 2008 performance *On Seeing the 100% Perfect Girl One Beautiful April Morning*, based on an eponymous short story by Haruki Murakami, extends over three empty rooms within which a performer moves in response to a sculptural installation of fluorescent lights that continuously shift in the empty space (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1: Performer Manish Chaudhuri reacts to light installations in *On Seeing the 100% Perfect Girl One Beautiful April Morning,* 2008. Photograph by Khoj Studios.

The audience is free to move around the performance space, resulting in varying experiences of the performance. The movement of the three elements – performers, spectators, and shifting lights – produces an intermedial effect, making the space dynamic and expanding time such that

"a moment in a narrative is opened up to the possibility of multiple meanings and resonances" ("*On Seeing*"). Movement and acting are liberated from dependence on a prior text, and, rather than illustrate narrative, performers' movements within the performance space produce visual experiences/sensations in the audience that may or may not pertain to the original text.

By unsettling theatrical conventions in performance, Chaudhari's work explores "the nature of performance," disrupts narrative structures and theatrical expectations, and draws attention to issues of spectatorship such as the creation of images and the production of specific experiences within the environment of performance (Chaudhari "Theatre Gupshup"). She says about her own work that

> It explores and develops a series of questions to do with the interruption of the narrative structure, how images are constructed and experienced, what is the relationship of the text and performer, what is the dynamic between the performer and the space, how are narratives created and understood, and finally, what is the role of the spectator in the performative experience. (Chaudhari "Theatre Gupshup")

In Chaudhari's 2009 performance *Some Stage Directions for Henrik Ibsen's John Gabriel Borkman*, stage directions from Ibsen's text are combined with texts by Raqs Media Collective to move away from personal narratives of characters within the play and recreate responses to the issues of mining, extraction, and accumulation. The performance explores Chaudhari's interest in form and the creation of images from textual descriptions, and asks, "Can the description of an image serve as a mode of its performance?" ("Delhi Ibsen"). Performers are isolated into white cubicles that reflect characters' physical landscapes within the text and perform monologues that narrate their own experiences of thinking about performing the text as the character. The intermedial form between performance and installation enables the audience

to distance themselves from the "emotional landscape of the play and to construct another landscape of larger histories" ("Delhi Ibsen").

As a designer, Chaudhari questions the theatrical practice of centering the performer and using design elements to bring the performer into focus, and many of her performance installations remove the performer in order to investigate the ways in which design elements create meaning in spectators' experience. In her series of performances entitled *Propositions: On Text and Space* (2010-11), Chaudhari explores how the absence of a performer to mediate the text would affect its presentation. She asks, "if there is only text and space how does text transform, literally, into image?" ("*Propositions*"). In *Propositions: On Text and Space I* (2010), texts from Chaudhari's previous performance *Some Stage Directions* are arranged in the form of three-dimensional light installations that "interpret and respond to the text spatially and experientially" ("*Propositions*"). The performance installation creates a landscape out of text and uses it as "a plastic and a concrete form" to explore the performativity of writing ("*Propositions*"). *Propositions: On Text and Space II* (2011) expresses texts from Roland Schimmelpfennig's play *Before/Afterwards* through the interplay of text, sound, space, and light. Building upon the text, the performance installation recreates the experience of being inside a picture frame, using transforming frames created by lights, and incorporates video and audio that reference texts and characters from the play. By externally recreating the internal emotional landscapes described in the text, the performance installation maps worlds that are between imagination and real life and explores the relationships between textual and spatial worlds.

Chaudhari's *The Transparent Performer III: Some stage directions for [24 Jor Bagh]1/x*, uses scenography to investigate the nature of theatrical spectatorship. In this site-specific performance installation or performative environment, the space of 24 Jor Bagh was transformed

using imposing wooden beams that dropped down from the ceiling or grew out of the floor, running across each other and disrupting the space (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2: Wooden beams extend across the performance installation with stage directions on the wall guiding audiences in *The Transparent Performer III*, 2014. Photograph by *Outset Contemporary Art Fund.*

Spectators maneuvered around the structures in order to experience the performance. Lights were attached to the beams to emphasize them and text on the walls functioned as stage directions that instructed audiences on how to move across the space. Removing the performer from the equation of theatrical experience, Chaudhari's *The Transparent Performer III* enabled the audience to experience performing for themselves. The performance installation sought to make "viewers rethink the dynamics of space and movement" ("*The Transparent*").

Since 2010, Zuleikha Chaudhari has been working with archival materials. Her performances *Seen at Secundrabagh* (2010 – 2012), *Rehearsing Azaad Hind Radio* (2018), *Re:*

Staging the Trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar (2021) and *Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case* (2014 – 2018) use archival materials to create intermedial and iterative performances that take multiple forms. *Seen at Secundrabagh* is a performance installation that is centered around a photograph taken by Felice Beato in 1858, three months after the rebellion of 1857. Taken in Sikander Bagh, Lucknow in 1858, the photo shows four men and a horse in a field of bones looking directly at the camera (Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3: "Secundra Bagh after the Indian Mutiny" by Felice Beato, 1858. Photograph courtesy: Alkazi Collection of Photography. Reprinted in Zuleikha Allana, "Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case," 2023.

While the photograph was used to project the success of the British Army in quelling the rebellion, the scene that it depicted was staged. The bones were arranged, and the subjects had to remain in the same posture for a long time for the photograph to be captured clearly (Favero 5). The performance looks at Beato's photograph from the point of view of the present, and creators Chaudhari and Raqs Media Collective employ actors, objects, video, and audio to interpret the photograph and reveal discontinuities in the narrative the photo seeks to create, revealing the photographer's intentions behind its staging (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4: Performers disrupt Beato's photograph in performance in *Seen at Secundrabagh,* 2010-2012. Photograph by Raqs Media Collective. Reprinted in Zuleikha Allana, "Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case," 2023.

The performance installation premiered in Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels in 2011, and has traveled to Festival D'Automne, Paris (2011) and Winer Festwochen, Vienna (2012). The

performance installation was a part of the performance Extra Time by Raqs Media Collective in Shanghai and traveled to various locations in India thereafter.

Chaudhari's *The Transparent Performer/Surface Tension* begins with the fifty-minute performance of *Seen at Secundrabagh* by Kavya Murthi and Bhagwati Prasad, followed by similar performances centered around thirty-five photographs that Chaudhari selected from the Alkazi archives. Using an intermedial form that uses video, narration, and text to disrupt projected photographic images, the performance seeks to question the status of the archive and the credibility of photographic images by looking at them from the perspective of the present and reflects on the performer as the mediator between the time and space of the photograph and its spectatorship in the present.

In *Rehearsing Azaad Hind Radio* (2018), a performance installation consisting of a 40-minute video placed within the set of a radio broadcasting studio, broadcasts made by Subhash Chandra Bose from Berlin over Azad Hind Radio[1] are re-enacted by four actors playing Bose (Figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5: *Rehearsing Azaad Hind Radio*: The performance installation with a video playing within the set of a recording studio, 2018. Photograph by Zuleikha Chaudhari. Reprinted in *Heath*, 2 Dec. 2019.

In conversations with director Zuleikha Chaudhari, actors playing Bose speak about his political philosophy and his strategies for gaining independence from British occupation. These re-enactments are interlaced with a 2016 lecture series on nationalism held at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). The lecture series took place at a time when JNU was labeled as a harborer of anti-nationalists by the state on account of student protests against state-sponsored injustice. Structured as rehearsals, the performance draws a correlation between historical and contemporary ideas of nationalism, particularly those that were formulated by anti-nationals – those who had been excluded from narratives of the state making them impostors. In representing Bose through actors, the performance also addresses Bose's experiences as an

imposter who had donned multiple disguises and names in order to garner support for his armed struggle against the British.

Re: Staging the Trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar (2021) is an online performance that consists of re-enactments and a retrial of the 1857 trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor of India, that formalized British occupation in India. Through an unfair show trial that demonstrated Zafar's collusion with an international Muslim conspiracy to overthrow the British colonial Government, the British consolidated power in India and banished Zafar to Burma (now Myanmar). The show trial, in the semblance of bringing justice to the people of India, was, in reality, an event staged for the establishment of colonial rule. In addition, the trial created an archive that provided evidence and created a narrative of Zafar's alleged "mutiny" against the state (Sharma and Chaudhari 2). In Chaudhari's performance, Zafar's poetry is employed to create a counternarrative of Zafar's allegiance to the people of India and disrupt the official legal archive of his trial. Along with actors, real lawyers, a judge, and expert witnesses, the prosecution's case against Bahadur Shah Zafar in the trial is re-enacted and re-examined from the perspective of the present. The performance enables audiences to consider issues of citizenship and belonging, fathom the limits of the law, and question narratives of the state as present within legal archives. The re-trial also demonstrates the creation of a narrative of Islamophobia by the colonial state that continues to reverberate within the present. Through an intermedial form consisting of re-enactments of Zafar's poetry placed within a retrial, the performance asks if poetry can enable us to "imagine and give voice to visions of alternative sovereignties" (Sharma and Chaudhari 5). New iterations of this material, *Public Rehearsals of Untitled Trilogy 3 and 4: Re: Staging the Trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar (1858)* (2024) rehearse

portions of the prosecution and defense statements from the original trial and analyze these from the perspective of the present (Figure 5.6).

Figure 5.6: Social media poster for *Public Rehearsal 4*, 2024. Social media post by Zuleikha Chaudhari on *Facebook*, 14 Feb. 2024.

Chaudhari's interest in creating performances from archival materials and photographs led her to the Bhawal Album from the Alkazi Collection of Photography, containing ninety photographs concerning the Bhawal Court case, a trial that extended from 1930 to 1946 concerning the ownership of the Bhawal estate in Dhaka. Chaudhari first performance based on this material *Even Better Than the Real Thing* (2014) at Khoj, draws correlations between theatre and law, such as their capacity to construct narratives, relate to history, and reinterpret archives,

creating present and future versions of reality. The testimony of artists, two photographers, a sculptor, and a painter, is employed to reinterpret legal testimony and reveal alternative truths. In Chaudhari's series of performances *Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case* (2014 – 2018), the Bhawal material in reinterpreted to reveal the performativity of law and performance as "a mode of doing something to the world" ("Landscape" 3).

Created in collaboration with Khoj, *Landscape as Evidence: Artist as Witness* combines Chaudhari's explorations in performance and law with Khoj's interest in art and ecology. The performances explore the archive of art created at Khoj to ask if art can serve as evidence to address contemporary ecological concerns within a legal framework. Chaudhari's series of performances *Landscape as Evidence: Artist as Witness* take the form of staged hearings before a commission of inquiry composed of real lawyers and judges and with artists as expert witnesses who provide evidence of environmental injustice through their art and artistic practices. I discuss the working of intermediality within *Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case* and *Landscape as Evidence: Artist as Witness* in the following two sections of this chapter.

Reframing the Archive: Intermediality in *Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case*

Zuleikha Chaudhari's *Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case* (2014 – 2018) consists of a series of performances based on the Bhawal Album from the Alkazi Collection of Photography in New Delhi containing ninety photographs used as evidence in the historic Bhawal Court case (Allana "*Rehearsing*" 104). The Bhawal Court case dealt with the ownership of the Bhawal estate in Dhaka, which at the time contained areas that were outside the control of the British. The estate had passed to Ramendra Narayan Roy, the second Kumar (prince) of Bhawal, and his two brothers. Roy was said to have died in Darjeeling in 1909, and his brothers

had died soon after. After the death of the second Kumar, one-third of the property was transferred to Bibhabati Debi, who was the second Kumar's wife. In 1920, a *sanyasi* (ascetic) appeared in Dhaka who looked like Ramendra Roy. There were rumors that he was Roy, despite his own initial denial of this proposition, and the fact that he spoke Hindi, not Bangla. The next year, he returned with two lawyers and laid claim to the estate, and a trial ensued which lasted until 1946, within which "the man's physical attributes, birthmarks, testimonies, witnesses, and memory were put together as forensic evidence to establish the identity of the man" (Chaudhari "*Rehearsing*" 197).

In the historic case, extending over three courts of law, the judgment ruled in favor of the plaintiff, the *sanyasi* who claimed to be Ramendra Narayan Roy. According to the terms of the petition, Roy agreed to a remuneration from the Court of Wards in exchange for his portion of the Bhawal estate. The *sanyasi* died a few days after news of the final judgment reached him by telegram. In February 1950, the *zamindari* system was abolished by the East Pakistan legislative assembly. The Court of Wards awarded Bibhabati Debi a sum exceeding Rs. 80,000 since she was one of Roy's widows. She refused the remuneration because she did not believe that she was the widow of the man who had died (Chatterjee 385). Structured as rehearsals, auditions, and retrials, Chaudhari's performances *Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case* re-enact the testimony and evidence presented in the historic trial and build on the archive to produce alternative contemporary meanings out of the documentary material.

One of the first iterations of *Rehearsing the Witness*, performed at the Mumbai Art Room in 2015-16, consisted of open rehearsals in which actors and participants read and enacted original testimonies from the Bhawal material and referred to photographs and drawings from the original evidence within the framework of a fictional retrial. The performance focuses on two

testimonies – Kumar Ramendra Narayan Roy (the plaintiff), the second Kumar of Bhawal, played by Saif Ali, and Bibhabati Debi (the first defendant), wife of the second Kumar of Bhawal, played by Mallika Taneja (Figure 5.7).

Figure 5.7: A performance of *Rehearsing the Witness* at the Mumbai Art Room with Bibhabati Debi (Mallika Taneja), Kumar Ramendra Narayan Roy (Saif Ali), lawyer A. N. Chaudhary (Prayas Abhinav), and Zuleikha Chaudhari, 2015-16. Photograph by Dheer Kaku. Reprinted in Zuleikha Allana, "Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case," 2023.

The two testimonies furnish contradictory accounts of the second Kumar's death and cremation, and audiences are to decide which of the two performances is more believable, bringing into focus the constructedness of truth production. Spectators could also participate in the process of truth production by auditioning and proving their own ability to become someone else in addition

to themselves. The performance shows that the credibility of narratives within legal proceedings is dependent upon the conditions of viewing and the experience of the audiences.

The second iteration, *Auditioning the Plaintiff*, was performed at the Kochi Biennale in 2016 and 2017 and looks at the relationship between actor and character. The performance installation consists of a single actor placed within a set along with a looping two-channel video (Figure 5.8).

Figure 5.8: Social media poster for *Auditioning the Plaintiff,* Social media post by Kochi-Muziris Biennale, *Facebook*, 1 Feb. 2017.

The actor introduces himself differently at different times – as Oroon Das, Rehaan Engineer, or Atul Kumar – and continually references the video as if it is a mirror and a mnemonic device. The performance installation foregrounds the theatre as a space where reality and fiction converge and the actor as the body within which being oneself and being someone else merges. The performance creates an ambiguous, unreliable witness and an unstable reality, and audiences are asked to judge which of the performances is credible.

The third performance from the Bhawal material, *The Actor as Witness*, was performed at the Dhaka Art Summit in 2018, and investigates the actor as a mediator of history within the framework of a retrial. The performance consists of a retrial with director Zuleikha Chaudhari, real lawyers and judges, and actors who are also expert witnesses.[2] (Figure 5.9)

Figure 5.9: *The Actor as Witness* at the Dhaka Art Summit, 2018. Screenshot from a recorded video of *The Actor as Witness,* 2018.

Actors reenact sections from original testimonies along with new scripted sections and, as expert witnesses, provide their own opinions as experts in their own fields. The judgment is not pre-known, and is provided by the judge at the end of the retrial. In the retrial, several witnesses are interrogated by the judge, Advocate Jyotirmoy Barua, and asked to compare two sets of photos – one of Ramendra Narayan Roy before he died, and another of the *sanyasi* dressed to look like Roy – to decide if the two sets are of the same person (Figure 5.10).

Figure 5.10: The first photograph from the left depicts Ramendra Narayan Roy. The center photo shows the *sanyasi* dressed as Roy and is a copy made by John Winterton.[3] In the third photo, actor Saif Ali, who plays the *sanyasi* in the performance, poses as Roy. Photographs courtesy: Alkazi Collection of Photography. Reprinted in: Zuleikha Allana, "Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case," 2023.

Different witnesses have different opinions about the issue and explain their positions. The rebuttal and arguments question the truth claims of the medium of photography and its relationship with identity and the self. Actors also re-enact excerpts from the original testimony, supplementing this with their own opinions, to reflect on contemporary questions of citizenship, identity, law, and performance.

The restaging of the trial features expert witnesses who shift between embodying witnesses from the historical trial and reflecting on the testimony and evidence as themselves. In this way, the performance puts actors on the stand as witnesses to the historical trial. By employing acting to embody historical people as characters, actors/expert witnesses produce interpretations of documentary material from their own positions, creating alternate narratives and possibilities that might have been overlooked by previous examiners. Embodying the role of Bibhabati Debi, Samina Luthfa, actor and sociologist, imagines the possible reasons behind Bibhabati Debi's refusal to accept that the returned *sanyasi* (the plaintiff) was her husband, the second Kumar of Bhawal. Luthfa's testimony reveals Bibhabati's backstory – she believed that her husband had died in Darjeeling in 1909, had moved out of the Bhawal estate after his death and claimed his life insurance, and had resisted the Court of Wards when they tried to take over her share of the Bhawal estate. She managed her portion of the estate, ran a household, and had achieved a level of financial independence (Allana "*Rehearsing*" 122). When the lawyers ask Samina Luthfa if Bibhabati Debi was a credible witness given the fact that her acquired independence and agency could have influenced her refusal to recognize her husband, Luthfa says that since Bibhabati was in a marginalized position in this case, she would have to take a position that supported Bibhabati. The lawyer dismisses the witness by pointing out that Luthfa spoke about taking a position and must therefore be biased. This exchange demonstrates the way in which Bibhabati Debi's opinion about the identity of her husband is denied within legal proceedings and emphasizes the court's suppression of Bibhabati Debi's lived experiences to produce a judgment that supported the interests of the state.

Actors step in and out of their roles using the theatrical frameworks of audition and rehearsal. For Chaudhari, an audition is the way in which an actor inhabits a role. Within an

audition, the actor presents a narrative about themselves to a panel of judges to prove their capability to inhabit a particular role. The actor oscillates between self and character, speaking in two voices. Rehearsal, for Chaudhari, is a "thinking and operating strategy" that foregrounds peripheral issues and provides a way to structure "tentative moves towards framing and reframing discourse" (Allana "*Rehearsing*" 113). The use of theatrical devices, such as rehearsal and audition, within the framework of a trial, enhances the theatricality of the realistic set that mirrors a courtroom. The performance draws a correlation between auditioning and testifying, and between rehearsing for a performance in the theatre and in the witness box. The actor, placed in the witness box, becomes a medium for channeling past events that are brought into the present through an act of interpretation. In this way, the performance foregrounds acting as one way of existing in the world, rehearsing as a process by which one might re-examine history, and auditioning as a method that enables the co-existence of multiple possibilities.

The use of documentary materials, including photographs and witness testimony, within the performance enables audiences to access a historical trial to reflect on contemporary questions, historicizing the state's use of documents and photographs to assess citizenship and belonging. Through the format of the trial, legal "history and historiography" is put on trial by revealing the "theatrical and narrative devices through which lawyers and judges present history" (Arjomand 94). The restaging of the trial about identity and ownership of land and the reexamination of historical evidence and testimony enables the discussion of contemporary issues related to citizenship and modern methods of assessing one's claim to citizenship, questions that were brought up by the state's drafting and institution of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC).[4]

When Rahaab Allana, curator of the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts, the archive where the photographs were stored, is questioned if both sets of photographs feature Ramendra Narayan Roy, he says that although in the historical trial the two sets were proved to be of the same person, he did not think so (as shown in Figure 5.10). Allana points out that the photographs had been taken under different conditions, and, thus, the "iconographic trace" had been broken, making it difficult to conclusively prove their origins. In addition to the individual, the "performativity of the camera" made it difficult for Allana to draw any conclusions about the photographs (Chaudhari "*Rehearsing*" 205). Moreover, the *sanyasi's* photograph was taken by a photographer hired by the state and was a re-staging of Roy's original photograph with the *sanyasi* playing the role of the person the photograph was meant to depict. According to Allana, this made for an "environment of coercion" and changed the "context for the interpretative value" of the photograph (205). Allana's testimony demonstrates the ways in which documentary evidence is used to create history and reveals the constructed nature of reality. The cross-examination presents multiple possible interpretations of the documentary evidence revealing the constructed nature of historical narratives that are constituted by means of interpretation, editing, and omission.

Advocate Jyotirmoy Barua confirms Rahaab Allana's position by asking him if he had any strong reasons for disagreeing with the verdicts provided by three different courts that the photographs depicted the same person. Allana replies that photographs are conjectural in nature, and it is difficult to know what was happening "outside the frame" when they were taken (Chaudhari "*Rehearsing*" 206). Advocate Barua pointedly questions Allana: "Are you trying to say that a photograph in a passport is not good enough to identify a person?" (206). When Allana replies that photographs can drastically influence the way in which we see things and fragments

individuals to focus on particular features, leading to multiple interpretations, advocate Barua questions Allana if he did not agree that modern identification processes using biometric data or DNA analysis could accurately identify a person. Allana replies that identity is fleeting, and even biological evidence of identity could be manipulated or deleted if it is stored as data. Nevertheless, images are subjective and liable to framing, editing, and elision, and one can never use images for proving someone's identity even when it is provided as evidence. Rahaab Allana's cross-examination questions the truth claims of the medium of photography, and, as an expert witness, his opinions about the subjective and conjectural nature of photographs influence audiences' perceptions of both the historic judgment in the Bhawal Court case and the use of identification documents and photographs to prove citizenship in the present.

The cross-examination also enables audiences to compare historical and modern methods of proving someone's identity using forensic evidence. Rahaab Allana reads from the original testimony as Percy Brown, secretary and curator of Victoria Memorial Hall in Calcutta, and points out the differences in measurement, position, and shape of the head, forehead, skull, hair, eyebrows, eyes, nose, nostrils, philtrum, lower lip, chin, jawline, face, and earlobes of the persons represented in the two photographs, saying that these are "fundamental differences" and that the photographs cannot depict the same person (Chaudhari "*Rehearsing*" 201). On the other hand, John Winterton, an artist and photographer from Calcutta, played by Shahidul Alam, testifies that the original photograph and one that he had copied to look like the original seem to be of the same person, taken at different times, on account of similar types of hair, and the shape and size of earlobes and lips. According to Winterton's archived testimony, the recreated photo could not have matched the original so closely had they been of different people. The actor, Shahidul Alam, however, has an opinion different from the character that he embodies, and

shows the court that the photographs belong to two different people by drawing an outline around the eyes, ears, chin, eyebrows, and mouth in each photograph and comparing the relative ratios of the lengths of the two ears. Alam says that there is a sixteen percent difference in the relative ratios, and it is not possible for such a large change to occur within the short span of time between the two photographs.[5] Thus, the photographs do not depict the same person. The ways in which actors and characters use quantitative methods to assess someone's identity highlights the multiple alternative interpretations of the data generated from photographs. These quantitative methods to identify people from photographs enable audiences to judge the truth claims made by surveillance and face recognition technology.

Drawing a correlation between historic and modern methods of forensic analysis used by the state, Advocate Barua questions Shahidul Alam about the credibility of the state's methods of using measurements to identify people, and if he thought that a person's passport could not be regarded as a form of identification with certainty. Alam replies that the state uses surveillance photographs to identify people that are often blurry, unclear, and badly lighted, which leaves room for error since it is difficult to identify people within such photographs. However, Alam says, as primary witnesses to events, photographers can present evidence. While photographers can distort the truth by manipulating photographs to construct realities, the disenfranchised must resort to it in order to control the narrative. He says: "When you have the state or the establishment using documents to deprive people of their rights, it is photography that they must resort to as a form of evidence" (Chaudhari "*Rehearsing*" 214). Alam's testimony clarifies the complicated nature of truth claims within photography – photographs can distort the truth but are also used as documentary evidence.

By foregrounding the uncertainty that underlines the truth claims of the medium of photography, Allana's and Alam's cross-examinations speak to contemporary debates, surrounding the CAA and NRC, about the use of photographs and other forms of documentary evidence to prove one's identity and claim to citizenship. The comparison between historical and modern methods used by the state to gauge identity enables audiences to historicize the practice of producing narratives of identity within legal proceedings. The fact that the historical trial concerns the identity of a *sanyasi*, who had voluntarily given up his previous identity, raises existential questions about memory and identity. The audience watches lawyers and judges construct accounts of the past and is implicated in a position to judge their credibility and decide, for themselves, whose story they find more convincing. Restaging portions of the trial, the performances throw into question the relationship between identity, photographs, citizenship, belonging, memory, and witnessing. In this context, the CAA and NRC's requirement of producing documents to legitimize one's citizenship seems absurd and highly suspicious.

Combining archival evidence with newly scripted sections and live testimony by expert witnesses, the different iterations of *Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case* use intermedial forms to reframe historic evidence to address contemporary questions about the use of documents to establish someone's identity and justify their claim to citizenship. The performances reveal the ways in which lawyers construct narratives of legal truth about identity using documentary materials and re-examines the historic judgment to reveal the process by which justice was "seen to be done" while protecting the interests of the state. The historic judgment is questioned by being compared to the judgment supplied within the performance through the re-examination of the archived testimony and evidence. In this way the performance demonstrates the performativity of the law, legal truth production, identity, and citizenship.

Recentering Nature: Intermediality in *Landscape as Evidence: Artist as Witness*

Landscape as Evidence: Artist as Witness (2017 - 2018), directed by Zuleikha Chaudhari in collaboration with Khoj and Anand Grover, consists of a series of performances structured as staged hearings before a commission of inquiry, with practicing lawyers and retired judges, that investigates contemporary environmental issues using art as evidence. The project interrogates the role art plays as a means of knowledge production in the context of ecological interrelations. Can artists and their artwork be used as evidence to protect the rights of nature in a judicial context? The project has an iterative format, with each successive version engaging with a different ecological issue and a changing roster of artists. In each of the trials, artists demonstrate, testifying as witnesses and using their art as evidence, how art addresses and tackles environmental problems.

The first performance of this series, held at the Constitutional Club of India on 7 April 2017, addressed a petition filed by director Zuleikha Chaudhari and Khoj opposing a fictional river-linking project recently cleared by the National Green Tribunal and thereafter the Supreme Court of India. Real-life lawyers Norma Alvarez and Anand Grover appear for the petitioners and for the state respectively, and the case is heard by retired judge Honorable Justice Yatindra Singh. The petitioners argue that the methods employed by the state to assess the impact of the river-linking project use a cost-benefit analysis that addresses the economic productivity of the land but ignores the project's effect on people and ecology. The second part of the petition requests that artists be permitted to serve as witnesses in legal proceedings. The petitioners present the evidence of artists Ravi Agarwal, Navjot Altaf, and Sheba Chhachhi, who employ different mediums to foreground those voices that are left out of courtrooms while making decisions about large-scale projects such as the river-linking project.

Ravi Agarwal, who works with photography, video installation, and public art, presents a clip from his documentary film *The Flower Pluckers*, that documents the work of marigold farmers who live along the banks of the river Yamuna, near Delhi (Figure 5.11).

Figure 5.11: A video of *The Flower Pluckers* plays in court. Screenshot from a recorded performance of *Landscape as Evidence: Artist as Witness,* 2017.

The traditional methods that the marigold farmers employ exemplify a "sustainable local ecology" that, Agarwal argues, can be a model for other landscapes (Chaudhari *Landscape* 23:30). Navjot Altaf, a visual artist who works in collaboration with Adivasi communities and artists in South Bastar, Chhattisgarh, presents a video clip from her film *Soul. Breath. Wind*, which documents a person speaking about the effect of industrialization on his life. He says, "Ever since Jindal has come, we have been living in fear. We can be killed… can be crushed by a truck at any time… This is what is happening. "Divide and rule" is the norm that Jindal follows. If our land is taken and we go hungry, what will we do? We too will become Naxalites." (Chaudhari *Landscape* 56:47). Altaf's film documents people who speak about the haunted

qualities of rehabilitation colonies in which the displaced face acute shortages of food and water, experiencing the unseen violence of industrialization. The final witness, Sheba Chhachhi, combines multiple mediums, photography, image, video, sound, objects, and lights, in space to create immersive installations. She presents as evidence her film, *Nilkanthh. Poison. Water*, in which she retells the myth of *samudra manthan*[6] to address the toxicity that surrounds the daily lives of people in Delhi. At a time when myths are being manipulated to pursue various agendas, Chhachhi's art retells myths to address contemporary ecological crises. Through their artwork, artists give examples of the negative impact that large-scale projects, similar to the river-linking project, have on local inhabitants and ecologies, demonstrating that it is unwise to exploit nature.

Based on the evidence presented by artists, Justice Yatindra Singh surmises that although there is some subjectivity in the evidence of the artists, the subjectivity arises out of the objective observation of a culture for a long time. The evidence that artists can provide is not irrelevant and should be considered, along with other factors, at the time of deciding upon large projects affecting landscape and ecology. However, Justice Singh upholds the river-linking project to continue "with reluctance" (Chaudhari *Landscape* 2:26:33). Sending the matter back would take a lot of time and the evidence brought forward by artists does not present any pressing case of ecological harm.

Re: Luxury Resort, the second performance of the series, part of the Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa, was held in the Old GMC (Goa Medical College) building on 6 December 2018 and addressed a petition opposing a recently constructed luxury resort in Hiracol, Goa by White Sands Sustainable Hotels Limited (White Sands henceforth), which had been constructed by acquiring over three hundred acres of farmland near the coastline. The questions that the commission examines are: first, whether the permissions given to White Sands should be

withdrawn and if the resort should be demolished; and second, whether the evidence given by artists should be considered before approving large scale construction projects in the future. Real-life advocates Caroline Collaso and Anand Grover appear for the petitioners, Zuleikha Chaudhari and Khoj, and the state, respectively, and the hotel is not represented in the hearing. The case is presided over by retired judge Honorable Justice Yatindra Singh, and features artists Kedar Dhondu and Vishal Rawlley as witnesses representing the petitioners.

Kedar Dhondu, a teacher at Goa college of Art and a painter, presents as evidence his paintings that address the destruction of the landscape of Goa and the unlawful selling of property. In a series of twelve paintings, Dhondu depicts the houses of *mundkars* (tenants) and landlords. While the houses of *mundkars* are lived in and lighted, the houses of landlords are abandoned and falling apart (Figure 5.12).

Figure 5.12: Kedar Dhondu's paintings showing the contrast between occupied and unoccupied houses. Screenshot from *Re: Luxury Resort*, 2018.

The contrast between the houses shows the tensions between the two groups and addresses the *mundkars'* protests to claim their right to property.

The second witness, Vishal Rawlley, works with film and video production to galvanize communities around social concerns, particularly environmental issues. As evidence, Rawlley presents a video documenting his public art projects. Along with children who live in the Camrabhat slums, Rawlley had cleaned up the local St. Inez creek and created public installations, such as the *Red Boat* that would enable community members to enjoy the backwaters of Goa, a floating garden that was visited by a local crocodile, and an art installation, *Narakasura*, that reminded viewers to refrain from littering by drawing on cultural imagination. The artists give evidence of the struggles of Goans against absentee landlordism and present alternative community-based solutions to develop the landscape in opposition to massive privately-owned luxury resorts that alienate local inhabitants from their own land.

Based on the evidence provided by Dhondu and Rawlley, Justice Singh rules that the evidence of artists should be considered when deciding upon large-scale projects and the government should issue a direction to this effect under the Land Acquisition Act or the Environmental Protection Act. However, the commission does not recommend the demolition of the luxury resort since it has been completed and the landscape cannot be restored to previous conditions. However, relief should be granted so that the public can access the beaches, coastline, and portions of the resort.

The third performance of the series, *In the Matter Re: Rights of Nature,* is framed as a staged National Green Tribunal addressing the harmful practice of stubble burning in the states of Haryana, Punjab, and Delhi, leading to the deteriorating air quality of Delhi and the National Capital Region. The petitioners in the hearing are Khoj, Zuleikha Chaudhari, and Maya

Anandan, a minor who urges the tribunal to consider the future of her generation. The second part of the petition requests the addition of the Rights of Nature as a part of Article 21 of the Constitution of India, which guarantees the right to life. The petitioners argue that human life is one amongst others in an interconnected and interdependent ecological system, and non-human entities should also receive equal protection and means of sustenance. The hearing was presided over by a Principal Bench with three retired judges, Justice Rajive Bhalla, Justice Kamaljit Singh Garewal, and Justice K. Kannan, who heard from three real-life lawyers, Harish Mehla, Mannat Anand, and Manmohan Lal Sarin, representing Khoj and Zuleikha Chaudhari, the Government of India, and a fictitious farmers union, respectively.

Witnesses included artists Shweta Bhattad, Thukral and Tagra, and Randeep Maddoke. Shweta Bhattad, farmer and artist from the village Barasingha, near Nagpur, Madhya Pradesh, testifies about the organization Gram Art Collective, a group made up of farmers, farm laborers, artists, and volunteers, who organize art residencies and host discussions about sustainable farming practices, such as multi-cropping and growing *desi kapas* (indigenous cotton). The organization also has a *beej* (seed) bank of indigenous seeds and makes products that recycle stubble. As evidence Bhattad presents a tunic that she is wearing of fabric made with stubble produced through multi-cropping techniques and through collective decision-making processes. She also presents her book *Eaten Cotton*, which is made with recycled stubble and *desi kapas* and outlines the work that Gram Art Project has done since 2013 (Figure 5.13).

Figure 5.13: Shweta Bhattad presents her book *Eaten Cotton* and wears a tunic made out of recycled stubble. Screenshot from *In the Matter Re: Rights of Nature*, 2022.

The next witnesses, Jiten Thukral and Sameer Tagra are artists who work with social intervention and studio practice, and present, as evidence, their game *Weeping Farm* that addresses the economy of loss surrounding women involved in agricultural practice. In the game, players embody a character who is a farmer and live out a year in the life of the character. The game is played like *Monopoly* and the player who accumulates the most debt at the end of each round is eliminated. Randeep Maddoke, a documentary filmmaker, presents as evidence his film, *Landless*, about landless farmers, who work on land that is owned by others, and discusses caste discrimination between landed and landless farmers that determines their access to resources that are distributed by the state. Through their artwork, artists give evidence of the problems that farmers face, the unfair criminalization of farmers for stubble burning, and demonstrate sustainable practices that can help farmers to reduce stubble production.

At the conclusion of the trial, the Principal Bench pronounced that the rights of nature should be recognized, and respected, and erroneous anthropocentric models of development should be replaced with those that place nature at the center. However, they are unanimous in their decision not to impose fines on farmers and argue that the call for a complete banning of stubble burning to reduce the air toxicity of Delhi is unfounded as farmers are not totally responsible for worsening air quality. Viewing stubble burning as the major cause of air pollution looks at only one side of the picture and ignores the role of industries and vehicles in contributing to air toxicity (Chaudhari *In the Matter* 2:32:26). Justice Bhalla speaks against the practice of demonizing farmers and indicts the policymakers of the nation who look at farmers only as a tool to provide food security, and do not provide security to farmers (2:37:57).

The structure of Chaudhari's trial performances in *Landscape as Evidence* replicate courtroom proceedings as theatre. The trial features real judges, lawyers, artists, and expert witnesses as their real selves, while the director, Zuleikha Chaudhari, switches between herself and the role of the court master. The lawyers' statements and witnesses' testimony are rehearsed in advance, as is the usual practice within legal proceedings, while the judgment is unknown and given at the end of the retrial based on the evidence and testimony provided. Artists are placed in the witness box and present their art as evidence of environmental injustice. The retrial becomes a scaffolding for artists to display their work to the audience and explain its connection to the issues being discussed. Artists' testimony and evidence demonstrates art's role in society, particularly in relation to the environment.

While theatricality is minimized in the presentation of the court, the retrial foregrounds theatrical elements. The director, Chaudhari, is present on stage as the court master throughout the proceedings and performs duties such as asking the audience to rise when the judges arrive or

depart, announcing cues for lights and videos to be played, and facilitating witnesses' taking of the oath (Figure 5.14).

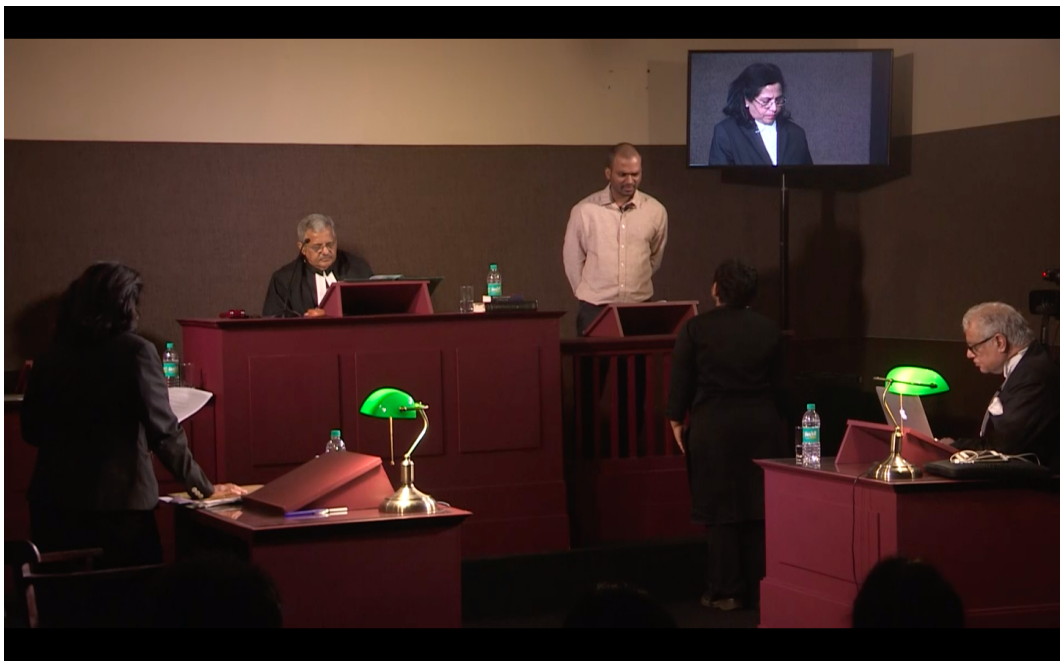

Figure 5.14: Artist Kedar Dhondu takes the oath as Zuleikha Chaudhari facilitates. Screenshot from *Re: Luxury Resort*, 2018.

During the trial, judges and lawyers make comments that remind audiences that the trial is a performance, and rules that govern legal proceedings are overturned by permitting unconventional forms of evidence and interrogating witnesses who are artists. Moreover, the set that looks like a courtroom but is placed within an art gallery, arts festival, or public monument, reminds audiences that the retrial is a performance. Staged as extralegal tribunals, the intermedial form between performance and legal proceeding allows audiences to draw correlations between theatre and law, emphasizing the performativity of law. The staged tribunal embeds artists and their artwork to make a case for particular environmental issues.

Each performance examines at least two questions: first, a specific environmental issue, such as the ecological impact of a river-linking project, a luxury resort, or stubble burning; and

second, an issue that re-examines the paradigm of law, such as the use of art as evidence or upholding the rights of nature. In the first two performances, the question of permitting art as evidence enables audiences to reconsider the definition of "objective truth," view the framing of truth within legal proceedings, and challenge perceptions that view art as subjective and therefore divorced from truth. In the third performance, the anthropocentrism that structures ideas of fundamental rights within Article 21 of the Constitution of India, guaranteeing the right to life, is questioned to foreground an ecocentric model of the law that recognizes the rights of nature to survive and thrive.

In each of the three performances, the examination of environmental issues through art reveals underlying causes and related issues, producing a deep understanding of the topic being debated. The use of art as evidence within the framework of a staged trial presents sides that were left out of consideration within legal proceedings. As lawyer Norma Alvarez argues in the first performance, the state approaches environmental issues in a limited way, using solely quantitative methods to assess their effectiveness. Art might enable the state to pause and imagine alternatives that protect the interests of local inhabitants. In *Re: Luxury Resort*, the petitioner's counsel, Caroline Collaso, argues that art should be permitted as evidence in a court of law since social concerns affect artists deeply and they convert mundane things into spectacular objects that enable people to see things in a different way, challenging the boundaries of law, rules, society, and imagination. The representative of the state, Anand Grover, counters these views arguing that artists live in the world of myths, their views are impressionistic, and they have only a partial understanding of reality. He says: "Artists, at best, are partial and at worst, they are biased" (Chaudhari *Landscape* 2:09:33). However, in the first and second performances, Justice Yatindra Singh adjudicates that art is relevant and the evidence of artists

should be permitted in courts when deciding upon large-scale projects that will impact local ecology. The arguments presented by artists that support the needs of local inhabitants enable audiences to view the issue being discussed in a more nuanced way, and Justice Yatindra Singh's support of the use of art as evidence enables the audience to reevaluate the role that art can play within law and in society.

The cross-examination of artist-witnesses brings up a variety of underlying issues and enables the audience to question established perceptions. For instance, the idea of development that is promoted by the state when it approves large-scale projects that negatively impact local inhabitants is re-examined by artists' testimony. In the first performance, Grover's cross-examination of artist Ravi Agarwal raises questions about the very definition of development – does industrialization only mean the application of new technologies? Agarwal argues that if industrialization displaces people, disabling them from using the new technologies that have been applied on their local landscape, then it alienates people from their own environment (Chaudhari *Landscape* 28:51). Sheba Chhachhi mentions, during her cross-examination by Grover, that the present state of extreme toxicity in Delhi is a consequence of the fast-paced urbanization that India has experienced. Similarly, in the second performance, artist Vishal Rawlley testifies against large-scale tourism projects by private investors that offer no space for public participation, raise real estate values forcing residents to move out, and alienate people from their own land. The lifestyles promoted by such projects is completely unsustainable to the ecology of Goa and prevents people from practicing traditional activities. Rawlley poetically asks, "What will the fisherman sing of when there is no fishing left? What festivals will they celebrate when there is no harvest?" (Chaudhari *Re:Luxury* 49:59). In her closing statement, Caroline Collaso, counsel for the petitioners asks the commission to question: "Is it development

if a few rich people play golf on what were once rice fields providing sustenance to its people? Is it employment if a proud farmer is a caddy or a security guard in a hotel?" (1:06:00) These rhetorical questions, presented in the form of arguments within staged trials, enable audiences to question their own preconceived notions about state supported development and think, for themselves, whose interests are being protected by the state and its judicial apparatus.

Finally, the placing of the trial within theatre enables judges to deviate from established legal procedure. The audience watches as judges make comments about other issues on the side, and applauds and laughs at the judges, lawyers, and witnesses' humorous interjections. The judges, lawyers, and witnesses, in turn, respond to the audience's laughter, and make comments for the benefit of audiences. In the second performance, Grover argues about the dangers of emotionality within protests in his closing statement and mentions the #MeToo movement and cow vigilantism as examples of this occurrence. Justice Yatindra interrupts Grover and asks him to leave out the #MeToo movement from his statement since Grover was not referring to the #MeToo movement in the right way (Chaudhari *Re: Luxury Resort* 1:16:44). When lawyer Collaso speaks about the massive golf course built by White Sands on rice fields, Justice Yatindra interrupts Collaso to ask if there were no golf courses in Goa before this one. Collaso clarifies that there were golf courses, but this particular golf course was massive and built on arable land. This visibly upsets the judge, and he makes a note of this fact. Similarly, the public's loss of access to beaches and to the coastline also makes the judge shake his head in disparagement. The judge says that the court should have given an interim order, and that, "Not all judgments of the courts are fair. Sometimes they give wrong judgments" (1:08:43). While giving his verdict, Justice Yatindra reviews the permissions that the courts had given to the luxury resort and the fact that the state had also conducted a social impact assessment in favor of

the project. The judge shakes his head in disbelief saying, “Mr. Grover, how can that be?” (1:24:59). By questioning the state and the law, the judge’s reaction to the evidence presented enables the audience to see the state and the law as questionable, opening up a space for the audience to exercise their judgment outside the bounds of the law.

Conclusion: Restaging Trials to Activate Aesthetic Judgment

For Hannah Arendt, the perpetrator of evil is someone who displays the “quite authentic inability to think” (“Thinking” 417). At a time when everyone “unthinkingly” follows everyone else, those who are able to think and refuse to join the crowd stand out and thinking becomes a political act (*The Life* 192). Judging is related to thinking though they are not the same. While thinking is concerned with the “representation of things that are absent,” judging involves making decisions about values associated with particular things (193). Judging, “realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world,” and involves the ability “to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly” (193). To exercise judgment, one should be able to see things from a position of impartiality and withdraw from any personal involvement in the matter. Arendt ascribes to the uninvolved spectator this “act of deliberate, active non-participation” that enables their ability to exercise judgment (*The Life* 93). It is only in the realm of art that one can be a spectator, detach themselves from real consequences and personal biases, and exercise their capacity for impartial judgment.

As Minou Arjomand writes, for Arendt, Brecht, and Piscator, the theatre is a space within which audiences can “develop their capacities for judging in ethical ways” by considering multiple perspectives even if it means going against the law (3). Trial plays place the law, history, and the state before an audience by interrogating the theatrical and narrative devices that

govern the creation of legal truth (94). Restaging a trial within the theatre pursues a justice that is not conditioned on established laws and the state's use of violence but one that depends on the "co-presence of people" in space (134). The condition of spectatorship in theatre enables aesthetic judgment, the form of judgment that is not based on following rules but stepping out of one's own position to compare it to the perspectives of others and accepting a "condition of human plurality" (53). Following Arendt, Arjomand defines aesthetic judgment as "one that focuses on particulars and affirms the multiplicity of truths and positions instead of applying a single rule to every situation" (74).

Zuleikha Chaudhari's trial plays enable the audience to rehearse their capacity for aesthetic judgment by re-examining state verdicts in historical trials and concerning contemporary large-scale projects in relation to the environment. The evidence is newly presented by actors and artists in cross-examinations with real lawyers within an aesthetic framework, and a new judgment is provided by a real judge. By comparing the new judgment with previous ones, audiences are able to perceive the intentions of the state and its legal apparatus. The law is put on trial enabling forms of judgment that are not based on the law but on listening to the perspectives of other people – artists, judges, lawyers, and other spectators. By listening to cross-examinations of expert witnesses by lawyers, who present multiple dimensions of the issue being discussed, audiences are confronted with multiple epistemologies and are free to make up their minds about the credibility of the narratives presented.

Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case restages portions of a historical trial, through theatrical frameworks of audition and rehearsal, to center the actor as the mediator of history and the producer of historical knowledge. By re-enacting and reflecting upon the historical trial, the staged retrial produces alternative versions of the case, building upon the

archival material to discuss the performativity of the law, identity, and citizenship. *Landscape as Evidence: Artist as Witness* reconfigures the working of law within a theatrical framework by using art as evidence to assess the ecological impact of large-scale projects cleared by the state. Structured as commissions of inquiry, the staged extralegal tribunals enable audiences to perceive nuances within the issues being discussed, understand the ways in which artists address contemporary environmental concerns, and imagine new legal paradigms. Using an intermedial form that recreates the courtroom as performance installations, Chaudhari's trial performances enable audiences to rehearse their capacity for aesthetic judgment.

Notes

1. Azad Hind Radio was set up in Berlin after the Free India Center was established in Berlin in November 1941. The channel broadcast weekly news bulletins in English and multiple Indian languages and aimed to rally supporters for Bose's armed struggle against the British.

2. Witnesses and actors in the third iteration of *Rehearsing the Witness* include: J. L. Winterton, artist and photographer, played by Shahidul Alam, photographer, Dhaka; J. H. Lindsay (defendant's witness), retired ICS (Indian Civil Service), secretary of the School of Oriental Studies in London and former collector of Dacca played by Nandini Chatterjee, historian at Exeter University; Percy Brown (defendant's witness), artist, secretary and curator of the Victoria Memorial Hall, Calcutta played by Rahaab Allana, curator at the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts, New Delhi; Dharam Das, the plaintiff's guru played by Ahona Palchoudhari, Anthropologist, Brown University; and Bibhabati Debi, widow of the second Kumar of Bhawal, played by Samina Luthfa, sociologist and actor.

3. The first two photos were presented as evidence during the trial in Dhaka in 1934. Both the photos were taken by John Winterton in his studio in Calcutta. In his testimony recorded within the archived evidence of the 1934 trial in Dhaka concerning the Bhawal estate and included within *Rehearsing the Witness*, Winterton says, "The photograph on the left, photograph (LX), I took myself from life. The photograph on the right (LXI), I copied from another photograph. To me, these photographs appear to be of the same person taken at different periods of their life" (Chaudhari "*Rehearsing*" 207).

4. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was passed on 11 December 2019 to amend the Citizenship Act 1955, to fast-track citizenship procedures for inclusion within the National Register of Citizens (NRC) for Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Parsis, and Sikhs

immigrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, who arrived in India before 2014. The CAA leaves out Islam and Judaism from its list of religions and nations such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet, discriminating against immigrants from these communities. The CAA sparked widespread protests across India.

5. The performance of the trial does not specify the dates on which the photographs were taken. The first two photographs in the figure, featuring the Second Kumar of Bhawal and the *sanyasi* respectively, were presented as evidence in the 1934 trial. These photographs were archived within the Alkazi Collection of Photography. The *sanyasi* appeared in Dhaka twenty years after the death of the second Kumar, and thus, there is at least a span of twenty years between the first two photographs in Figure 5.10.

6. The myth of *samudra manthan* from the *Vishnu Purana*, describes the churning of the oceans by gods and *asuras* for *amrita*, the elixir of immortality. Among numerous other symbolic objects, the churning of the oceans also brought up poison, which was ingested by the god Shiva, turning his throat blue.

Conclusion

Landscape as Evidence: Artist as Witness, created collaboratively by Zuleikha Chaudhari and Khoj, places artists on the witness stand who present their artistic works as evidence of ecological harm. The performance looks back at the archive of art created at Khoj to highlight artists who address contemporary issues through their art. By looking at art within a legal framework, perspectives excluded from the domain of law are revealed, creating expansive, alternative ways to think about rights and justice. Within the performance, artists reveal nuances and underlying causes for contemporary ecological issues through their art and present community-based art practices that demonstrate practices of care for one's surroundings. Unlike large-scale externally controlled urbanization projects, these artistic practices help create sustainable interrelationships with humans and non-humans. By creating art in collaboration with local communities and promoting local art forms, the voices of those excluded from consideration are centered and emphasized.

The intermedial performance practices that I discuss in this dissertation work in a similar way to include perspectives that have been excluded from modern Indian theatre by collaborating with artists from different artistic and cultural backgrounds. Within intermedial performances interactions between different media foreground acts of mediation to emphasize disruptions, inconsistencies, and diversions, reflecting mechanisms of orientation that structure our perception of reality. To conclude my discussion of intermediality within contemporary Indian theatre, I point out some points of convergence and divergence between the intermedial performances that I have discussed and suggest future directions for research on intermediality in theatre and performance.

All the performances that I study in this dissertation take an oppositional stance to state policies, accepted ways of living, widespread beliefs, and popular perceptions. As one of the hierarchies that structure aesthetic experience in India, caste is a central concern for many practitioners of intermedial theatre, particularly practitioners and groups who collaborate with folk performers. *Ponga pandit*, *Chandala*, *Janani's Juliet*, and *Natchathiram nagargiradhu* depict characters who survive and resist caste-based violence and discrimination. The performances and films include folk forms of performance that express Dalit experiences, memories, and desires, and question the exclusion of these forms from the mainstream. *Trunk Tales* does not mention caste specifically but exposes how caste structures daily habits of eating and drinking within audiences' own homes. Naya Theatre's *Zehreeli hawa* and the three iterations of Zuleikha Chaudhari's *Landscape as Evidence: Artist as Witness* bring up ecological issues that continue to affect locals. *Zehreeli hawa* exposes the precarity disseminated by neoliberal capitalism, depicts the injustice faced by the residents of Bhopal, and asks audiences to consider the lives lost and lands destroyed for industrial progress and economic growth. Similarly, through staged trials, *Landscape* exposes the detrimental effects of state-sponsored large-scale urbanization projects on the ecology. The final iteration of the performance reverses perceptions about farmers being responsible for air toxicity in Delhi, revealing industrial effluents and vehicles as the real culprits.

Many of the intermedial performances in this dissertation connect environmental justice to social justice. In the performances, industrial projects cleared by the state and managed by global corporations and non-locals are shown to negatively impact local landscapes and communities, particularly humans and non-humans dependent on the land. This simultaneously global and local perspective is reflected in the cast of characters of these performances who

emerge from diverse social, artistic, and cultural backgrounds. *Zehreeli hawa* dramatizes marginalized Bhopalis such as Izzat alongside the CEO of Karbide International. In *Trunk Tales*, the actor embodies different kinds of characters, all of them excluded from spaces in various ways. While *Chandala*, *Janani's Juliet*, and *Natchathiram* depict characters from the same region (Tamil Nadu), the performances and films center intercaste relationships in a highly stratified society. Zuleikha Chaudhari's performances transcend boundaries between artistic and non-artistic disciplines, and include different "actors" – from farmers to real lawyers and judges, and bureaucrats to visual artists and community art practitioners.

The performances I discuss in this dissertation are based on real incidents and experiences, and create fictional interpretations of reality. They cannot be categorized as entirely fictional or entirely real and blur boundaries between reality and fiction. Within intermedial performances, reality and theatricality are imbricated in ways that divest these categories of experience of meaning and significance. Real events such as the Bhopal gas disaster and real incidents of caste violence are remembered through fictional reenactments to mourn those who died, and performances point out existing social and political structures that continue to support the perpetrators of these crimes. *Janani's Juliet* depicts the real theatre group, Indianostrum, devising a play on caste violence and Pa. Ranjith creates a fictional film out of this experience in *Natchathiram*. *Trunk Tales* draws inspiration from a number of textual sources, most of which are autobiographical and non-fictional works, and muddles the codes of reality and fiction in performance by using real objects and food as props. *Rehearsing the Witness* performatively interprets the legal archive of the real Bhawal court case, enabling audiences to historicize the methods used by the state to prove someone's identity and justify their citizenship. *Landscape as*

Evidence, similarly, draws from Khoj's archive of artists to make a case for the relevance of art to real ecological issues.

There is a gap of around twenty years between the performances of Naya Theatre that I include in this dissertation, *Zehreeli hawa* and *Ponga pandit*, and all of the other performances and films in my remaining chapters, which were performed or filmed only after 2018. *Ponga pandit* was first performed by Naya Theatre in 1977 and has been within the repertoire of *nacha* performers Sukhram and Sitaram since the 1930s. Yet, it gained notoriety only after the rise of Hindutva majoritarianism after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and Gujarat pogroms in 2002, renewing its relevance in the present. Written and directed toward the end of his career, *Zehreeli hawa* represents the culmination of Tanvir's intermedial theatrical style. Moreover, 2024 marks the fortieth anniversary of the Bhopal gas disaster, and reminding audiences of the event continues to be relevant within a right-wing state financed by neoliberal capitalists. I include these performances by Naya Theatre to demonstrate the historical connections between more recent intermedial styles and the forms developed by folk performers, the IPTA, and left-oriented theatre practitioners.

The intermedial performances I discuss in this dissertation have different approaches to narrative framework and can be classified into dramatic, non-dramatic, and postdramatic forms of theatre. Performances circumscribed within a single narrative framework such as *Zehreeli hawa*, *Ponga pandit*, and *Chandala* are dramatic performances. The staging of folk forms within the performances embeds additional narratives and experiences into the play and diverts attention from the primary narrative, making these non-dramatic elements. Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry's *Trunk Tales* combines, fragments, and interlaces several narratives, and is a non-dramatic performance. Zuleikha Chaudhari's performances do not subscribe to narrative frameworks but

use theatre and performance to explore archives, real-life experiences, ecological issues, and codes of performance, making them postdramatic performances. In examining different kinds of performances through practices of intermediality, this dissertation demonstrates how the concept can be applied to a diversity of styles, genres, and categories of performance.

By locating new forms of intermediality within Indian theatre, I respond to current scholarship on the effect of digital technology on theatre, but this dissertation considers other kinds of intermediality in the context of Indian theatre, by looking at linguistic, formal, sensorial, and transmedial interactions within theatre. Future avenues for research include forms of digital intermediality within postdramatic forms of Indian theatre, such as within the theatre of Anuradha Kapur, Maya Rao, Deepan Sivaraman, Amitesh Grover, and Abhilash Pillai, among others. Similarly, researchers can explore the history of Indian theatre to locate instances of intermedial interaction that speak to social and political issues of the time. For instance, the theatre of the IPTA, B.V. Karanth, Badal Sircar, Kalakshetra Manipur, street theatre, and other forms that I briefly mention in my introductory chapter can be further investigated through the lens of intermediality. The relevance of intermediality to Indian theatre, as I demonstrate in this dissertation, makes it an effective framework to study theatrical interactions in other multilingual theatrical cultures with diverse indigenous forms of performance. Interactions between theatre and film between regions and nations in multiple languages can also be theorized through intermediality.

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