NATYA KUMBH

COLLECTED PLAYS OF MRINAL MATHUR

VOLUME 2

The Last Trial at the Red Fort. Satya Shiv Sundar. *Dev Divya Aur Duniya.* Hemu – The Last Hindu Emperor of India. Children of Chittagong. *Lala Ji Ne School Banaya Hai.*

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Dear Reader (and hopefully a seeker of new play to perform in, or direct),

The second volume of *Natya Kumbh* is dedicated, as was the first, to my parents, Kumkum and Bhartendra, who are the *KUM-BH* of everything I am.

And to my wife Ritu, and my children, Arnav and Gauri, who are my universe.

The first volume of *Natya Kumbh: Collected Plays of Mrinal Mathur* was, in many ways, a record of a journey that I had not quite planned. This second volume is a reminder that the journey has continued because of the people who have walked with me, stood by me and, often, pushed me forward.

I remain deeply grateful to Mrs. Usha Bhalla, Dr. Mahesh Prasad and the teachers who first encouraged me to step onto a stage; to my B-school batchmates who gave me the moniker 'bhand'; to Ramesh Menon and my Creative Writing classmates who made me dream; to Rasika Agashe, Sanhita Manch and Sajida Saji, who set *Pashmina* on its first journey; and to Dr. M. Sayeed Alam, who showed me what it means to live the life of a professional theatre practitioner and gave me the confidence to inhabit the stage.

I owe much to the directors who have taken my words from pages of these books to the proscenium: Saleem Shah, Zafer Mohiuddin, Amar Sah, Kuljeet Singh, Satyabrata Rout, Glenn Hayden, Rajesh Tiwari, Sudheer Rikhari and many others. To the actors, crews and theatre companies who have given these plays their lives; to the stalwarts of Delhi theatre who encouraged me; to Mahesh Dattani, who taught me the value of focus; to Prakash Goplani, my partner in advertising, which makes my theatre possible; and to my publishers and everyone who has helped these words find their way into a book, my gratitude remains immeasurable.

And now the *kafila* has grown.

Ankur Kalra and Vibgyor have chosen not merely to support my writing, but to help create a larger home for it: Natya Kumbh, The Great Indian Drama Festival, a theatre festival that carries these plays and the conversations within them across cities.

What began as scripts becoming performances is becoming a living ecosystem of plays, artists, audiences, readings and new interpretations.

So this second volume is not simply a collection of plays. It is another milestone on a journey made possible by a remarkable group of people who remain by my side.

The pages that follow are theirs as much as they are mine.

And the *kafila* marches on.

Mrinal Mathur

26th August, 2026

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The Last Trial at the Red Fort

Lal Quilay Ka Aakhri Muqaddama

Note from the Playwright

This play is a fictional retelling of the INA Trials of 1945, where Bhulabhai J. Desai gives the Defence address. As Bhulabhai puts up the defence, the characters of Shahnawaz, Sahgal & Dhillon are shown discussing its key points. At different stages in their conversation, when they are struggling for understanding, perspective, or closure, a figure portraying the soul of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, as the three would have remembered, appears. Through conversation with the characters, or by addressing the audience, he is heard.

The play was originally bilingual. A mix of Hindustani and English. It has been translated by the playwright for this publication.

Characters

Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose

Bhulabhai J. Desai

Maj. Gen. Shahnawaz

Col. Prem K. Sehgal

Col. Gurbakhsh Singh Dhillon

Voice (of the court reader)

Chorus

The stage is lit in three sections. At stage left, Bhulabhai J. Desai is giving his defence address. In the centre is a sparse furnished ante room where Shahnawaz, Sahgal and Dhillon have their discussion. Stage right is a raised platform from where Netaji's memory speaks to all. There should be a provision for a chorus of singers to sing the INA songs where indicated.

ACT 1
Scene 1

Complete darkness. The voice of the court reader rings out as the charges against the three accused are read out.

Voice: The accused Captain Shah Nawaz Khan, Captain P.K. Sahgal and Lieutenant Gurbakhsh Singh Dhillon, Indian Commissioned Officers are charged with; Committing a civil offence, that is to say, waging war against the king. In that they together, at Singapore, in Malaya, at Rangoon, in the vicinity of Kyaukpadaung, and elsewhere in Burma, between the month of September 1942 and the 26th day of April 1945 did wage war against his majesty the king emperor of India.

They are also charged with; Committing a civil offence, that is to say, murder, in that he, Lieutenant Gurbakhsh Singh Dhillon, at or near Popa hill in Burma, on or about 6th March 1945, by causing the death of Hari Singh did commit murder, by causing the death of Duli Chand did commit murder, by causing the death of Daryao Singh did commit murder, by causing the death of Dharam Singh did commit murder.

Captain P. K. Sahgal is charged with committing a civil offence, that is to say, abetment, in that he, Captain P. K. Sahgal, at or near Popa hill in Burma, on or about 6th March 1945,did abet the offence of the murder of Hari Singh, Duli Chand, Daryao Singh and Dharam Singh as specified in the charges thereof.

And, finally, for committing a civil offence, that is to say, abetment, in that he, Captain Shah Nawaz Khan, at or near Popa hill in Burma, on or about 29th March 1945, did abet the murder by one Khazin Khan; and one Aya Singh, of Gunner Mohammad Hussain, which offence was committed in consequence of such abetment.

As the charges are read out against each, each of the three are revealed - Shahnawaz, Sahgal and Dhillon, turning around in their ante room to discuss the charges. They can sit or walk around and light up when they feel like, as would suit a conversation between three former comrades in arms.

Dhillon: Why so many charges? It could all have been covered under one… waging war against the king.

Sahgal : The case should carry some weight. No?

Shahnawaz: They are so very consistent, the British!

Sahgal: What do you mean?

Shahnawaz: Haven't you noticed? They have charged me for the murder of a Muslim soldier and the two of you for the murder of Hindu soldiers… 'Divide and Rule,' here as well.

The three of them laugh.

Sahgal: But they are fair too. It's their… 'identity.'

Dhillon: Which is why we call them '*gora*' isn't it?

Sahgal: I am not talking about the colour of their skin; I'm talking about their 'fairness.' The murder charge is for murdering our soldiers, not theirs.

Shahnawaz: Well, at least they accept that killing an enemy soldier in war is not murder.

Sahgal: *(Pensive)* The enemy soldier was a fellow Indian Shahnawaz *Bhai*. Fighting among ourselves is our identity… and is increasingly becoming so… perhaps that's why they have been able to rule us for 200 years…

Dhillon: But they have started becoming like us, to some extent. Harass the juniors more. Follow the hierarchy.

Shahnawaz: Our hierarchy is determined by our valour Dhillon. You are the seniormost here my friend, you are the bravest. How can PK and I forget the tiger you turned into after giving up your staff position to enter the battlefield.

Dhillon: I don't agree with your assessment sir, besides, I was talking about the charges… Khan *Saahab* is the seniormost by rank, so he's been only charged with abetment, not murder.

Sahgal: Of course he has!! Just see how beautifully they have worded it… 'his abetment of a murder, which was a consequence of the said abetment,' so it's NOT a murder charge, it's abetment but it was his abetment which led to the murder; which makes it a murder charge! Amazing.

Shahnawaz: One should learn word play from them.

Sahgal: It's not word play. They have taught the world how to weaponize language. How to dish out injustice clad in the flavour of fairness and justice.

Shahnawaz: True! And they encoded those words into our laws and made these rules and regulations to make it appear how just and rule bound they were…

Sahgal: To bind us in chains… with words.

The three are silent.

The initial bars of the song "Subhash Ji, Subhash Ji" is heard.

A Singer from the Chorus :

Subhash Ji, Subhash Ji, woh jaan-e-hind aa gaye,

Hai naaz jispe Hind ko, woh shaan-e-hind aa gaye.

The volume is very low. It is a slow version of the song. The opening lines are repeated twice. It stops.

The left stage lights up to reveal Netaji.

Netaji: I had passed the Indian Civil Service in England in 1920, but finding that it would be impossible to serve both masters at the same time – namely the British Government and my country. I resigned my post in May 1921, and hurried back to India with a view to taking my

place in the national struggle that was then in full swing. I reached Bombay on July 16th and the same afternoon I obtained an interview with Mahatma Gandhi. My object in seeking an interview with Mahatma Gandhi was to get from the leader of the campaign I was about to join, a clear conception of his plan of action.

On arriving at Mani Bhawan, the usual residence of the Mahatma in Bombay, I was ushered into a room covered with Indian carpets. The Mahatma received me with his characteristic hearty smile and soon put me at ease and the conversation started at once. I desired to obtain a clear understanding of the details – the successive stages of his plan, leading on step by step to the ultimate seizure of power from the foreign bureaucracy.

Slow Fade

Lights on the trio.

Shahnawaz: Note how he spoke of freedom from 'the bureaucracy.' He knew what they had done. How they were ruling us.

Dhillon: Absolutely! He knew what we fighting against.

We weren't fighting against foreigners, or the British, or the British government or their king and army…

Sahgal: What do you think? Will we ever be free from British bureaucracy!?

Shahnawaz: This *muqaddama* itself, is an example of that bureaucracy.

Dhillon: Example? Or… result.

Sahgal: Friends…

He motions to a character who has walked into the light. It is their defence counsel.

Dhillon: Hmm… Let's hear what our lawyer, Bhulabhai has to say in our defence.

Scene 2

Lights fall on the defence counsel Bhulabhai J. Desai. He gets up to speak to the court (The audience)

Bhulabhai: Sirs! I rise to make the address for the defence of the three brave Indians who stand before this military court. And I use the word Indians with 'great measure,' for a Hindu, a Sikh and a Muslim stand united as brothers-in-arms to symbolize the India that is being judged today…

These charges are not the whole story, there is rather, a story behind these charges, a story that moved forward through a cascading series of events.

Almost a hundred years ago, after untold butchery, that exposed the true nature of the British presence in India, a *'muqaddama'* was held in this very venue, the Red Fort and the last Mughal was exiled. Since that first war of Indian Independence, a revolution has been brewing in the hearts and minds of the people of this nation. This revolution took the form of enlightenment in its first phase, then the form of organisation, and after that, just as it was flexing its muscles, Mahatma Gandhi put it on a path of *satyagraha*, of resistance based on truth!

Despite the non-violent nature of the movement, British violence – both political and economic; did not abate. While some rebels replied in kind, it was the force of our conviction in the righteousness of our freedom struggle that was the norm!

While the empire was busy oppressing Indians, it was also busy making Europe's problems the world's problems. It's need for men and materials to fight the world wars, made the empire even more rapacious.

As the war progressed, nearly 2.5 million Indians were pressed into service. Many faced humiliating capture as the British faced setbacks in the second world war. The large Indian diaspora, that the British populated throughout the world to serve as labour, was also not spared the horrors of war.

In the month of December 1941, war was declared by Japan against Britain and America.

The next event of importance, is the surrender of the British Indian Forces at Singapore which took place on 15th February and then, the most important material event took place on 17th February at Farrer Park. After this, came the formation of the first Indian National Army in September 1942. This army was comprised of Indian soldiers who had surrendered to the Japanese; but it was dissolved in December 1942, and then in July, 1943 - the event that altered everything…

Lights dim as the trio is mesmerised and remembering the remarkable moment when Netaji had first addressed them.

Shahnawaz: Do you remember that day?

Sahgal: Remember?! I live it. I relive it. Everyday.

Dhillon: I had only heard of him.

Shahnawaz: I had heard him…

Sahgal: What a sight it was! I could not believe that one person could have such an effect on people…

Dhillon: The way Netaji moved us…

The martial version of the song 'Subhash Ji, Subhash Ji' is played or sung by a chorus. All lights fade as Netaji makes the speech at the INA review. While the song is going on the soul/shadow of Netaji walks past the trio as if receiving a guard of honour.

Chorus : Subhash Ji, Subhash Ji, woh jaan-e-hind aa gaye,

Hai naaz jispe Hind ko, woh shaan-e-hind aa gaye (2)

Subhash jaan-e-hind hain, Subhash shaan-e-hind hain.

Subhash aan-e-hind hain, Subhash maan-e-hind hain.

Subhash Ji, Subhash Ji, woh jaan-e-hind aa gaye,

Hai naaz jispe Hind ko, woh shaan-e-hind aa gaye.

Subhash Ji Subhash Ji…

Toofaan-e-hind laayenge, woh shaan-e-hind laayenge,

Firangiyon ki kaum par woh keher banke chhayenge.

Subhash Ji, Subhash Ji, woh jaan-e-hind aa gaye,

Hai naaz jispe Hind ko, woh shaan-e-hind aa gaye (2)

Lights on Netaji.

Netaji: Let your battle cry be – "To Delhi, To Delhi!" How many of us will survive this war of freedom, I do not know. But I do know this, that we shall ultimately win and our task will not end until our surviving heroes hold the victory parade on another graveyard of the British Empire – The Lal Qila or Red Fortress of ancient Delhi.

With the force of arms and at the cost of your blood you will have to win liberty. Then, when India is free, you will have to organise the permanent army of Free India, whose task it will be to preserve our liberty for all time.

For the present, I can offer you nothing except hunger, thirst, privation, forced marches and death. But if you follow me in life and in death, as I am confident you will, I shall lead you to victory and freedom. It does not matter who among us will live to see India free. It is enough that India shall be free and we shall give our all to make her free. May God now bless our Army and grant us victory in the coming fight!

Inquilab Zindabad! Azad Hind Zindabad!

Fade out.

Scene 3

Lights fade in on the three.

The trio is visibly moved as they remember Netaji's words.

Dhillon: It was the first time I had heard someone talk about our freedom in that manner. The way he put our fight for freedom in perspective. That it was a fight. And we have to fight the fight. That fighting for freedom doesn't mean we ourselves will get freedom. We will fight, and die. That we will have to shed our blood for an idea; the idea of a free India.

Sahgal: That was the appeal of his speech, isn't it? He didn't offer any hope, there was no reward to be expected, no 'benefit' to be gained. He spoke the truth, that's all. That we all have a right to be free; that right had been stolen from us… and the only way we could get it back was by fighting for it.

Shahnawaz: "We, have to fight for freedom!" More than freedom, you know what I heard? 'We.'

Sahgal: 'We' as in…

Shahnawaz: Do you remember the Masjid meeting I had conducted with Muslim officers in May, 1942.

Sahgal: Well, you mentioned it, but…

Shahnawaz: I had shared my reasons for wanting to join the INA. Safety of the POWs, keeping watch over the Japanese, and; we would have the preparedness and weapons to fight them too, if the need arose.

Sahgal: Yes. You told me about it.

Shahnawaz: And there was one more reason. I wasn't important for me, and frankly I found it a bit strange several officers

present in the meeting expressed it… and some more openly than others. (hesitates, then continues)That Muslim soldiers should be ready as well. If an Indian National Army or Government comes into being, it shouldn't just have Hindu and Sikh soldiers.

Dhillon: But why…?

There is a prolonged silence as Shahnawaz looks at the other two and they begin to realise how the participants in the meeting would have been thinking.

Shahnawaz: This reason, this question… it has brought us to the precipice… of partition.

Pause.

Shahnawaz: I found the answer in Netaji's words, and deeds.

Sahgal: *(Empathetic)* How?

Pause

Shahnawaz: Virtually every leader of our freedom movement says the same thing; that Hindus and Muslims are one.

Dhillon and PK join him in the flow…

Dhillon: They are brothers!

Sahgal: The bodies are different, but the soul is the same…

Dhillon: And there's one more type of expression… that they are the two arms of India. The two eyes… The two ears… a total anatomy class.

Laughter.

Shahnawaz: That we are all part of a Ganga – Jamni *tehzeeb.*

Sahgal: Etcetera!

Shahnawaz: But what they are really saying is that some are Hindu, and some Muslim… and we should come together for our country…

Dhillon: Or what the others are saying, that 'because' some are Hindu and some are Muslim, we should have separate countries…

Shahnawaz: But Netaji! He is the only one who doesn't see some as Hindu and some as Muslim. He sees us as Indians only! He doesn't say Hindus and Muslims should forget their differences… he sees no difference!! In this life, and I am sure even if my religion allows more lives… I will never see another patriot like him!

Sahgal: Absolutely! In his presence, we never felt that anyone was north Indian or south Indian; Hindu or Muslim; Punjabi or Bengali…

Dhillon: Which is what makes me so sure that he is no longer with us. Had he been here, what's happening in our country today… it wouldn't have been happening…

A deep melancholy fills the air as the three face the realisation the Netaji could have died in the plane crash. There is silence.

Shahnawaz: Under his leadership, we created an Indian nation outside our country that we are not able to create within it.

Sahgal: Perhaps that's why we could. In a foreign land, it is easier to see everyone as Indian. That was the biggest reason for my joining the INA. I knew that the Malay and Burmese people didn't like Indians much. It was a question of our material, physical and cultural survival.

Dhillon: That is true. I think in every country of the world, for some reason, Indians are not liked much. I wonder why that is?

Shahnawaz: They are jealous.

Sahgal: Of how Indians progress wherever they go. Maybe. But I think it's because they don't get us. We are not easy to miss anywhere. We have this weirdly unique ability of blending in yet standing out at the same time.

Dhillon: We find it easy to dislike what we don't understand.

Shahnawaz: Yes, but there is a reason for the lack of understanding as well. We tolerate far too much. They start wondering whether we are up to something.

Dhillon: Which is what Netaji changed abouts us. We don't tolerate their aggression any more.

Sahgal: Which made us intolerable!

The three of them laugh. They stop.

Shahnawaz: And there are leaders here who want to make us intolerant.

Sahgal: Forget about them, let's be intolerable for a while!?

The three of them are motivated and transformed and stand up and chant patriotic slogans. The chorus breaks into the song Qadam Qadam Badhaye Ja.

Chorus :

Qadam Qadam baṛhāye jā
khushī ke gīt gāye jā
ye zindagī hai qaum kī
tū qaum pe lutāye jā

Tū sher-e-hind āge baṛh
marne se tū kabhī na dar
uṛā ke dushmanon kā sar
josh-e-watan baṛhāye jā

Qadam baṛhāye jā, khushī ke gīt gāye jā
ye zindagī hai qaum kī, tū qaum pe lutāye jā
Chalo dillī pukār ke
qaumī-nishān sambhāl ke
Lāl qile pe gāṛ ke
lahrāye jā lahrāye jā

Qadam Qadam baṛhāye jā
khushī ke gīt gāye jā
ye zindagī hai qaum kī
tū qaum pe lutāye jā

Blackout.

Scene 4

Lights fade in on Bhulabhai.

Bhulabhai: *Aur aise qadam badhaye in veeron ne, ke saara jahaan dekhta reh gaya…* Over 23,000 volunteer soldiers, both prisoners of war from former British Indian Army and civilians from Indians settled in Malaya and Singapore took part in active warlike operations against the British!

One battalion reached as far as Chittagong. They crossed the Chindwin river and the Naga hills. They fought and besieged Imphal and Kohima. The islands of Andaman and Nicobar came under their suzerainty…

The Indian National Army, which was the Army of the Provisional Government of Free India fought valiantly on the easter front until they lost the battle to hunger and disease, to air power and indiscriminate firing – which has very well been the method of the British since Jallianwala!

Lights appear on the three accused as well.

These three officers before you are the remnants of that valiant force which chose to fight against every odd, whether god or man-made, for one and only one cause – Freedom!

ACT 2
Scene 1

Bhulabhai: During the last many days, you have heard evidence on the two charges with which my clients, the accused before you, have been arraigned. Shortly stated, the two charges are waging war against the king, and without detailing anything, murder and abetment of murder. My submission to the court is that, there is really only one charge; that really and truly, there is only one charge before the court, and that is – waging war against the king, every other charge is 'reductio ad absurdum!' because every single shot fired, is down to this, that the accused – Shahnawaz, Sehgal and Dhillon stand before you, for waging war against the king.

Pause, as lights appear on the trio.

Dhillon: Congratulations Sahgal *Saahab* the defence counsel appears to be following the same tack… he's making the case about one thing; whether we waged war against The king or not.

Sahgal: Should congratulations be in order Dhillon? Don't you thing taking this tack would be detrimental to our case. What right did we have to wage war against The king.

Shahnawaz: Does any soldier have this right?

Sahgal: To wage war?!

Shahnawaz: Which everyone knows we did.

Dhillon: Correction, they are coming to know; which is why the country is up in arms in our support.

SAHGAL: Point taken, but Shahnawaz is saying something else.

Shahnawaz: I'm trying to get to the crux of the issue. That we waged war against the king, is a fact… our lawyer is making it our defence, because prisoners of war cannot be prosecuted for waging war! But we are soldiers!

Dhillon: Such convoluted language! I think you are becoming far too British to be a member of the INA.

PK Sehgal has been thinking.

Sahgal: Countries fight wars. Their soldiers follow orders. They don't decide. They are part of it. If soldiers start taking decisions to wage war, isn't it terrorism, fascism.

Dhillon: *(To Shahnawaz)* Which is why you didn't join the first INA formed by *Bhai* Mohan Singh? Because he was a soldier and a soldier should not decide and lead the fighting against the Government?

Shahnawaz: Three generations serving in the British Indian Army. Sixty relative. The oath I took in the Academy… *(To Sahgal)*You took your time as well, didn't you.

Sahgal: I couldn't understand whose army I was joining. Captain Mohan Singh's; an army of POWs'; an army of Indian soldiers or an 'Indian' army.

Dhillon: I had no doubts. I saw Captain Mohan Singh as a brave soldier and an honourable man.

Sahgal: Q.E.D.

Shahnawaz: What!?

Sahgal: Just look at the three of us. We aren't just soldiers, we are officers. We are aware, educated and are 'expected to know' right from wrong. Yet, we reacted differently to the same situation. Our reasons were different.

Dhillon: But our objective would have been the same.

Sahgal: Really?

Shahnawaz: Wars are fought by nations gentlemen; soldiers are just a device. We have to be a nation first before trying to overthrow a government or win a war against another nation. Our vision has to be clear. We cannot just fight against something; we must fight for something. We cannot fight to destroy if we have not created.

They are pondering. They freeze and lights come on Netaji.

Netaji: Indian Nationalism is neither narrow, nor selfish, nor aggressive. It is inspired by the highest ideals of the human race, *viz*., Satyam (the true), Shival (the good) , Sundaram (the beautiful).

Speaking for myself, I stand for an independent Federal Republic. India must fulfil her destiny and cannot be content with colonial self – government or Dominion Home Rule.

India is not Canada or Australia or South Africa. Indians are an Oriental people, a coloured race… it is this race, the Indian Army – much more than the British Army which is defending India today. If India is strong enough to fight the battles of England outside her borders – she is certainly strong enough to defend herself from foreign aggression. The principles of Democracy, Liberty, even Communism are all found in some part of India. A free India will be an India of principles.

I have three cardinal points for the constitution that should be drafted. These three points are as follows :

(1) The Constitution should guarantee national sovereignty. What we want is government of the people, by the people and for the people.

(2) The Constitution should be prefaced by a declaration of rights which will guarantee the elementary rights of citizenship. Repressive laws, ordinances and regulations should be unknown in free India.

(3) There should be a system of joint electorate. Nationalism and separate electorates and self – contradictory.

Friends! Let us all stand shoulder to shoulder and say with one hear and with one voice that our motto is "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

Scene 2

Netaji and the trio freeze in silence as Bhulabhai continues his speech.

Bhulabhai: I do not desire to weary you with 250 pages of evidence and about 150 exhibits, which are before the court. What I submit are the conclusions of facts justified by evidence.…and; it is not a case of three individuals waging war, against the king; the evidence before you amply bear out the fact that these men charged before you were a part of an organised army. Therefore, it is not a personal case of any kind or sort. The honour of the Indian National Army is on trial before the court. What is on trial before the court is the right to wage war with immunity on the part of a subject race for liberation.

What is on trial before the court is the very foundation of international law. What is on trial before the court is justice – whether the said international law is the same for all, for all peoples, irrespective of their race or provenance or the colour of their skin!

Lights dim on Bhulabhai and light up on the trio.

Shahnawaz: Got them!

Sahgal: Totally! Having fought a world war for humanity and freedom, how will they justify having different rules for different peoples.

Dhillon: They've been getting away with it for centuries; but why are YOU surprised. Aren't there different rules for different people?

Sahgal: What they have done is just for show… all the white man's laws and rules based on equality… liberty… fraternity

Dhillon cuts him short with a slight edge to his voice.

Dhillon: I am not talking about them. I am talking about us.

Shahnawaz: Us?! You mean our army… and which army, the INA or the British Indian Army.

Dhillon: Us. All of 'Us!' You were appointed as officers directly so you wouldn't know how people like us were treated. I know, I have experienced it; sometimes we would get a kinder officer, and he would bridge the gap somewhat; but by and large, nobody would leave us in any doubt where our place was in the system!

Sahgal: They are racists! That's what they are!

Dhillon: I am not talking about them; Sir! I am talking about Indian officers. When an Indian officer would come to know that this GS Dhillon was once a *jawan*, his behaviour towards me would change… you yourself Khan *Saahab*; 'third generation in the army,' don't tell me you never felt that what would these first generation officers know about what being an officer was!

Didn't we feel, in the early days of the INA; these *Madrasis* and Bengalis won't last in the battle field! And it's not just about the army. It's about us. Upper caste, upper class, upper this and upper that… and don't tell me that Indian Muslims and Sikhs don't have all this!!

Hats off to our learned defence counsel. I don't know how he can argue with a straight face that we want equality with the rest of the world when we mock the concept among ourselves!!

Silence

Fade out.

Fade in on Netaji.

Netaji: My own suggestion is that we should immediately go out into the country with the rallying cry – "All power to the Indian people." This will galvanise the masses in a moment. In order to put forward this demand in an

effective and irresistible manner, we should leave no stone unturned in our effort to attain national unity. This effort will necessitate the setting up of a machinery which will preserve harmony and goodwill among the people under all circumstances. Such a machinery will be provided by a Citizens' Defence Corps organised on an all – party basis. But such a Corps should be quite independent of the Government. Let us not commit the fatal mistake of thinking that our mission will be over, once we win freedom. If she can win freedom now and save herself, she will best serve the cause of humanity.

Let is proclaim once again – "All power to the Indian people here, and now."

Scene 3

Then lights fade in only on Bhulabhai. He continues his presentation to the court.

Bhulabhai: When Sri Subhash Chandra Bose arrived in Singapore, he took command of the Indian National Army and there was a conference of delegates belonging to the Indian Independence League called the Greater East Asia. This led to the proclamation of the Provisional Government of Free India, and this Government, it is this 'Government!' that declared war on Britain and America. And why do I call it a government? Because immediately after its proclamation, different ministers concerned with the functions of the state took oaths of allegiance, Netaji became the head of the state and the Indian National Army was the army of the Provisional Government of Free India! This Government moved its headquarters to Rangoon from Singapore, it moved from Burma and beyond, right up to Kohima, it governed, yes governed territories that are a part of India, until its retreat, and the British occupation of Burma. And in these territories, departments of Justice of Education were taken over. A commissioner was appointed by the government. The evidence is before you, even the dies for a postage stamp of the government were ready for printing and functioning of a postal system. In its territories a sugar factory, means of production and agriculture were running.

It had its own bank, and at assets to the tune of thirty-five lakh rupees were sequestered when that bank was shut. It was war sirs, war, by a government against another. By a people against their oppressors. By a state against a state. By a nation against another, for liberation. Against those who deny it liberty while claiming to fight for it all over the world!

Silence as Bhulabhai finishes his impassioned speech and lights fade.

Lights fade in on Netaji as he delivers his statement on the formation of the "Provisional Government of Free India."

The trio are lit as well.

Netaji: With the formation of the Provisional Government of *Azad Hind*, the second dream of my political life has been fulfilled. The first being the organisation of a national revolutionary army. Only one more dream now remains to be fulfilled, namely to fight and win our freedom…

The world knows, of course, that Nationalist India has been at war with Britain for a long time. Nevertheless, since the Provisional Government of Free India has been formed for the first time, such a declaration has been necessary in order to clarify our attitude towards Britain and America…

This declaration of war is not a propaganda stunt. We shall prove by our actions that we mean what we say.

Lights fade.

Dhillon: On hindsight, it looks like Netaji had foreseen Bhulabhai's 'line of defence' when he set up our Government in Exile.

Sahgal: Which is why we love him. And it wasn't only his foresight; it was his message to us… and to all those who have and will fight for freedom in times to come.

Shahnawaz: Until we, ourselves cannot form and run a government. Unless we show ourselves and the world that we can govern responsibly and be governed, by laws and rules of our own making, we cannot overthrow a government to establish our 'rule.'

Until we are free from the faults we see in the British, we should not!

Dhillon: After all, we didn't want to end up replacing the people in the same system, we had set out to change the system itself!

Scene 4

The trio is reflecting on what happened. Bhulabhai continues.

Bhulabhai: …I ask the court to accept that the Provisional Government, was formally established and proclaimed. And, the evidence is quite clear, that in Malaya alone, in June 1944, 230,000 persons actually took written oaths of allegiance to the Government! And this government was recognised by the Axis powers – Germany, Italy, Japan, and others.

All this is proof, and more than proof, that it had the right to declare war, and once it declared war, its army became subject to the international laws of war. And these laws make it outside the pale of examination by any municipal tribunal.

Pause

And; if the use of an atomic bomb is part of the normal civilised conduct of war, then the actions of the Indian National Army and specifically, the three accused are nothing but!

Lights Dim on Bhulabhai.

Shahnawaz: I still can't believe it. They killed 2 lakh people with 2 bombs!

Dhillon: The news in correct. And I've heard that the radiation caused by the atom bombs is going to kill as many more in the coming few years.

Sahgal: They killed a population equal to the entire population of *Azad Hind* in only two days!

Pause

Sahgal: If we were faced with atomic weapons would Netaji have done what he did?

Dhillon: He wouldn't have compromised on his values and beliefs. Such people don't change their stance basis who or what they are facing.

Shahnawaz: Sounds like you are speaking of Gandhi Ji, not Netaji.

Sahgal: Whichever 'Ji.' If faced with an enemy who won't shy away from using atomic weapons; or is hell bent of wiping out your entire race; what would you do?

Dhillon: But why would anyone want to do that? The bombs were used to end the war quickly. A prolonged war would have led to many more lives being lost.

Shahnawaz: Because of how the Japanese fight. They were no less barbaric. Why do you think we were always suspicious of their intentions. But if the war is fought honourably, following the rules of war, I don't think it's an option the enemy will use.

Dhillon: Which is why we are facing trial, not a firing squad; right?

There is a slight sarcasm in PK Sahgal's words which slowly connects with the other two.

Sahgal: Sometimes I can't believe the two of you. So mature, and then suddenly so juvenile. And I can't make out whether this innocence is Netaji's or Gandhi Ji's!?

Lights fade in on Netaji.

Netaji: In spite of British propaganda, it should be clear to all right thinking Indians that in this wide world India has but one enemy, the enemy who has exploited her for over a hundred years, the enemy who sucks the life – blood of Mother India, British Imperialism. I am not an apologists of the Tripartite (Axis) Powers; that is not my job. My concern is with India. When British Imperialism is defeated India will get her freedom. If, on the other hand,

British Imperialism should somehow win the war, then India's slavery would be perpetuated for ever. India is, therefore presented with the choice between freedom and slavery. She must make her choice. Britain's paid propagandists have been calling me an enemy agent. I need no credentials when I speak to my own people.

Countrymen, as the British Empire disappears, the day of India's deliverance approaches. I want to remind you that in the year 1857 began India's first War of Independence. In 1942 has begun her last war of Independence. The hour of India's salvation is at hand.

Azad Hind! Fight and win India's liberty, and then build up India with full freedom to determine her own future – with no interference! Free India will have a social order based on the eternal principles of Justice, Equality and Fraternity.

Scene 5

Lights fade in on Bhulabhai.

Bhulabhai: Sir, it is unthinkable that any member of any organized army should be charged with an offence merely because he fought one or ten or ten million people belonging to an army of the State with which he is at war?! Nothing is an offence sir, which is done by any person who is justified by law… and the law in question is not the law of this tribunal or court or land or even the British and their King, it is international law. The law under which an Indian Government was at war with the Empire!

This line of defence has a profound effect on the trio. They resume their conversation.

Sahgal: "Nothing is an offence which is done by a person who is justified by law."

Shahnawaz: Everything isn't fair in war; whatever is fair, is how a war should be fought.

Dhillon: By fair you mean the laws and; rules of war. And who has made these… er… rules?!

Shahnawaz: Well, the British… Europeans for that matter…

Dhillon: Because we are slaves and they are our masters.

Sahgal: That can't be the reason. Our laws; I mean the laws of the Indian National Government, the rules of the INA; were not so different from British law…

Shahnawaz: The law doesn't have to be fair…

Bhulabhai continues his defence address. He now picks up a book and quotes.

Bhulabhai: I now share legal writings in this subject. What is War – it is a "regulated violence in which the conduct of hostilities is governed by certain principles and rules…"

And "in the absence of any international authority competent to suppress international wrongs, war has always been held legal…"

And let us not forget that war can be between "states and those which have the right to make war like states… "When an oath is taken by any man to his state, "he is a belligerent, and his use of armed force against his opponent does not make it a personal case…"

and even if you call them rebels, it is written that "if the rebels are sufficiently organised and are sufficiently resourceful to make war, then it is entitled to be regarded as war, and there will be no individual consequences to persons who take part in it."

Most importantly sir, "these laws are binding upon nations as a fundamental condition for their admission to the full and equal participation in the intercourse of civilised nations."

The trio continue their conversation.

Shahnawaz: But if we want freedom, then we should fight like a free people. Organised as a Government. That's fair.

Dhillon: So we will have to change ourselves before we can change governments… overthrow rulers…

Sahgal: This way no government will be overthrown… no revolutions, no change…

Dhillon: You are being too pessimistic.

Shahnawaz: Try and change just one thing about yourself, then you will get a sense of what Sahgal is saying.

Chuckles.

Bhulabhai continues.

Bhulabhai: …and now I ask the court, if this international law is applicable to the Strasbourg in 1680, or Serbia and Montenegro against Turkey in 1877, or South Africa

against the United Kingdom. To the belligerents in the American civil war… to the Confederate Government.

To the Poles and the Czecho – Slovaks who were recognised as such even when their army and land were subjects of enemy powers. The King of the two Sicilies. The rights of the rebels in the Spanish Civil war. Even the Greeks, the Dutch and the citizens of France and Belgium after they had been conquered by the German army in World War II! If French Partisans can be given the right to wage war under international law… then why not Indians!? Why not these three accused!? Why not the 230,000 Indians who took the oath of allegiance to the Provisional Government of India!? Why not, to the soldiers who fought under its anthem, its flag; and its leader!?

Why not those who ran a Government and managed territories!? Is it the colour of their flag, or the colour of their skin.

Lights fade out on Bhulabhai.

Fade in on the trio. They are stationary and speak mechanically.

Shahnawaz: We want the bride to be fair.

SAHGAL: *Haldi*! an *ubtan* of *Haldi*, that is what's needed for fairness.

Dhillon: The groom is quite fair, must be from a high class family.

Shahnawaz: Upper class people are fair…

Sahgal: Upper caste people are fair…

Dhillon: Rich…

Shahnawaz: Cultured…

Sahgal: Royal…

Dhillon: Well educated…

Shahnawaz: Such people ARE fair…

The three of them unfreeze.

Sahgal: And here we are… ready to lay down our lives to create a nation, where everyone will be equal. Whatever their caste or class or religion or descent…

Lights on Netaji.

Netaji: When the INA is getting trained to march to victory or to spill its last drop of blood on the way, the rich people are asking me whether total mobilisation means 10 percent or 5 percent of their riches. I would like to ask these people who are speaking of percentages whether we can tell our soldiers to spill only 10 percent of their blood and save the rest…

Indians as a nation believe in the ideal of sacrifice. Among the Hindus we have the ideal of Sanyasis and the Muslims have the way of the Faqirs. Can there be a greater cause, a nobler cause and a holier cause than the liberation of 38 crores of human souls?

Silence and slow fade.

Scene 6

Lights fade in on Bhulabhai.

Bhulabhai: Sirs! I rise to address the question of allegiance. The accused, when joining the British Army, had sworn allegiance to King and country. I want in this connection to take the statement of Captain Arshad. It is the most emphatic statement he made. "We believe that the only allegiance we owe is allegiance to our country." And if you wish to question beliefs, I choose to answer with facts. The facts pertaining to the events which took place at Ferrer Park on 17th February. The British Officers and British other ranks were separated from Indian Officers and Indian ranks. They having been separated, the Indian Officers and Ranks, numbering anything between 30,000 to 45,000 were all asked to assemble at Ferrer Park. There Colonel Hunt made a short speech, that he was 'handing' them over, on behalf of the British Government, to the representative of the Japanese Government, Colonel Fujiwara.

At the gravest hour, when, as prisoners, their life and honour was at stake, the King's representative broke his allegiance to the Indian subjects, and then his representatives have the audacity to demand their allegiance!? And when those very Indians, realise through this abandonment, where their allegiance really lies, his representatives have the temerity to put them on trial!

Fadeout on Bhulabhai, fade in on the trio.

Sahgal: Whatever the British did. However they exploited and destroyed our motherland. In whichever manner they damaged our fraternity… hadn't we taken an oath to be

loyal to the British Government; to King and Country when we had joined their Army.

Shahnawaz: An oath they broke.

Dhillon: Is that a defence or a justification?

Shahnawaz: If Colonel Hunt, had not separated Indian prisoners from British prisoners and handed us over to the Japanese to do as they please with us; would this defence be justified? Did we abandon the British Indian Army because the British Indian Army abandoned us!?

Dhillon: Let's put it another way. If Colonel Hunt had kept all of us Indian Officers with the British officers in the same POW camp, would we have joined the INA.

Sahgal: Netaji's INA. Definitely!

Dhillon: Forsaking our oath?

Shahnawaz: No. By retaking the oath we had forgotten. Which every Indian takes, the moment they are born. To serve their country.

Dhillon: But what about the oath we broke. The allegiance we had sworn!? Shouldn't we be… punished! For that!

SAHGAL: Our martyrdom; will be our punishment. Or have you forgotten, we had set out to die. That was our punishment, as well as our duty.

Dhillon: Then why the INA. If the Japanese had told us to join their army and fight the British so our country would be free from our oppressors, then by this logic, we should have had no problem in joining them. But we didn't…

Shahnawaz: Netaji was asked once. "Why are you taking the help of one such as Hitler?" You know what he said. For India's freedom, if I have to take the help of the devil himself. I won't shirk from it. But we should remember; he had spoken of taking the devil's help; not becoming the devil himself.

Bhulabhai continues as the trio freeze.

Bhulabhai: This court sees the accused as stooges of the Japanese. But if the British and American armies fought under the command of an American General – General Eisenhower, Britain may not be called the stooge of the Americans. I have shown ample evidence and statements to show that the Indian National Army was prepared to shoot and it even did so, any Japanese who attacked the honour of Indians in Malaya! The Army was trained by Indian officers. It comprised of Indian officers. And it was led by Jaan – e – Hind – Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. And let it be known that it was a voluntary army!

Lights fade in on Netaji.

Netaji: Friends, do not get carried away for one moment by the propaganda carried on by Anglo – American Agencies.

I have seen much with my own eyes and I can, therefore, compare the actual conditions here with the lies propagated by the B.B.C., that is the Bluff and Bluster Corporation.

I have studied very carefully the struggle for liberty that has gone on all over the world during the last 200 years, but I have not as yet discovered one single instance where freedom was won without outside help of some sort. Where the enemy is that power world – empire, namely, Britain, it would be the height of folly not to accept any assistance that may be offered to us.

The internal politics of Germany or Italy or Japan do not concern us, and no one should make the mistake of concluding that external collaboration with the Tripartite (Axis) Powers means acceptance of their domination or even of their ideology in our internal affairs.

Scene 7

Fade in On Bhulabhai.

Bhulabhai: Sirs. The only thing the accused can be charged with are waging war against the King. A war that began with their subjugation. An abandonment by that very King that led to their realisation. The arrival of a leader who stirred their latent patriotism. A war that I have shown to be legal. A war that is the both right, as well as their right. A war, which they have lost, but in whose execution, they have won honour. While I have demonstrated that their acts in the execution of the war are not open to trial by this court, it is for this honour that I wish to respond to the charges of murder and abetment against them.

Lights dim on Bhulabhai and fade in on the trio.

Sahgal: *(With some Self-doubt)* We gave everyone the opportunity, didn't we?

Dhillon: To fight?

Sahgal: To not fight.

Dhillon: Of course! Netaji had made it clear in Singapore itself. This fight is only for those who are completely committed to it. Who are willing to die, and are most probably going to die fighting. And anyone who wishes to leave, can… and they should. And it wasn't just before we commenced fighting. He repeated it in Rangoon… and got the Divisional Commanders to announce it personally to every soldier.

Sahgal: And we repeated the same message. Before every major advance. On every front. I had given a speech in the same

vein before the Popa battle. Actually we would always give three options – return, surrender or fight.

Dhillon: Nobody chose to surrender.

Shahnawaz: Returning through the jungle would have been as dangerous I think.

Sahgal remembers an episode and laughs.

SAHGAL: You know about that incident bear Kyaukpadaung right? Our lines for retreat had been cut off. A British Intelligence officer sent a message to one of our platoons. We had lost the platoon commander and a *Havildar* was in command.

Dhillon chuckles.

Dhillon: Yes, the Brit had messaged "come to us, surrender and we will spare your lives"… and the Havildar replied "Mister, I do not come."

Laughter. It dies down soon and they are serious again.

Sahgal: That platoon fought to its last man.

Dhillon: Forget retreating. We didn't even penalise those who left their posts. When 18 soldiers of the 4th Guerilla deserted in December last, I didn't punish them.

Shahnawaz: Why?

Dhillon: Why?! Don't you know why?! They did not have any ammunition. They did not have food. They just gave up trying to survive on their diet of boiled leech and snake infested vegetation! Constant bombardment by artillery. Mortar fire. Bombing by the Air Force. Bombing wet vegetation! Do you know what happens; our soldiers were not only getting blown to bits or burnt alive. They were being scalded to death! They didn't give up. Their desperate mind ceased to function.

Shahnawaz: They should have been punished.

Dhillon: What punishment could I have given that they had not received!! And you are a fine one to talk. Sir!! Did you ever punish anyone; at least before March '45. We would just threaten them with a firing squad… and then give them a chance 'reform!' So what's our response to this charge of murder and abetment to murder?!

Shahnawaz sits down to explain.

Shahnawaz: 7th of March was my last salute to Netaji. I didn't know then that was to be our last meeting. He was so ashamed by the incident of the 2nd Division. Four of our own had deserted together; and that too, four Majors! And they didn't just desert; they betrayed us. They shared all intelligence they had about our bases, our movement and our plans! He said the matter had left him unable to face anybody, especially the Japanese army and the Burmese people. They were laughing at us. Calling us names… 'the cowards who had set off to die for their freedom. Those who had set out to unfurl the tri at the Red Fort were running around waving white flags of surrender!

Pause

And then he said something which made me feel my stomach had been devoured from inside in an instant!! He said if he ever heard of any other case of desertion… he would commit suicide!

The other two are shocked. React sharply.

Dhillon: What!!

Sahgal: Oh God!!! Why didn't you tell us!?

Shahnawaz: What could I have said. Told you about his helplessness. His deep anguish. All I knew was from that moment on, I would have to be very careful… nothing should be done that would risk his life. 'We' could not have risked his life then.

Sahgal: 'Risked?' You too are sure we have lost him in the plane crash then…

Silence. Then Shahnawaz speaks in a voice reverberating with emotion.

Shahnawaz: Oh he is dead all right! Because my soul refuses to believe that he is alive and I have not died fighting!

Pause.

Dhillon: This is why we had to be so… so cruel… all of a sudden.

Sahgal: *(Putting two and two together)* Which is why this subterfuge. We had to punish deserters, but without making it official. If we had ignored it, he could have come to know… and if we had punished desertion officially, he would have come to know.

Shahnawaz: Which is why I had to punish gunner Mohammad Hussain. And in a manner that his execution was carried out surreptitiously. And who knows if I hadn't someone would have alleged that a Muslim officer pardoned a fellow Muslim deserter!

Lights come on Netaji. who "speaks against Partition."

Netaji: You are all aware that Gandhi Ji and Mr. Jinnah are discussing the Hindu-Muslim question in Bombay, and the League demand of Pakistan. We Indians in East Asia are fighting for a free and united India. Therefore we shall never be a party to any compromise with Britain. The agreement between the League and the Congress will be the forerunner of a compromise with Britain.

All that it wants is the division of India into Hindu and Muslim States. There will be four Muslim States which will remain under British influence.

I ask the millions of Muslim young men in India: "Will you be a party to the vivisection of your motherland? What will your status be in a divided India? Therefore, my friends, if you want freedom you must fight for it and

kick the British out." There should be no compromise with Britain. Our divine motherland shall not be cut up.

Inquilab Zindabad! Azad Hind Zindabad!

Fade out

ACT 3
Scene 1

Fade in. Bhulabhai continues his address.

Bhulabhai: Therefore to summarise the evidence, it suffers from the worst infirmities, and much more so in this case, where a man is charged with murder. Was an order given? Was it carried out? Was the order part of the established rules of war, especially when it came to the treatment of deserters? What did the witnesses see? Are the witnesses reliable? And while this court is looking at two incidences, there are many instances of that kind, where people were sort of sentenced, but the sentence was never carried out.

Bhulabhai continues to mouth some lines which are not heard as the lights fade. Lights on the three who are sitting / standing pensively.

Dhillon: What are you thinking Prem *Bhai*?

Sahgal: The trial is ending my friend. I'm thinking of Bhulabhai's closing sentences, and our sentence.

Dhillon: Aah! That doesn't suit you Sahgal *saahab*… if you were the thinking type, do you 'think' you would have been here?

They all smile and laugh a little bit.

Sahgal: I am thinking about all three of us.

Dhillon: If any of us would have been the thinking about the three of us, we would definitely have not been here.

This time the laughter is louder.

Shahnawaz: (suddenly serious) Our failure to fulfil our promise to Netaji is our prison sentence, for life…

Sahgal: What is to become of our promise, our fight for freedom.

Lights fade in to reveal Netaji's last speech.

Netaji: You might feel that you have failed in your mission of liberating India. But I would say that it is only a temporary failure. Many of your comrades have laid down their lives on the battlefield and have become immortal martyrs of *Azad Hind*. This great sacrifice can never go waste.

Soldiers of the Indian liberation army, be true to India. Let not your faith in India's destiny be shaken. There are many roads to Delhi. And Delhi is still our goal. The sacrifices of your immortal comrades and yourselves will certainly bring us victory. There is no power of earth which can keep India in bondage. India will certainly be free and, that too, soon. Jai Hind!

Lights fade in on the trio.

Shahnawaz: We will be free. Soon. America will pressurize the British. But more importantly, they won't be able to handle the pressure from the Indian officers and soldiers of the British Indian army, navy and air force. They have come to know of what we went through. The Farrer Park incident, Netaji's speeches and actions… our courage under fire. They have come to know of the courage and conviction with which Netaji created and led the Provisional Government of Free India. It's given them belief. Mark my words; they won't be able to Indians in the service for long.

However, the fight for freedom, that will continue…

Sahgal: I know what you mean. This trial has taught us what Netaji meant.

Dhillon: Yes. The INA campaign wasn't just a fight for freedom. It was a preparation for it. Netaji was preparing us for independence.

Shahnawaz: He was making us worthy of it. Only then would it be worth it. And to be worthy of it, we had to fight and overcome any faults within us first.

Sahgal: "Be the change you wish to see in this world"… "we have no right to punish anyone for the sin that is in all of us"… "truth is the only way… unless we are truthful to ourselves, we cannot be true… and if we are not true, we cannot be free!"

Shahnawaz: Netaji's words.

Sahgal: No. Gandhi Ji's. But they convey the same message, don't they. That hypocrites can never be freedom fighters… and that's the life we Hindustani's were leading.

Those who practice violence of all sorts against fellow Indians while wearing the khadi garb of Ahimsa… or those; like we (were); who considered our jobs our duty, while forgetting our duty towards our country and countrymen.

Scene 2

Fade in on Netaji. The words are rattled out in a staccato manner rather than continuous speech. He is agitated. Bhulabhai and the Trio are watching him.

Netaji: If I have understood Mahatmaji correctly, he too would like to see people think for themselves even though they may not always agree with him. I do not know what sort of opinion Mahatmaji has of myself. But whatever his view may be, it will always be my aim and object to try and win his confidence for the simple reason that it will be a tragic thing for me If I succeed in winning the confidence of other people but fail to win the confidence of India's greatest man.

The (Quit India) movement has been continuing with unabated vigour. Be brave and continue the struggle, for freedom is at hand.

I feel perfectly convinced that it is now quite clear that Sir Stafford has gone to India to try the age-long policy of British Imperialism – 'divide and rule.' At this juncture we must discharge our duty adequately. We cannot get freedom as a gift from Britain. We must win our freedom and independence by shedding our own blood at the altar of our motherland.

I would like to remind you that when Mahatma Gandhi commended his non co – operation program to the Indian nation at the annual session of the Congress at Nagpur in December 1920, he said, "If India had the sword today, she would have drawn the sword." And proceeding further with his argument, Mahatmaji then said that since armed revolution was out of the question, the only other alternative before the country was that of non co – operation or *Satyagraha.* Since then times have changed

and it is now possible for the Indian people to draw the sword.

Shrimati Kasturba Gandhi is dead. She has died in British custody in Poona at the age of 74. Kasturba has died a martyr's death. She had been suffering for heart disease for over four months. But the callous British Government turned a deaf ear to the humanitarian pleadings of the Indian nation to release Kasturba on medical grounds. I can only express my contempt for those brutes who profess to fight for freedom, justice and morality and yet perpetuate such cold – blooded murder.

India's last war of independence has begun. Troops of the INA are now fighting bravely on the soil of India, and in spite of all difficulty and hardship they are pushing forward slowly but steadily. This armed struggle will go on until the Britisher is thrown out of India and until our Tricolour National Flag proudly floats over the Viceroy's House in New Delhi.

Father of our Nation! In this holy war of India's liberation, we ask for your blessings and good wishes.

Netaji is overwhelmed. He breaks down.

Everyone is frozen. Lights fade out. They return to the three characters, each in a spot.

Dhillon: Netaji was leading us on Gandhi Ji's path…

Sahgal: A path that was no different from his. Nor was their destination. One carried a stick, the other a gun.

Dhillon: It seems clearer in hindsight. It was on the basis of Mahatma Gandhi's launch of the Quit India movement in August 1942 that Netaji declared war on the British and resolved to create the Provisional Government of Free India.

Sahgal: They kept the world engrossed in their Left – Right – Left… and the world failed to see when this Left – Right became a march, our march towards freedom.

Shahnawaz: Mahatma Gandhi says it is better to fight a war than to be a cowardly non – violent *Satyagrahi.*

Dhillon: I've heard Mahatma Gandhi had a good laugh when he came to know we had named one Brigade – 'Gandhi Brigade' after him!

Laughter.

Silence.

Sahgal: Will we get a chance to be soldiers again.

Shahnawaz: No.

Sahgal: Not in the Indian National Army, but in the army of the Indian Nation.

Dhillon: That will remain the difference between the two armies.

Sahgal: Which means we will have to be ready to fight for freedom; always.

Shahnawaz: We will be free, when will slavery end?

Sahgal: Our slavery has ended, because Netaji set us free. Let's see if Bhulabhai has understood this; or not…

Fadeout.

Scene 3

Fade in on Bhulabhai.

Bhulabhai: After having concluded with evidence that all charges against the accused do not hold up to the trial of law, My final submission to the court is – that this trial itself is wholly illegal! What did the British Government think? That by holding this trial in India's "Tower of London" you will be able to demonstrate your hold over India.

Perhaps in its hubris the Government forgot that these three had sworn to reach the ramparts of the Red Fort, from where Netaji had intended to announce his victory.

And you have brought them here and by doing so, you… you have demonstrated that we are a free people. For even in our defeat, our honour is intact, for in our adversity our hope is unbound, for in our sacrifice our spirit is alive, for in our diversity, the unity of these three soldiers of the nation, even when they belong to different religions, that unity is victorious.

Jai Hind!

Silence… Prolonged Silence. The Actors, Director and all members of the cast and crew come on stage. The martial version of Anthem of the Provisional Government of Free India is sung

Chorus : Subh sukh chain ki barkha barse, Bharat bhaag hai jaaga.
Punjab, Sindh, Gujarat, Maratha, Dravid, Utkal, Banga,
Chanchal sagar, Vindhya, Himalaya, Neela Jamuna, Ganga.
Tere nit gun gaayen, Tujhse jivan paayen,
Har tan paaye asha.
Suraj ban kar jag par chamke, Bharat naam subhaga,
Jai Ho! Jai Ho! Jai Ho! Jai, Jai, Jai, Jai Ho!

Sab ke dil mein preet basaaey, Teri meethi baani.
Har sube ke rahne waale, Har mazhab ke praani,
Sab bhed aur farak mita ke, Sab goud mein teri aake,
Goondhe prem ki mala.
Suraj ban kar jag par chamke, Bharat naam subhaga,
Jai Ho! Jai Ho! Jai Ho! Jai, Jai, Jai, Jai Ho!

Subh savere pankh pakheru, Tere hi gun gayen,
Baas bhari bharpur hawaaen, Jeevan men rut laayen,
Sab mil kar Hind pukare, Jai Azad Hind ke nare.
Pyaara desh hamara.
Suraj ban kar jag par chamke, Bharat naam subhaga,
Jai Ho! Jai Ho! Jai Ho! Jai, Jai, Jai, Jai Ho!

Satya Shiv Sundar

Truth Goodness Beauty

Characters

Ripudaman: First seen as a man in his thirties, and then aa a college student. The same actor plays the roles of Satya's Cricket Coach from his school days, Sundar's college sweetheart and Shiv's mother.

Prakash: Ripudaman's father

Satya: CEO of a large software company.

Shiv: Founder and Director of a large computer / hardware company.

Sundar: CEO of a large search and social, digital company.

Two of Ripudaman's college friends

Scene 1

Lights come on to reveal three characters standing in three different spots on the stage. The rest of the stage is in total darkness.

Centre, upstage is Shiv. He is a swarthy man, in his late fifties, dressed in white Kurta Pyjama. He has a microphone in front of him and is supposedly addressing a public rally.

On the spot left stage is Satya. Satya is a bald, bespectacled, slim fifty-year-old man. He is wearing a suit, without a necktie. He is standing and supposedly chatting with people at a family function.

On the spot right stage is Sundar. He is a lean, bespectacled, tall bearded man with close cropped hair. He's wearing a blue shirt and jeans. He is supposedly addressing a press conference.

Satya: *(greeting, listening… and talking to someone)…* Nooo… I don't get to decide just because I'm the CEO… It's actually quite natural these days in most companies in the US; especially in the IT sector; to give holidays for Diwali.

At least to all the Indian employees…

Listens

Yes of course it's to do with the large number of Indians working there. And it's not just in the companies… as their partners… their vendors…

Listens

Yeeesss… they understand how important this festival is, you know…

The need to probably return and spend time with the larger extended family… though people have stopped doing that these days.

They're worried they may not be able to get back into the US…

Laughs, listens

…and even if the company is working, our time and work is managed in a manner that we can be, well… relatively less busy in Diwali week… How do you think I am getting to celebrate this Diwali in India…? Why? even the President got in front of the cameras to greet the people on the occasion of Diwali this year… He ended up doing it on Dussehra day, but then hey… you know our President!

Shiv: **…**Friends, Venkata *Garu***,** and extremely respected, honourable, our beloved, Prime Minister *Garu*… No… I am sorry, Chief Minister *Garu*, though I must say, maybe *Ma Saraswati* has blessed my tongue… and a day will come when the entire state will celebrate, and the entire country will bow, as our beloved CM will become PM…

This Deepawali… on this auspicious day… I am so happy to be back in my city… Hamidabad… my state… my country… to breathe the same air and feel the same energy as my brothers and sisters gathered here today… *(sobs, theatrically for effect)* … I missed you… all the riches of the US fade away… compared to the riches of the blessings and love of my elders… and friends…

Sundar: …Yes, next question please… *(listens)*… looks like there's a lot of love the media has for us… *(laughs)*… but, seriously; I would like to reiterate, as I have said several times before, that we at Boogle Inc., take privacy very seriously. It is core to what we do and flows directly from our vision of empowering our consumers with information. We have more than a billion consumers, and playing ducks and drakes with their privacy is eventually going to be inimical to our business… and this question is not just important here… it's important across the globe… wherever our consumers exist…

Listens

Well you see, at the Congressional hearing I was present as Sundar the president of our company. So, out there, while I spoke for Boogle, I would venture to state that the entire industry takes the matter very seriously. Let me assure you, that all our products have privacy and security protocols inbuilt, so… whichever platform of ours you are on, your… your information, your pictures… your data is safe… with us *(grins)*…

Satya: **…***(greeting someone)* Of course I remember you *Attaya*, but I'm Satya. You are probably confusing me with somebody else - What a question to ask? There are so many cherished memories… How are you, I hope your health is better… *(notices someone behind his aunt)* Oh Anil, how he has grown… and what are you up to young man…

Shiv: …It is a great honour for me, to be nominated as the MP candidate from your party.

As you are aware, for the last thirty years, since my youth… I have been a staunch contributor… er… supporter of CM *Garu's* father, our father, the venerated *Appaji*, what he has done for the state… er… only our present CM can match… It was through *Appaji's* blessings that we set up, our first computer assembly unit in this very city… He used to say… I still remember – "Shiv I have two sons, not one – and you are the elder one…"

Sundar : …We believe any class action against us to be unfair and we will continue to challenge it through all possible means at our disposable. We welcome competition. We believe it keeps us on our toes and is good for business. In fact, we encourage competition and competitiveness by addressing the biggest barrier to setting up competitive businesses, which is access to information… so that anyone can set up the company they want or pursue a career they like…

Satya: …A career in calligraphy? That sounds quite interesting… and I understand where you are coming from, but, you must ask yourself; is it something that's really sustainable? Is it something that has future demand and revenue stream?

You must know, that our software can do it; and much more… virtually every calligraphic style can be replicated… and if you're telling me that there is an innovation or uniqueness that you can bring to it, then I'm sorry to say, but I expect AI to, well… at least as far as calligraphy goes… to learn the semiotics of alphabet designing and what they connote- very soon…

I foresee a future where manual calligraphy, which by itself is a niche area, will be completely replaced by AI driven software, like our Turquo Plus… It can create amazing stuff… and that too at a fraction of the cost and time, with a far greater variety than what a manual calligrapher can hope to accomplish…

Sundar: …*(Laughing)*… fear of AI is the last thing on our minds. On the contrary, we are seeing the benefits of AI wherever we have executed it. Using faster processors and heuristics, learning capabilities in software are already helping multitudes. And, they have the potential to change and positively influence millions.

People with speech and visual impairments are using AI driven software embedded in their mobile phones that can help them listen, speak and even see. People from different parts of the world can communicate using AI supported translators… all this use of AI is going to require hundreds of thousands of trained professionals… doing jobs that probably we cannot even foresee now…

Shiv: …and today, more than five thousand sons and daughters of this great city are employed in our factory… and we don't just assemble computers anymore… all make sorts of devices, from mobile phones to laptops to computer

chips… and everything under your favourite HD brand, and… we also make for many other brands, from all over the world.

I am proud to say that thanks to *Appaji's* blessings, the support of CM *Garu* and the humble efforts of my team – and…

…The efforts of your humble servant, there is a HD in almost every hand in the world…

Satya: **…***(Taking a call on his cell phone… he uses a Bluetooth device)*… Excuse me.

Yes? Yes! Of course Korash… excuse me *(To his nephew)*, I must take this call *(Turning in another direction to indicate that he has stepped away to speak on the phone).*

Thank you Korash, for pulling me out of a somewhat sticky conversation. Yes, things are fine here, but you know how it is with family in India, most of them think I can get them a freebie… and it oscillates between getting a free software upgrade to a job in Megasoft for one of their relatives…

Shiv: …many people will tell you that Shiv spends most of his time in the USA… let me assure you, that while my body is there, my soul is here, while my feet walk the streets of the US, my head is bowed in obeisance at the feet of the *Najamma*, presiding deity of our city, while my brain develops new innovation and technology, my heart beats for the development of our beloved city. It is only by travelling all over the world, that I have been able to bring the benefits of technology to my brothers and sisters… what use is the fame and little bit of wealth I have earned… if it doesn't benefit my own people…

Sundar: **…**I believe such questions stem from the way you look at our business and business model… rather than look at our margins from the perspective of how much profit we

make over our cost, I would urge you to look at them as a percentage of the value we are creating…

By using our tools, enterprises unlock value from their existing operations… they are able to create connections… aaa… linkages, that help them create new businesses… and new opportunities to create value…

As they speak the last set of dialogues, somewhere in the middle of their lines, the trio take out a black cloth and start blindfolding themselves. As their dialogues end, they have walked away from the spotlights they are in, into the darkness in the centre of the stage.

Satya: …Go up to five billion and then wait, they'll get back to you. Unfortunately for us they know; that we have missed the bus when it comes to mobile and so they will drive a hard bargain, but at the same time… and fortunately for us, our board knows it too. So, we can… in a sense equalise the leverage if it comes down to it.

(Listens) No. No. That's not the understanding I have. Let me be very clear. I'm not looking for a foothold. If that was the objective, we would have been working on it in our own labs. I'm looking to dominate the market from the outset… therefore we need to buyout an AI processor unit that comes with a technology that can be ubiquitous… for mobile…

(Listens)…don't worry about that, with mission statements as broad as ours… anything can be brought in our ambit… and a processor, especially with AI can be called software – isn't it?

For us the criticality is to be an integral part of every human interaction… be it professional… or personal… *(Voice fades away)*

Shiv: …please don't forget that I am one of you! My school, my friends, my family, everything, is the people of my city… I know there is much that remains to be done for the city and for all of you, I will put all my might and ensure that

the confidence shown by CM *Garu* in me will be justified; and the people of this great city will get the representation they deserve… *Jai Najamma! Jai Hind!*

Sundar: *(Listens)* Well frankly I find that laughable. It is our company that has enabled a greater spread of information… which in turn (stresses); fuels a wider spread of economic and political power.

People now, know more. They can have a greater say. They are given platforms through which they can express themselves. They give their opinion, they are enabled to connect… They form communities that can work towards greater democratisation… both economically and politically.

It is through information, that people can, and people have been making choices. And their array of choices has only increased with mobile. Mobile is making this information and actionability more accessible… and more, shall I say immediate. We have provided this freedom. And it is something, quite frankly, what we pat ourselves on the back for…

I hope that answers your question…

*(Points towards another journalist)*yes sir… you… in light blue shirt…

Spotlight on Ripudaman (middle aged avatar); in a light blue shirt and trousers

By now the three of them have reached the centre of the stage. Lights fade out on them. The spot on Ripudaman remains.

Blackout

Scene 2

Lights come on one part of the stage to reveal Satya, Shiv & Sundar sitting on three chairs. Their blindfolds are on. They sit side by side. There are two laptops set on tables around them. There is a large mainframe, with some servers also placed around them, to convey the impression of a room which has a large amount of computing power.

There is a side table with a jug of water and a glass, and an old-fashioned landline phone. A door on the side leads to what would be a toilet. Facing the three of them is another chair. Next to this board is a small table on which is placed a covered casserole.

The man in a light blue teri-cott shirt and trousers, with a gamchcha, enters the stage and turns the flipboard sheet to read 'Day 1' (The flip board is placed at a corner of the stage. It stays on stage throughout the play and is the suggested device to show the passage of time.)

He then walks up to the set and takes his position behind the chair, staring at the three of them.

It is Ripudaman. He is in his early thirties, but he looks and walks like an older man, he has the arrogance of middle aged frustration.

He's unshaven, wears a light blue teri – cott shirt hanging out over a muddy coloured pair of trousers and chappals. He has a 'gamchcha' loosely draped around his neck.

The three; Satya, Shiv & Sundar, are waking up slowly, as if recovering from being drugged. Ripudaman is watching them. They are finding their bearings… realising they have blindfolds on… moving their hands to try and remove the blindfolds.

Ripudaman: Hello.

A minute of your time please - before you take off your blindfolds.

There is a gun pointed at you. I will shoot you if you do not do exactly what I say. And I will not shoot to kill… you'll just be horribly injured. I hope you have understood.

All right? Is that clear.

The three prisoners nod slowly.

You can take off your blindfolds now.

The three of them take of their blindfolds cautiously. They get used to the light and realise where they are. They realise their situation. They are shocked to see themselves together in a room. Captive. Shiv starts getting angry. He rises.

Shiv: What the fuck (is going on)

Ripudaman: Sit down *(Points the gun)*

Shiv sits down

Thank you. Gentlemen. This is a kidnapping. You are my hostages. I shall be… (pause) dealing with you. You are to follow my instructions completely to avoid getting hurt.

I don't like guns. I carried one today only so you could understand your situation. I won't be carrying one in the future, but you needn't worry. There is one pointing at each one of you… from a hole in these walls somewhere… and will remain pointing at you during your stay here.

You are to remain…

Satya: Do you know who you're talking to… do you have any…

Ripudaman: Obviously, I wouldn't have kidnapped you otherwise. Would I?

And please; don't interrupt me again.

Isn't it a sight? The founders and CEOs and largest shareholders of the biggest IT companies in the world in one room!

As I was saying - you are to remain in this room. The room is completely secure, and every action of yours will be watched. This room is part of an isolated facility. So please don't expect to be rescued. The door you see over there leads to a toilet. There is a jug of water here and three glasses, one for each one of you. The jug will be refilled once daily. Please watch your consumption.

I know what you do… all too well I'm afraid… and there's no reason why you can't continue doing it. You can work on these computers here… do whatever you want, write code… make business plans… create algorithms and apps and… well, whatever it is you do.

You have access to email - so you can be in touch with the outside world. The machines don't have cameras or audio so you can't send out video or audio content, but you can access it. And I'm not stingy on support. Whatever computing facility you need, whatever zettabytes of space or power you need… it's all available.

By the way, if you are thinking of using these computers to get someone to track you down- please do try. It'll be fun!

We will be monitoring whatever you do on your computers and, trust me – we are fully capable of preventing you from; shall we say, harming yourself. Some of the best minds in the IT world are working for me… heck, some of them worked for you, but got kind of… bored… but it's nothing personal, I'm sure.

Well… that's what I had to say. Any questions?

Silence

Satya: I think what you have done and are planning to do is extremely stupid. Don't you know that the whole world… the security agencies of the entire world are hunting you down this very minute… you have no chance of getting away with this.

Ripudaman: I just might. But there's no way you are getting out of this unless you do exactly as I say…

Shiv: Whatever you are… and whatever you think you know about us… it doesn't include me. You see, my friends here…

Ripudaman: …Friends! That's rich…

Shiv: *(Continues without noticing)* my friends have had a more protected existence in the US. Whereas I have had to set up factories and businesses in an India… that… I don't think you have seen… So… I'm not bothered about you being caught by the cops etcetera.

I want you to know - whatever happens, however much money you make out of this… I will ensure – that you are hunted down… wherever you are… and made to suffer a bad… terrible death.

Ripudaman: What makes you think I have kidnapped you for the money?

Sundar: What do you want?

Ripudaman: I want to ask you something.

Satya: Are you out of your fucking mind?!

Ripudaman: That too, is irrelevant.

Sundar: And if we don't want to speak to you?

Ripudaman: You will; eventually.

And why should you forego the opportunity to talk. That you have been kidnapped is just a… situation.

We can always have a civilised conversation.

Shiv: Boy… you are insane.

Satya: You could've reached out to us and met us… it's possible… I know for a fact that we all are quite accessible…

Ripudaman: But I couldn't have got you all together?

Shiv: So, you want to fulfil… some weird fantasy of being a chat show host…

Ripudaman: Now that's funny… seriously… but no it's not that.

Shiv: Then what is it? Look ass hole - If you don't want a ransom, that's your fucking problem…

I am not going to waste my breath talking to you – I am just gonna wait to see you being taken down and shot like a pig by the Marines or something…

Ripudaman: Relax mister. As I said, we can be civil with each other.

Looks around at the hostile faces

No; well, then I'll be leaving you guys to… do what you want…

But, I suggest you get some rest. I shall be back tomorrow to talk… and if you feel like talking beforehand, just call on the… er… helpline. Dial One.

Ripudaman moves to leave the room

Sundar: Might I suggest you consider taking a ransom and ending this quickly… that would be better for you… (corrects himself)… all of us, I'm sure.

Satya: Don't encourage this crook.

Do you have any idea what you have done! What our kidnapping could be doing to the global economy as we speak!

Ripudaman: Then, wouldn't it be good if we spoke sooner, rather than later?

Good night gentlemen. Talk to you soon.

Sundar: Wait. Wait. But who are you? You know all about us. Before we speak to you… don't you think you should tell us… err… who you are…

Ripudaman: I'm your kidnapper. That's all you need to know.

Shiv: You. Just look at you. You could be any *chumma* farmer or labourer in this act. Who's your boss? If we have to talk to anybody, we'll talk to him!

Ripudaman: (something has riled him up) Who do you want? Mogambo? The Godfather? I'm a crook… like you guys… it's just that I don't use computers or software or social media to do my job for me…

I'm a banker…

But all you really need to know is… I'm the man with the gun…

He turns to leave, picks up the casserole, remembers something. Turns around. Gives a chit of paper to one of the three.

Ripudaman: Hey! Your computers are password protected…

(Hands them a chit of paper) Here's the password…

(Gleefully) I always wanted to do this.

Leaves. Stops at the exit of the set.

Ripudaman: *(pauses, thinks, turns to speak to the three)*

…and…err, I am an engineer. Like you guys…

Leaves

Fade out

Scene 3

Lights on the other part of the stage to reveal the rest of the set.

The flip board says, "10 years ago."

It is a hostel room of an engineering college

The hostel room has two beds, a centre table and a couple of chairs. The walls have posters of cricketers and film stars. It's late night and a booze party is going on. There is a bottle of Old Monk Rum, a Cola, a bowl of peanuts and a plate of what looks like kababs. There's a used Cola can which is now an ashtray. We see three young engineering college students, sitting in their nightwear. Ripudaman and two of his friends. They are drunk but not out of control.

The younger Ripudaman is wearing a light blue polo T of the, a snazzier denim / chino pair of trousers of the same colour, and a pair of sneakers.

They continue drinking and talking. Ripudaman and Friend 1 are drinking slowly, Friend 2, quickly, and is somewhat more inebriated. Ripudaman is sitting on a chair or stool while the two friends are sitting on the beds.

Friend1: Have you noticed how she stands out in a crowd…?

Ripudaman: In a batch of six hundred engineers, don't you think one out of just twenty-seven dames is gonna stand out…

Friend1: No man, that's not what I mean… and you know it… even if it had been the other way around you know - and this college was full of women, she would have stood out. *(rearranges his sitting posture, to address his friends with greater intensity)*… it's the way she carries herself, as if her womanhood is a gift… that's… that's not from this world… and those eyes… the way she can look at you, as if you are the only one in the world for her… and then she can turn away… as if you're nobody… and that laugh…

Friend2: *(Interrupting)… Aur uske mamme…*

Friend1: What!! What is this *mamme* crap man! You bloody North Indians can only think from below the belt I say!

Friend2: And what is this North Indian North Indian shit! Haven't you fantasized about her… or jerked off on her… *(turns to Ripudaman)… pagal hai saala Madrasi*!

Friend1: You're not going to get it OK?

Friend2: OK, then here's the deal… whatever she has above the belt is yours… I'll make do with whatever she has to offer below the belt… *chalega?*

Laughter

Friend1: Is this the way to talk about your *babhi*?

Friend2: What *bhabhi*? We've been here for three years and you've hardly spoken to her…

Friend1: *Abi ek saal hai na…* I'll talk to her!

Friend2: You wanna bet *macha*. I bet you… that a year from now, we'll be drinking in this room and you'll still be fantasizing about talking to her.

Ripudaman: *Abe jaane de na*, you know he is senti about her… and don't mess around this year… it's the final year… we gotta get serious man…

Friend2: *Tu hai na* serious… that's enough for *Majnu* and me.

Friend1: Absolutely! And what are we going to achieve by getting serious?… there are no jobs - at least for us… who wants Civil engineers… and that too from this shit hole college.

Friend2: Ya *Machaa*. Should have done computers or electronics… and… and she would have been in your class as well… and you wouldn't have been stuck with us!

Friend1: As if we had any choice… getting Civil itself was a big deal…

Ripudaman: Not for me guys… civil engineering is what I wanted to do… I want to build man… and none of that fancy

architecture stuff that guys do for self – satisfaction… I want to build things that matter to… like… society OK? And that's the real big deal.

Friend2: For me, getting into Engineering itself was a big deal…

Friend1: It was deal only for you, no? Ha… Ha… *(teasingly)* come on tell now man… what 'deal' did your dad do to get into engineering? Huh? C'mon, tell na…

Laughter

Friend2: Now this, YOU won't understand.

Friend1: Why not? Look, other than Ripu… and some other guys, Harsh, Mayank… maybe Sharib… 90 percent of engineers are here because that's what their dads wanted them to do.

Ripudaman: Why exclude me? Ya, I mean, my dad also wanted me to be an engineer. It's just that I wanted it too… and it's not like he WANTS me to be an engineer, it's that… he doesn't want me to be a farmer that's all.

Friend2: You're saying farmer as if he's some *ghareeb kissan* singing… *kya tha woh… 'mere desh ki dharteeeee… eeeeee… mere desh ki dharti sona ugle heerey moti… mere desh ki dharti… ho ho….oh!'*…

The other friends join in, one starts banging the table while Ripu is play acting (mimicking the actor who played the part)

…phew! *(Slumps down, continues)*… *kissan* my foot! your dad owns land, right? Near that place… what's it called… *jahaan*…

Friend1: *(Excitedly)* I remember! I remember! That place that is like burning… ya *jalna*!

Ripudaman and Friend 2 laugh.

Friend2: *(Continues)*… Its Jalna man… Jaaalna… OK… *(turns to Ripudaman)*… ya, so, your dad owns land there right?... and *theek thaak* amount boss…

Ripudaman: What do you mean amount! No… tell me… what do you mean by 'amount' of land?! It's not money in a bank or an FD! It's not a… it's not a fund.

You guys don't know shit! For you land is like an end-all. That's why you use such words… that's why you want to buy 'plots!'… and measure its rate… and track its value!... *time aayega toh bech denge achche profit pe.*

That's not how it is for us… ? For a farmer, his land is something living… it gives him and his family – life! Its value doesn't lie in what he will get if he sells it… it lies in what he is able to get out of it…

Friend2: So?

Friend1: So?

Ripudaman: So? What do you mean so?

Friend1: So, we know what's coming. We are in final year with you man… *(Friends speaking to each other)*

Now he'll talk about how fucked up being a farmer is - there's no support, no irrigation… how tough it is… how the… how the… cropping pattern has changed so that you are forced to grow what the soil doesn't support…how all this has ruined his dad's life and why he doesn't want to let him become a farmer…

Friend2: And that's why Mr. Ripudaman Rathod is here! To become an engineer… That rhymes man! Ripudaman is here, to become, and engineer. (2)

Ripudaman: Shut up man!

Friend2: But I'm worried - he's stuck in a place that won't let him become an engineer.

Friend1: Now what's this angle?

Ripudaman: There's no angle man… he's right…

Friend1: …He!? This guy…

Ripudaman: *(Quickly turns and pre-empts Friend 2 and addresses them both)* OK – let's put it this way - he's not wrong… Ask yourself man - does an engineering college really produce engineers? Look at our batch itself. There are so many people here who are preparing for some government job or the other… IAS or what not… then there is another set that wants to do an MBA… who will probably end up selling soap or working in a bank… and even the ones that end up in engineering are gonna be in a completely different field…

Friend1: I see what you mean…

Friend 2 is knocking down drinks faster

Ripudaman: Ya… I mean why be a chemical engineer just to be in a better college, so you can get a job in software! And; half of those are going to be fucking sales jobs…

Friend1: Abroad… in the US mostly…

Ripudaman: Bang on!… that's why virtually everyone is learning code or JAVA or C++ or Python… it's crazy isn't it! We are producing mechanical engineers who can write code and can assemble a computer but can't operate a fucking welding machine!

Friend1: But you are not going to do that!

Ripudaman: Damn right man!

Friend2: Good for you… you son of a landlord!... oh sorry! Landowner… landowner farmer… whatever. Who is going to be a great Civil engineer! Let's toast to that… Cheers!

They cheer loudly and drag Friend 2 in. He joins in animatedly

Friend2: *(Completely drunk)* And what of the land, what'll happen to it?

Friend1: He'll sell it… *(Speaks to Ripudaman)*… but wait till there's some development or a highway planned nearby… that's when rates shoot up!

Friend2: Then he'll be rich… our big landlord is…

Ripudaman: *Arre bhai!* Just a…

Friend2: Oh sorry… sorry! Our small poor farmer…

Ripudaman: Middle level… and I don't think… even if I am working as a civil engineer… that we'll sell…

Friend2: *(Latches on to one word in the sentence and starts talking loudly)* Middle level… yes… middle… that's the fucking problem… we are fucking middle everything… we are fucking middle class… we will always remain middle class… you will remain middle class… and you *machaa*… you are also middle class… and you will also remain fucking middle class. And if you bloody dickheads think getting into the IAS or bloody Hindustan Lever…

Friend1: *(Interrupting)* You mean Hindustan Uni Lever…

Friend2: No! Hindustan Lever… and… as in leaver!… as in leaving for the US of A… and you *choots* thinking that any of this is going to change anything… It won't! … because your bloody middle class upbringing is going to ensure that you bloody stay middle class… you eat middle class… you bloody marry middle class… you are even going to fucking dream middle class… that… that your bloody kids also become… become engineers!!… and you know… you know what this middle is all about… it's about ass holes like Ripu… he's going to be an engineer… BUT, he'll not sell his land… he's going to bloody live in the past… trying to hold on to what was passed down… that's… That's what really makes us middle class!

The poor OK! The poor - they are always in the present… they have to survive no?! The rich! They are

fucking thinking ahead… all the time… The middle… bloody always looking behind…

And Ripu… Ripu… Ripu is fucked even more… he's a farmer… and that too middle class… middle class farmer… He won't sell his land… farmer's son… emotional connect… *Yeh dharti meri maa hai… The dharti meri maa hai.* You're totally screwed man… you're fucking… bloody… screwed… (laughs himself off to sleep on the bed he's been sitting on)

Ripudaman and Friend 1 remove the glass from his hand and tuck him in.

Friend1: He's right you know… we are stuck in the 'middle'

Ripudaman: In the middle of some peace and quiet now… lets have this last drink in peace… It's the middle of the night as well…

They both laugh

Slow fade. As the lights fade a couple of lines are heard.

Ripudaman: …but we have to be more serious this year man…

Friend1: Fuck it man… hey… do Professor Choubey man… the way he spoke today… yaar… hey… come on man… c'mon *yaar*!

Ripudaman: OK… *(Mimicking somebody)* OK *(Clears his throat)*… istudents! ij this bending or ij this inserting… *(Loud laughter)*

Scene 4

Ripudaman walks to the flip board. Changes it so it reads 'Day 2' and comes back to the room. During this time. Satya, Shiv & Sundar have taken their seats.

Ripudaman: You people ready to talk?

Shiv: Fuck you!

Ripudaman: *(Long stare)* Maybe, my being civil or honest isn't going to work. Would you rather I forced you…

Sundar: Look, we can talk, but by making us your hostages, aren't you using force, anyway? You have our attention now. Release us. We can agree to meet… all of us, in a more conducive environment, and we will talk then.

Shiv: …and you better decide quickly… because you're going down… the whole world is looking for us…

Satya: …All right… all right… even if it isn't, even if there's no danger of you being caught… I'm sure you realise that there's no way we can talk in this weird situation, we don't know you, how can we trust you? What if this is really about ransom? What if you are some psychopath waiting for the right time to kill us…

Shiv: That he is…

Satya: *(To Shiv)* please!

Yes, as I was saying, to start off, why don't you tell us a little more about yourself. You mentioned that you were an engineer… so there must be a lot that we understand about each other…

Ripudaman: Ah… empathy… *(Speaking to Satya)* I was wondering when I would hear that.

Don't patronize me!

I have kidnapped you to have a conversation. Once we complete it, to our mutual satisfaction, you'll be free to go.

But not before. And as we talk, we might get to know one another… the thing is, you have no reason to fear. No harm will come to you. Even if you do something stupid or violent, you will only be subdued, and we'll be back to where we started. So, talk… and be free.

Long pause, as everyone thinks.

Satya: Weird as it is… so go ahead… what can we do… we are your prisoners… what do you want from us… what do you want to ask us?

Silence. Shiv looks to protest but rethinks his position. Ripudaman, meanwhile, is considering what Satya said, staring at him.

Ripudaman: You are not ready.

Sundar: What?!

Shiv: I knew it. There's something else going on with this weirdo!

Ripudaman: If you want to say anything, say it. I'll listen, but you are not ready for a - conversation. So, anything to say?

Satya: Wow! He is going to decide when we are going to talk? He is probably going to decide what we will talk about? You want to give us a script?

Why don't you end this charade and… and lay it out… and finish this talk or conversation or whatever and end this…

Ripudaman: You are not ready. You are not ready.

He goes away. As before, he takes the casserole with him. He goes to the flip chart changes the card to Day 3, then Day 4. He pauses for a while. Thinks. Changes it to Day 5. He walks back into the room. The three of them are now exhausted and depleted.

Ripudaman: Hello. *(Looks around)* I think you are ready to talk.

Satya: If you want to kill us, why don't you just shoot us and get it done with.

Ripudaman: Why would I do that? And what makes you think I wanna kill you?

Shiv: BECAUSE! You have not given us anything to eat for the last five fucking days!

Ripudaman: You are ready to talk!

Sundar: We were always ready to talk…

Ripudaman: You were willing to talk, but you weren't ready. And it's so odd; about not getting anything to eat… you just had to ask.

Satya: What are you playing at?

Ripudaman: Nothing! You can eat as much as you like. In fact, grub for you is in this casserole I lug around… you just have to… Buy it.

Sundar: What?

Satya: Oh God! What the fuck is this now?

Ripudaman: *(Enjoying himself)* You heard me. You can get to eat as much as you want. You just have to buy your food… pay for it… give me money.

Satya: Are you crazy?

Ripudaman: *(Continues, without listening)*… think of it like travelling in a low-cost airline… whose tickets for some reason are priced as much as a full-fledged carrier… it's amazing isn't it?

Aah… you don't know what I am talking about… you jet setting billionaires you. It's like travelling in an airplane… where you have to buy food… and you can't eat out…

Satya: You are crazy.

Sundar: Our wallets are with you. Take the money you want.

Ripudaman: Naah… I'm afraid that won't be enough to pay for your meal here *(Pats the casserole).*

Silence

Shiv: You bastard! That's your plan. No ransom, just extort money from us for food! You fucking weirdo!

Ripudaman: Sir! If you are really serious about your political career, you will have to watch your language…

But truly, there's no plan… I'm sure you can afford to buy food… I've spent so much on this fool proof arrangement… it would be your way of chipping in… to our conversation…

Satya: We are so grateful to you, for doing so much for us…

Ripudaman: I'll let that pass. Look, how much are your companies worth?

Silence

Ripudaman: Your companies have a net worth around 2 trillion dollars. That's like bigger than the GDP of most countries in the world! And as founder directors…

I'm sorry; but your shareholding pattern is public… you guys have a personal wealth of close to 300 billion dollars! A couple more like you… and you have as much wealth as the poorest half of the world's population!! … and you are gonna spite me the price of a meal! C'mon guys! Don't be so cheap!

Sundar: How much money do you want.

Ripudaman: How much money will you give?

Shiv: I'm guessing a cheapskate like you will have cheap taste in food as well… so I'm guessing a couple of dollars a head.

Ripudaman: That's mean. You know as well as I do, that some of the best food in the world can be had at that price from street food stalls… raise your bid guys.

Satya: We are too tired for this. What's the amount? Take the money. Get us the food. Take more. Get us out. Get it over with.

Ripudaman: *(Stern)* No. You are going to offer me a price that is justified!

Sundar: Take a thousand… dollars…

Satya: Oh… hang on it's a ransom… a million… dollars?

Ripudaman: No!

Shiv: What do you want weirdo.

The rest of the conversation picks up a fast pace. Ripu speaks quickly. The trio answer back at the same pace. It is like a slanging match!

Ripudaman: Look mister. Have I tied you up? Have I tortured you? You have access to a clean toilet… water… you have access to your fucking lives… you have access to your machines… your… software… so why can't you make me the right offer for some food… *(Opens the casserole… steaming food)*… a plate of rice for each one of you? Or you can go ahead… and eat your computers.

You are fucking billionaires! You haven't eaten for five days! How much will you pay for a plate of rice! Is that so fucking tough to answer?

Sundar: *(Reconciliatory)*… Look, we'll pay what you want… but whatever we say… you can call it inadequate… …that's all we are saying? We haven't said no to paying you.

Ripudaman: What if I come back after five more days… or maybe ten… or maybe fifteen, by when you would have gone insane with hunger… maybe… insane enough to try and kill each other… to eat… How much will you pay me then?

Satya: What do you want from us?

Ripudaman: Answer me!!!

What will you pay for? A plate of rice or your precious shares in your fucking IT companies!! How much will you pay for it?

Silence

Satya: *(Understanding)* Is that why we are here? To prove some fucking (truism)…

Sundar: (Trying to calm him down) We'll pay you whatever you want if we are starving to death… that's what you wanted to hear…

Satya: But what does it show?… Economists call it…

Ripudaman: *(Interrupts)* It shows that whatever obscene sum of money you make from selling your computers and software… it is worth nothing in front of a plate of food when you are hungry – So why do you have so much money?! Why do you make so much money?!!

Satya: That's what's bugging you?

Ripudaman: Answer my fucking question!! Talk to me!!

Sundar: We have money because what we make… what we create… because what we have created… It makes a difference to people's lives.

Ripudaman: You make! You create!! What do you make… bits and bytes in cyberspace… apps… electric impulses passing through wires… my brain does that too! Is there something you make that I can touch… smell… eat!!! I'll tell you what's more tangible – bread, warm clothes, four walls… a roof! And it's not me who's saying that… it's you! Look at you, I have given you all the computing power in the world, and you are willing to trade it all for a plate of rice!

Who has created this wealth for you - engineers and masons, and rig workers and manual labourers… sailors and longshoremen… welders and blacksmiths… a fucking army of tough, poorly paid men and women who brave the elements to put down buoys, lay cables… set up cell-phone towers…

This internet of things… the web… the cloud… cyberspace… these emoticons and social media posts - they don't float around in the air… they exist because of things that people built.

What do they get out their labour – a fucking daily wage; and you get your valuations and obscene bonuses!

Satya: Where do these valuations come from?

Ripudaman: What?!

Satya: They come from the market – from people wanting to invest in stock of tech companies so that the value of their savings grows! It comes from the people. The people… that what did you say… 'build' things…

If they don't want to invest, let them not; we won't make so much money. It's their choice. They are interested in technology.

If an article comes in the newspaper on the latest advancement in… in irrigation technologies versus the… "Top 5 smartphones" of the year… what do you think people will read?

Ripudaman: But that's not the reason… it is the result…

Satya: Economists call it the theory of… (unintended consequences)

Ripudaman: Shut up! You fucking talk of economic theorems while a hundred thousand farmers and agricultural labourers and truckers and retailers make a pittance out of putting food on your dinner table, while just one IT guy makes the

same amount of money for putting what… a smartphone in your hand at dinner time!

Satya: If you want to hold us to ransom and force us to agree to your absurdity, what choice do we have…

But you're saying nothing new - Henry Ford, Rockefeller, Ray Croc… wasn't there a disparity between the money they made and their workers…

Ripudaman: It's the scale of the disparity that is absurd! It's the disparity with those who don't work for you that is absurd! It's the disparity with those, without whom you would not be able to do what you make money for - that's absurd!

Satya: But the principle is the same… and in this case you are comparing our businesses with others…

Shiv: Maybe if you hit him on the head with a computer, he'll understand the value of technology…

Sundar: Look, if value or money gets you riled up, think of it as… remuneration, for risk taking, ingenuity… if we develop technologies that can make people connect with each other seamlessly and cheaply… or make things quicker and faster… manage inventories, systems, businesses, cut costs… provide people solutions and ideas that they need…

Ripudaman: You are not writing copy for your ad mister.

And when did a bunch of nerds with IIT and IVY league management degrees start calling themselves, risk takers?! What was the risk you took – a job on the West Coast vs. the East Coast…

And even those that weren't blessed with an IVY league education - like *bhaisaheb* here *(Points to Shiv)*… they knew they had some innovation up their sleeve that would make them money… what was the risk they took?

And *(Turns to speak to Satya)*… no the principle is not the same… it is not your ingenuity, but the aggressive selfishness with which you curbed others' ingenuity that has led to what…

…What did you call it remuneration?!

Didn't you buy out search engines, or software companies that were as ingenious? Didn't you run them into the ground, where you couldn't buy them out? Didn't you create… what anyone would call cartels - to ensure that only a certain set of machines that could run a certain set of software… were built by those who learnt a certain set of languages.

Sundar: But why pick on IT. Isn't it the case in every industry – all companies want to be number 1, they make better products, or price them cheaper, or advertise… they… try and be more efficient, make their supply chain work harder…

Ripudaman: All nuts and bolts… all stuff that can be made… and anyone can make… a semi-literate man can make a soap and work hard and make it a success… but you create a barrier to opportunity… and where you didn't erect barriers, you screwed up your consumers' brains. Don't you know that these things are addictive? Social media? Smartphones? They are addictive, aren't they?

Satya: We don't know?

Ripudaman: No, you do. They are.

Sundar: There isn't enough research.

Ripudaman: Why? Because you didn't want it. It would have got in your way – to make more money. If you can spend billions finding ways to make software and the internet faster and cleverer, can't you research what it's use can do to people?

Sundar: We do that by the way, but such understanding develops over time…

Ripudaman: Like the ill effects of tobacco… or high levels of sugar in colas… I get it… but they accepted that they were selling joy, without masquerading it as utility or a benefit… They didn't institutionalise this addiction to their usage…

And everyone does it in your world… without exception!

From the social media moguls to the guys who aggregate cabs for you… the travel websites… the big online stores, whether they sell books or biscuits… The modus operandi is the same – the drug peddler's way… Isn't that why you keep your kids away from smartphones and technology… just like drug lords keep their kids and families away from drugs while spreading them all over the world?

Sundar: Can you tell us what law we have broken? Have we done anything illegal? In creating technology that helps humanity!

Ripudaman: You smug bastards. You hide your greed and your assault on humanity behind the wall of legal technicalities.

You have the audacity to garb your profiteering in philanthropy! Everything you have done – connect people, give them information, make their work easier; you have done to solve the western world's problems, and make profit from it.

They don't have enough labour; so you automated. People in the rest of the world need technology that gives them jobs, clean water, basic education, cheap medical care. But you take their data and throw addictive web-based apps at them. You create a system that enriches you from their poverty and then pretend to spend some part of your money to 'help' them!?

I can't imagine that this is the kind of people you are…
this is what you have become.

The light fades away from the three as Ripudaman mouths the dialogue above. When Ripudaman stops speaking, there is a slow fade on him as well.

Scene 5

Slow fade into Satya in cricketing whites. He is confronting his cricket coach from his school days. It is the early nineties. The flip board says "more than 25 years ago." Sundar and Shiv have remained in the present and are observing Satya's argument with his coach.

Coach: Did you run him out deliberately?

Satya: How can you say that coach!?

Coach: Did you? Or did you not?

Satya: You have been coaching me for the past 6 years. Don't you know the answer sir!

Coach: What happened?

Satya: I hit the ball to mid – off. It was my call. He had backed up too much. There was no run. I had to send him back.

Coach: Don't you think Aditya is an older, more experienced batsman. Not to mention your senior.

Satya: But I was batting better Coach. And you know that.

There is a pause. The Coach lets out an exasperated sigh.

Coach: How will you explain this to the whole world now?

Satya: Why do I have to explain it to the whole world Coach. You know. The team knows. Everyone on the field knows. Everyone who has ever even played a single game of cricket knows.

Coach: The school management has gotten involved; the PTA has gotten involved. Apparently Aditya's aunt had come to cheer him on. She's a motormouth and told all the mothers who raised the issue at yesterday's parent teacher meeting…

Satya: …but what's that got to do with…

Coach: *(Continues his tirade)* So the teacher in charge of Ashoka house has started saying that this was an attempt to snatch the school team captaincy away from her house… and your team, that you are saying knows what happened last Sunday!! Just ask those who are from Ashoka, they have starting toeing their Housemaster's line…

Satya: *(Shocked)* How can this be?! I spoke to Aditya after the match. He was cool. We won coach! We won!

Coach: And you were man of the match… but if Aditya had not been run out, maybe he would have been… and the state team selectors who always show up for our quadrangular would have noticed him!!!

Satya: Is that how it is coach?! No! No! I wanted us to win, not get 'noticed!'

Coach: And that's the fuck up boy!!! The whole city isn't bothered with any of this. All they know is that You are the "selfish batter" who ran out his team mate so he could score more runs, become captain and get noticed!!

Satya: *(Tears welling)* But that's not true coach! That's not true!! I would never do that! I have never done that!!

There is silence as the Coach waits for Satya to get a grip on himself. He does not commiserate with or support Satya. He just waits.

They take the same position as the Ripudaman and Satya of the present. They change their appearance back to the present on stage. The flip board changes back to Day 5 (one of the other two hostages led a helping hand) The exchange continues.

Ripudaman: Look, that's not how the truth works, it's perception, it's what is spread around and repeated… people start seeing it… they even start looking for it… and everything starts reaffirming and reinforcing the truth they have started believing…

Satya: Perhaps some - day, there will be a technology, so people can know what really happened, what's true and they will

not be affected by rumours and what people say… and what they claim they saw… they will be careful before spreading something… they will be able to check facts… and… and…

Silence.

Slow fade.

Scene 6

Shiv is seen in shorts and a white shirt. He is reading. Lying down with his head on his mother's lap. She is explaining the moral of the story he has been reading. The flip board now reads, "more than 35 years ago." Satya has returned to the present and Sundar is as he was. They are observing Shiv and his mother.

Mother: Taranjit aunty said something so meaningful the other day… it's a saying in Hindi… or Punjabi I think… *neki kar aur kuen mein daal…*

Shiv: What does it mean Amma?

Mother: Do good…

Shiv: …And throw it into the well…

Mother: *(Laughs)* well yes, but what it means is be good for the sake of being good… not to show off.

Shiv: Strange no Amma… Taranjit aunty saying that and you always keep saying Punjabis are such show offs!

Mother: Quiet! When did I say that… I mean I might have said that but not for her… and you don't have to repeat what adults say!!

Shiv: But that's the same thing as what you say no? That I should always be a good boy… so why bring up Taranjit aunty.

Pause as him mother thinks through what her son has said.

Mother: Aiyyo!! You and your logics! It's not just about being, the saying is about doing. Let us say you do something good for someone… then there is no need to have any expectation that something good will be done to you, or the same person will return the favour… just do the good deed, and forget about it.

Shiv: *(Thinking)* Appa works in a hospital…

Mother: But he is not a doctor son…

Shiv: That's what I was coming to Amma, he does good, but he also gets salary.

Pause. Mother strokes his forehead.

Mother: Do you remember a lady Mrs. Balakrishnan, who came in that white Ambassador car…

Shiv: The one with the blue light on it!!

Mother: Yes, the same… she came to thank your Appa, because he gave CPR to her husband in the waiting hall of the hospital. Your Appa gave him CPR… he saved him… you remember she had got gifts and cash…

Shiv: …yes…

Mother: Appa didn't take a single paisa, didn't you see… and now she is doing a case against the hospital for negligence…

Shiv: Amma…

Mother: What?

Shiv: When I become an engineer, I will make a machine that gives CPR… and I will give it to everyone, so many lives can be saved.

Mother smiles.

Mother: And what will you do with this good thing you create son?

There is silence as the Mother waits for Shiva to reply.

As she is waiting, they transform into the Ripudaman and Shiva of the present. The flip board changes back to Day 5 (one of the other two hostages led a helping hand) Shiva is speaking with a lot of excitement, like a passionate businessman selling his idea to investors, or a son passionately describing his dreams to his mother. As he speaks animatedly, the actors change their appearance back to the present.

Shiv: We are going to established a CPR Corporation! I've patented the technology… I have proved that human given resuscitation only works 78% of the time whereas my machines have achieved a 99% recuperation rate. I am going to make CPR Booths every five hundred meters… on every street…

So, if someone has a heart attack- CPR corporation will be there for them. To save lives! Everyone would get instant attention, hundreds of thousands of lives would be saved. We'll have to man the kiosks… so many thousands jobs as paramedics - right?

Pause. Thinks.

Shiv: But… life-saving is free, and you can't charge anyone for saving his or her life… or rather, if you charge, you won't appear benevolent, and you won't get all sorts of concessions…

Pause. Thinks. Again.

Shiv: But, running booths, paying salaries to those who worked in them… all this takes money…

Pause. Thinks. Again. Has a brainwave.

Shiv: We'll have to allow advertising on booths… then the paramedics uniform would get branded… and hey, if the booth exists, why not use it as a store to sell some stuff… while the paramedic waits for a heart attack to happen in the vicinity… If the booth is there… it can double up as a cell-phone tower… or some other sort of relay… and once it's connected… it would start offering other services… data, information… entertainment… it would get a screen…

And hey! The booth would start collecting data on the people who come to it… all the information about their lives… the booth would get their medical data… if they bought groceries from the booth, it would get data about

their eating habits… and so on… it would eventually know pretty much everything about everyone… Pretty soon, businesses, politicians… welfare… anyone… or anything that had to reach people - would have to go through the CPR Booth…

See *Amma*! *Neki kar aur kuen mein daal*… we will be giving CPR for free… and the lives of all those who gathered around it would have been better, more convenient… more entertaining…

Ripudaman: How many patents to you own?

Shiv: Eight hundred and fourteen…

Silence.

Slow fade.

Scene 7

Slow fade into Sundar wearing baggy denims in the fashion of the nineties with a hoodie that carries a college name. He is walking with his college sweetheart. A slow meandering walk, as if it is the end of the conversation and it is time to go their separate ways. The flip board again goes back to saying "more than 25 years ago." Satya and Shiv have returned to the present. They are observing Sundar's conversation with his girlfriend.

Girlfriend: …and the smartest guy in our batch can't come up with a better line that "it's not you, it's me."

Sundar: But that's not what I have said.

Girlfriend: You are saying that we don't have data to support that we are suitable for each other!? Are you listening to yourself!!

Sundar: No. I am saying we don't have enough data 'points.' Aren't you listening to me!! Look; we are both 22… in the final year of engineering… we like each other, because of… OK… some characteristics…

Girlfriend: We 'like' each other…

Sundar: Like. Love. Want to marry… whatever, it's because of some characteristics… some qualities… and these, will be there in how many people… Take a wild guess… there are 1.5 million engineers in India of our age group… and globally… perhaps four times that number… and 90% of them are men… 6 million prospective boyfriends… and have you met them all, have you seen them all. How can you be sure… and what if the data points change tomorrow?!

Girlfriend: And how does one 'mine' all these data points?!

Sundar: There has to be a way… there will be a way…

Girlfriend: I thought we had a relationship Sundar… I didn't know it was a computing test…

Sundar: It's not… I like you… I love you dammit… but how can you like me… how can you love me… how can you be sure… everything has to be perfect…

Girlfriend: We had something beautiful Sundar. It was beautiful because it wasn't perfect… and don't worry… I will maximise the number of data points…

This time, the two of them transform into the Ripudaman and Sundar of the present. The flip board changes back to Day 5 (one of the other two hostages led a helping hand) Ripudaman concludes what the 'Girlfriend' was saying. The actors change their appearance back to the present.

Ripudaman: …I am seeing Rajesh tonight…

Sundar: No, not Rajesh… not him, please…

Silence.

Slow fade.

Lights. The trio are facing Ripudaman. He turns to leave. Before leaving, he turns back.

Ripudaman: Whatever you made. Whatever you created. It will reach everyone right? The poor, the destitute, or those who want to live away from it all… some farmer… alone in his fields… he'll be able to call for help, he will be connected to something… some drone or something right? Some tech on his wrist… anything… so that if he's watching his crops withering away… and doesn't know what to do and gives up… something will be able to… to reach that old dying man… gasping for breath… his mouth full of froth from the poison he had ingested… to maybe clear his pathways… and try… just try… to bring him back to life…

Silence

All characters freeze.

Slow Fade

Scene 8

It is early morning. The boys' hostel room. It carries the remains of the night's drinking session. Friend 2 is fast asleep. One hand inside his shorts. As the lights come on, we see Friend 1 shaking him awake.

Friend2: *(Sleepily)* Hey! What *machaa*, let me sleep man…

Friend1: Get up. We have to go.

Friend2: And I have to cum. Get lost man!

Friend1: No. It's important. C'mon… get up!

Friend2: What happened man?

Friend1: It's Ripu… his… aaa…

Friend2: What?

Friend1: His father died.

At this point a spotlight appears at a side on the stage. Ripu is standing over an 'arthi'; his father's. He changes his appearance from a student to a farmer's. From a T & jeans to a light blue teri-cott shirt and trousers with a 'gamchcha'. He does this to the duration of the scene.

Friend2: What!?

Friend1: His dad died.

Friend2: *(Awake now)* What? When? Where's Ripu.

Friend1: We got a call last night. After you had dozed off. It happened suddenly…

Friend2: What! Shit. And why the fuck didn't you wake me up? Where is he?

Friend1: He's left for home.

Friend2: What *machaa*! You should have woken me up. We should have gone with him… and if you couldn't wake me up, at least YOU could've have gone with him…

Friend1: No, that's taken care of. Robin has gone with him.

Friend2: So let's leave. Right away!

Friend1: We will, but there's no rush. We have to get to Aurangabad. Robin and Ripu would have reached the village and they'll bring the body to Aurangabad sometime in the late afternoon. We have to be there to set up things… we'll be more help there.

Friend2: But why Aurangabad?

Friend1: His dad committed suicide. There's some case or police matter and it's to be handled in Aurangabad…

Friend2: Oh God! Suicide! Why?

Friend1: I don't know exactly… but it seems the land was mortgaged… and he lost it yesterday…

Friend2: Oh fuck! And to think… *(remembers the conversations of the previous night)* shit man! Ripu must be going through hell huh?

Friend1: Let's… just get moving… OK?

Friend2: Ya Ya of course. Give me half an hour… that's cool right?

Friend1: Yes yes. Er… you have some money?

Friend2: Ya, around 20,000 bucks.

Friend1: Take it. It's a police matter… and the circumstances are like… crazy man. Who knows what's going to happen… we should have some money… I have taken the 15,000 I had.

Friend2: Yeah, ya of course! Let's get moving.

I have my credit card as well… and I'll speak to papa. His company will have a distributor or somebody in

Aurangabad. Maybe he can help… or give us money if we need it.

Friend1: Cool. Let's go now.

They walk out

Blackout

Scene 9

We return to the hostage area. Characters unfreeze. This exchange is peaceful.

Satya: *(Gently)* If all this is so damaging… if there are so many people wanting this; governments will regulate won't they?

Ripudaman: That won't solve anything. China has built a firewall with millions of censors who can clamp down on people. We will merely trade an oligopoly for an oligarchy… but change has to happen… the new source of inequity and power that has been created in the world… it has to go.

I have kidnapped you… to talk… but once your hegemony, which is destroying equity in the world is identified by more and more people… they won't be talking… the yellow vests won't be burning down Louis Vuitton showrooms – they will burn down the campuses that you showcase as progress…

Sundar: You have threatened us enough *(Weak smile)*. What would you have us do?

Ripudaman: Change the way you think. All the things you said… your ingenuity… your intelligence… your creativity… it has helped people… and you think that's why you and your companies are valuable today…

But you are not valuable because you help people.

You are valuable, so YOU must help people.

You are Truth, Beauty and Goodness…

Live your names… your provenance.

It has given you Bapu's talisman – "to ask whether every action of yours helps the weakest, poorest person you ever saw"… and only you feel what it means…

You have a gift, you can create things and programs and machines that can help people. But they won't help if you abdicate the choices to plan, direct and govern their use.

The ones who discovered how to make fire would have probably directed their tribe, so too the ones who made the first set of wheels or the first sea going boats or rafts… and so should you…

It is your responsibility. If people are getting left behind by technology, you have to focus your energies on technology that educates everyone… no matter how poor… if social media is screwing up our brains, you have to find ways to cut off its access to people… you have to seek and prosecute those who misuse it. If smartphones are so damaging to kids, you have to write on them that kids should not use them… you have to make software that recognises usage by a kid and shuts it down…

We don't know all this. Politicians don't know it. All those intellectuals walking around the groves of academe… they don't know it… we can't figure out how things change… they change so fast!

And; and this is most important. It's why only you can and must do something. You know the world that existed before all this… the ones who come after you – they WON'T!!

Remember, your competitors… others… who walk the path of innovation in technology – they will follow the examples you set. The ABC of China is behaving exactly as you did when you were consolidating your empires and your market shares; and they are right in saying – "that if they could get big and rich in this manner; why shouldn't we?!"

It's the same logic that's screwing up our climate – if they used coal, why can't we? If they drained wealth from Africa then why can't we?

And you have done it before – people like you; they gave up their patents so we could live in a wireless world, computer companies opened up their software so anybody could create, you created a web and ensured that and more technologies could get interconnected… you have to do it again.

It's up to you.

It's up to you.

I'm just a farmer's son. I can't grudge you a plate of rice, no matter I don't make money on it.

He gets up. Leaves the casserole in front of them. Gets up to leave.

Ripudaman: You will be free in a couple of hours. This facility is two kilometres underground. You will be taken up and left with homing beacons on your person.

You should be rescued soon enough.

Niyant kuru karma tvam

Do your duty.

Make us proud.

Remember – It's up to you. It's up to you.

Blackout

Epilogue

Ripudaman (older version) with his father, they are both dressed the same way, a farmer in Marathwada. Standing. Talking. Ripudaman is distraught, his father is calm.

Ripudaman: I… I couldn't do it

Prakash: Couldn't do what?

Ripudaman: Punish them.

Prakash: Punish them?! For what?

Ripudaman: They… they killed you.

Prakash: That's not true. I killed myself.

Ripudaman: Because of them! Because of people like them! You worked as hard as any of them. What you created was as important as anything they did. But they made money. We couldn't even save our land!!

Pause

Prakash: *(Consoling)* So you'll continue punishing yourself?

Ripudaman: What?

Prakash: You couldn't punish them because you know they are not guilty. You think you are.

Ripudaman: I… I'm sorry papa, I wasn't there… I…

Prakash: No. It wasn't your fault. It was mine. I made a mistake. I shouldn't have killed myself. I was a coward… but you my son, are brave beyond belief… and I am proud of you.

Ripudaman: For what, I could never be a farmer's son.

Prakash: But you are… and much more. You have set them free, you have 'let' them be free to choose how technology will change the world; and that's what a farmer does, he just

plants the seeds… and lets the winds and waters choose what the crop will be like.

Ripudaman: And what if this continues, what if technology replaces all the farmers in the worlds… what if the world doesn't need us anymore and everything we eat starts getting made in factories?

Prakash: So be it. It's the law of nature. And who better than a farmer to know of nature's laws…

Ripudaman: It will all go away… just like that?

Prakash: No. The seeds of humanity that each generation plants in their children. It will never go away. Satya. Shiv. Sundar.

Truth. Goodness. Beauty. They are eternal. They will stay. Whether in forests and jungles… or farmlands and pastures… in factories and labs… and even in microprocessors and neural networks…

They will stay… they will live.

As they live in you, my son.

They embrace

Slow Fade

A Fair Ending

Dev Divya Aur Duniya

Characters

DEV: A middle aged man of middle height & complexion. Neither fat nor thin. Non – committal, measured of speech and manner.

DIVYA: His lover. Young, attractive, vivacious, opinionated, high strung.

***DUNIYA* (The World):**

Four to five actors - men and women. They form the world that changes with the conversations that DEV and DIVYA have *(or is it the other way around?)*

Scene 1

DUNIYA is bright. Dressed in golden hues. DUNIYA is office. Someone is working on a laptop, someone else is on the phone. Two people are having a corridor conversation, someone is just staring at the office ceiling, twirling a pen in their hand, thinking… daydreaming, there is a boss in the DUNIYA, who is talking to someone who is silent, vapidly looking at the wall behind the boss while the boss is speaking.

DEV and DIVYA walk into the centre of the stage and stand on the steps of what would be the fire exit of the office building. They light up and start talking. DUNIYA comes to a standstill.

DEV: Marry me.

DIVYA: I can't.

DEV: Why?

DIVYA: *(After a pause)* Because you're already married… That's why.

They both laugh

DEV: Exactly! Which is why I am asking YOU to marry me, and not the other way around.

They laugh again.

DIVYA: And that's the only reason?

DEV: Yes. Of course.

DIVYA: You are so stupid.

DEV: Not stupid. *(Then, expansively, as if speaking to an audience)* Genius!

DIVYA: It's the same thing. Isn't it?

DEV: I guess… so what do we do?

DIVYA: Do?

DEV: Yes. Now that you have refused to marry me. But remember this… always… I proposed… and you refused… *(Melodramatically)* So here I am… pining for you… wanting to… build a life together, while…

DIVYA: *(Continues speaking like DEV)* …while I have refused marriage - because I am in it for sex! just sex! for physical pleasure… so we have no choice, no choice but to continue with our debauched scandalous affair…

DEV: All right then *(Sighs with mock despair)*. If that's how you want it.

DIVYA: And you don't?

DEV: No. I want your heart… not your body…

DIVYA: I am a pervert.

DEV: And I am a saint.

They laugh. They stop. They smoke in silence. DEV looks at DIVYA for a long time.

DEV: I want to fuck you. Right now. Right here.

DIVYA: *(Casually)* OK. Let's do it.

DEV: *(Taken aback)* I want to, that doesn't mean I will.

DIVYA: What! You are refusing… while I am pining for you… I am wanting to…

DEV: This is abstinence. While what you are doing is… err… reticence.

DIVYA: It's nonsense. Sheer nonsense!

They look at each other. Giggle. Smoke.

Silence.

DEV: It's incredible. Isn't it?

DIVYA: What?

DEV: This. What we are doing… what's happened… Could anyone have foreseen something like this, say… six months back.

DIVYA: Everything is unforeseen isn't it… but that doesn't make it unexpected…

Or… incredible, as you put it. Well, you know what… for me at least, it's not incredible at all… I always felt that it was something you wanted.

DEV: Really?! You could tell…

DIVYA: Tell what?

DEV: That… that we could be together… know…

DIVYA: Why do you ask? Is it supposed to be disease that symptoms should be seen… *(There's an edge to how this is said)*

DEV: You know that's not what I mean… I'm just curious. Is it something about the way I look, or speak, or dress.

DIVYA: I guess as you open up, you'll get the ability to see for yourself… but it's not physical… that I'm sure of… Like everything else about us. The more you try and cover yourself up… the more it shows… like plaster on walls… too much of it and it starts to peel off and the cracks appear.

DEV: And how come it isn't visible to everyone. Doesn't it mean that if, you can see it, that you are searching as well…

DIVYA: That's not the 'searching' I am talking about… the world can't see it because the world doesn't bother to look… and the world doesn't bother to look because…

DEV: *(Interrupting)*… because they are scared…

DIVYA: I think it's because they have been told… and they don't want to look… waste of energy… it's not that they are

scared… if they were scared, they would have noticed… fear has a way of drawing in the afraid.

DEV: So, now I am afraid?

DIVYA: We all are, which is why we search.

They stub out their cigarettes.

DEV: Stay.

DIVYA: No, let's get back to work.

DEV: Let's have another cigarette.

DIVYA: No, not me.

DEV: Let's share one. Please.

DIVYA: OK.

DEV lights up another cigarette.

DIVYA: So, when do you want to do it?

DEV: Tomorrow.

DIVYA: When?

DEV: In the morning. Vinita is going away for a small business trip. She has an early morning flight. The kids go off to school at seven. Come over home to pick me up on the way to work. We'll have an hour.

DIVYA: An hour Mr. abstinence… do you think you have so much… sustenance… *(Laughs loudly)*

DEV: Fuck you. *(Smiles)*

DIVYA: I wasn't talking about what we're gonna do, I was talking about how much time we have. Why do want to meet in the morning?

DEV: Well we have time in the morning… and… I don't have to lie. 'A colleague is gonna pick me up on the way to work.' That's what I have to say, and it'll be the truth.

DIVYA: Does it bother you so much?

DEV: That we are doing this?

DIVYA: No. Having to lie.

DEV: No.

They are quiet for a while.

DIVYA: I am sorry.

DEV: Please! Don't be. We are in in together.

DIVYA: I was feeling sorry for your having to lie… not… Yes we are in it together…

DEV: Let's get back now.

(stubbing out the second cigarette)

DIVYA: No. let's light up another.

DEV: Oh c'mon!

DIVYA: Just kidding. Ya, let's get back. I really want to complete the presentation today.

DEV: Yeah, so do I. It's being weighing on my mind.

DIVYA: We don't want that do we, I mean… anything weighing on your mind till tomorrow, or else picking you in the morning could end up being a five - minute job.

It takes some time for DEV to understand what DIVYA meant. When he does, he grimaces.

DEV: Shameless!

DIVYA: Pig!

DEV: Think of some other animal please. You know that one's taken. How can somebody want to preview the presentation two weeks before the due date!?

DIVYA: The guy is just insecure.

DEV: I am sure everyone is to some degree. What I can't stand is the hypocrisy. To pretend that you don't care about the impression you make when you really do, to mouth big

words like integrity when all you are is a fucking sycophant. Sometimes I feel if that's what it takes to get to the top, then my days in this company are limited.

DIVYA: I know what you mean. Who the fuck does he think he is!?

DIVYA mimics the boss. His stentorian manner. As if addressing a group of people.

DIVYA: 'Guys! We've got to make it happen! I'm not here for the accolades, I'm here for excellence. Ya, OK. I want the presentations to be crisp, action oriented and precise. I don't care what the system wants, I want you to express what's best for the business. Ya, OK. I will preview them in two weeks' time. Ya, OK. It will help me guide you better; and also give me time to familiarize myself with the content… I'll present on behalf of the department… Ya, OK. I'll be doing your job guys. So let's get a move on. Let's go!!'

(Turning to speak to DEV) What an ass hole! You should present DEV! Not only will he ruin the presentation, he'll come out of the meeting agreeing to everything… Hello! where are you? What are you thinking?

DEV: Ya OK. *(Grins)* I was thinking… maybe we are maligning a noble animal, it's not a pig, it should be something without a spine, something…

DIVYA: (*Laughs)*

DEV: Anyway, let's close the presentation now. I suggest we split up the work. Why don't you compile the flowcharts and the key take outs from the research, while I put the sales figures and the key inferences down. Anyone of us can format the presentation once all this is put together.

DIVYA: Why should we split up the work? I'll put it all together. It's my job… and you can have a look thereafter.

DEV: Yes, I know. And I know you will be able to do a good job. But this way we can wind up sooner.

DIVYA: Fat lot of good it's going to do.

DEV: The presentation.

DIVYA: No. Winding up sooner. *(Winks)*

DEV: I wouldn't bet on that. It just might do some good.

They come close. Facing one another. They stay that way for a while. They split up and walk out of the stage

Blackout.

Scene 2

DUNIYA is dull. But DUNIYA is a beach. It is dressed in beach wear. A couple is sitting on a mat. A person is getting ready to go for some adventure sport and is wearing a life jacket. There is a vendor selling cold beverages walking around the stage.

DEV and DIVYA are walking on the beach. They have a couple of beers between them. They are dressed in beach wear as well. DUNIYA comes to a standstill. DEV stops. DIVYA notices that he has stopped and comes to a halt as well.

DEV: Can you scratch my back please?

DIVYA: No.

DEV: Please, please, please… please!

DIVYA: I don't want to.

DEV: Please, just once. I won't bother you again… please.

DIVYA: OK. Where?

DEV: Here, just beyond my finger… here… yes, yes, yes… oh wow! A little to the right…

DIVYA: Here?

DEV: A little to the left…

DIVYA: Here? S*cratches his back.*

DEV: Oh Yes! Oh Yes! Oh man… this feels so good (sighs with pleasure as his back is scratched)

DIVYA: That's it.

DEV: Thank you. That was amazing.

They start walking again.

DIVYA: How amazing?

DEV: Sometimes I think it's more amazing than sex. Having a strong itch, feeling it just out of your reach, then having somebody scratch there… it's sheer pleasure, it's like you have climbed Everest and now you can jump off because there is nothing left to achieve in life.

DIVYA: I don't know if it's more amazing, but for you, it's certainly more frequent.

DEV: Maybe we can balance it all out while we are here.

DIVYA: *(Condescendingly)* Yes, since DEV *Saheb* has deigned these three days in Goa be granted to his fuck interest, let's balance out his itches and his ejaculations!

DEV: What's got into you?

DIVYA: Nothing.

DEV: Look, it was you who said that we were not getting enough time together…

DIVYA: You obviously don't think so… of course?

DEV: No. No! That's what I was thinking as well, it's just that you said it first.

DIVYA: Why were you thinking that?

DEV: Thinking what?

DIVYA: That we are not getting enough time together.

DEV: What do you mean?

DIVYA: I mean, why were you thinking about us not getting enough time together? We were getting enough time for doing it, weren't we?

DEV: That's what you think?

DIVYA: That we were getting enough time together?

DEV: That we are in it for sex.

DIVYA: *(Irritably)* Look mister. Spare me the dialectic. I have been through this before. It doesn't work. It might be a new toy for you, but I've been on this *chook chook* train before?

DEV: I don't know where you are going with this, and I don't want to.

DIVYA: Why?

DEV: Because it doesn't matter whether it's new for me or whether you have been through this before. What matters is what's going on right now.

DIVYA: And what is that?

DEV: *(Loudly)* I don't know. I don't know all right! Can you imagine something like this happening to someone like me?! Can you even begin to imagine what I am going through?! I'm fucking middle class. I'm fucking thirty - five! I am married dammit! I have kids!

DIVYA: So you feel terrible, right? And when you do, what do you do… you crawl into bed and fuck your wife?

DEV: No!

DIVYA: So, you haven't done it with her since we started doing it?

DEV: No.

DIVYA: I'm sorry. Which one is it?

DEV: No, I have done it with my wife after we started fucking!

DIVYA: That's why we are here? For this three - day Goa excursion?

DEV: *(Despairingly)* No. We are here because I am sick! I don't know what I am doing… and because I want to be with you.

DIVYA: *(Caustic)* Oh, you do? Then why don't you pay me while you are at it!

DEV: How dare you!

Silence

DEV: What if I leave Vinita and the kids?

DIVYA: Don't.

DEV: Why?

DIVYA: What have you told her? About this trip, I mean.

DEV: That I am travelling for a sales conference.

DIVYA: She knows I am with you?

DEV: Yes. It's a conference. Why shouldn't the entire team be there.

DIVYA: And you must be speaking to her while you are here, and maybe sharing some happy gurgles with the kids, right?

DEV: Wouldn't it appear odd, to not do so?

DIVYA: *Laughs*

DEV: What's so funny?

DIVYA: Nothing… and you are thinking of leaving her… and your family. What are you doing man!

DEV: Look, I am just being honest with you. I want to be with you. But I am torn, I have a family too.

DIVYA: *(Sarcastically)* I am so sorry for you, you poor thing, getting sucked into all this… against your wishes… you have a family you can't leave… what will the world say… No! Wait! That one is easy… just blame it on this unhinged and unhitched subordinate who corrupted you!

DEV: *Stares at DIVYA for a long time*

DEV: *(Dejected)* We can go back.

DIVYA: Whatever you say.

Silence. They stop and are staring at the sea.

DIVYA: He hit me.

DEV: Who?

DIVYA: You know who.

DEV: What did you do?

DIVYA: I left him.

DEV: Immediately?

DIVYA: No. I let him keep on hitting me. He would curse me. He said he knew what he was like… and to him our relationship had only been about… having fun, but I had screwed up his brain. So, I thought he loved me. And I tolerated… his behaviour.

DEV: But you said you left him.

DIVYA: Yes, I did.

DEV: You did the right thing.

DIVYA: *(Smiles)* And what about you?

DEV: I'll do the right thing too if you hit me.

DIVYA: *(Laughs loudly)* Maybe that's what I should do. Hit you. *Hits him on the back.*

DEV: Stop it.

Hits him again.

DEV: Stop it!

DIVYA: C'mon, do the right thing! C'mon baby!

DEV: The right thing to do would be to get something to eat.

DIVYA: I think that's the smartest thing you have said today. I'm famished.

DEV: So am I… I think it would have been better to say you were hungry rather than try and bite my head off.

DIVYA: Me? I was trying to bite your head off?

DEV: No. No. I was referring to the great white shark that's swimming in the ocean and walks up to the beach now and then.

DIVYA: Oh! You saw it too.

DEV: Yeah! So what do you want to eat?

DIVYA: *Thinks.* Let's have some prawns. Big ones. In lemon, butter and garlic.

DEV: Sounds good. But shouldn't we have something a little lighter. I mean, we just had breakfast.

DIVYA: So what! We're hungry.

DEV: I guess I am going to end up fat after this trip.

DIVYA: You mean fatter…

DEV : Yeah, right!

DIVYA: But why should it bother you?

DEV: What sort of crazy question is that. Shouldn't fitness be important?

DIVYA: Why does someone want to be fit. To look good. Why do you want to look good? To get laid. So if fitness matters to you, it means a wife and an affair are not enough and you want more.

DEV: You have a one - track mind! Don't you? I think we should talk about something other than just us?

DIVYA: What? The sales conference? Current affairs.

DEV: Whatever! Thankfully we're going back in a couple of days.

DIVYA: There's something else for you to be thankful for… Thankfully… I'm clear.

DEV: Sorry?

DIVYA : The HIV test you wanted me to get done, report's in… I'm clear.

DEV: You got that done!? You didn't have to! I… I had said it when we had started. Because I was scared.

Divya stares hard at Dev. Dev's consternation is apparent.

I couldn't risk it. I mean, what if I gave something to my family because of what we did.

Divya continues to stare at him.

I'm sorry. I was only thinking of myself. It was stupid. And unkind.

Silence

DEV: Maybe I was trying to scare myself out of falling further… somehow get out of this…

DIVYA : So what's changed now?

DEV : I know you…

DIVYA: You what?! *Laughs*

DIVYA: I think you should also hit me.

DEV: I'm sorry… I can't… and I won't.

DIVYA: Wow!

Blackout.

Scene 3

DUNIYA is red. DUNIYA is a coffee shop. There are a couple of waiters walking around and a Barista behind the counter. Someone is reading a newspaper, sipping coffee, while another person is tapping away on a laptop.

DEV and DIVYA come in and take a table. They get their coffees. They are casually dressed. Shirts, denims. They start talking. DUNIYA is frozen, but is staring at them.

DIVYA: You had a good Holiday?

DEV: *(Furtively)* Yes.

DIVYA: Where were you staying?

DEV: The South.

DIVYA: Why? Less happening.

DEV: No. More peaceful.

DIVYA: So, you were looking for some peace?

DEV: What do you mean?

DIVYA: You wanted to get away from your troubles. You wanted some peace.

DEV: Taking a hotel somewhere peaceful doesn't mean you want peace.

DIVYA: That's true. Like being graceful doesn't mean you have grace, or doing an act of charity doesn't mean you are kind, or being truthful doesn't mean you are honest.

DEV: Well, I don't see the link, but it sounds deep.

DIVYA: I have been reading.

DEV: That's good.

DIVYA: I have been alone.

DEV: *Ignores what is said.* What have you been reading?

DIVYA: The world is crazy. Do you know that one percent people have around two thirds of the world's wealth… and the top one hundred richest people probably own half of it… and it's getting worse. The rich are getting richer and the poor, poorer. But, there's a change from the past. The rich are no longer as unmindful of this. They probably have some guilt that they shouldn't be so rich just because they invented a portable gramophone and photocopier all rolled into one. So they do some charity here, some more there, open a foundation and all that sort of thing. Just to feel less guilty.

DEV: You mean to say that if people are nice it's because they feel guilty.

DIVYA: Just the filthy ones.

Silence

DEV: *(Forcefully)* Isn't it normal to go for a vacation with your family?

DIVYA: Oh! You're back to normal now? Why didn't you tell me?!

DEV: There was no reason to.

DIVYA: You HAD to go to Goa!? WE had just been there!

DEV: Look, I don't make all the decisions about where we go for a family vacation.

DIVYA: Of course. You have a family.

DEV: So do you DIVYA.

DIVYA: And they're doing great I am sure. How are Vinita and the kids? I hope they had a good time.

DEV: Yes.

DIVYA: You don't have to sound so morose if you had a good time.

DEV: I missed you.

DIVYA: Thank you.

DEV is about to say something, but he stops himself. There is silence for a while.

DEV: How is your sister?

DIVYA: She's doing fine. She won't need a hysterectomy, so everybody at home is happy.

DEV: I hope you are more at ease now. You were so worried last week.

DIVYA: Yes, I am feeling better.

DEV: You want to meet up over the weekend. Vinita is…

DIVYA: Travelling again.

DEV: Yes, but we can meet whenever…

DIVYA: Really?

DEV: Yes. Of course we can.

DIVYA: That would be better, because I have joined some weekend classes.

DEV: Wow! That's so cool.

DIVYA: Yeah man! It's important to be occupied and to also brush up your skills regularly, the job market isn't getting any better.

DEV: Hey! Whoa! Are you looking out?

DIVYA: No, but it's good to be up to date, isn't it?

DEV: That it is. You're starting this weekend?

DIVYA: Yes.

DEV: Oh. All right then, we'll meet up some other time.

DIVYA: Any time, you mean.

DEV: Ya, Ya. That's what I mean.

DIVYA: You done with your coffee?

DEV: Yes.

DIVYA: Should we leave?

DEV: Whatever you say.

He leans forward to kiss DIVYA.

DIVYA: Not here. Are you out of your fucking mind!

DEV: OK. OK

DEV: But, tell me… what happened to courageous DIVYA… suddenly bothered about what the world is gonna say?

DIVYA: Why don't you tell me what happened.

Uncomfortable silence. DIVYA is staring at DEV, while he is fidgeting

DIVYA: Then tell me something else… what do you think? Is it better to be truthful or kind?

DEV: Hmmm… I think… kind…

DIVYA: Why? So, you don't hurt someone with the truth?

DEV: No… I don't feel anyone can be completely truthful, you can just be kind… and hope the truth comes out…

DIVYA: Coward!

Blackout

Scene 4

DUNIYA is green. DUNIYA is passing by while DEV and DIVYA snatch a few, brief conversations. DUNIYA is busy in itself. Someone is jogging, someone is ordering food in a restaurant, someone is working, someone is walking hurriedly, while someone else is sitting still. DUNIYA comes to a standstill DEV and DIVYA have brief conversations. Each exchange takes place under different spots, at different places on the stage.

DEV and DIVYA are dressed casually, similarly, in white shirts and denims.

DEV: *(Friendly)* Hi, I didn't see you in the morning. Where were you?

DIVYA: *(Aloof, distant)* Had taken the first half off.

DEV: Why?

DIVYA: *(Surprised)* What do you mean?

DEV: I mean, what happened?

DIVYA: I had some work.

DEV: 'Work,' work? or some personal work?

DIVYA: Some personal work.

DEV: Oh. I didn't know about that.

DIVYA: *Stares at him.* That's why it's personal!

DEV: *(Trying to maintain equanimity)* I'm sure it is. Have you had lunch, or you want to join me?

DIVYA: Yes sure. I haven't had lunch.

Blackout

DEV: I wonder how this movie *Mouseman* is? These days you can't trust anyone to give you the real picture, it's as if everything's for sale.

DIVYA: The movie?

DEV: What else?

DIVYA: One time watch.

DEV: Oh, you've seen it.

DIVYA: Friday last.

DEV: First day, first show or what? I never knew you were a fan of this super hero.

DIVYA: I am not. It's just that a friend of mine was really keen to see the movie and I couldn't say no.

DEV: Friend? Someone I know?

DIVYA: No.

Blackout

DIVYA: Did you hear about the plan to work late every evening for the next two weeks till the quarterly presentation?

DEV: Yes I did, in fact, I endorsed it and told boss that everyone in the department was ready to chip in.

DIVYA: Well I am not.

DEV: Please, clarify!

DIVYA: I have classes in the evening and I can't stay back after five thirty.

DEV: But you had signed on for weekend classes?

DIVYA: I had, but these are different.

DEV: But you didn't tell me.

DIVYA: *(Irritated)* Do I have to tell you everything that I do after office hours?

DEV: No. But, if I had known, I wouldn't have put your name in the team that will prepare the presentation.

DIVYA: *(Angry)* And made it appear that I wasn't willing to work for any special project. What if I want to be part of it? Maybe I can come in an hour early rather than stay back an hour every day? And why can't we be more productive during office hours?

DEV: Relax. It's not such a big deal. We'll manage, and you will be part of it, I just didn't know your schedule after work, OK?

DIVYA: *(Angrier)* No! It's not that you didn't know. You presumed I would have nothing to do after work. As if I don't have a life.

DEV: Why are you making this about yourself? I didn't ask anyone in particular… and I frankly don't understand what the issue is. We've always chipped in a few extra hours towards the end of each quarter, it's just that we are trying to make it more structured… so that everyone stretches equally, and we work to a schedule… and everyone can 'live their life' after work.

Blackout

DEV: You wanna go out for dinner sometime.

DIVYA: Vinita is travelling?

DEV: Shut Up!

Blackout

DEV: You were having dinner at Thai Kitchen last night, right?

DIVYA: Yes. Were you there?

DEV: No… I was passing by… and I happened to look in the window and I thought it was you… you were with some guy…

DIVYA: Yes, I was with Dixit… but why didn't you come in and meet me… were you not alone?

DEV: It was just the kids and one of their cousins who had come over to stay for the weekend.

DIVYA: Isn't the Thai Kitchen a long way off from West Enclave.

DEV: Yes, it is… but the kids wanted to go out for a drive… and it just got longer… and longer… er… who's…

DIVYA: But you must have had dinner somewhere?

DEV: We did… we went elsewhere… the kids don't like Thai… who's Dixit?

DIVYA: Dixit? I didn't tell you?

DEV: No, you didn't.

DIVYA: Oh sorry, I had met him during my weekend classes, he's the one who guided me to select the programs that I am pursuing currently… we go to the same gym as well.

DEV: You are seeing each other?

DIVYA: No! We're not. We are just… friends.

DEV: And what about his, it's OK, let it be… sorry… none of my business… what does he do?

DIVYA: He has his own… well… start up.

DEV: Wow! Tell me more…

DIVYA: Nothing much to tell really… he's younger than you. He's younger than I am. He's working towards a new start up… he's funny, he's fun to be with… look, I wanted to tell you about him, but I wasn't sure how you would react.

DEV: *(Venomously)* Why? He's just a friend isn't he.

Blackout

DIVYA is on his cell phone, speaking to someone. DEV enters the spotlight.

DEV: Who're you talking to? Dick.

DIVYA : *Gives him a cold stare and indicates that he should be quiet, and continues…*

DIVYA: No way! *Speaking into the phone. Laughs.* You are some weirdo man! Did you really say all that? I wish I had been there to see his face…

DEV: What?! It's Dick. Isn't it?

DIVYA: (*Speaking on the phone)* Listen, I'll call you back later. Yeah, I know, bye. (*Turns to DEV)* Yes?

DEV: Nothing. I just wanted to know if it was Dick.

DIVYA: Dixit you mean.

DEV: No, Dick, why use two abusive words for someone if one will do. *Laughs.*

DIVYA: *Doesn't laugh. Keeps looking at DEV until he stops laughing.*

Blackout

DIVYA is going through his smartphone as if checking messages or emails. DEV walks into the spotlight from behind him. He glances at DIVYA's phone.

DEV: Hey! What was that? what was that? 'See you tonight.' *He lunges playfully at the phone, DIVYA pulls away to keep the phone from him. He tries to grab it again.* C'mon, let's see what's going on…

DIVYA: Dev, don't… hey… please… stop it! Behave yourself *(Angrily)!*

Both are still.

DIVYA: What is it? What do you want?

DEV: Nothing.

DIVYA: Then why are you bothering me?

DEV: I am bothering you!

DIVYA: Wouldn't you call hounding somebody to see their message bothering them?

DEV: I'm not hounding you. I want to see that message.

DIVYA: Why?

DEV: I have a right to.

DIVYA: What! You have a what?!

DEV: Is it from Dick… Okay, Dixit.

DIVYA: Yes.

Silence

DEV: Why are you being so secretive about him! I just happened to see your phone and got excited that maybe you are going out… seeing someone… that's all.

DIVYA: Really!… you got excited… in what way?

DEV: In the right way, *(Forced smile)* the way a… a friend would.

DIVYA: Which means that you are cool with it, if I'm seeing someone.

DEV: Yes, why shouldn't I be… I am your friend and I would always be happy… if you are…

DIVYA: Look, yes, we are spending a lot of time together, but… we're not… like… together… yet…

DEV: Yet?

DIVYA: I've just been through a very painful relationship DEV, and I suppose it's natural to be cautious…

DEV: Oh! You're through with the relationship… I wouldn't have guessed… don't you think you should have told me at least.

DIVYA: Don't you know that it's over?

DEV: How would I, *(Smiles – snide remark)* I am not as experienced at getting into casual relationships and dumping people when someone else comes along.

DIVYA stares at him with shock. Anger. Blackout.

Scene 5

DUNIYA is grey. DUNIYA is dressed in corporate work wear. DUNIYA is a meeting room. DEV and DIVYA are sitting at two ends of a table, facing one another. DUNIYA is busy in the meeting. Someone is presenting, someone else is taking notes. A couple of people are nodding away superciliously, another is dozing. DUNIYA freezes.

DIVYA : Is it true?

DEV: What?

DIVYA: That I am not getting promoted this year?

DEV: I don't know. All right! And even if I did, you know I can't share such information with you. It would be professional misconduct… and would be a breach of company rules as well as policy.

DIVYA: Cut the crap! Just tell me if it's true or not.

DEV: Are you not listening? It is not fair, it is not right, and it is not allowed. And what is the hurry? You know very well that the list will be out on Friday, which is what… two days away… and HR will inform you…

DIVYA: What will HR inform me!? Don't I know what they have in mind. They have asked me to take the X2 program next month. Which means they are building a case that I need some skill upgradation before I move on to the next level… and since I have to take a program for it… I must wait till next year!

DEV: Why are you being so negative! Maybe they want you to take the program because they want to promote you, maybe they will promote you right after the program, or maybe the program is a means to selecting the right candidate for the next level and you are the one, maybe…

DIVYA: Stop it! Just look at you, defending those bastards…

DEV: I am not defending anybody, I am just asking you not to overreact.

DIVYA: I am not overreacting Dev! I am just asking for what I deserve. You had said that I was ready for a promotion. Hadn't you? You were going to recommend me for one. Weren't you? Now, when the time has come for promotions to be announced, why are you being vague?!

DEV: I am not being vague. On the contrary, I think I am being open with you. I am having this meeting, am I not?

DIVYA: *(Sarcastically)* Thank you so much! If you are indeed being open, then why don't you tell me?

DEV: Because it is not the process! *(Exasperated)*

DIVYA: Did you recommend me for a promotion?

DEV: Yes, I did.

DIVYA: Telling somebody that they are being recommended for a promotion. Is that as per process? Is that professional?

DEV: Not entirely.

DIVYA: Not entirely. Not entirely! You vindictive bastard! You are behind this. You knew how important this was for me. How could you DO this? How could YOU do this?

DEV: You have totally lost your senses. I was the one who recommended you for a promotion, and I am the one being accused here!

DIVYA: You haven't done me any favour. I have met all business objectives set before me. I work hard, I don't give up. I don't break rules or policies. I am neither negligent nor take too many leaves. And I am due. Didn't you cross this level in two years. So why not me?

DEV: The company doesn't owe you anything! You have done your work with excellence, which is what you are supposed to do. Am I denying you that?

DIVYA: Well, you are denying me a promotion…

DEV: I am not! I don't even know if I am or not! How many times do I have to fucking repeat myself! *(Shouts)*

Silence

DIVYA: *(Evenly, in control now)* Did you recommend my name?

DEV: Yes.

DIVYA: Then why am I not… OK… OK… if I don't get promoted, can you tell me the reason?

DEV: No.

DIVYA: Because you don't know the reason.

DEV: Because you are not fit to listen.

DIVYA: I am listening. No No; please go on, I am listening.

Silence

DEV: Firstly, I don't decide on your promotion. I can only recommend. Secondly, the company has other employees as well, who are, if I may add, doing excellent work. Everyone can't be promoted. Thirdly, it is wrong to compare yourself with others in the organisation who came before you. Circumstances, business and their performance would have been different. Lastly, a promotion isn't all that there is to your work. What matters is the opportunities the organisation gives you. How much it invests in you. That's why you are going for the X2 program. That's why you have been given some responsibilities that your peers haven't. And for some reason, if you aren't promoted, there are other ways of showing that we care, a bigger raise, a better assignment. For God's sake, there could be no promotions even… for anybody in the company… what

if there is a restructuring planned that we are not aware of?

DIVYA: Wow! This is really fine talk. How come I haven't heard it before? All I heard from you was 'you deserved it', 'you should get promoted'… and what not!

DEV: I thought I was talking to a friend.

DIVYA: And now you are not.

DEV: Apparently.

DIVYA: How fucking convenient. You decide when I am your friend… you decide when I am a colleague… it all depends on when and what you decide right?

DEV: *(Retaliating, something he was dying to do)* Am I the only one who behaves like that. Don't you decide when to be a friend and when not to be. When to fuck and when to stop. When to be in a relationship and when to say it's over!

DIVYA: Oh! So, it's all my fault that I am getting fucked professionally for not fucking you anymore.

DIVYA is sulking. DEV suddenly looks weary.

DEV: It's pointless… talking to you *(Getting up)* … I wanted to see you promoted… I know how much it means to you… I have tried my best… whether you believe it or not… and… and it's not personal… in the sense that I have tried and pushed because I believe in my professional capacity that you are ready and deserving… but there are times when the organisation doesn't… and it could be due to a host of factors… things I don't… and can't control.

DIVYA: You were getting up to leave, I suppose… so why don't you? I'll stay here a while.

DEV looks at DIVYA thoughtfully. Leaves. DIVYA wants to speak to him, but doesn't.

Slow fade.

Scene 6

DUNIYA is black. DUNIYA is a party. It is dressed in black. A couple is dancing. Someone is meandering about, drunk. Someone is talking loudly, someone else in whispers. There is loud music going on. The music stops and the revellers in black are trooping away to the wings, drunk pooped out from the partying. They freeze. A spot light turns on to reveal DEV and DIVYA sitting on the front seats of a car. The are making out. DIVYA suddenly pushes DEV away. They both look straight ahead.

DEV: *(Contritely)* I'm sorry.

DIVYA: *(Affectionately, turning to look at DEV)* Thank you.

DEV: Thank you *(Surprised)*?

DIVYA: For dropping me home.

DEV: Don't mention it.

Silence

DIVYA: Thank you.

DEV: *(Cheekily)* For dropping you home?

DIVYA: No. For… being there…

Silence

DIVYA: I have been through hell Dev.

DEV: You telling me!?

DIVYA: I know. Which is why we both know that we shouldn't go there again.

DEV: I love you.

DIVYA: Don't say that.

DEV: I can't help it. Maybe it is easier for you…

DIVYA: No, it hasn't been. I have missed you. I have missed being with you. There are so many times that I have… I have cried myself to sleep, thinking of you… and so many times when I haven't slept at all. There have been so many times when I have wanted to just drive over to your place and… wake you up… and see you… to let it be known to the world that we are in love… to hell with all of you… or to just get it over with.

DEV: *(Looking at Divya with surprise and love)* I didn't know. I was just too busy with myself and my feelings. I would feel so helpless. I would feel bound and gagged, and I would get so jealous that you were free. It didn't occur to me that your freedom was your choice and my slavery, mine. I didn't just want to be with you, I wanted to be like you… *(Turns to look at DIVYA)* I want to be like you… and then I would realise that I didn't have the courage to break free, to be like you… and that made me angry…

DIVYA: Are you still angry?

DEV: I am, but at least I know why. You can imagine what a shock it was when I discovered my feelings for you. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe that this orthodox, 'archetypical' family man with a career would; would fall in love… and here you are, you are thanking ME for being there!!… I should thank you… with my life; for helping me… be honest with myself for once… and that's where the anger came from… knowing the truth about myself, but not having the courage to say it… or do anything about it… and to have the one person who shares your truth with you, just fade away from your life… it was getting too much…

DIVYA: Don't be too hard on yourself. I have been very selfish too. I know what it's like. To have felt something… but to have been fed a lie all your life… by the world… and that too about your own self… it fucks you up.

DEV: But now you don't… you don't care about the world… while I am still worried about what people will say… or do… and how I will face up…

DIVYA: No. I do. I do care about the world… but not about who I am sleeping with. It's not a big deal. The trick is to realise that the world isn't really bothered… it appears so because when the world wants to be mean, it tries to get to you where you are most vulnerable, or special; which are usually the same things.

DEV: And that's what you are. So special. You have built a successful, independent life… and… it sounds so condescending… but let me say it… I am proud of you… you are an inspiration.

DIVYA: Thank you.

Silence

DIVYA: What do you like so much about me?

DEV: Now you are fishing?

DIVYA: *(Laughs)* Tell me. C'mon, tell me.

DEV: Look I can't choose. Your manner I guess, that's what first attracted me to you… the way you carried yourself… it was confident, even brash… but so… so friendly… you were so loud at times, but then, one could catch you listening… you were always around people…

DIVYA: *(Smiling)* Really? Haven't heard that one before.

DEV: You're right, that wasn't it… well not entirely… it's what I saw other than the ease with which you went about life. There were some moments when you were alone, near the water cooler, or the photocopier… you would be looking around, as if asking, 'hey, how come I am alone, at this moment'… and I felt that there must be something that this person has to say… which only I will know if I walk up and talk… that's how it started right?

DIVYA: Right. You know what I liked?

DEV: *(Shrugs)* No.

DIVYA: That you thought of me… and spoke to me as a person. Not as someone defined by my gender, or position, or background or designation… or name… *(Looks at DEV)* I love you.

DEV: Don't say that. *(He hides his face)*

Silence

DEV: *(He looks up with an angst-ridden expression, of someone who has decided to do something about something)* We are soulmates! We are meant to be together. We should fight. We should do something together.

DIVYA: It's still 'we' isn't it? *(Looks hard at DEV)* There must come a time, when 'you' must do it. When you have to say 'I' will do this.

DEV: Yes. Yes! I will do everything. I will make 'us' happen. I will keep us together. Whatever you want.

DIVYA: Whatever I want? It's too late now. It's too painful. It's not going to work… there's just… too much at stake…

DEV: Please. Please! Don't say this… *(He is grovelling now)* I want you. I need you…

DIVYA: I should go now…

DEV: Wait! Is it about this guy Dixit? Tell me! *(Divya stares at him impassively)* Why won't you tell me?! *(Speaks in a raised voice)*

DIVYA: I am going.

DEV: Yes, I heard you.

DIVYA: *(Gently)* I mean I am leaving… Dixit and I have decided to move to another country… somewhere where we can be together… a bit… well… more easily.

DEV: *(Stunned, stuttering)* What! When? What do you mean. Your work, your home… for that… that matter Dixit's business… whatever he does… I mean… hey… you are getting promoted… in some time too, right… *(Stops talking, stares at DIVYA)* Is it about me?

DIVYA: No. It's about me.

DEV : Why didn't you tell me?

DIVYA : You haven't been very talkative.

DEV : Yes, I haven't… Does anybody else know?

DIVYA : Just the two of us… and now you. *(Dev winces at this exclusion and realises Divya and Dixit are a couple)*

DEV : Well, thanks for letting me know. When…

DIVYA: It will take a few months, but I will quit work soon to concentrate on all the formalities for our move… are you all right?

DEV: Yes. Yes. I am fine. This probably the best thing to do… *(Looks away from Divya)* for you.

DIVYA looks at him for a long time. DEV is silent; and looking away. DIVYA gets out of the car, shuts the door and goes away – exits the stage. DEV watched DIVYA walk away. He screams and bangs his head on the steering wheel.

Scene 7

DUNIYA is white, pure. DUNIYA is peaceful. DUNIYA is a Sunday morning full of people who have just got over their weariness to get tired again the next day. Someone is having a hearty breakfast, another, enjoying a cup of tea. Someone else is busy wrestling with a bulky newspaper. A couple has decided to go for a long bicycle ride, while another is lying about in bed, smothered by white sheets and indolence. They freeze. The lights fade out just enough to defocus on them, but the white form of DUNIYA is visible to the audience.

DEV and DIVYA appear under two spots in two corners upstage. They are dressed in white. They are speaking to each other on their cell phones. They are not still, the walk about as they talk.

DIVYA: Hi.

DEV: Hi. What's up?

DIVYA: Total chaos man! You will not believe the amount of paperwork required just for a temporary residence… and then they have the nerve to talk about climate change!

DEV: Don't worry, you'll be able to manage it… but tell me, haven't you hired a consultant or something?

DIVYA: We had, initially, but the creep was more interested in ripping us off… and we were doing all the physical work anyway… so we decided… let's get this done ourselves.

DEV: *(While speaking nicely, DEV is looking menacing)* Physical work eh? …hmmm… so you and Dick have been doing a lot of physical work… *(Laughs)*

DIVYA: That is such a bad one… and at a time like this! But now that you mention it *(Coyly)* there has been some physical work going on…

DEV: Noooo! *(Melodramatically)* I have been finally… permanently… completely… been replaced by… Dick! *(Laughs)*

DIVYA: What could I do… he is the one who agreed to run away with me after all… other people didn't… or couldn't… *(Laughs)*. And! Will you please stop calling him Dick!

DEV: *(Smiles, visibly malicious, but not discernible to DIVYA in his tone)* OK. Shit then?

DIVYA: Yeah. Right! As if that's any better… but come to think of it, it's a good name to carry abroad. It's quite universal.

DEV: I think shit is even more universal. Don't you? There are those you won't call dick, but even they got to shit!

DIVYA: *(Laughing)* Shut up man! And what sort of conversation are we having…

DEV: Yeah, yeah, I know. Look, if you need my help with anything, just let me know, OK?

DIVYA: Sure. There won't be much though. I might need a recommendation from you if I start working or go for some higher studies. There's also an affidavit where I might need your signature as a witness.

DEV: Well I have certainly been a witness to a lot of your… ahem *(Clears his throat)*

DIVYA laughs. Silence.

DIVYA: Thank you for bringing back my friend.

DEV: Which one is it now?

DIVYA: You.

DEV: Please don't say so. I am sorry for my behaviour. I couldn't handle, how our relationship unravelled, and I am sorry.

DIVYA: *(Looks up to the heavens. Despondent. But it's not discernible over the phone)* No. No. Don't. I was the one who

misbehaved. I know… I mean I have always been a bit impulsive and brash, and I shouldn't have said some of the things I said.

DEV: Oh! So there are many, that you think you were right in saying.

DIVYA: That's not what I mean.

DEV: I know. So let me know, if there's anything I can help you with. Take care. Bye.

DIVYA: Bye.

Blackout

DEV and DIVYA are back on their phones, talking to each other.

DIVYA: It's confirmed for tomorrow night.

DEV: So soon, I didn't realise. Wasn't it supposed to be next week.

DIVYA: Well, we had booked at a particular fare, with the understanding that the airline could offer us any flight at that fare within a specific time period at a day's notice. Why do you think I was so insistent that we meet last week! God knows what you were so busy in.

DEV: Well, you could have told me about this, rather than just texting repeatedly 'we have to meet! we have to meet!'

DIVYA: Maybe I would have if you had bothered replying.

DEV: *(Sudden anger)* You are the one going away, right? So maybe if you really wanted to meet, we would have.

DIVYA: Let's not fight.

Silence

DEV: Ya. Let's not.

DIVYA: We can meet tonight… tomorrow morning… anytime…

DEV: No, I'm a little caught up…

DIVYA: I can ask the airline if we can get a couple of days… or… or I'll pay a different fare if needed… but we should…

DEV: No no… no no! Don't do that. You don't have to. We'll be in touch, you know we are there for one another… and it would have been great to see you once before you left… but hey! we'll be talking… we'll Facetime…

DIVYA: Yes. Of course! I am going just a little farther.

DEV: Yes. We are going to be a… further…

DIVYA: I'll call you when I land.

DEV: It's all right. You don't have to. All the best. Have a blast. Best wishes… happy landings and all that crap.

DIVYA: Cool. Bye. Love you man.

DEV: Yeah. Love you too.

Blackout

DIVYA and DEV are back on the phone talking to each other. DEV has a hip flask in his other hand.

DIVYA: *(Excited, speaking quickly)* What a ride man. What a ride! The place is awesome. It's so friendly, but it's so tough. You can do anything here, as long as you do it right. Nobody questions who you are, but they blow your pants off if you screw up with what you are doing.

The best part – we're LEGAL! We're legal here – Dixit and I. No more being careful all the time… in cafes and movie halls. In restaurants and parks. Even in your own home. No more turning away from someone looking at you… fearful of what could come your way… but wanting to turn and look… No more wearing masks and taking part in parades on the road… fighting for the right to be yourself in your own bedroom! I'm free. We're free! Can't you imagine? How much we are loving this place!

But, it's not been so bright for us on the work front dude. Dixit has to navigate a bloody mountain of paperwork

before he can set up his business here, and I need to study for at least six months before I can even think of getting a work visa. It's not easy. But we are living together, and we are able to save some money. His aunt stays about two hundred miles from where we are staying, and so far, she's been a great help. She's an angel.

DEV: *(Speaking with a slight slur)* Miles huh… so I guess pretty soon it would be gallons and pounds… you naturalised already!

Silence

DIVYA: Are you… are you drinking.

DEV: (*Aggressively)* Yes, I am. So?

DIVYA: Are you at home?

DEV: Yes, I am. So?

DIVYA: Nothing! *(Forcefully)* just look at the time.

DEV: It's booze time your time, isn't it? I'm drinking your time… I'm… yeah… living your time.

DIVYA: That's good. Anyway, where was I… yes… so while his aunt is helpful, we feel shitty taking her help in setting up our home… or navigating the place. I just hope it never comes down to asking her for money. There are times when I just can't take the food… so we end up binging on instant noodles… and I think we are both putting on weight… I'm also shit scared about the coming winters… I don't think the woollens we have got are going to be enough… so we'll have to spend on that as well… my studies are gonna drain our resources further…

DEV: *(Irritably)* Oh God! Just shut up, will you. Am I your agony aunt or something. What the fuck are you moaning about. This was your choice OK? Learn to live with your choices.

DIVYA: I am. I am not running away from my choices. But I think I can share some of the tough times I'm having with a friend as I live through the choices I make.

DEV: Just cut the 'friend' crap OK. I don't have time for all that right now.

DIVYA: Call me when you do… or when you are sober.

Blackout

DIVYA and DEV are back on the phone talking to each other.

DIVYA : So, what have you been up to?

DEV: Nothing much… work… the usual. *(Smiles)* I thought you were going to wait for my call?

DIVYA: Are you crazy? If I feel like talking to you, I will call OK… I just wanted to share what's been going on. We got a lucky break… I can pursue an assistantship along with my studies and Dixit got…

DEV: *(Interrupting, gently)* DIVYA… DIVYA…

DIVYA Ignores him and continues

DIVYA: …Dixit got an OK to show that his business is based out of India… for a year, until he finishes his…

DEV: *(Interrupting. Gently, but loudly)* DIVYA, I don't want to talk.

DIVYA: Oh! OK. I'll call you back later.

DEV: No. Don't call me. I don't want to talk. I don't think we should talk.

DIVYA: What do you mean?

DEV: Look, you remember the last time we spoke, we spoke of living with our choices, right?

DIVYA: *(Confused)* Right.

DEV: So let's live with our choices. You have made a choice to live there, with Dixit, and I have made my choice…

DIVYA: *(Angry, but still confused)* What are you saying!

DEV: I'm saying, we shouldn't talk, or interact or stay in touch… in any manner. We are leading two separate lives, and we should be getting on with them, and… and yeah… that's it.

DIVYA: *(Calmly)* That's it!? And I suppose that's the way it is with everyone you once knew, but is no longer part of the life you are living…

DEV: Whatever you think… look, I know we are friends for life. If there's any help you need, I'm here for you and I know you are there… and… when we meet… if we meet, we'll meet as the best of friends.

DIVYA: Just cut the bullshit. What's going on?

DEV: *(Slowly, mouthing each word with great deliberation)* Nothing. It's just that I have had enough. I can't bear it any more. I want to be with you… but I am caught in this life… and you are getting on with yours… I can't live like this… this feeling that I'll be stuck in this forever… without the courage to come out… while you move on… I get so angry… so jealous… it's just too damn negative for me… I love you… I want to love you… but the more I speak to you and keep up this pretence of being friends… and no longer your lover… I hate you… and I don't want to hate you.

DIVYA: At last, some honesty…

Silence

DIVYA: Are you sure?

DEV: *(Exhales)* Yes, I am. So, Goodbye?

DIVYA: OK. Goodbye.

DEV: All right then. You are OK, right?

DIVYA: Yes. I'm fine. Take care then.

DEV: Yes. You too… goodbye.

DIVYA: Bye.

Blackout

Lights come on to reveal Duniya.

DUNIYA is bright. Dressed in golden hues. DUNIYA is office. Someone is working on a laptop, someone else is on the phone. Two people are having a corridor conversation, someone is just staring at the office ceiling, twirling a pen in his hand, thinking… daydreaming, there is a boss in the DUNIYA, who is talking to someone who is silent, vapidly looking at the wall behind the boss while the boss is speaking.

DEV walks onto stage. He is dressed in black, he is carrying a cell phone in his hand. He looks at it and puts it down. A member of DUNIYA walks up to him and asks him :

Why do you keep looking at the phone again and again?

DEV : Nothing. Just like that.

Slow fade.

Blackout.

Hemu
The Last Hindu Emperor of India

Characters

Note: While there are a large number of characters, each scene has a maximum of five characters only. The construct of the play is episodic. Moreover, the characters wear modern clothing as a metaphor for the contemporary relevance of the politics of the time. Thus, it is recommended that only five actors divide the characters among themselves.

Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar
Akbar's Bodyguard

Bairam Khan — Regent to Akbar.

Taj Khan Karrani — Afghan Noble, founder of the Karrani dynasty of Bengal, Orissa and parts of Bihar

Shah Quli Khan – Mughal General
Abul Fazl – Akbar's biographer

Pir Muhammad – Mughal General, loyal to Bairam Khan

Hemu's Father

Islam Shah — Afghan Emperor (Son of Sher Shah Suri)
Salim Khan – Faujdar in Islam Shah's army

Adil Shah – Afghan Emperor

The Minstrel - Fakir

Shah Muhammad Firmuli – Afghan Noble

Sikandar Khan Firmuli – Shah Muhammad's son

Ibrahim Khan – Adil Shah's brother-in-law

Sirmast Khan Sirpani – Afghan Noble

Rizwan – Gatekeeper to the heavens in Islamic theology

Sikandar Shah Suri – Claimant to the Afghan throne

Junaid Khan – Afghan Noble, Governor of Ajmer

Tardi Beg — Mughal governor, rival of Bairam Khan

Iskander Beg – Mughal General

Abdullah Uzbeg – Mughal General

Haider Muhammad – Mughal General

Murad III — Ottoman Caliph
Murad's Bodyguard

Murad's Minister

Khuda Baksh – Turkish spy in India

Scene 1

A few years since the second battle of Panipat. A corner office. Akbar sitting on a chair, wearing a modern business suit, with his turbaned crown identifying his kingship. Bairam Khan, similarly attired with his regent's turban and Akbar's brooding, menacing bodyguard standing behind him in a warrior's helmet, but otherwise attired in the mafiosi suit. Across the table is Taj Khan Karrani. Dressed in a dark suit again, but with his own different headgear. Taj Khan bows to Akbar.

TAJ KHAN: Jahanpanah! – the great benevolent ruler the world seeks succour in, Alampanah! – the upholder of the entire world, Zill-e-ilaahi! - the shadow of God upon this earth, your humble servant, a follower and keeper of the faith, from the eastern shores of Hindustan, the proud principality of Bengal, salutes the Ghazi of Islam, his Highness, Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar,

Akbar the Great – the greatest emperor of the world, so great that the only one, whose name and title are the same AKBAR, meaning GREAT.

AKBAR: What do you want Taj Khan!?

TAJ KHAN: What the Jahanpanah wants - Bengal.

AKBAR: You already have it. But; if you are still wanting it; I suppose the *suba* awaits its ruler.

TAJ KHAN: *(flustered)* It already has its ruler. It seeks; your… benevolence

AKBAR: How?

TAJ KHAN: I shall be your trusted ally; with the Afghan sword in the East, the empire will be safer, stronger.

AKBAR: And; may I also ask, why?*(Silence. Taj shifts.)*

TAJ KHAN: Because we are fellow Muslims, we are brothers.

AKBAR: You are NOT my brother, and least of all because we have the same religion. I am a Mughal, not some tribal Afghan! Man Singh is my brother. The Rajput is the Mughal's brother. Warriors.

TAJ KHAN: I am quite sure, the Jahanpanah knows, and perhaps, his late father knew even more, how much of a warrior an Afghan is.

BAIRAM KHAN: Careful whose name you drag into the conversation Taj Khan.

AKBAR: Let him Bairam *baba*, it will answer his question. *(to Taj Khan)* Where was your Muslim brotherhood, when you hounded Humayun out of India. The Rajput Rana of Amarkot who gave refuge to our family – he is my brother.

TAJ KHAN: It was fear Jahanpanah, these Hindus fear the sword of Islam.

AKBAR: Step outside and say this to Man Singh, I assure you your body will be returned to your family for an honourable burial.

BAIRAM KHAN: *(trying to defuse the situation)* Badshah Salamat, let us consider the proposal, and not how it is spoken… *(to Taj Khan)* and Taj Khan, present it in a manner that suits the proposal.

Taj smiles, changes tactic. Softer.

TAJ KHAN: Alampanah, do not make the mistake of equating the Hindus with Muslims just to spite the Afghans who beat, I concede, only at times, the Mughals.

AKBAR: Oh! You mean the mistake Islam Shah and then Adil Shah made with Hemu?

TAJ KHAN: Precisely. Empires cannot be built on… such men. Traders who mistake opportunity for destiny.

AKBAR: Empires collapse when they fail to recognise men such as Hemu.

Taj glances at Bairam Khan, seeking alignment.

TAJ KHAN: Khan Baba understands these things - lineage. Structure. Order.

BAIRAM KHAN: Order follows victory.

TAJ KHAN: Then let us secure both.

Steps forward, in a measured manner.

AKBAR: *(rises – Taj Khan backtracks)* The mistake is yours. This is Hindustan. My Hindustan! Men don't stand together here because they pray the same way. Which is why Hemu rose to be your Emperor with the support of Persians, Turks, Arabs and even the other Afghans. It is a land of plenty, not the barren desert or the desolate steppe where people like us originate from. Here, the rivers, the meadows, the fields, the forests and their rich produce create space and place for all to find what brings people together.*(Steps closer. Voice lower.)* In Hindustan… a man's brother is not decided in a mosque.

A pause. Bairam watches Akbar carefully now.

TAJ KHAN: Yet it is Afghanistan which has never been conquered.

AKBAR: A vain boast! Who wants to conquer it anyway! A barren land, where only a few valleys matter, which were always conquered, enroute to India.

TAJ KHAN: *(Mocking, desperate)* So that you could make the Indian, these Hindus your brothers?!

AKBAR: You cannot see – The Mughal and Rajput fight like one — brothers. The Hindu Jat and the Turk — brothers for they turn to the land. The Baniya and Arab — brothers; for their life blood is trade, and the colour of money matters more than the colour of their religion's flag…

Taj tries to interrupt. Akbar does not let him.

AKBAR: *(Continues)* The Parsian and the Kayastha – brothers. Why do you think Faizi and Badayuni on one side and Todarmal and Birbal on the other, manage the written word of the Empire and its bureaucracy! Don't you know that the Mullah and the Pandit have adopted the same ways to keep their flock under their sway; This is Hindustan! A soldier is brother to a soldier. A ruler is brother to a ruler. A scholar to a scholar. A trader to a trader. A farmer to a farmer, perhaps there will be a tribal like you…

Steps even closer. The tone sharpens.

AKBAR: *(Continues)* An Afghan… who… *(A pause. Taj stiffens.)* …is brother only to his clan. *(Silence. It lands like a verdict.)*

TAJ KHAN: We conquered this land.

AKBAR: You raided it.

TAJ KHAN: We ruled it.

AKBAR: You passed through it.

Taj's restraint cracks slightly.

TAJ KHAN: And you? You think you are different?

Akbar smiles faintly. Not warmth. Recognition.

AKBAR: I am. Because I am not looking for brothers. *(Steps back, reclaiming space.)* I am building a brotherhood.

Silence. Even Bairam shifts slightly at this.

TAJ KHAN: Then you will stand alone.

AKBAR: No. I will stand above.

Taj exhales. The sycophancy is gone now.

TAJ KHAN: You insult the Afghan.

AKBAR: I categorise you. *(to Bairam Khan)* Before my reign ends, take away their swords and put the plough in their hands instead.

TAJ KHAN: You will need us.

AKBAR: I will replace you.

A long stare. Taj understands this is final.

TAJ KHAN: Then remember this— Hindustan does not belong to those who classify it. It belongs to those who seize it.

Akbar nods slightly.

AKBAR: That is why you lost it – to Hemu.

Silence. Taj bows—thin, controlled—and exits.

BAIRAM KHAN: You push them away.

AKBAR: I place them correctly.

BAIRAM KHAN: They are still Muslims.

AKBAR: They are Afghans first.

BAIRAM KHAN: And you?

A pause. Then quietly, firmly, Akbar replies.

AKBAR: Bairam Baba, you know what the difference is; between people like Taj Khan Karrani and me.

Silence.

AKBAR: He is a Muslim, who happens to be Indian. I am an Indian, who happens to be Muslim.

Silence.

BAIRAM KHAN: Islam can unite it.

AKBAR: Islam cannot navigate it.

BAIRAM KHAN: Babur conquered it.

AKBAR: Babur survived it. Have you not read the Baburnama, well, neither have I, because I cannot read, but you

yourself have read it out to me. *Dadajaan*, realised early that every time he would break a city, it's inhabitants would retreat into the jungle and before long, they would rebuild. They would just not be defeated; we can win on plains. But, we lose in forests. We fail on rivers. They fight with terrain. We fight against it.

BAIRAM KHAN: Then we make it ours.

AKBAR: Or we become theirs.

Silence stretches.

BAIRAM KHAN: You move away from Islam.

AKBAR: I move towards rule.

BAIRAM KHAN: That is dangerous.

AKBAR: That is accurate.

A long silence.

AKBAR: This is why… at Panipat… I had told you not to do that.

Bairam's face tightens—controlled, but real.

The Bodyguard remains still.

Akbar stands.

Bairam watches.

Fade Out

Scene 2

The scene is a cleavage in space and time. Upstage right is Bairam Khan in the field of battle. He is dressed the same as in the previous scene. The Mughal General, Shah Quli Khan is dressed in current day military fatigues of a three star General. He is wearing a 16th century Mughal warrior's helmet though. The two of them are discussing how the battle, that has just gotten over, went. Hemu cannot be seen. He is lying somewhere, grievously injured. This space is THE FIELD.

Downstage left Akbar's bodyguard is narrating what happened; to a young Abul Fazl, Akbar's future biographer. Abul Fazl is dressed in denims, a t and a jacket. Much like the young, today. This conversation is happening several years after the battle at Panipat. This space is THE COURT OF MEMORY.

THE FIELD

BAIRAM KHAN: How did you capture Hemu alive?

SHAH QULI KHAN: Khan Baba. I cannot lie to you. The truth is… I didn't capture him, he, well, he just fell in our lap. His elephant, Hawai was roaming around the battlefield listlessly, carrying his unconscious master on its back.

BAIRAM KHAN: Will he live?

SHAH QULI KHAN: The wound is fatal my lord, Allah knows how he is holding on to life; the arrow pierced his eye and entered his brain through the socket. He pulled out the arrow and continued fighting till he fell unconscious.

BAIRAM KHAN: He must stay alive till the Badshah reaches us. Do we know who the archer was?

SHAH QULI KHAN: No Sir. It happened by chance. The archers were firing en masse as per our strategy to deal with elephants in battle.

BAIRAM KHAN: Hmm, then the reward from His Majesty will be all yours.

SHAH QULI KHAN: His victory is all the reward I need, and daresay, all I deserve.

THE COURT OF MEMORY

ABUL FAZL: *(squatting, tracing shapes)* Tell me about the planning.

BODYGUARD: The brave Mughal soldiers pretended to retreat and took formation inside a ditch on the battle field. That's when our archers took over. They released volley after volley against the elephants that Hemu was so proud of. The elephants were unable to navigate the ditch and became sitting ducks. Then it was easy pickings for our cavalry.

ABUL FAZL: Hemu must have been shitting bricks!

BODYGUARD: No sire! He continued to fight bravely; one must respect the enemy and his courage.

ABUL FAZL : War isn't just about courage, isn't it? it's about strategy.

THE FIELD

BAIRAM KHAN: What was the strategy.

SHAH QULI KHAN:

What strategy my lord!?Panic had almost set in, we were not in retreat, but the line was broken and we had our backs to the walls. Some soldiers retreated into a ditch and others followed; fortunately, among the soldiers who found themselves in the ditch most were archers, so they could continue firing and avoid the

elephants who could not navigate the ditch, and if they tried had to come in single file, becoming easier targets once again.

BAIRAM KHAN: But the cavalry charge from the rear, that was a masterstroke, which flank surrounded them, Sikandar Khan Uzbek's OR Abdullah Khan Uzbek's?

SHAH QULI KHAN: Both flanks had collapsed sire; it was providence again that they found the elephant brigade where they did.

BAIRAM KHAN: So much providence; don't you think this will anger the *Badshah Salamat* – that victory wasn't seized through the tactics of his Generals but through vagaries of fate.

SHAH QULI KHAN: On the contrary, don't you think, it will please him and the entire Muslim world no end, that it was the will of Allah?

Bairam Khan sees an opening.

BAIRAM KHAN: True!

THE COURT OF MEMORY

ABUL FAZL: What were our formations?

BODYGUARD: Right — Sikandar Khan Uzbek. Left — Abdullah Khan Uzbek. Centre — Ali Quli.

ABUL FAZL: And the Emperor?

BODYGUARD: From where he could see the battle and plan all the manoeuvres. Where he must be. It was His Majesty's foresight and leadership that turned the tide against a much larger force. Then, the ground began to move.

ABUL FAZL: *(eyes widening)* Elephants?

BODYGUARD: Yes. Armour on their heads. Blades on their tusks. Men on their backs. Fire behind them.

THE FIELD

BAIRAM KHAN: Imagine what would have happened if Hemu had his artillery with him.

SHAH QULI KHAN: Yes sire; in fact, if we have to reward anyone, it should be Khan Zaman. The way he rode, and ensured his surprise attack captured the artillery vanguard.

BAIRAM KHAN: Foolish of him, to send out the artillery as the vanguard. *(reflecting on the strategy)*

SHAH QULI KHAN: I am not sure my lord. In fact with advances in artillery, I see it as the future of warfare – to soften the enemy with artillery fire before sending in the infantry and cavalry. Hemu was ahead of his time.

THE COURT OF MEMORY

BODYGUARD: …but the fire did not last for long, a bold charge by Khan Zaman and his cavalry unit captured Hemu's artillery and took it out of the equation.

ABUL FAZL: Did they charge?

BODYGUARD: They tried.

The conversations in the two spaces become more animated and switch from one to the other faster. Building the force of the account of the second battle of Panipat from the differing perspectives.

SHAH QULI KHAN: They advanced like certainty.

ABUL FAZL: Were we afraid?

BODYGUARD: No.

SHAH QULI KHAN: Our horses were. They resisted the reins.

BAIRAM KHAN: So you dismounted.

SHAH QULI KHAN: We had no choice, but to fight on foot.

ABUL FAZL: Did we ride into them?

BODYGUARD: We met them like lions, we met them head on, each warrior rose with a roar, some jumping several feet into the air to strike the enemy on their elephants.

SHAH QULI KHAN: We aimed low. Cut the legs. Strike the drivers. But they kept coming.

ABUL FAZL: Did they fall?

BODYGUARD: They broke.

SHAH QULI KHAN: Our right broke first.

BAIRAM KHAN: Sikandar.

SHAH QULI KHAN: Yes. Left followed.

ABUL FAZL: And then we pushed forward?

BODYGUARD: Yes.

SHAH QULI KHAN: We pulled back. Not ordered.

BAIRAM KHAN: Instinct.

SHAH QULI KHAN: Survival.

ABUL FAZL: Did arrows fill the sky?

BODYGUARD: Yes.

SHAH QULI KHAN: We fired everything we had, at anything that moved… then we saw him.

ABUL FAZL: Where was he?

BODYGUARD: Ahead.

SHAH QULI KHAN: On the elephant. Not behind. Not hidden. He came forward.

ABUL FAZL: Did he run?

SHAH QULI KHAN: He drove into the centre.

BAIRAM KHAN: Ali Quli held?

SHAH QULI KHAN: Barely. He broke us open. Yes, it was providence.

ABUL FAZL: And then?

BODYGUARD: We turned the tide.

SHAH QULI KHAN: We were near the end. Then the land intervened.

BAIRAM KHAN: The ravine.

SHAH QULI KHAN: Yes. They could not cross.

ABUL FAZL: What saved us?

BODYGUARD: Clarity. Vision. Leadership. From the day the young Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar burnt the effigy of Hemu to fill our hearts with courage, our victory was written.

SHAH QULI KHAN: Time.

ABUL FAZL: And then?

BODYGUARD: We struck.

SHAH QULI KHAN: And then the lucky arrow.

Bairam Khan is suddenly alert

BAIRAM KHAN: His Majesty arrives.

Enter Akbar in a business suit, but with the emperor's warrior helmet. Centre stage. Both spaces continue to be lit.

ABUL FAZL: Did the Emperor kill him?

A pause. The Bodyguard kneels slightly, lowering to the child's eye level.

BODYGUARD: No. *(Soft, clear)* The Emperor does not strike a man who cannot stand.

BAIRAM KHAN: Alampanah! You have to behead him.

AKBAR: He is already dying, what good will come of such a deed, we should be merciful.

BAIRAM KHAN: He is suffering, it would be the merciful thing to do.

ABUL FAZL: Because he is merciful?

BODYGUARD: Because he sees further.

SHAH QULI KHAN: *(to Bairam Khan)* It will not feel like victory.

BAIRAM KHAN ignores SHAH QULI KHAN and continues to exhort Akbar to behead Hemu.

BAIRAM KHAN: You burnt his effigy to symbolise what you were going to do to Hemu, you will lose face in front of your men.

BODYGUARD: He sees his Hindustan taking shape. The Hindustan he was born into, the Hindustan he has lived, and wants to create.

ABUL FAZL: This is spectacular! So, what happens!? Does His Majesty change every rule of every ruler in the history of Islam.

BAIRAM KHAN: If you do not behead him, no one will fear you; who knows how many other Hemus will rise; you will be saving countless lives… son.

As the final, personal cry from BAIRAM KHAN echoes, both worlds begin to dim. They fade out. AKBAR is left alone holding the sword in hand. The split dissolves. Suddenly BAIRAM KHAN's and SHAH QULI KHAN's shouts are heard.

IN CHORUS: Nara – e – taqbeer! Allah – o – Akbar! Nara – e – taqbeer! Allah – o – Akbar! All hail, Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar. The Badshah Ghazi. The master of Hindustan. The slayer of the infidels. The sword of Allah. His reflection on earth. AKBAR! AKBAR! AKBAR!

AKBAR is horrified. With a gesture he signals lights to come on to the COURT OF MEMORY and plunge the FIELD into darkness.

ABUL FAZL: It was greatness. Oh Akbar! The compassionate one! I will write that he chose not to strike.

BODYGUARD: What you write, we will endure.

Lights Fade. The action returns to centre stage with AKBAR and BAIRAM KHAN.

BAIRAM KHAN: Why do you refuse? You earned it.

AKBAR: You declared it.

BAIRAM KHAN: It strengthens you.

AKBAR: It confines me.*(A pause)* I choose to be remembered differently.

BAIRAM KHAN: And the truth? Your title? Your reverence and respect as a true Ghazi of the faith.

AKBAR: I have faith in Hindustan, how does it matter – my faith!

BAIRAM KHAN: So, you will spare the rest of Hemu's army and his family?

AKBAR: They don't stand against my faith; they stand against the Emperor of Hindustan; as I stood before the Emperor of Hindustan before me – Hemu! *(a terrible change)* Send General Pir Muhammad to Rewari!

Scene 3

Centre stage, an interrogation chamber has been created. It is however, looking like a modern podcast studio. The host and guest in this case though, shall stand. The host or victor is PIR MUHAMMAD, Akbar's general interrogating the guest of prisoner is HEMU's FATHER after loss at the Battle of Rewari. PIR MUHAMMAD is wearing battle fatigues with a General's helmet of the 16th century Mughal Army while HEMU's FATHER is dressed in a shirt, trouser and sandals that a grocer would wear in the main market of Rewari today. He is wearing a Haryanvi turban though. As the conversation proceeds, ISLAM SHAH and ADIL SHAH appear on stage recounting Hemu's story.

PIR MUHAMMAD: Name?

HEMU'S FATHER: Puran Das

PIR MUHAMMAD: Father's name?

HEMU'S FATHER: Rai Jai Pal Das

PIR MUHAMMAD: You don't put Rai before your name?

HEMU'S FATHER: Hereditary titles make you vain. I was just a petty trader.

PIR MUHAMMAD: Children's names?

HEMU'S FATHER: Jajuhar Rai, and, Raja Vikramaditya, the Great Emperor of Hindustan, Basant Rai - Hemu to you.

PIR MUHAMMAD: Titles don't make you vain now, do they?

HEMU'S FATHER: Not when you have earned them.

PIR MUHAMMAD: Let us not waste time. Your son sold salt?

HEMU'S FATHER: Saltpetre. Don't you know what Rewari is known for all over the world?

PIR MUHAMMAD: Since when?

HEMU'S FATHER: Since he was a 10 year old.

PIR MUHAMMAD: Whatever! He used to sell; trade; he was a bloody shopkeeper like you. No?!

HEMU'S FATHER: That is what we do, yes.

Pir Muhammad studies him.

PIR MUHAMMAD: You are a baniya, right? No lineage. No cavalry. No tribe.

HEMU'S FATHER: I am a dead Emperor's father. The Emperor of Hindustan.

Silence. That lands.

PIR MUHAMMAD: The Emperor of Hindustan was Humayun, who has now been succeeded by our Badshah – Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar!

HEMU'S FATHER: Ha! Humayun, The Emperor of Hindustan!? Wasn't he driven out by Sher Shah Suri.

PIR MUHAMMAD: *(piqued)* Now he was a general, not a shopkeeper! *(mocking)*. A… shopkeeper of the nation.

HEMU'S FATHER: Celebrate yourself as much as you want; mock a 'shopkeeper of the nation' as much as you want General; a day will come when you and your ilk will be dethroned, exiled, and dismembered by a 'nation of shopkeepers!'

PIR MUHAMMAD: Curse all you want old man; We rule this land now, it is our time – and I have all the time. You are going to tell me exactly what I want to know. Who was behind him?

HEMU'S FATHER: Have you forgotten our battle so soon, didn't you notice how the people of Rewari stood up as one to fight for their son, Hemu, the Emperor of India. Rajput, Jat, Baniya, Arab, Persian, Turk, Afghan, even the Mughals present here!

PIR MUHAMMAD: No you fool; behind his rise!? Tell me how a shopkeeper became this so called Emperor. Who is supporting him? Which foreign power? What black magic of the heathens? What was behind all this?!

A shift. A presence forms in another part of the stage. ISLAM SHAH steps forward. Dressed in a crisp business suit with the wearing Sher Shah Suri's crown. By his side, faujdar – SALIM KHAN, similarly dressed, with an Afghan soldier's helmet.

ISLAM SHAH: He had neither rank, *hasb*; nor did he have race, *nasb*; he possessed neither beauty, *surat*; nor any notable qualities, *seerat;* What did you see in him Salim Khan?

SALIM KHAN: Resourcefulness was his visiting card.

ISLAM SHAH: Yes, your army would have never won Ferozepore, had it not been for Hemu. How did you find out about him?

SALIM KHAN: Word had spread that a trader kept returning customers saying his godowns were empty but was seen keeping guard over them at night.

ISLAM SHAH: Smart thinking. So there was always a streak of opportunism and trickery in that mind of his.

SALIM KHAN: Some would call it business acumen. He managed to supply rations for Our army in times of famine.

PIR MUHAMMAD and HEMU's FATHER have been listening. PIR MUHAMMAD breaks through the barrier of time to engage with them.

PIR MUHAMMAD: For this you made him Superintendent of markets?

ISLAM SHAH: No. I figured someone so shrewd would be able to smell out who was hoarding material, and how to extract it out of them at the best price. And I wasn't wrong in my assessment.

SALIM KHAN: But, in doing so, wasn't he creating a network of merchants and traders who would do anything to be in his good books.

ISLAM SHAH: Yes, but as long as they kept the Army supplied and the treasury full, how did it matter?

PIR MUHAMMAD: It would create people loyal to him.

ISLAM SHAH: But he was loyal to me.

SALIM SHAH: Yes, that he was – loyal to his master; till the end.

PIR MUHAMMAD: Hence the promotion to Chief of Intelligence and Superintendent of Posts!?

Pause. ISLAM SHAH smiles. SALIM KHAN explains.

SALIM KHAN: We have both fought countless battles on the soil of Hindustan, Pir Muhammad, we both know that only fools believe India resides in its villages or cities. India resides in its markets. Who controls its markets, controls India

ISLAM SHAH: You hear "market". I saw "map".*(A pause)* Grain from Bengal. Salt from the west. Horses from the north.

HEMU'S FATHER: Each caravan a message.

ISLAM SHAH: Each trader a witness.

PIR MUHAMMAD: And you turned trade into intelligence.

ISLAM SHAH: He did. The Dak ran through him. The Departments of Post reported to him.

HEMU'S FATHER: News arrived before rebellion formed.

ISLAM SHAH: Before armies moved. Before alliances settled.

PIR MUHAMMAD: So he controlled information.

ISLAM SHAH: He controlled timing.

A pause.

PIR MUHAMMAD: And this made him powerful?

ISLAM SHAH: This made him necessary. *(Silence)* Understand this. After Sher Shah… there was no empire. There were fragments.

HEMU'S FATHER: Afghan chiefs.

ISLAM SHAH: Clans.

HEMU'S FATHER: Ambitions.

ISLAM SHAH: Each man a claimant. Each province a throne. Every heart filled with ambition, eyeing the throne…

PIR MUHAMMAD: So you needed control.

ISLAM SHAH: We needed resources. I needed visibility.

SALIM KHAN: You got it. And so did he, the visible face of the power of the Afghans – the Director General of Army, the custodian of Humayun's brother, Kamran Mirza, when he defected to our side.

PIR MUHAMMAD: So, it was him!

ISLAM SHAH: Yes. And he remained loyal to the end; my end. With my life his loyalty to me ended. My son*(a cry of sadness)*

Silence. Fadeout on ISLAM SHAH and SALIM KHAN. Lights on ADIL SHAH on another part of the stage.

ADIL SHAH: …and then it collapsed.

PIR MUHAMMAD: Adil Shah! You murdered a child king. Your own 12 year old nephew. Islam Shah's son and rightful heir. *(to Hemu's Father)* This is the reality of your son. He should have been the young lad's regent – clearly; he was no Bairam Khan

HEMU'S FATHER: Neither was Firuz Khan an Akbar.

PIR MUHAMMAD: So you inherited Hemu's loyalty?

ADIL SHAH: I inherited chaos.

PIR MUHAMMAD: You created it.

ADIL SHAH: And survived it. I won everyone over.

PIR MUHAMMAD: How?

ADIL SHAH: Money.

HEMU'S FATHER: From the markets.

PIR MUHAMMAD: Oh! Because of him.

ADIL SHAH: Yes. Because of him.

PIR MUHAMMAD: What did he become under you?

ADIL SHAH: Everything I could not be.

HEMU'S FATHER: He moved from information… to force.

PIR MUHAMMAD: A General?

ADIL SHAH: An age old Afghan policy in India. Adopted from the Tughlaqs; keep a Hindu General with a Muslim General so they could spy on one another.

HEMU'S FATHER: Imagine, trying to spy on Hemu!

ADIL SHAH: Which is why he became the most successful General of the Afghans. Junaid Khan, his general Daulat Khan, Sulemin Khan Karrani. He beat them all.

HEMU'S FATHER: Hemu! Prime Minister of the Sultan of Hindustan.

Silence. Fadeout on ADIL SHAH. Lights on the podcast chamber only.

PIR MUHAMMAD: – the second most powerful man in India.

HEMU'S FATHER: No. He became the second most powerful man in India before he became prime minister; when his victories made people realise what he could

become, it is the might of your enemies that makes you powerful.

PIR MUHAMMAD: What happened next?

HEMU'S FATHER: That was the last time I spoke to my son, when he was made Prime Minister. Fate took him with Adil Shah to Gwalior. Then, destiny took over at warp speed…

PIR MUHAMMAD: So, you have nothing else to tell me old man, what am I to do with you now?

HEMU'S FATHER: No wonder you are a mere general, you ask the Emperor's father what to do, I can only imagine what you are like when you face the Emperor. *(laughs mockingly)*

Silence. PIR MUHAMMAD has had enough.

PIR MUHAMMAD: I serve the emperor old man! I ask one more thing of you. Convert to Islam or die.

HEMU'S FATHER: For eighty years I have worshipped God in the way of my own religion; how can I forsake my faith? Shall I, through fear of death, embrace your religion without understanding it?

PIR MUHAMMAD looks at him quizzically. Lights Fade. Lights return on the Podcast zone. Only PIR MUHAMMAD stands. Holding a bloodied sword in his hand.

Fade Out.

Scene 4

TAJ KHAN KARRANI and SHAH MUHAMMAD FIRMULI, two Afghan nobles are on the way to Gwalior for the public durbar. They travel light. Business suits with overnighters. Their turbans indicate their tribal affiliations. They stop to rest. A tavern is illuminated centre stage. They doze off. A FAKIR appears and converses with the two. The lighting indicates it is a dream. The interaction conveys the two are awake - such is the aura of the FAKIR.

FAKIR (sings, slow, measured)

In the lands where banners broke before they rose,

Where kings were crowned between two blows,

A merchant walked where armies bled—

And counted grain where soldiers fed.

TAJ KHAN: A merchant?

FIRMULI: Or a spy?

FAKIR

A man who learned where power hides—

Not in swords, but what sustains their sides.

(He circles slowly.)

Junaid of Ajmer raised his claim,

With borrowed steel and borrowed name,

Four thousand horse, a restless band,

A throne imagined in his hand.

FIRMULI: Four thousand is not small.

TAJ KHAN: Enough to hold Ajmer. Not enough to rule Hindustan.

FAKIR
Enough to believe.

(A beat. Then continues.)

The Sultan called—but did not go,

For kings who feast move armies slow,

So one was sent who did not wait—

Who measured time, and not just fate.

TAJ KHAN: Hemu.

FAKIR

(nods) With fewer men. With sharper sight.

He did not march with drums or cries,

He moved where silence multiplies,

He learned their roads, he traced every glade,

He cut their breath before the blade.

FIRMULI: Cut supply.

TAJ KHAN: Before battle.

FAKIR
Before battle.

Daulat Khan stood proud in field,

Armour bright, unwilling to yield,

Lines were drawn, the sun bore witness—

War prepared in perfect fitness.

FIRMULI: So he fought conventionally.

FAKIR
He prepared to.

But night has rules the brave ignore,

And Hemu did not wait for war,

He moved when men had laid to rest,

And struck where sleep had made them less.

(A pause. The air tightens.)

TAJ KHAN : A night attack?

FIRMULI: Against Afghans?

FAKIR

Against certainty.

(continues his song)

No trumpet warned, no banner flew,

No lines were formed, no honour grew,

Only fire, and steel, and breath—

And men awakened into death.

(Silence.)

FIRMULI: That is not battle. That is slaughter.

FAKIR

That is victory.

(continues his song)

Daulat fell before the dawn,

Junaid fled, his army gone,

No second line, no ordered retreat—

Only shadows left to meet.

TAJ KHAN: He destroyed them completely?

FAKIR

The spoils were taken, counted, shared,

The Sultan praised, the court declared,

A servant loyal, fierce and true—

But power grew in what he knew.

FIRMULI: He distributed the spoils?

TAJ KHAN: Among Afghan soldiers?

FAKIR

He paid them their revelry,

And bought their memory.

Not by birth, nor by decree,

But by what men came to see—

That where he stood, the outcome bent,

And war obeyed his intent.

FIRMULI: This is not one battle.

TAJ KHAN: This is a pattern.

FAKIR

He fights before the battle forms,

He wins before the first of storms,

He breaks the line before it's drawn,

And leaves no space to carry on.

FIRMULI: He removes the second move.

TAJ KHAN: He removes the game.

A long pause.

FIRMULI: Why did we not see this?

FAKIR (FINAL STANZA)

While clans were counting blood and name,

He learned the land, he changed the game,

And where you saw divided ground—

He saw a map that could be bound.

Silence. The fire crackles.

TAJ KHAN: *(Quiet, shaken)* If this is true—

FIRMULI: —it is not him alone.

TAJ KHAN: He has become.

FIRMULI: What we are not.

A long pause.

TAJ KHAN: Then this ends only one way.

FIRMULI: Together.

They both look at the Fakir.

TAJ KHAN: Where?

The Fakir steps back into shadow.

FAKIR

Where you remember you are not alone.

The sons of Afghans who spare none.

FIRMULI: *(Whispers)* Gwalior. My son will stand with you, stand with him Taj Khan.

The Fakir disappears. The light dims. The two men sit—no longer rivals, not yet allies.

Fade Out.

Scene 5

The public durbar at Gwalior. Four Afghan nobles are gathered around the sultan ADIL SHAH – black tuxedo. SIRMAST KHAN SIRPANI – Afghan noble, upstart, dressed in gawdy formals. SIKANDAR KHAN FIRMULI – Son of Shah Muhammad Firmuli, dapper, elegant. TAJ KHAN KARRANI – claimant to the Governorship of Bengal, dressed in an understated business suit or combination. IBRAHIM KHAN SUR – brother in law of the sultan, ostentatious, richly dressed in a three piece suit. All of course, wearing turbans connoting their status and/or tribal affiliations.

TAJ KHAN: Peace be upon you, Sikandar Khan. I have travelled with your father, he waits.

SIKANDAR KHAN: Peace be upon you Taj Khan. Tell him, I do not.

IBRAHIM KHAN : We have to give the Sultan time.

SIKANDAR KHAN: Stop defending your brother-in-law Ibrahim Khan! You should know more than anyone what is going on.

SIRMAST KHAN: I for one do not. *(noticing)* The Sultan!

A brief pause. Sultan ADIL SHAH ENTERS. Tension in the air. They greet the Sultan.

SIKANDAR KHAN: *(Measured, controlled)* Sultan, we have not gathered for courtesy, is there something you wish to tell us.

TAJ KHAN: Careful Sikandar Khan. Do you question the Sultan?

SIKANDAR KHAN: I ask His Majesty a question, that is different from questioning him.

IBRAHIM KHAN: One wouldn't have known it from your tone.

SIKANDAR KHAN: Then perhaps the Sultan, will not waste time in replying.

ADIL SHAH: The son of Shah Muhammad Firmuli is allowed a little leeway.

SIKANDAR KHAN: If that baniya can be allowed to call the shots in the empire of the Surs, then what to speak of leeway to a Firmuli!

TAJ KHAN: Enough Sikandar Khan. *(to Adil Shah)* Your Majesty, I for one refuse to believe that your magnificence will take decisions, in, well, the manner our Firmuli brother alluded to, but all the Afghan families are curious to know the reason.

ADIL SHAH: The Prime Minister, who Sikandar Khan refers to by his Hindu caste, is the best example of the 'reason' behind the new way – merit! He has risen by dint of merit. And; not just as an administrator, or spymaster or finance wizard – but as a warrior who has humbled many in the Afghan families, who ironically went against the very Afghan brotherhood you refer to Taj Khan!

FIRMULI: So we are to give up the *Subaahs* that we have won in battle!

IBRAHIM KHAN: You forget under whose banner you fight!?

ADIL SHAH: Let me explain Ibrahim. *(to all gathered)* The *Subaahs* belong to the empire. *(to Sikandar Khan)* Or do you doubt that Sikandar?

SIKANDAR KHAN: No.

ADIL SHAH: Then why should the *Subaadar* be a hereditary post? If a *Subaah* needs a warrior, it will be given to one, if it needs an administrator, the most capable from among us will get the chance, if it needs a diplomat…

SIKANDAR KHAN: What!? Are things come to such a pass that the Kannauj of the noble Firmulis is to be given to the upstart clan of Sirpani dog-merchants!!

Silence. Everyone is stunned.

TAJ KHAN: Sikandar! In front of the Emperor!!

SIRMAST KHAN: *(kindly)* My son, why all these harsh words?

SIKANDAR KHAN: *(fiery)* I am not your son!

SIKANDAR KHAN draws his sword. A gasp, IBRAHIM KHAN rushes ADIL SHAH out of the stage, like the Secret Service protect the President these days.

Fade out.

Fade in.

IBRAHIM KHAN and ADIL SHAH are standing in the light.

ADIL SHAH: What happened?

IBRAHIM KHAN: Sikandar Khan killed Sirmast Khan!

ADIL SHAH: In a public durbar! What was everyone doing.

IBRAHIM KHAN: It was pitched battle sire! I had no choice…

ADIL SHAH: You slew Sikandar!?

IBRAHIM KHAN: I had no choice. It was either him or me.

ADIL SHAH: I will have to pacify his father, Shah Muhammad Firmuli, the clan is powerful.

Silence. IBRAHIM KHAN doesn't say anything.

ADIL SHAH: Don't tell me…

IBRAHIM KHAN: Doulat Khan Nouhani murdered him, we could not have him thirsting for vengeance once he returned to Kannauj.

ADIL SHAH: And… Taj Khan Karrani.

IBRAHIM KHAN: He has fled.

ADIL SHAH: The civil war grows worse. *(Silence)*

The call to prayer. It cuts through everything. All movement stops. Both of them offer the Namaaz.

IBRAHIM KHAN: Taj Khan and the Karranis. Sikandar Shah and the rest of the Surs. The Nuhanis, they will use this fracas in Gwalior, as an excuse – they all have to be neutralised. Immediately.

Silence

ADIL SHAH: Where's Hemu?

Fade Out

Scene 6

The gate to the afterworld on stage. A man in crisp formals a Maulvi's turban- RIZWAN, the gatekeeper. Facing him is a gathering of four great warriors and generals of their time. JUNAID KHAN, TAJ KHAN KARRANI, SIKANDAR SHAH SURI and TARDI BEG. They are all dressed in crisp white kurta and black trousers, much as how the departed are dressed in Muslim burials in India. They are however wearing the turbans of their tribes. All have been defeated in battle by Hemu.

RIZWAN: Has Sikandar Shah Suri arrived; aah yes! He is here, we can begin.

Silence. Rizwan takes out his diary and begins to read. The four generals await his declamation.

RIZWAN: Hmmm… four powerful Muslim Generals! All defeated by a Hindu Baniya. What do you have to say for yourself. Hmmm… Junaid Khan – he took you out With four elephants and just 4,000 cavalry. What happened there?

JUNAID KHAN: A tactical surprise, and I would say trickery as well – he attacked us at night.

RIZWAN: When you and your men were sleeping with your bellies full of biryani!

JUNAID KHAN: So, that we could wipe out his entire force in the morning.

RIZWAN: Still; a completely outnumbered enemy against the army of the faithful, there is no precedent! Shameful!

JUNAID KHAN: *(Defensive)* Have you heard of the Polish Winged Hussars?

RIZWAN: Not yet?!

JUNAID KHAN: You will!

RIZWAN: No. You will come to know, what losing to that infidel, that too when he was outnumbered means…

SIKANDAR SHAH: Sir. You speak as if it was holy war! Hemu had Afghans in his army as well.

JUNAID KHAN: …and Rajputs, Turks, and even Arabs.

RIZWAN: All the more reason, not only was a Hindu Baniya your opponent, he had managed to bring together so many; so many creeds together!

SIKANDAR SHAH: …but all under Sultan Adil Shah's flag, isn't it?

RIZWAN: You are a fine one to talk- just you wait till I come to you, you lost to Hemu as well didn't you? When you styled yourself as a Sultan, unlike this Junaid Khan fellow, who was just the *Subaadar* of Ajmer…

Silence

RIZWAN: Yes, Junaid Khan Saahab, a Hindu Baniya– outnumbered, what happened?

JUNAID KHAN: He had beaten my General Daud Khan, just a day before. There was no way we could have imagined he and his troops could recover from that bruising battle and attack so soon. Our approach was justified…

RIZWAN: What! So you lost two battles in a 24 hour period, against that… Ya Khuda! what could it be other than your lack of courage, faith and belief in the power of the Almighty! To lose against that, that… vegetarian!

SIKANDAR SHAH: Now what does veg, non-veg have to do with the outcome of the…

RIZWAN: Quiet!!

SIKANDAR SHAH SURI submits sheepishly. Taj Khan Karrani comes to his defence and complete the point he had started making.

TAJ KHAN: *(Low)* But My Lord, it is a valid question, isn't it. How does being non-vegetarian, give us supremacy in battle?

RIZWAN: Because it gives protein, temper, ferocity– Muslims eat the most meat!

TAJ KHAN: But that is factually wrong on a per capita basis sire. We have seen research data here in the after world. If that were true, pork wouldn't be the most consumed meat in the world. And, how can we consumer so much meat?! Most of us live in deserted lands – the excess salts would kill us. Most of our diet is based of fresh greens and carbs ranging from couscous to rice to gain.

RIZWAN: Something has to be done about the eternal continuity of information in the afterworld. But don't we have the livestock we sacrifice for meat!?

TAJ KHAN: Either this is jest OR this is a test. Livestock which we do not kill! It is the goat and cows, their milk is what we drink to quench out thirst, where is the water in our lands!? Yes, it is true that India is so rich in water that we have increased our meat consumption here, but then *'chaar roti and do boti'* can hardly be considered the big bulky protein rich diet that you think should make us invincible?!

RIZWAN: Coming to water; you had all the water in the world at your disposal in your defeat to Hemu, isn't it?! Speak!!

TAJ KHAN: *(Slow. Measured. Like reopening a wound.)*Tanda. Yes. I held the river. The Ganga was my shield.

RIZWAN: And yet you sit here.

TAJ KHAN: Because he did not see the river as I did. He did not cross where we watched. He crossed where we did not think to look.

RIZWAN: With elephants? With silence?

TAJ KHAN: He did not defeat us. He… he appeared.

Silence.

RIZWAN: There's a pattern here, right? A non-martial creed of a docile blasphemous religion leads a coalition, including our co- religionists, and, even though, outnumbered, he manages to defeat the warriors of our faith!

SIKANDAR SHAH: He came like a storm without warning. No declaration. No formation. He does not announce war. He arrives inside it.

RIZWAN: The brave, supposedly unconquerable Pathans! Arrive at the gates of the afterworld, bathed in defeat and fear!

JUNAID KHAN: Why pick on us?! Why don't you ask this Turkic Tardi Beg!?

SIKANDAR SHAH: He didn't just lose to Hemu, he deserted! No wonder he was killed; executed… by Bairam Khan.

TARDI BEG: Mind your words Afghan Dog! and that Bairam Khan was a Shia and always had it for me…

RIZWAN: Silence! Have you forgotten where you are?! Stop this Afghan – Turk; Shia - Sunni! And Tardi Beg – you! Do you think we won't know that you took interest payment from Humayun, and when his life was in danger, rather than giving refuge to your Badshah and Hamida Begum, you turned them away!

Everyone is aghast.

RIZWAN: This is the reason! All of you lacked faith!!

TARDI BEG: Baghdad had faith.

RIZWAN: W-H-A-T!!!???

TARDI BEG: Baghdad had faith. It was the centre of the Muslim world, but when Changez Khan decided to sack it, all the faith

and all the strength and all the history of our purity of our belief - it still burned, didn't it. The Mongols were not Muslims, I think it's just fortuitous that they carried the name 'Khan' so that most people in the world will think we are a continuation…

RIZWAN: You hide your cowardice behind the few military defeats suffered by Islam?! Have you forgotten that in less than a century the sword of Islam swept through the known world, and unto Europe?!

TARDI BEG: But what about Spain, where are we there?! Was faith lacking under the Andalusian sun!?

RIZWAN: *(Admonishing)* Do not compare!

TAJ KHAN: But, isn't there merit in what he says My Lord. Did we capture India? It took 300 years to establish a foothold… and all the lands we keep boasting about were decrepit remains of nation states that were hardly of any consequence! India and China had 50% of the world's GDP, South America was awash in gold and with North America held another quarter of the world's wealth, and Africa had all the natural resources – what did we capture?! 3 – 4% of the world's GDP in barren lands that you keep pressurising us to live up to! Some great conquest that never happened!!

JUNAID KHAN: We are in agreement sire, we accept and submit to your justice, we lost to Hemu, because he surprised us with his military acumen – but were not cowards; and, perhaps this very burden you and history puts on Muslims, made us underestimate him in the first place.

SIKANDAR SHAH: He made the best of the coalition of brave, intelligent, resourceful, artistic; and scientific peoples- irrespective of their religion and beat us. That's all.

RIZWAN: *(Reflective)* Hemu is gone. But there is, there is someone else like him out there now, isn't it? What say, Tardi Beg?

Fade Out

Scene 7

Upstage, a simple staircase. Dimly lit. A body stumbles and falls. Darkness. Bairam Khan and Akbar appear centre stage. Akbar is sitting. Bairam Khan hovers around him. Akbar's bodyguard is visible as well. As always, dressed in business suits with their traditional headgear.

BAIRAM KHAN: No one must know.

AKBAR: They will.

BAIRAM KHAN: Not yet.

AKBAR: A fall cannot be hidden. It is the Emperor of Hindustan we are talking about.

BAIRAM KHAN: The news can be delayed.

Silence.

AKBAR: He was alone when he fell?

BAIRAM KHAN: On the steps. From the library. He was hurrying when he heard the *Azaan*, and in attempting to kneel…

AKBAR: A king… undone by stairs.

BAIRAM KHAN: It was Allah's wish

AKBAR: That we lose Hindustan in less than a year of winning it back from the Surs… through your famous victory Bairam Baba…

BAIRAM KHAN: No… that it is your time to be crowned king.

AKBAR: Where, in Delhi.

BAIRAM KHAN: No. We will halt at Kalanaur. The Badshah's death will be kept a secret till then. Mulla Bekasi will appear at the Royal *Jharokha* daily till your

coronation *Khutbah* is read for three days in your name in the mosques of Delhi. Only then…

AKBAR: But why hide his death, when my coronation is planned.

BAIRAM KHAN: If they know—*(He doesn't finish.)*

AKBAR: -they will move.

BAIRAM KHAN: They are already moving.

AKBAR: Adil Shah? Through Hemu?

BAIRAM KHAN: If Hemu was acting on Adil Shah's orders I wouldn't be as worried…

AKBAR: What! You believe he acts on his own!?

Silence.

AKBAR: And Sikandar Suri.

BAIRAM KHAN: Still in Punjab.

AKBAR: So we stay.

BAIRAM KHAN: We must.

AKBAR: What about Delhi - who holds it now?

BAIRAM KHAN: Tardi Beg.

AKBAR: In my name?

BAIRAM KHAN: No, in the name of the Mughals. And, he will continue to do so, even after the coronation.

AKBAR: Why is that?

BAIRAM KHAN: Akbar can never lose Delhi.

AKBAR: You doubt whether Tardi Beg will be able to hold it?

A pause.

BAIRAM KHAN: I do not doubt… Hemu.

Silence. A distant ceremonial sound begins. The suggestion of coronation.

BAIRAM KHAN: *(quietly)* Come my brave Jalaluddin. It is time.

Fade Out

Scene 8

The Purana Qila at Delhi. The Governor of Delhi TARDI BEG holds a council of war. Essentially, a modern looking war room with a large whiteboard centre stage and Mughal nobles and generals discussing their plans. They are all dressed in contemporary battle fatigues with appropriate headgear and turbans. ABDULLAH UZBEG, HAIDER MUHAMMAD, ISKANDER BEG and PIR MUHAMMAD.

TARDI BEG: He will be at the gates of Delhi soon. What are our preparations Haider Muhammad?

HAIDER: Unbelievable. He left Chunar, what? Six months ago?

TARDI BEG: Yes… Iskander Beg

ISKANDER BEG: As a student of military strategy…

ABDULLAH: You should burn your books. Change your university, and sack your teachers.

HAIDER: Abdullah Uzbeg is right. It is unprecedented; and it is not only his speed…

ABDULLAH: …he marches with heavy artillery, elephants; and heavy cavalry!

ISKANDER BEG: Shock and awe.

HAIDER: What?

ISKANDER BEG: It will be called shock and awe.

HAIDER: What will be?

ISKANDER BEG: Destroying the enemy morale before destroying the enemy with heavy bombardment and crushing them with droves of elephants.

HAIDER: Have you noticed one more thing.

TARDI BEG: What?

HAIDER: His route. He travels along the Yamuna, he didn't move towards Awadh – it was Kalpi, Etawah, Agra, then towards Delhi.

ABDULLAH: Using the river, as a defensive front, as am escape route, if needed…

ISKANDER BEG: Perhaps as a route- for the elephants and heavy artillery whose speed we marvel at?

TARDI BEG: An integrated riverine and infantry campaign, that's how he wins his battles?!

HAIDER: Twenty two of them.

ABDULLAH: You seem to be keeping track

PIR MUHAMMAD: Twenty one, unless you lot have already accepted defeat.

TARDI BEG: No, we are studying our enemy… You can convey this to Bairam Khan.

PIR MUHAMMAD: My services are yours Governor.

TARDI BEG: They may be. But I know who you serve.

HAIDER: Right now, there is no point in such discussions… *(pause)* …even if they be true.

ISKANDER BEG: What about his supply lines?

PIR MUHAMMAD: The clever baniya has contacts all over Hindustan! He does not need supply lines, there are nodes operating for him everywhere!

ISKANDER BEG: Another reason for his pace, energy and powerful moves… I hope the we Mughals get the chance to make use of what we learn of warfare…

HAIDER: …and of Hindustan, from him.

ABDULLAH: I say we have learnt enough. I too respect the enemy, but valorising him will not serve me well

when I am about to behead that infidel! I vote we ride out to meet him. We fight fire with fire, the elite of the Mughal cavalry, we must fight on our terms! And; if in this cause, whether we meet death or glory, there will be no dishonour.

TARDI BEG: What do you say Haider Muhammad?

HAIDER: What matters is the task assigned to us by our emperor – Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar, the son and heir our beloved Humayun. He has ordered us to ensure, Delhi must not fall. What if we ride out to discover that Humayun has flanked us and takes Delhi, without a fight, like he did Agra?

ISKANDER BEG: Which is what military strategy dictates as well, we will be better served by holding defensive positions. Seven hundred and fifty kilometres.

TARDI BEG: Pir Muhammad, you?

PIR MUHAMMAD: I am with Abdullah Uzbeg. Well, that's that; the decision is yours Tardi Beg!

ABDULLAH: What do you choose, Tardi Beg.

Silence.

TARDI BEG: I choose neither.

Silence.

TARDI BEG: We will march out, but meet Hemu at Tughlaqabad. It will give the Mughal cavalry and mounted archers space to manoeuvre and the battlements can serve as options for defensive positions. It will keep the line for retreat open as well. Abdullah Uzbeg shall lead the vanguard. Haider Muhammad the right flank, and Iskander Beg, the centre. Proceed with your preparations. May God and the Timurid blood flowing in your veins grant you victory and vengeance over this pretender!

The three of them leave. PIR MUHAMMAD is alone with TARDI BEG.

PIR MUHAMMAD: What are my instructions Tardi Beg? Do you wish me to hold the reserve, or perhaps you plan a flanking move…

TARDI BEG: I don't have any instructions for you Pir Muhammad… yet. What I have, is a question.

PIR MUHAMMAD: Yes?

TARDI BEG: How far is Chunar from Delhi?

PIR MUHAMMAD: Around 500 miles.

TARDI BEG: And Kalanaur. Punjab?

PIR MUHAMMAD: Around 300.

TARDI BEG: Then why have the Jahanpanah and Bairam Khan not managed to reach us even though the road is clear, while Hemu has been able to fight his way to the gates of Delhi?

PIR MUHAMMAD: Why don't you ask them after you win.

TARDI BEG: No, better you ask your master, Bairam Khan; why do you think I have kept the line open for you desertion; sorry, retreat!

Fade Out

Scene 9

TARDI BEG's beheaded torso. Akbar's bodyguard stands guard over it. Bairam Khan in military fatigues and the Mughal regents turban waits for Akbar. Akbar enters. Akbar is dressed immaculately in a business suit. Only his military headgear indicates the Badshah is ready for war.

AKBAR: Why Bairam Baba why??!!

BAIRAM KHAN: You question me?

AKBAR: I wish to know the reason.

BAIRAM KHAN: Before, I do that, I seek the Badshah's forgiveness, for executing Tardi Beg without taking his permission.

Akbar, suitably mollified, changes his manner slightly.

AKBAR: And I, so that no questions be asked again, confer upon you the title of Khan Baba, you shall no longer be addressed as Bairam Baba by your Jalal, but by this title.

BAIRAM: And I, Bairam Khan swear on the soul of my master, Humayun, and the head of my unborn son, that I will be faithful to your trust and this title.

AKBAR: Let us now pay attention to this matter– was he the only Mughal who showed cowardice? From Chunar till Delhi, other than Iskander Khan Uzbeg, who put up a fight worthy of a Mughal?

BAIRAM KHAN: He was a Governor, not just a General. He was not just a Mughal, he was your representative, he cannot be remembered as a coward, and most importantly… his execution was less a punishment, and more a lesson.

AKBAR: If that is so, then, before the rest of the army forgets the lesson, shouldn't we move?

BAIRAM KHAN: Yes we should. I was just waiting for his coronation.

AKBAR: So soon?

BAIRAM KHAN: Immediately. Coins have been struck.

AKBAR: In his name?!

BAIRAM KHAN: Yes. The Purana Qila was awash with water from the Ganges, his *abhishek* was performed in accordance with Vedic rituals, holding a ceremonial umbrella over his head. He has even given himself a new name – Hemchandra Vikramaditya.

AKBAR: And those Afghans who miss no opportunity to fight in the name Of Allah just stood by, silently?!

BAIRAM KHAN: He has defeated everyone that mattered. Bribed everyone that had the power, but not the resources, rewarded everyone who had resources and courage, but not lineage. He knows everyone's weaknesses. Everyone knows his strengths. He is an emperor indeed – the last Hindu Emperor of India.

AKBAR: You could not have been just waiting for this to happen; you wanted it to happen!! You let it happen!!

BAIRAM KHAN: Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar has to become Emperor of Hindustan by defeating an Emperor – not some Afghan rabble. He has to become Emperor, by destroying the Hindu baniya who dared, not reckless warriors of the faith, who know nothing of it!

AKBAR: He will be defeated. But; I doubt whether he will be destroyed. We have much to learn. His focus

on trade as the engine of India's growth. Building a network of communication, mastering coalitions, and above all recognising talent and skill based on inter-generational training, education and experience; rather than religion. Why, it seems to be a Hindustan I would wish to rule and ruled in the way I would wish to rule it. We march at dawn Khan Baba, if he is as much an Emperor as we make of him, he won't wait till we reach Delhi, he will want to defeat us where we defeated the rulers of India then – at Panipat.

BAIRAM KHAN: Your wish is my command Jalal, but please allow for one caveat – you will stay at least eight miles behind the front lines, we cannot to suffer the indignity of you falling prisoner, or worse.

AKBAR: What could be worse than falling prisoner?

BAIRAM KHAN: That is precisely why.

He bows long and hard. Salutes Akbar. Akbar leaves. Bairam Khan watches him leave. The bodyguard is about to follow; Bairam Khan stops him. Akbar needs to be alone.

Fade Out

Final Scene — Istanbul

The court of Murad III. Mirrors the opening scene but; The court is austere. Grey. Geometric. No warmth of Hindustan. Sharp lines. Controlled space. Power without intimacy. MURAD III sits elevated, not relaxed. Beside him, his MINISTER, who is measured, observant. Behind him, still as shadow, a Bodyguard. A single figure stands below. His name is KHUDA BAKSH, a spy from India. All characters are dressed in dark business suits but with turbans of the Caliph, his minister, bodyguard. Khuda Baksh wears the headgear worn by a 16th century Turkish nobleman.

MURAD III: You have travelled far.

KHUDA BAKSH: There was no matter more important for the custodian of the faith, the leader of the faithful. It was clear since I left the shores Hindustan of that this matter can only be resolved by his most merciful Caliph, the Sultan Murad, the third.

MURAD III: Then speak clearly.

A pause.

KHUDA BAKSH: A new religion is being propounded in Hindustan, it is being called, Din – e – Ilahi… it, it… *(Khuda Baksh looks at the Minister)*

MINISTER: Speak without fear; and speak truthfully, our Sultan values the truthful.

KHUDA BAKSH: I cannot say it My Lord, my lips quiver, my voice shakes.

MURAD III: What is this nonsense. Are you aware of this Grand Vizier?!

MINISTER: The spy confided in me your Majesty, but this was far too important for me to convey to you, so I advised him to address his Majesty directly.

MURAD III: Then speak! Or by Allah, while I may not punish you for what you are about to say, but I shall have you slayed if you dither any longer.

KHUDA BAKSH: *(Rattling away)* Akbar has started propounding a new… religion. He is combining aspects of Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism – even those of the idol worshipping Hindus. He says people should investigate their religious arguments, instead of blindly following the religion in which they are were born and educated, because by doing so they are excluding themselves from the possibility of ascertaining the truth, which is the noblest aim of the human intellect.

MURAD III: Does he mean to say that the Holy Quran is not enough!!??

Silence. The silence reaches a crescendo. MURAD III rises instantly. Sword drawn.

MURAD III: Answer me! Not enough??!!

KHUDA BAKSH: He studies other books.

MURAD III: *(Furious)* Blasphemy!!!

KHUDA BAKSH: He listens to other faiths.

MURAD III: Heresy!!!

KHUDA BAKSH: He includes their wisdom.

MURAD III: Treason.

The sword gleams. The room tightens. MURAD III makes a proclamation; his bodyguard joins him. And they set off…

MURAD III: *Gustaqh–e–Rasool kee ek hi sazaa, sar tan se juda, sar tan se juda! Gustaqh–e– Rasool kee ek hi sazaa sar tan se juda, sar tan se juda!*

This Akbar is going to lose his head! He thinks the Caliph of Islam cannot reach him. Lead me to this apostate, Khuda Baksh! Your head will be crowned with the wealth of the world and this pig will experience suffering he cannot even imagine!!

The MINISTER and KHUDA BAKSH do not move.

KHUDA BAKSH: Sir, where is he off to?! shouldn't we tell him which Akbar we are talking about.

MURAD III stops in his tracks. Silence.

MURAD III: Which Akbar are you talking about?

Silence. KHUDA BAKSH keeps his head bowed. He doesn't say anything. The MINISTER speaks for him.

MINISTER: Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar, the Emperor of Hindustan.

MURAD III. Deflated. Sits down. There is a pause as he collects himself. Admonishes Khuda Baksh.

MURAD III: You fool! Why didn't you mention that you were talking about the Jahanpanah! – the great benevolent ruler the world seeks succour in, Alampanah! – the upholder of the entire world, Zill-e-ilaahi, the shadow of God upon this earth, your humble servant, a follower and keeper of the faith – Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar, the only emperor whose name and title are one – AKBAR the GREAT. And how dare you speak his name without the honorifics that must precede it. I could have your head for that you idiot! Get lost now!!

Khuda Baksh leaves

MINISTER: The Emperor of Hindustan.

Silence. Then—something shifts. MURAD III slowly sheathes the sword. A pause. Then, measured.

MURAD III: Hindustan is… different. They, er… They are our allies, aren't they?

MINISTER: In a way, yes.

MURAD III: What do you mean "in a way?" They are our allies because they do not get in the way! If Akbar wants, not a single spice or silk or fine cotton will reach us.

MINISTER: He is powerful, yes.

MURAD III: Powerful! You have no idea. Actually, you are the one who should have an idea – shouldn't you be advising me as my Grand Vizier!

MINISTER: Of course your Majesty's assessment is accurate, their armies… Their cavalry alone outnumbers our infantry! Their GDP is six times that of the Ottoman Empire!

MURAD III: Exactly! and this is the power that spy of yours was instigating us against; Imagine!

MINISTER: What are we to do?

MURAD III: We must follow the tenets of our faith, compassion, mercy, understanding… after all, it is Akbar The Great we are talking about, there must be a plan or move that we have not been able to grasp.

MINISTER: A wise and religiously sound decision oh great Sultan!

MURAD III: Can you imagine, a new religion; that Looks beyond Islam!! In its 900 years, not one has dared, and I don't think anyone ever will… he… we should look beyond such trivialities…

The Bodyguard is still. There is a prolonged silence.

MINISTER: *(Sighs)* When a Muslim has become the most powerful man in the world, the most powerful man in the world is no longer a Muslim…

MURAD III: Anyway, the moment has passed. Nothing can be done now. We had our chance. We had our moment; but it's too late now. We should have supported him; We… should have supported… Hemu!

BLACKOUT

Children of Chittagong

NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

Children of Chittagong is a work of historical fiction inspired by the events surrounding the Chittagong Armoury Raid of 1930 and the extraordinary young revolutionaries who participated in it. The uprising, its leaders and many of the events that followed are historical; the children and their families in this play are fictionalised characters, inspired by the lives, circumstances and stories of the young people who became part of the movement. They are imagined not as portraits of particular individuals, but as a way of entering the domestic, emotional and psychological worlds from which a generation of revolutionaries emerged.

This play would not have existed without Glenn T. Hayden. I owe him not only the title *Children of Chittagong*, but also a conversation that set the idea in motion. What began as a conversation about the extraordinary story of these young revolutionaries became, over time, this play.

I am deeply grateful to Shri Tapan Datta and the Surya Sen Bhavan for their extraordinary hospitality and generosity. The memoirs and material about the revolutionaries that they shared with me provided the historical bedrock on which the fictional world of this play was built. Their willingness to open both their doors and their archives made the past feel remarkably close.

I also owe a special debt to my friend Amit Bandhyopadhyay and to Anil Ghosh, whose tour of Chandannagar opened another door into the world from which this history emerged. Walking those streets, seeing those places and listening to the stories attached to them gave the imagination something that books alone cannot provide: a sense of place.

To all of them, my gratitude.

And finally, to the young men and women whose courage inspired this work: this play is an act of remembrance. I hope it brings them, if only for a little while, back into the rooms, streets and lives from which history took them away.

CHILDREN OF CHITTAGONG

A play inspired by the Chittagong Armoury Raid of 1930

The Structure

This play is a work of fiction inspired by the events surrounding the Chittagong Armoury Raid of April 1930 and the stories of the young revolutionaries who participated.

While the uprising and several historical figures are real, the characters of the children in this play are fictionalised composites inspired by the lives of the teenage participants associated with the movement. Their names in the play are *daak naams*— affectionate household names commonly used in Bengali families.

The five boys at the heart of the play are:

Shantu
Piku
Shimu
Bubai
Gora

These names are not meant to represent any single historical individual but rather to evoke the youth, intimacy, and domestic worlds from which many of the revolutionaries emerged.

The play is structured around memory, and the same actors move between generations. The actors portraying the parents also portray the boys in their youth, allowing the audience to witness how the memories of children continue to inhabit the bodies of those who survived them.

The historical figure Surya Sen (Masterda) appears in the play as a teacher and leader who guides the boys during the brief period of their rebellion.

Characters

Masterda (Surya Sen)
Teacher, organiser of the Chittagong uprising.

The Boys

Shantu
Piku
Shimu
Bubai
Gora

(These characters are portrayed by the actors who also play the parents)

The Parents

Shantu's Mother
Shantu's Father

Piku's Father

Shimu's Mother *(a widow)*

Bubai's Elder Sister
Bubai's Father

Gora's Mother
Gora's Father

Casting Structure

The play is performed by ten actors.

Eight actors portray the parents in the present timeline. Those same actors transform into the boys during the remembered past.

The actors also function as chorus singers and narrators of historical moments, moving between roles as memory and history shift.

Total Actors: 10
Total Characters Portrayed: 14

Chorus

The actors will be singing strains of popular Rabindrasangeet and Nazrul-Geeti. It is recommended that they be joined by a chorus and a team of live musicians.

Scene One – The Empty Rooms

The stage is divided into five triangular spaces, radiating outward from a central point like five slices of a circle, each one a fragment of a different household.

It is early evening. It has been a month or so since the Chittagong raids and the battle of Jalalabad. Some of the boys have been killed. Some are missing. Some are hiding.

Shantu's room occupies one slice of the stage. It bears the marks of a middle-class, educated household, orderly but modest. A small wooden desk stands near a window frame. Books are stacked carefully: school texts, a grammar book, perhaps a volume of Bankim or Tagore. Two narrow beds share the space, their distance from each other revealing that the room was meant to be shared. One bed is neatly made; the other remains untouched, its blanket folded in the same careful way every day. Shantu once shared this room with his elder brother, who died in the raid. The parents are schoolteachers or scholars of modest means.

Shantu is missing/underground.

Next to it is **Piku's room**, smaller, warmer, almost crowded with the marks of affection. Piku is his father's only child, and the room reflects this. His father is an artisan, perhaps a carpenter or metalworker. A low workbench stands against one wall with tools laid out carefully—chisels, files, a hammer polished by use. Piku's sleeping space is simple but intensely personal: a rolled mattress, a pillow embroidered by his mother. The room contains small objects saved from daily life—wood shavings, a toy carved imperfectly by a father's hand, a tin plate placed neatly beside the bed. Everything here suggests a household in which one child received the full measure of attention and hope.

Piku has been killed at Jalalabad.

The third space is different from the others. It does not belong to the same town or class. This is **Shimu's room**, though "room" may be too generous a word. Shimu came from a poor family in another district and

arrived in Chittagong to join Masterda. He lived in a small outhouse room attached to a larger colonial bungalow. The bungalow itself is not shown, only hinted at by the faint outline of a veranda railing that cuts across the background. The room is sparse: a charpoy, a metal trunk, a clay water pot, a thin blanket folded at one end.

Shimu is missing.

The fourth slice belongs to **Bubai**. His family lives in a lower middle-class household, cramped but dignified. Bubai is the only son among five sisters, and space is precious. His sleeping place is not a full room but a corner carved out of the family's shared living space. A mat lies on the floor beside a wooden trunk filled with folded saris. A string runs overhead where clothes have been hung to dry. A small shelf holds a few schoolbooks and a tin container of writing ink. Bubai's corner is a small territory claimed by the only boy in a house full of daughters.

Bubai has been killed in battle.

The final slice belongs to **Gora**, whose family stands slightly higher in the social order. His father is a government servant, a landlord with an honorary high post in the colonial administration. Gora has a room of his own. A study table with expensive stationery. A wooden chair sits beside it, upright and disciplined. A framed calendar hangs on the wall. He has made a wall hung temple for *Bharat Mata.* The room is tidy in the way households of senior quislings.

Gora has been captured and is being tortured.

The five spaces become visible simultaneously. Sounds of police raids – whistles, the thumping of boots, screams of beatings, loud violent searches where utensils are thrown about.

Slowly, parents begin to enter to strains of Rabindrasangeet about loss.

The first to enter is ***Shantu's mother****, followed slowly by* ***Shantu's father****. They step into their slice of the stage without looking at the other rooms. Shantu's mother moves first. She straightens something in the room, almost automatically, and then notices the second bed. Her hand lingers on its blanket. Shantu's father stands a little further back. His eyes move across the room methodically—as though searching for some clues as to what happened.*

Shantu's Father: Why have you made one bed and not the other? It is an *apshagun.*

Shantu's Mother: *(cold)* Which one? The bed that is made or the one that isn't?

Silence

Shantu's Mother: Did you get the fish… …and the prawns? We must, have them… at home, always. He can return any time.

Shantu's Father: Stop it! Stop it now, for God's sake. They needed mothering, not the smothering… which led to this.

Shantu's Mother: You! Are blaming - Me!?

Shantu's Father: Who else woman! You and that mother–in–law of yours, and that good for nothing you brought as dowry to Look after the children! Didn't they know what was going on?

Shantu's Mother: You knew. What did you do? "I will tell you what have to study." "I have decided you will be a lawyer." "I am getting your admission done." You know what led to this!

Shantu's Father: I only did what was best for them.

Shantu's Mother: No you only did what that *ingrez* boss of yours said would be the best for your children.

Shantu's Father: It would have been a life!

Shantu's Mother: Life! What life!?

They break down in each other's arms.

From the opposite side of the stage, ***Piku's father*** *enters alone. His movement is slower, heavier. He steps into Piku's room The tools on the workbench draw his attention. He picks one up, examines it, and replaces it carefully. His hand then moves to the mattress on the floor where Piku slept. For a moment he seems uncertain whether to sit or stand. Eventually he lowers himself slowly onto the*

edge of the space, his body bending inward. He picks up some wicker trays in his hands.

Piku's Father: Someone has to be taught, this concentric *Ailbana* technique Piku's Ma left us with, someone has to… to carry this forward. It cannot be allowed to die out with… with…

Pause. Overwhelmed. Regains control.

Piku's Father: …But who? Montu, no, he's a vagabond, so was Piku… *(laughs)*…but he is insensitive, should I teach Shyamal's son? But he has started working for that *ingrez*, he will just copy these designs on their machine made dress materials. Oh God! Why did we marry off Tupai and Pukai outside Chittagong!? This art must stay here… but why, it belongs to our daughters, more than our sons. But their children…? How will they breathe in the patterns of our hills and rivers into these…

Pause. Space for quiet lament.

Piku's Father: …Wait a minute! Why am I thinking only of my family, why do we think like this, me, my, mine; how can I think like this!! How can we continue to think like this, is this why they sacrificed themselves? My son! My son! My only son!

From upstage, almost tentatively, ***Shimu's mother*** *appears. She carries the air of someone who has travelled a long distance and still does not fully understand where she has arrived. She pauses at the edge of Shimu's narrow quarters, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings—the charpoy, the trunk, the thin blanket. Her hands hover over the objects without touching them, as though she feels she has entered a stranger's life. Gradually she kneels beside the charpoy and presses her hand to the bedding, trying to sense the presence of the son who once slept there.*

Shimu's Mother: *(wailing)* What a wonderful room the British Babu gave you to live in my son. There was no one to say anything to you. No Zamindar to drive you to *begaari*, no boys to taunt you for your poverty. Why the Babu

even arranged for these books and clothes for you. What was the need?! What was the need?! Now who will look after this helpless destitute widowed mother. My child! My child! My only child! Oh Bharat Mata! You have so many children, I had just one, did your hands not tremble while taking him from me. Tell me, tell me, I want to know… tell me…

Overwhelmed. Collapses.

From another entrance come Bubai's elder sister and father, together. Bubai's father is helped into a corner of the room by the elder sister. Her clothes are dishevelled, her spirit intact. He has been beaten. The broken ribs have led to internal bleeding. He is dying. His gaze moves from the mat on the floor to the shelf of schoolbooks. Both of them aware that Bubai had occupied a small portion of a space that belonged to his sisters and their sarees and their precious trinkets.

Bubai's Father: The saree, the saree, correct your saree.

Bubai's Sister: These sarees are for you baba. We have to keep your chest tightly bound…

Bubai's Father: Those brutes! When our boys had Sergent Farell's wife at their mercy, just see how well they treated her, and look what they have done to you, my child, my daughter… where… where are your sisters… where are they!!?

Bubai's Sister: They are safe, don't worry! That home will not be searched.

Bubai's Father: Hiding from me, eh? You think your father will give in to their torture.

Silence

Bubai's Father: Yes. I know what your silence says… we did, we all did, we gave in to their torture, but now… now your brother and the children of Chittagong have awakened us. We will…

He collapses.

Finally, ***Gora's parents*** *enter the last room together. Gora's father goes directly to the desk and studies the neatly arranged books and papers. Gora's mother walks around the room slowly, touching the back of the chair, adjusting the calendar on the wall, straightening objects that are already straight. Her actions are careful, deliberate, as though maintaining order might somehow restore the life that once filled the space. She moves to pick up a book the father had rearranged.*

Gora's Father: No! Let that be, don't touch any book. He should find the room exactly as he left it.

Gora's Mother: Only this one. I'll put it back. After I finish reading it.

Gora's Father: What book is it? *(taking the book)* "My Fight for Irish Freedom" by Dan Breen. You knew? *(looks at the calendar she was touching)* You knew!

One by one the parents begin to notice one another.

Shantu's parents move across the stage and notice Piku's father sitting alone. Shimu's mother rises slowly from the charpoy and looks across the stage toward the other rooms. Bubai's father is helped out from the corner of his family's space and pauses, Gora's father looks outward, haughtily.

The parents leave their individual spaces cautiously. When they finally come together, they stand in an uneven circle between the five rooms. Their bodies carry different emotions. Some stand rigid, as though trying to hold their composure. Others lean slightly toward the group, drawn by the need to share the burden of uncertainty. A few keep looking back toward their rooms, unable to fully detach themselves from the spaces where their children once lived. They speak.

Shantu's Mother: How is baba?

Bubai's Sister: He will not make it.

Piku's Father: So, he will be the first to meet them in heaven.

Silence

Shantu's Father: What is that brute Ahsanullah up to now?

Gora's Father: You are asking me?

Shantu's Father: You would know.

Gora's Father: Not any more, I have left their service. The case has to be fought.

As they begin to speak to one another, their movements grow more animated. Hands gesture toward the rooms behind them. Parents point toward objects that once seemed harmless: books, notebooks, tools, scraps of paper. Each tries to reconstruct the past few months through memory.

Shantu's Father: We should have kept track of what they were reading.

Piku's Father: We should have kept track of who they were meeting.

Gora's Father: We should have kept track of where they were going.

Bubai's Father: We should have kept track of why they had stopped sharing.

Silence

Shimu's Mother: I did. I used to know everything, I cannot read, so I made him read out whatever he was reading, in Bengali. My dutiful son; he would tell me where he was going, who he was meeting. But, how did it help? Once he had decided, without saying anything - he left.

Silence

Bubai's Sister: All excuses! Didn't we know what the drills were for. I ask you *Kaku;* What did you think was Shantu going to use his driving and wrestling skills for? His graduation in psychology? And *mesho*, do you expect me to believe that you thought that swimming in the river, when you could get him access to the club, would be better for his health! What about you Baba?

The emotions shift between disbelief, anger, pride, and fear.

Shantu's Mother: The way these British have tortured and enslaved the people; are they not responsible for these conditions? They heaped this misery upon our heads.

Piku's Father: Famine after famine after famine. They just want to extract everything from the land, and people willingly pay more for factory made.

Gora's Father: It is the *gaddars*, the Mir Jaffers and their clan – their excesses led us to this, where our boys were forced to rebel.

Shantu's Mother: But didn't we all eulogize Masterda and all the other martyrs? When Bagha Jatin met his death. When Kanailal was martyred. Jatin Das's funeral that had six lac mourners – how could we have celebrated all this and then not want our sons to be like them?!

Gora's Mother: And I am proud of that.

Shantu's Mother: So, they wanted us to be proud of them?

Silence

Shimu's Mother: When someone experiences injustice, he rebels, but when he knows justice will never be found, he goes to war.

Shantu's Father: The schools are to blame…

Silence

Bubai's Sister: …to thank! How can a master teach about the history of Garibaldi and Bismark and not expect the youth to not look around and notice what shape their own country is in?

Shantu's Father: No, I was speaking about allowing those revolutionaries a free entry to all schools.

Gora's Mother: They are all local boys *dada*, they all had entry into our homes, how could anyone stop them from entering the schools and grounds where they had studied.

Piku's Father: That Malang Baba is to blame. How can you awaken a nation; incite passions; and then tell people; no! blackmail people to stop a revolution midway, when

the youth are all charged up… their zeal and energy would have had to have found an outlet!

Bubai's Sister: Since we are at it; let's find some fault with Masterda as well.

Silence. The dying Bubai's Father speaks.

Bubai's Father: Just as the moon has marks and patches, so will everyone else. But not Masterda, he is the sun. He has already sacrificed his family, he does not care for his life, when they were about to capture him in '24… he had killed himself, the Mother kept him alive.

Silence

Gora's Father: Everything is, somewhere… a reason. There are so many things that we can discover and discuss; on hindsight, but it would have been better if we had known.

The parents' actions convey their helplessness; and ignorance. The movements become increasingly restless. They step away from the group and return again, drawn back toward the rooms and then toward one another. Hands rise in questioning gestures. Heads shake in confusion. Gradually the energy begins to ebb. Gradually, their movements slow down as exhaustion replaces urgency. They return to their rooms. Lights fade. Then, with physical alterations completed, from within the five rooms, the figures of the boys begin to emerge again, their movements light and alive. Time has shifted.

The play moves quietly into the past.

Scene Two – The Children of Chittagong

The entire scene is imagined as a contemporary vox – pop or podcast with the interviewer already having asked what could be construed as different versions of the same question – what do they want to be when they grow up, how do they see the future, what do they wish to become etcetera.

The five rooms have the same props, but they have been rearranged in the transition so that the rooms look occupied.

Shantu's room, it is evening. Study time. He is sitting on the chair speaking.

Shantu: Baba wants me to be a lawyer. Ma wants me to stay at home. So, the challenge is how be a lawyer, while staying at home. To be a successful lawyer, I will need to get a degree from either Calcutta or abroad. Baba says he will manage a recommendation out of his boss, who went to Cambridge, it seems. That really bothers Ma, she is worried I will go there and end up losing my religion and marrying a foreigner. Then the melodrama starts, every meal, after such a career discussion becomes a headache. And not just every meal, Ma starts hovering around Dada and me, all the time. She knows that we are not interested in any of this, maybe that is why she has started going along with Baba. And he just keeps giving his second hand speech about Cambridge. Cambridge. Cambridge! How will I ever achieve anything like this?

Shimu is cleaning his small hovel while speaking.

Shimu: You should hear my mother."I have only one saree, that too, torn. Is this how you want to keep your mother. You have no idea, your mother's *Thakurbaadi* was so well off. My marriage to your profligate father ruined everything. He blew up all the money he made from his farms on that

naachnewaali from Calcutta. Promise me Shimu, promise your old, ailing, lonely and destitute mother, that you will study diligently. The opportunity and the great blessing the *bara sahib* has bestowed upon you by keeping you in his servant quarter, and supporting you with a scholarship; you will not let that go to waste. What can a son do after such emotional blackmail. I left – and joined, Masterda!

Gora: I cannot believe it. I don't want to believe it. But, Naren *Kaku* never lies. Baba is the one who mediates in the British torture chambers!? He gives the inducements! He manages the funds for the traitors and in return, he has access to British society and clubs. The Raj's faithful servant; when *Kaku* confronted him, he said, he was being the Robin Hood and through this approach he saves more revolutionaries and keeps the flame alive. If my friends come to know…

Piku is working on creating a handicraft item. He is engrossed in his work, but shares his story.

Piku: I don't I will be able to escape the work my caste has to do even if I get educated. I mean, Baba, wants me to study, at least till intermediate, but I think it's so that the white and brown Sahibs can't cheat me of my earnings. He doesn't want me to look for a job or something; which again is a defence mechanism I think. He is sure no one will give me a job, at least not in places where the *Kulins* or *Kayasthas* or the *Boddis* work. I keep telling him that is not the case, at the Sadarghat Club, no one bothers; and it's not as if they know such things but they don't matter, it's as if they are not bothered at all! Who has the time.

Bubai: *(angered by the question)*What kind of stupid question is that! What do I want to become!? I am the seventh child of a woman who died giving me birth because we had only girls before me and my father wanted a boy! At one end, our society has decayed to this level and at the other

end the British continue to destroy and pillage my motherland and divide Bengal into Hindu – Muslim! And you expect me to plan my career!!

The five boys who began the scene alone in their separate worlds march out of their rooms and stand downstage. The look a cohesive unit, held together by an unspoken purpose. Behind them, the rooms remain.

BLACKOUT

Scene 3 – The Adventures of the Children of Chittagong

The entire scene is a medley of the adventures in the lives of the five representative children of Chittagong. Their adventures before they joined the group. Their life after they joined and the preparation for the raid.

The medley is to be presented as a few months of wonder, joy and friendship a la the adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. The boys will talk, laugh, argue, fight, make up, discuss, chat, sing – all while they walk, swim, dance, exercise, practice drills, wrestle, work – painting, writing, producing weapons and bombs, or just planning the revolution.

Scene 3a

The world seen on stage changes overnight; it is full of electric excitement – Masterda has arrived! With Master-da had come the heavily bearded Ambika Charan Chakraborty; dark skinned Nirmal Sen with his unusual height, who peered benignly down at everyone; muscleman man Ananta Lal Singh; the moustached Ganesh Ghosh; and Charu Bikash Dutt who walked with a limp.

The boys shake off the lethargy of the previous scene and animatedly engage in discussing the arrival of their heroes; like children of today talk about their heroes and exchange cards, the children of Chittagong are gathered around a school bench talking about what has happened.

Shantu: Masterda has not come alone. Ambikada, Nirmal Da, Charu Bikash Dutt, Ganesh Da; and… *(pauses for effect)*

Gora: And who else?

Shantu: The mighty Ananta Lal Singh!

Gora: What! They are all here! Together, in Chittagong. They must be planning something big!!

Bubai: Baah!! I don't believe it. Who told you?!

Shantu: Dada! My dada is personally involved with hosting them in Chittagong. Why? Do you doubt my dada now!! Just you wait till I tell him.

Bubai: *(flustered)* No… I didn't mean it like that, I am sure if dada has said so, then it must be so.

Silence

Bubai: **…**Err… can we meet them, I mean even, err… see them, from a distance, I mean…

Shantu: *(Self-important)* Dada has said he will introduce me first, then we will decide which members of the class can meet

them, after all, the *biplobis* can't just trust anyone, isn't it?

Gora: Is it true, what they say about Ananta Lal Singh, that he is extremely handsome and well-built and has a mop of curly hair that makes him very attractive.

Shantu: I will meet him and tell you, but dada tells me he keeps his hair short and he is not that good looking, he is in fact quite rugged, and very lean, which is what all fighters have to be, but then, how will you know…

Just then Piku and Shimu, come running in.

Piku: *(breathing hard)* What are you fools doing here!? Ananta Lal Singh – our Anantada has just barged into the classroom and is giving a speech. The master isn't able to say anything to him. *Ae*, what are you waiting for… C'mon, c'mon!!

They run away into the wings; to music and return soon to continue their discussion around the bench.

Bubai: *Ki re!* Anantada is nothing like you said; in fact he looks exactly how Gora described him – so who's the fibber in your family; you or your precious dada!? *(laughs)*

Shantu: *(angry)* Don't you dare talk about my dada…

The others calm him down.

Shimu: Oof! Let it be, we should be happy we got to hear Anantada speak, now I just want to see Masterda…

Piku: Hey! What are you saying! You can't see Masterda, nobody can 'see' Masterda, when he wants to see someone, he sees them – permanently!

Laughter.

Gora: So is it all true!? That he cannot be caught, that he can cheat death itself…

Shantu: *Arre* what sort of revolutionary will you become? Questioning everything!? You should have faith!

Piku: Absolutely! In the 1924 raid, even when he was surrounded by hundreds of policemen, and they were firing bullets from all corners, he didn't wince once!

Shimu: He consumed cyanide, so that the police won't be able to catch him alive and even that couldn't kill him!

Piku: But that happened because the cyanide was adulterated, isn't it!

Shantu: Which is why this colonial terror must end, even the cyanide they sell in India is spurious, imagine the quality of everything else! *Ae*, what happened Bubai!?

Bubai: I am still thinking of what Anantada said to us – "An impotent lot. That's what you are. What will their education do for you? You were paralysed since the day you drew your first breath!"

Silence

Gora: It is food for thought isn't it? We are doing nothing, and it seems even Masterda's wife is fighting. Do you know? She is the silent partner. She once scaled the walls of Chittagong jail just to carry a message for Masterda.

Bubai: No. He has left her, he only serves the nation.

Piku: But when she fell ill, he did nothing but take care of her for a month he said it was his duty, and a revolutionary who cannot do his duty, can do nothing for the nation.

Silence. They are thinking about Masterda.

Scene 3b

The presence of senior revolutionaries starts influencing the young boys. An intimate conversation between Bubai and Gora as they are walking around the stage.

Bubai: Die we all will, Gora. Death is the one certainty that lies ahead of each one of us. But can we give a new meaning to that death? Burn away the falsehoods we have believed in with heart and soul. In death let your life find a new meaning. Remember; no one is going to give you credit for the things that your father has achieved. You will be remembered only for the work that you have done.

Gora: What achievements of that traitor will I ever want to take credit for?! He is part of the system that has tortured my nation and its people. I am ashamed that such a person…

Bubai: Say no more Gora! How dare you speak about your father like this! Don't forget that it is the education 'he' has given you that has filled your mind and heart with the truth! Perhaps, if he had been so fortunate…

Gora: But, now that he knows, now that he is aware, what is he doing?

Bubai: He is not answerable to you Gora. *(pause)* This chant of Bande Mataram that we shout from the top of voices and the bottom of our heart, wasn't this penned by an Indian who was a magistrate of the British *Samrajya*? Will you speak of Bankim Chandra in this manner!

Scene 3c

The boys share the stories of their recruitment. The boys form a circle and one boys walks up to the centre and enacts it.

Bubai: I was told to deliver a letter. So, there I was, with a letter in my hand, waiting at the entrance to *Kabtipada* village, looking like a lost fool.

Piku: That must have come naturally…

Bubai: Ha… very funny! Yes, coming back to the story, I was waiting for one Nobeen Babu when the local constable comes and asks me what I am doing there?

Shimu: Oh God! Then, what did you tell him?

Bubai: The trick is to not tell such bumpkins anything. I just shouted at him "a Babu from the city is waiting to meet the famous barrister Nobeen Babu who will be visiting his *mashima* in a few minutes time, and you are questioning him!?"

Shimu: And he believed you?

Bubai: It frightened him enough to not bother me for the whole day, but by the time dusk came, some passersby must have gotten suspicious, and informed the constable.

Piku: Why didn't you run away?

Bubai: And leave my mission unfinished? No way!!

Shantu: He found refuge in the home of a widowed Muslim woman. She hid him in her home, and didn't even let her mother-in-law know that she was hiding a revolutionary.

Piku: What a risk she took! She would have arrested and probably stoned to death by her own community!

Bubai: I was sure, they wouldn't raid a Muslim home… though… there was a knock on the door at night but the woman turned away whoever was at the door… anyways, at dawn, I was back at the entrance to the village, to continue my vigil; this time I stayed hidden though.

Shimu: Did this Nobeen Babu turn up then?

Silence

Shantu: There was no Nobeen Babu! Nirmalda just wanted to check if he could survive alone… imagine, instead of some Nobeen Babu, Nirmalda landed up and surprised Bubai!

Laughter

Shantu: Actually the plan was to make him wait a day longer, but his gang of sisters had gotten so nosy that Ganeshda advised Nirmalda to get him back a day earlier.

More laughter.

Piku: OK - now I want to tell Gora's story.

Gora: Hey! Not fair, you just tell your story and I will tell mine.

Piku: There's nothing exciting about my story – I was told to keep following Krishnada and listen to him… so for three months… everyday; he would take me on these long walks and keep reciting the *kobi's* poems and talk about the history of our country, and that was it, one fine day he said I have to work for the cause, and I could refuse if I wanted to- refuse after tolerating all those endless talk sessions- no way!

I have to see some action, no? And that's it- happy? Everyone? Now let's turn to Gora's story; which is… 'not fair.'

Bubai: *(chuckling)* Yes, yes, I remember now.

Gora: You too Bubai!

Bubai: Sorry, but he's right – it was very 'unfair' *(laughs again)*

Shantu and Piku join the laughter. Shimu is curious.

Shimu: What is it? Tell us what happened?

Gora: *(sportingly)* OK! Tell it the way you want it, I am happy I don't have to enact it again and give you all the opportunity to laugh at me again!

Piku: So Gora goes to the Congress office, but there's no one there, so he decides to wait… then Ambikada appears and starts screaming at the top of his voice – "why hasn't the office been cleaned yet!?" and "and what are you doing sitting there doing nothing lazybones! Is this the time to come??!!"

Shimu: Ambikada though Gora was the cleaning guy?!

Piku: Wait… so Gora starts to clean up the place, he picks up a broom… *(mimics)* …now or much loved and pampered *khokha* hadn't done a day's work in his entire life… this is how he held the broom… *(laughter)* Somehow, he managed it, but then it was time to wipe the floor; and there was Gora, tumbling and groaning…

(laughter)

Gora: C'mon… it wasn't that bad!

Shantu: It was actually worse…

Bubai: Don't stop… tell, tell…

Shantu: Yes, while wiping the floor Gora didn't know whether to squat or to bend… so there was this intermediate pose… I think he invented one; we should call it to 'squ-end'

More good humoured laughter follows.

Shimu: All this because Ambikada mistook him for the cleaning guy?

Bubai: That's the beauty of it all! Ambikada knew all along who he was and why he had come to the Congress office?!

Shimu: It was a test?

Piku: Everything is a test.

Shantu: But Gora, kept returning day after day, he never once answered back… …and Ambikada soon realised he had found his revolutionary.

The mood changes. Gora is beaming. Everyone applauds.

Shimu: So nobody was recruited by Masterda directly?

Shantu: I was.

Chorus of voices: What! Masterda himself! No! it can't be…

Bubai: Another of his tall tales…

Shantu: I mean, I met him very early, and 'directly,' there was no test or meeting as such… There was this class debate on Dadabhai Naoroji's book, and I was explaining the ill effects of the British Raj… as soon as it got over, dada asked me to go over to the sports room…

Piku: …and…

A pregnant silence.

Shantu: Masterda was there… in flesh and blood.

Oohs and aahs from the others. They are hooked to the story.

Bubai: What was it like, I mean, meeting him for the first time…

Shantu: Well, he wasn't the Superman I had imagined… but those eyes, I felt he could see through everything!

Shimu: That he could.

Piku: Meaning?

Silence

Piku: Ya, go on Shimu.

Shimu: I'm sure you remember how…

Silence

Bubai: You are a *biplobi* – never hesitate!

Shimu: You remember how I used to follow you around. Many of the boys have noticed, and a couple of you have even told me they saw me… around school or near the field or the Sadarghat club… well, one day Masterda noticed me… and asked me to come to office and watch a meeting… after everyone left, he told me to eat a bit before leaving… so I did… he served me himself… as I was eating, he said… *(pause)* Shimu… remember all that glitters is not gold. A costume does not make a man out of anyone… remember Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, he made a name for himself not because of what he wore…

Silence. The boys rise, they understand how Shimu must have felt and stand with him… he continues.

Shimu: The way you spoke, looked, dressed, how you could turn to English just like that and then revert to such polished Bangla in the blink of an eye… I… I could never work up the courage to even speak to you…

They come together. Clasp hands as brothers.

Piku: By the way, which one was so stylish… this *laatsaab* Gora, or this stuttering Shantu or perhaps this 'always harried' by his *didis'*- Bubai! No wait… I think I know who you are talking about…

Scene 3d

Bubai, Shimu and Gora are gathered together as a tea stall. Piku comes running in with some news.

Piku: Did you hear, Pundit-da caught Shantu smoking!!

Shimu: Where? When?

Bubai: This is very bad; Masterda sees personal weakness as the biggest form of cowardice.

Piku: Fortunately, the news hasn't reached him… and hey, it must stay between us please… Ganeshda and Anantada are handling it themselves. *(sniggers)*

Bubai: There's something you aren't telling us…

Piku: They played the family card.

Shimu: What does that mean?

Bubai: His Dada is his hero, and his uncle is supposed to be this big undercover revolutionary that no one knows about.

Piku: So they gave back all that he keeps on telling everyone – "physical strength and mental strength must go hand in hand,"… and they said "Think?"

Bubai: *(joins the laughter)*Oh dear! Our beloved intellectual Shantu… family honour and that brain… all sacrificed at the altar of a puff of tobacco.

Piku: That's what they told him - "A son of such a family needs to think?" And he was to give his word that he would never do something like that again… you should have seen his face when they asked him, "does your dada know? And your *kaku*?"

Shimu: Poor Shantu. We should support him… I think… so what did he do? He must have been mortified, I am sure

it was just an error of judgement and such a fine soldier… I am sure he will never do something like this again.

Piku: That's the fun part…

Bubai: So this wasn't the fun part… *(laughs)*

Piku: Our great thinker, rather than begging forgiveness or renewing his vows, had a 'thought'- that he shared with Pundit-da. He said, "What if I give my word and then discover myself incapable of quitting?" They are still laughing over it at the club!

Silence. Everyone bursts into laughter.

Scene 3e

Gora is addressing the audience. The audience is imagined as a classroom of younger students. Gora is showing off.

Gora: The Government of India Act of 1919 created a system called Dyarchy which was fundamentally flawed because it created an arbitrary administrative division that ran contrary to the fundamental premise of the act that promised to pave the way for Indian self- governance by limiting control over finances and bureaucracy, which is why the Indian National Congress rejected the act as inadequate while endorsing Bal Gangadhar Tilak's comment that the reforms were a sunless dawn prompting Annie Besant to call them unworthy of England to offer and India to accept, but the opposition was superfluous as the real British intention was revealed since the Act was accompanied almost simultaneously by the Rowlatt Act of 1919, which authorised the government to imprison any person without trial, passed despite unanimous opposition from every Indian member of the Central Legislative Council. This gross…

Half way through his speech the other boys have silently crept up behind him and are mimicking him and sniggering. He stops midway and goes quiet as he notices them.

Piku: *Ei* Gora! What are you doing here? Bothering these class VI students…

Bubai: Yes, Ganeshda is looking for you, why haven't you gone for your driving lessons today?! Your job will be to drive, no… why are you practicing these speeches and all?!

An embarrassed Gora walks off to guffaws. The boys gesticulate to the class to go back to their studies, walk off as well.

Fade out

Scene 3f

The stage is bare, but for the empty rooms that remain in the shadows. A loud blast is heard. Gora rushes in. Distraught.

Gora: *Aee* Shantu. Shimu. Bubai. Piku. Where are you?? Hurry… there's been an accident, Krishnada had been wounded in an explosion while making bombs…

The other boys rush onto the stage.

Gora: *(continues)*Shimu. Shantu. Hurry, come with me, we have been assigned the task of getting him medical help and then taking him into hiding… …and, Piku. Bubai. You… you… have to take over the lab, what are you all looking at me like that for???

Everyone is stunned. Silence. The reality of the violence that they have been 'preparing' to be a part of has just driven home.

Shimu: What are we to do?

Shantu: What are we to do?!! Why, we will take Krishnada to the hospital… no; no… no… that's not the procedure, we have to take all wounded to Dr. Jagat only, but… but…

Shimu: Are you sure it's our job?!

Gora: Yes, I have to get my car and drive. Nirmal da's orders.

Shantu: Should I tell dada? Ma had said we both have to reach home in time, Mashi is arriving from…

Gora: Are you crazy!!!???

Shantu: Yes, yes… sorry, I just, I mean…

Bubai: I know… we all feel the same way, but this is what we have been training for, right… and Masterda has shown faith in us by giving us these tasks, we have to live up to his trust, right… isn't it… we have to…

Pumps up everyone. They regain their composure.

Piku: Yes. Yes. And we will head to the lab… *(pause)* Any specific instructions for us?

Gora: Let me think… wait… don't rush me!!*(pause)* Yes, Piku- you will do the mixing; Nirmalda trusts your craftsmanship, and Bubai he was telling me Bubai has to prove worthy of being the Chemistry topper of his class… go now… Master-da and Ambika-da…

They are about to leave, when Shantu catches Bubai by the collar.

Shantu: You be careful. All right. You will keep in mind that you are working with extremely volatile acids – OK!?

They look at each other. Hug. Shout Vande Mataram. Disperse.

Scene 3g

Fade in

The boys appear as a chorus. Things are more serious now. The tone and manner of their speech is like a pledge. They narrate what the daily routine for a revolutionary should be.

The boys: Leave your bed by 5 a.m. Sit outside and contemplate on the vastness of the universe. Give up daydreaming and fickleness. Concentrate 100 per cent on every task no matter how simple it may be. Finish every task in the amount of time allotted. Success will come to him who aims high and follows the right path. Spend the day in preparing your mind. Criticize yourself every morning. Good behaviour, good principles, good intentions – if these are lacking, you will become unhappy. Give up prejudice. Remain alert always. Use your commonsense. Give women the kind of respect you will give your mother. Never share your bed with anybody. Read the Gita daily. Get rid of fear, anger and worries. Stay away from women and girls until you are certain that you cannot fall prey to their charms. Womankind for us can only be viewed as, the divine mother. Tea, tobacco, stay away from them as well. Do you know what these self-sacrifices are? They are your strengths. Invest your time and your knowledge in them.

Fade out

Scene 3h

A choreographed sequence set to martial music where the boys are going through drills, wrestling. Boxing. Shooting guns. The song and martial beats last for six to seven minutes and then, stop abruptly. The boys are panting. Sweating profusely from the extreme physical performance on stage over the past few minutes. Each makes an announcement.

Shantu: Subhendu was stabbed last night.

Shimu: At the Congress office, by goons hired by some faction… not everyone is fighting for freedom you see, many are fighting for the right to replace the British.

Bubai: We have to practice fighting with knives.

Piku: When the time comes, we will have to look at the enemy in the eye and stab him and watch the warm blood spilling over our hands…

Gora: …and pull out the knife, after giving it a twist so that his intestines tumble out and he dies a painful death.

Fade out

Scene 3i

Fade in

A table lies Centre stage. Pulled out from one of the rooms. The boys are gathered around. They are sharing what money they have been able to collect to contribute for the equipment and material which will need to be purchased for the raid.

The banter of the earlier sequences in this scene has returned, the innocence has not.

Bubai: Here's my 500 rupees…

Shantu: You had stolen 1000 hadn't you?

Bubai: I stole from the money baba had set aside for *chhot-di's* wedding, Masterda told me to return it.

Piku: From your sister's wedding corpus?! What were you thinking!? Didn't you foresee this would happen?

Shantu: …and why return only half?

Bubai: She has enough sarees and all, I didn't want the feast to be compromised.

Pause. Slight laughter as the others get it.

Piku: Here's my 200 rupees…

Shantu: …baba knows about it?

Piku: Yes.

Shantu: And he let you take it?

Piku: Well, he knows that the trader we sold our creations to, has run off with the money to… er… Hyderabad…

Shantu: …and what if he decides to go after him?

Piku: I'll tell him it must have been the other Hyderabad.

Bubai: Where's Shimu?

Shantu: He got his mother's jewellery. Masterda asked him if he had left anything behind to which he said no, so, Masterda told him to return it as well, he said "we will not leave our mother's bare."

Piku: …and what about Gora?

Shantu: Gora was getting his father's rifle as his contribution, but…

Piku: But what?

Shantu: His uncle reported it stolen.

Bubai: So he's in jail?

Shantu: At home.

Piku: Same thing.

Scene 3j

Shantu and Bubai. It is dusk. Darkness around the stage and the two boys under diffused light. A long silence before anyone speaks.

Shantu: Dada doesn't want me to be part of the raid…

Bubai: …why does that surprise you?

Shantu: We have taken the same vow, haven't we?

Bubai: He is… he's just protecting you.

Shantu: He is just protecting my mother.

They don't speak. A long silence. Slow, very slow fade.

Scene 3k

Fade in to a chirpy brightly lit stage. The only time in the play it will be lit with such warmth and brightness and happiness. The boys are out on a picnic a few days before the raid. One of them is reading another is distributing tea from a thermos, two of them gathering leaves etc to light a small fire to prepare food. Some animated conversation, a game of ludo. Rabindrasangeet plays in the set up to the scene and continues throughout- themes of nature, innocence and love.

Bubai: Today, we shall celebrate.

Shantu: With *bon-bhojon* – a feast in the woods. What a perfect day for a picnic. *Ei* Piku, sing *na*…

Piku, then Shimu followed by all the boys join the song that has been going on in the background. The song ends, moving them to tears.

Shimu: Masterda says "Love of poetry will not kill the revolution, the poet is inextricably entwined with our lives."

The music continues. Languidly, they check the clay pot in the centre in which the food was being cooked.

The boys eat. The entire meal is enacted. Set to continuing Rabindrasangeet. Slowly. A stack of enormous and sturdy lotus leaves are washed and cleaned. They are kept to a side, carefully. The boys go up and grab a pair each.

One is kept as a seat and the other the platter. The food is served. Each boy serves the other. Great care is taken to ensure the portions are equal.

The rice is served first. A sticky, smoky smell fills the auditorium. The bottom layer of the rice having been rescued just in time. Over it generous helpings of a steaming carp and vegetable stew (maachher jhol). A squeeze of lemon juice is added to every plate and shiny green chillies placed by the side.

They eat to music. The music fades, lights fade, the boys go to sleep.

Scene 4 – Their Masterda's Heart

Shouts, wails, screams cut through the darkness. The aftermath of the raid. The British exacting vengeance on Chittagong.

Fade in

The five rooms, but they are no longer intact. Beds lie disturbed, books sit out of place, objects have been handled too often and returned without care. The order of the earlier world has given way to something unsettled.

The parents appear and start putting things in order. The beds are made; the books and cupboards are rearranged. The families of the children are expecting a visitor.

Masterda enters quietly. He walks past every room. There is no announcement, no shift in light to mark his arrival. He simply steps into the space. The parents sense him before they turn. One by one, they do. Their gaze settles on him not with shock, but with recognition.

Shantu's parents greet him. His mother gets him a glass of water. He doesn't take it. Piku's father, gets a stool for him to sit. He refuses. Gora's parents walk up to him. They stare at each other. Bubai's elder sister notices Masterda, with deep devotion, she walks up to him and touches his feet.

Shimu's mother has scraped together some muri for Masterda to eat. She places it in his hands, gestures for him to eat. Then with a deep roar, she breaks down in wails and tears for her dead child. The others hold her. They are all together in their grief.

A ring forms around Masterda, some sitting, some standing. Shimu's mother, half swooning, supported by Bubai's sister. Shantu and Gora's mother clutching hands.

Piku's father on his haunches and Gora and Shantu's fathers sitting on a chair and occasionally pacing around. Masterda stands still.

Shantu's Father: *(hesitant)*Did 'we' miss out on something, at the planning stage?

Piku's Father: Or perhaps, there was something, you didn't plan for.

Silence

Masterda: No. We had been working with this date in mind for two years. It had to be that date, that day; Good Friday, the 18th of April, just like the soldiers of the Easter Revolution.

Gora's Mother: Such young children, Oh *Maago*, they must have been scared. Forgive us Masterda, if any of our children showed even the slightest fear.

She breaks down. Gora's mother supports her. Holds her.

Gora's Father: How did you fight fear.

Masterda: There was no fear. This is what we were training for. Surprise was complete. It went like clockwork. The British were in there homes, the soldiers were sleeping. We scared them away, All objectives were achieved, immediately. We were all together, that is all that mattered; and when we raised the flag of Independent India in the precincts of the very armoury where they kept weapons used to intimidate and subjugate us, we were free. We had shown the world and all Indians…

Gora's Father: *(interrupts)*And that was the plan? to surprise the British, to shock the nation…

Masterda: …the children were to return, to their homes. The British humbled, a nation emboldened.

Shimu's Mother: Then where are they? Why have they not returned?

Shantu's Father: Yes. If that was all to it; what were the leaflets for. There were dozens of children, who had leaflets to distribute, there were centres that people had to reach to collect weapons.

Gora's Father: It doesn't appear the raid was meant to just demonstrate, there was something else planned.

Masterda: What would I have planned? Death to the children. Then why would we not have used the weapons to continue the fight? We had, after all, taken control of the armoury. It was our job to continue the fight, and we are, are we not.

Bubai's Sister: *(Determined. Stoic)*Yes Masterda, we are, We know, the British Seargent who searched our home, and kicked *baba* to death. The *daroga* who has tortured *mesho (pointing to Shantu's father)* or the same court where Gora's baba served and who threw him out with such disdain; we know.

Piku's Father: They will be avenged. I know who will do it, Shantu and Shimu, they are…

Shimu's mother. Startled. Bubai's sister stops talking. Piku's father has identified Piku's body as Shimu's – he is alive.

Piku's Father: *(correcting himself)*I meant my son, Piku. He will avenge our torture.

Masterda: Bharat Mata will be avenged. But, it will not be vengeance. It will be justice.

Shantu's Mother: *(faintly)* Why did Bharat Mata take both my sons? Could she not have left one for me?

Silence

Shimu's Mother: *(faintly)* Why did Bharat Mata take my only son?

Silence

Piku's Father: *(faintly)* Why did Bharat Mata take my only child?

Silence

Masterda: There will always be a greater loss. It is as Dumas wrote, what could I do? They would not be separated, they were together till the end.

Shantu's Father: Then how did they get caught, who betrayed them? The Muslim villagers, Swadeshi Hindu boys in their midst? They would have gone crying to the darogas of their community.

Gora's Father: *(reconciliatory)* Even if it was not that, they can be easily misled. All it takes is an authority figure to misguide them. They are poor, and desperate. Like all poor people, why should they be bothered about replacing once rich master with another.

Masterda: Stop it! You must not say such things. This is how they divide us. This is how whoever wants to rule us, will always divide us.

Shantu's Father: So we blame it on fate?

Before Masterda can reply, Shimu's mother, who has remained apart, watching, steps forward. She looks at Masterda with great sadness, bewilderment rather than accusation.

Shimu's Mother: Did they eat? You were fighting for so many days? Did they eat. You gave them food?

Masterda: Yes. We had supplies. It was all planned. Why do you think we beat the British.

She thanks the heavens and blesses Masterda. He winces and avoids her aashirwaad, when Piku's father accosts him from behind.

Piku's Father: We understand why you did it, we have no qualms. In fact, it is an honour, no greater fortune.

Masterda: *(cautious)* What?

Piku's Father: You and the other elders, you were there no? You did the last rites for them, their souls would have found *mukti*, to be cremated by their Masterda, it does not matter if they are no more; every Hindu is not so fortunate, as to meet the funeral pyre lit by their *devta*.

Masterda is looking around at each family member. They are staring at him. They surround him slowly. Masterda almost breaks down under their searing gaze. But, he manages to regain his composure before they can realise.

Fade out

Scene 5 – What Really Happened

This scene is a whirlwind enactment of the raid. The rooms are in darkness. They serve as battlements. Nooks and crannies for the raiders to hide and have their conversations. The action unfolds with the five children and Masterda. They rush about. Fight. Hide. Talk. Scatter. Regroup. This is repeated throughout this battle scene. Once the raid ends, they disperse to an area of the stage identified as the Jalalabad Hill for the final battle. The Children of Chittagong's last stand in the raid. The boys are not identified by name. Only Masterda is identified. Every other boy is a soldier of the rebellion.

Fade in to Masterda lying on a couch humming a song, when a boy bursts in on him.

Masterda: What happened? Any news?

Boy: I want to talk.

Masterda: Talk.

Boy: About something very serious.

Masterda: I am sure.

Boy: I want to discuss my feelings.

Masterda*(Attentive)*

Boy: Masterda, why are we never ready? Why is everything not perfectly aligned? Are we not ready? OR Are we not ready?

Masterda: For?

Boy: For our last day upon this earth! Or is this just an excuse to keep on living. To keep enjoying our youth. To keep celebrating our runs and drills and swims and political discussions.

Silence. A moment of understanding. Alignment.

Masterda: Your words have made me do a bit of soul searching. The delays are due to a subconscious desire to live. Let us fix the date and delay no more.

A flurry of activity as the other boys come and surround Masterda. They carry all the weapons and documents and material needed for the raid. From clothes to canteens of water. Handmade bombs and maps and files.

Masterda: The hour has come for the ultimate self – sacrifice, for the ultimate surrender. Think it through, from all angles, and if you find an iota of doubt, it is better you go back. Remember, once we start, everything will be over soon, then… then… how do I explain it, our work will be done, We will never know what the outcome was. Our life so sweet… and to donate it for one's country… even sweeter. Remember, we are not here to "do or die," we are here to; Do and Die.

Boy 1: What should be the date? When do we attack, Masterda?

Boy 2: The 17th of April? What do you all think?

Masterda: What day is it?

Boy 3: Thursday.

Masterda: No. Since childhood, nothing has gone right for me on a Thursday. I suggest – Friday, it's my lucky day.

Boy 4: It's done then – Friday, the 18th of April

Boy 5: That's Good Friday

Masterda: *(gleefully)*Perfect! 18 April 1930 – Good Friday. The day the Irish held their Easter Revolution.

They disperse. The five boys and Masterda take positions around the stage. The light changes. It is the night of the raid. Last minute updates. Discussions. Adrenalin laced shouts and comments thrown at each other.

Boy 1: Aru and Taru got burnt while making the bomb. They are deciding what to do…

Boy 2: What is there to decide? If we take them for treatment, we are caught, if we don't they will suffer… they have to be shot – it is war.

The action turns to another set of boys.

Boy 3: Where is the Dodge?

Boy 4: It is at the garage.

Boy 5: On the day of the raid! Why?!

Boy 3: They are going to hijack a taxi.

Boy 5: What about the driver?

Boy 3: *(shrugs)* Kill him? Or chloroform him?

Boy 4: Masterda has made it clear. No Indian is to be hurt.

They change positions again. Rapidly.

Boy 2: What if there is a traitor in our midst?

Masterda: No. I have no reason to suspect any of the boys. *(pause)* We keep a sharp eye on each other.

Boy 2: And what if there is a coward?

Masterda: That I am sure of. There isn't any.

Another group is formed.

Boy 4: The watches are synchronised.

Boy 1: The watches are synchronised.

Boy 5: The watches are synchronised.

The entire group comes together again. It is time for the assault. Light and sound are building up to a crescendo.

Boy 3: Remember brothers. Laying down our lives will never go waste. Today we seek retribution for centuries of torture. We need courage and strength. We will show no mercy; We will have our revenge for Khudiram and Kanai Lal. For the women and children killed at Jallianwala Bagh.

Masterda: We have to postpone the raid for two hours. The cars will not be available till then.

Boy 2: But Masterda, what about the train line sabotage parties?

Boy 4: What about the leaflet distribution teams? Do we tell them to wait?

Boy 1: And the second stage teams? Should they reach the collection points for the arms and ammunition at the same time as planned?

Masterda: No. Yes. The plan can be delayed. The plan cannot change.

The crescendo comes to an abrupt halt. Everyone waits. The silence continues until it breaks.

Masterda: It is time.

The stage is lit for darkness and the night. The children and Masterda take their positions. The children through physical acts enact the battle and secure key positions on stage. The music is fast in tempo. Goes with the movements.

The children are shouting in Bengali – "Inquilab Zindabad. Bande Mataram. Samrajyabad Dhongsho hok. Biplob dirghojibi hok." They scream out the key highlights of the battle, and the one casualty.

Boy 1: The telegraph office is ours!

Boy 2: A British officer has been killed!

Boy 3: The Pathans are running away!

Boy 4: The police line has been taken, most of them were sleeping, no Indian has been killed.

Boy 5: A machine gun has opened up!

Boy 1: We are firing back. We have silenced it!

Boy 2: Two Britishers tried to attack, but they have been chased away!

Boy 3: The European Club was empty. It was Good Friday.

Boy 4: The armoury is ours! Hundreds of rifles and guns.

Boy 5: We are safe. We are together.

After the exertion the boys are gathered around Masterda. They are elated. The light and sound is a reflection of their victory.

Masterda: Heartiest Congratulations! You have done well.

Boy 1: We have failed.

Masterda: What?!

They hold up empty boxes, belts and pouches.

Boy 2: No ammunition. No cartridges.

Masterda: Are you sure!? Have you searched everywhere?!

Boy 3: *(panicking)* Yes! We searched every nook and cranny. Every room!! Every part of the armoury! What is to be done!?

Boy 4: Four hundred rifles. Machine Guns. And we cannot use even one of them!!

Boy 5: What will happen to the second phase?! Once the leaflets are distributed and people reach the collection points for the arms and ammunition; what will we give them? What will we do?!

Prolonged silence and a stern look from Masterda. The chatter stops.

Masterda: We will burn down everything. But first, we will light the fire. A fire that will be seen from every home in India!

The mood and the stage changes. With great solemnity. The Indian Swadeshi Flag is raised and Masterda reads out the proclamation of the formation of the Provisional Government of Free India.

Masterda: Dear soldiers of the Revolution! The great task of revolution in India, has fallen on the IRA.

All the boys stand in attention.

Masterda: *(continuing)*We in Chittagong have the honour to achieve this patriotic task fulfilling the aspirations of our nation. It is a matter of great glory that today our forces have seized the strongholds of the government in Chittagong. The enemy armoury has been captured; the central telephone exchange of the town has been destroyed, external telegraph communications have been snapped, railway lines have been removed and goods trains derailed; train communications have been cut off. The enemy force has been defeated. The oppressive foreign government has ceased to exist. The national flag is flying high. It is our duty to defend it with our life and blood. The IRA declares today for universal information and recognition of the end of predatory rule and control by the British imperial bandits on the Indian soil in Chittagong. Chittagong is a tiny part of India; but it is hoped and expected that the achievement of today will inspire and impel our countrymen to do likewise everywhere in India and to free our entire motherland from the unholy clutches of the British bandits before long.

I, Surjya Sen, president of the IRA Chittagong Branch do hereby proclaim the existing council of the IRA in Chittagong to form itself into a provisional revolutionary government to carry out the following urgent tasks:

To defend and maintain the victory gained today, to extend and intensify the armed struggle, to suppress the enemy agent within, to keep criminals and looters in check; and, to take further course of action, one that this provisional government will decide later. This provisional government expects and demands full allegiance, loyalty and active cooperation from every true son and daughter of Chittagong. And desires sympathy and active support from all the patriots and nationalists and from every person who has the well-being and liberation of India in his or her heart. With full confidence in victory in our holy war of liberation!

Chants and shouts of victory surge through the cast on stage. Suddenly, an explosion. Lights Fade.

Fade in

The entire team is weary now. They have formed a circle around Masterda. It has been four days since the raid. The Battle of Jalalabad is about to begin.

Boy 1: Where are the others?

Boy 2: Himu got burnt remember, they have gone to drop him off; and now I don't think they will be able to return, we have lost surprise.

Boy 3: But we have not lost our will.

Boy 4: One overripe watermelon. One unripe mango.

Boy 5: I have some *khichudi* saved from day before yesterday.

Masterda: I know you are hungry.

Boy 1: Yes Masterda. Hungry for battle.

Laughter.

Masterda: It is coming.

Boy 2: *(points to Boy 3)* We know, it is all because of our dear friend here, who had the smart idea of checking for food from that Muslim farmer, Gaffur Abdul. He must have informed the police by now.

Masterda: You must not blame him.

Boy 2: No Masterda, I am not blaming him, I am thanking him. Thanks to him we are finally going to get the fight we have been waiting for…

Boy 4: …that you have been training us for.

Laughter. Masterda does not laugh.

Masterda: Not him. That peasant. Gaffur.

They turn serious again. The take positions. The battle commences. The entire episode is demonstrated quickly through physical movements of battling gunfire

and firing back. They lie prostate as the shoot. Light and sound serve as the enemy and create the atmosphere of bullets whizzing past. The actors celebrate their successes and the pain and tragedy of being shot with exclamations in Bengali like, "Masterda Gelaam."

Dusk falls on stage. Masterda and the boys get up. They celebrate. The British have retreated, unable to take and unwilling to risk, any more casualties. The celebrations soon turn to sorrow.

The actors, symbolically remove their clothes, belts and arms and ammunition to form a pile that represents the bodies of their slain brothers. They are walking away, when along with, they turn to look back at the pile and Masterda speaks.

Masterda: Look at them. Sleeping so peacefully. In the lap of their motherland. Look at those bodies, lean strong, All those months of training and drills, wrestling in the mud and swimming in the rivers, racing up the hills and running on the muddy shores and beaches of our Chittagong. Look at them, till you can look no more.

Boy 1: They are together, but we have to disband.

Boy 2: Because, we have to win.

Boy 3: They will be cremated as per rituals, they will get to go home. *(turns to Masterda)* They will be, isn't it? Their *kapaal kriya* will be done? The pind – daan will have to take place, what about their… their shraadh? It will be done, isn't it or is it different for boys?

Boy 4: Why are you asking all this? Didn't you get it done before you left home? The rest of us had all these rituals done.

Boy 3 is startled and worried. Everyone laughs. He relaxes. Masterda is tense.

Masterda: Of course! the British would never dishonour their enemy dead.

As he says this an unidentified actor (one of the actors playing the other characters), enveloped in the Union Jack is circling the mound of corpses. Seeing no one around, sets fire to the pile. The boys are aghast. They disappear into the wings. Masterda remains; watching tills the embers extinguish and he takes their place in the centre of the stage.

Scene 6 – Their Masterda's Voice

A magic land where the souls of Masterda and the dead children are playing football. It is an exciting match. There is much fun and camaraderie. There is intense competitiveness. The match ends. The scoreline reads 1- 1. The players shake hands. While shaking hands, talking to each other, discussing arguing – the scene is enacted as if it were the end of a real football match; by the entire cast. Everyone is exhausted. Everyone is divinely happy. Once again, the children are not identifiable by name, only Masterda is.

Child: Fish, football and freedom. That is all a Bengali needs.

Child: Football you can't play. Freedom you don't have. Fish – well, as long as *Mashima* is there to remove the bones for you… clearly you are no Bengali!

Laughter

Child: Ya Right! But there's one more 'f' the Bengalis are good at…

Child: What?

Child: Can't tell you now. Masterda is watching.

More laughter

Child: Look, these are the warriors; you chose…

Masterda: You think I chose them? I think they chose me. I only chose freedom.

Child: And we are free now, aren't we? But, not in the way you wanted.

Masterda: But, in the way I expected… This is how it was to end.

Child: *(happily)* In a football match!

Another child joins them

Child: …followed by fish… *Pabda machcher jhol*!

Another child speaks up

Child: Masterda! A football match and a wager – that could have been another way to settle the issue right?

This triggers a flurry of excitement with various children joining in with their 'expert' comments on this imaginary situation as Masterda watches, bemused.

Child: Wow! Gandhi XI vs. Irvin XI

Child: …and the team formed of Congress workers…

Child: …only Congress workers! they wouldn't have given *Anushilan* or *Jugantar* players a chance… or for that matter, the HSRA…

Child: Too violent for them…

Child: But every team needs some stout defenders too you know, especially when the match has no referee – to give the British a card…

Child: Why!? Instead of a card, for every 'f' the British committed, Gandhiji would have responded with an 'f' of his own.

Child: *(sly dig)* He advocates celibacy you know.

Chuckles

Child: You and your one track mind – for every 'f' that is - 'foul' Gandhiji goes on an 'f' for 'FAST.'

Child: Aah… so that's why Shantu would have rather died than be on his team…

Silence

Child: He still died. Didn't he?

Silence

Masterda: We are all on one team. But why are we talking about our team… what about their team?

Child: What Masterda? Their team would have also had mostly Indians, how many British rule India, a handful! It's the

Indians who play for them that make up the bulk of the team!

Child: And they would have mainly been Muslim.

Masterda: *(gently)* Just as there would have been caste Hindus a few decades ago, don't forget, we learnt football by being on their team.

Child: *(contritely)* I apologise Masterda, as you said, we are one team.

All the other children chime in

Children: We are one team.

Masterda: But more importantly, now; a winning team!

Child: What have we won Masterda?

Child: The right to be called a team. A team that showed the world that a British team could be defeated

Child: So what! Mohun Bagan did that; And that too, 20 years ago.

Child: Yes, without shoes, barefoot.

Masterda: The stuff legends are made of. But we remember the result, not the story, and the way out team played, they will remember the story, not the result.

Child: But we have nothing to show for it Masterda.

Masterda: Freedom does not just mean, having everything. Freedom means, having nothing – freedom is sacrifice.

Silence. Masterda has become what he is. A teacher. Their beloved teacher, much before he was their leader.

Child: You mean, freedom is – passing the ball…

Child: Freedom is enjoying the game.

Child: Freedom is giving your best, no matter what the result.

Child: Freedom is playing fair.

Child: Even if you lose?

Silence

Masterda: It's just a game.

Child: What are you saying Masterda! It's just a game. Everything?! everything that we gave our lives for?! Everything that you gave your life for?! Everything we set out to achieve? To drive the British out. It's just a game!?

Masterda: Did you have fun? Did you play as a team? Did you give up? When you were playing, what Was more important? You or your team? When you were playing – Were you free? There is no road to freedom. Freedom is the road. This great sacrifice is never in vain. I knew that this; this is what a nation is made of. Sacrifice of the self. And somehow, somewhere, and by somebody, a beginning has to be made. Much like the Irish who fought in 1916.

Child: And they are terrible at football!

Laughter and the tension eases

Masterda: And this beginning I am talking about. It is not made of men, it is not made by men. who have learned to adjust. Men who have found ways to live within what exists, to negotiate, to survive, to endure. Who calculate. Who measure profit and loss. Who don't play the game, who play for the result.

Silence

Child: So, that's why we were so… so… necessary… *(warily)* important?

Masterda: You understand now? A nation is not built on law. It is not built on agreement. It is not built on negotiation. Those come later. Teamwork is nationhood.

Child: And we are all players.

Child: But we are also sons and daughters and brothers and sisters, and friends…

Child: …of those who made us see India through the white man's eyes. To measure her as others measure her. To find her lacking where others find her lacking.

Child: When you made us see *"Janani Janmabhumishcha Swargaadapi Gariyasi"* and we saw what you saw…

Child: *(overwhelmed)* We could not see our mother, and motherland in chains any longer.

Silence

Child: Was it worth it Masterda?

Masterda: As if waiting would have changed anything. As if restraint would have preserved us. Look at what has followed. Look at what this land has become. Look at how easily we have turned on one another. How quickly unity has dissolved into suspicion. How the very people we have fought for… no… no… they are not ready for what they have been given. Do not ask me if I regret. Regret belongs to those who believe there was a safer path. I do not know that there was. I know only this. We began something. And beginnings are never clean. They are never complete. They are never enough. But without them— nothing moves.

The entire group comes together and forms a sports huddle; the formation turns outward to stare the India of 1947 that lies below.

Lights fade slowly.

Scene 7 – What they fought for.

The five rooms are seen one last time. They appear as in the beginning of the play. Shantu's desk holds its books in quiet order, their edges aligned as though awaiting a morning of study that will never come. Piku's workbench carries the memory of hands that shaped and repaired, each tool resting in the indentation it has made over years.

Shimu's small room is sparse but dignified, its few objects arranged with the economy of someone who owns little but keeps it with intent. Bubai's corner is still threaded into the life around it, a mat slightly worn at the centre where a body once sat and read. Gora's room is the fullest.

The surviving parents shall appear and clear the stage – slowly, in turn.

It is 1947 — Time for the first departure (SHANTU & PIKU). A cacophony of violence is heard – screams of communal hatred and violence.

Fade in

Shantu's mother is waiting for Shantu's father. He walks in. His face, ashen.

Shantu's Father: They met Suhrawardy.

Shantu's Mother: And… did he say anything?

Shantu's Father: *(Silent)* No. He just asked them a question?

Shantu's Mother: What?

Shantu's Father: *(Silent)* He asked them how could he be sure if the revolutionaries won't kill Muslims when they are released.

Shantu's Mother: Didn't they question him in return!? That all of them; who gave up their lives, those who went to jail – did they do so just for the Hindus or for all, irrespective of community?!!

Shantu's Father: What do you think?!

Shantu's Mother: *(Thinks)* Why speak to those politicians. They should speak directly to people. Everyone knows them. They should address all those rallies that are being held.

Shantu's Father: He did. He went to a rally at Cox Bazaar. he told the audience "What is one community supposed to tell the other? Hey look, we are all good, and you are all bad!?" Is this the foundation of the common civilization that both communities belong to, on which we have been standing all this while?!" He went on to ask them if they believed the communal question was unimportant, they should raise their hands. Not a single hand went up.

The two of them are in shock. They start packing their belongings. He begins by folding up the desk. The movement is so small it is almost missed. He stands at the desk, his fingers resting lightly on the spine of a book, and for a long moment he does not open it. His hand traces the edge instead, as if reacquainting himself with its solidity. When he finally lifts it, the gesture is slow, deliberate, but the act of reading does not follow. Shantu's mother watches—not him, but the hesitation itself. Something passes between them without words. She turns away from the desk and goes to the bed. Her hands move with sudden purpose, pulling the sheet tight, folding it sharply, pressing the air out of it with firm strokes. There is no smoothing, no lingering. Each fold is an ending. The father closes the book. The desk is dismantled. The books are packed.

He places it on the stack, then begins gathering them. He ties them with cloth, his fingers fumbling once before tightening the knot. One book slips loose and falls slightly apart from the rest. He notices it. He looks at it. Packs it. The room is bare. They look at the neighbouring home.

Piku's father does not move immediately. He stands before the workbench as though before an altar that no longer answers. His hand hovers over the tools, unsure where to begin.

When he finally picks one up, it is with a familiarity so ingrained it almost breaks him. He weighs it in his palm, testing its balance, then sets it down exactly where it was.

He picks up another, and another, each gesture slower than the last. There is an attempt, at first, to gather them—to bring them together into something that can be carried forward—but the attempt collapses under its own impossibility. He cannot choose which part of his life to take and which to abandon. His hands move faster for a moment, as though urgency might solve the problem, but then they stop altogether. He steps back. The workbench is made a bed into which ever belonging is loaded. Piku's father picks it up on his head.

When they leave, it is without ceremony. Shantu's parents lift their bundle together, their movements synchronised not by habit but by necessity. Piku's father pauses at the threshold, his body turning halfway back into the room before stopping.

They leave. Their footsteps do not echo. They simply vanish into distance. The rooms remain open behind them. Empty. Bare.

It is 1971 — Time for the second departure (SHIMU & BUBAI). A cacophony of violence is heard – screams of communal hatred and violence. But this time in Urdu, not in Bengali. They are screamed out as military commands. To rape. Murder. Burn alive. The stage is completely dark. A searchlight. A metaphor burns through the three rooms that are still occupied.

Fade In

Shimu's mother is lying on her side. She is slowly dragging the entire meagre content of the room into her bosom. The few rags, a notebook, a pencil, a torch, a book. She condenses into a ball. The scene is interrupted by a shrieking woman hurtling onto stage. It is Bubai's sister. There is no hesitation in her body. She goes directly to the trunk. Her hands opening it with a force that suggests she has rehearsed this moment in her mind long before it arrived. She does not examine what lies inside.

She gathers quickly, folding without care, pressing fabrics into the space until it will take no more. The corner where Bubai once sat disappears in seconds, not through reverence but through urgency. Everything is packed inside the trunk. While packing she is talking.

Bubai's Sister: It is called operation searchlight.

Shimu's Mother: Who is searching for the light?

Bubai's Sister: *Uff… Mashima*! There is no time.

Shimu's Mother: It is my time.

Bubai's Sister: No. Not now. Not like this.

Shimu's Mother: How? To be shot dead. Then to be cremated. Even when my heart is beating.

Bubai's Sister: You will not be shot dead. You will not be cremated.

Shimu's Mother: I am alive?

Bubai's Sister: We are. Do you understand. We are. We have to be. Bengal has to be.

Shimu's Mother: Bengal? Where is Bengal? Where is Bengal?

Their departure is fast. Less visible, more certain. Bubai's sister leaves without turning, her body angled forward, already moving beyond the space before her feet follows. She is dragging Shimu's mother away as she continues questioning.

While being dragged away, her gaze is fixed on the rooms. The rooms they leave behind almost burn in the light. Gora's room stands alone now, surrounded by absence. Her voice is heard.

Shimu's Mother: Oh! So Bengal is Bangladesh? First East Bengal. Then East Pakistan. Now Bangladesh. So many name changes, all in one life; and my life, unchanged.

It is 2025 — Time for the third departure (GORA). A cacophony of violence is heard – screams of communal hatred and violence. But this time in English, not in Urdu, not in Bengali. They are screamed out as speeches in university reading rooms, as sociology sermons. With cold logic on the need for harmony in society and the identification and alignment of those who oppose the progress of the nation.

Fade in

Gora's room. The busiest. The small wooden temple that carries the statue of Bharat Mata is alit. In the time it burns down, Gora's descendants gather each and every piece of furniture. Every book. Every object. Their movements measured not by hesitation but by the weight of time carried in their bodies.

They do not speak. They do not need to. Once everything is packed, they are ready to exit. The decision arrives not as a choice but as a conclusion already reached. A woman steps forward first, her movement slow but irreversible. There is no attempt to stop her, no argument, no delay. A man follows, his pace matching hers without effort. They walk through the space that once contained their lives, their son, their history, and they carry everything. Nothing is left behind. The glowing embers of the temple remain and slowly wither away. Only ashes remain. The light is extinguished.

When they leave, the entire cast and crew comes on stage and with great measure and purpose, remove everything until the stage is bare. The rooms do not remain. The outlines fade, the suggestion of space collapses into nothing. Where there were five rooms, then three, then one, there is now no trace. No object. No boundary. No memory that can be pointed to. The stage is bare. The silence that follows is complete.

BLACKOUT

Lala Ji Ne School Banaya Hai

Note From the Playwright

This play is inspired by the story of my alma mater, Modern School. It is a work of fiction and does not claim to portray historical fact. Rather, it attempts to imagine how the values that built one of the finest schools in India might have come together.

The situations, conversations and words attributed to the historical figures in this play belong to the fictional world of the drama. They are not intended to represent what these individuals actually said or did. The creative liberties taken are entirely in the service of the play and its exploration of an idea: what kind of education can shape not only an individual, but a society.

I have approached the people, institutions and histories that inspired this work with deep respect. The play is neither an attempt to document their history nor to define it. It is an imaginative tribute to the ideals and perhaps a mild critique that they, and the institution that inspired this work, came to represent for me.

Modern School was my alma mater. It gave me an education that has continued to influence the way I think, question, create and engage with the world. I am conscious, however, that I was able to receive that education because my parents believed it was worth making sacrifices for. They went beyond their means to give me the opportunity to study there. What they gave me was much more than a place in a school; they gave me the chance to discover a world of ideas and possibilities that has remained with me ever since.

This play is therefore, above all, a tribute. To my parents, whose faith and sacrifice made my education possible. To my teachers, who gave that education meaning. To my alma mater, whose influence made that education meaningful. And; to my friends, who made school life joyful.

If this work occasionally moves beyond history into imagination, it does so with gratitude, affection and respect. It is my small attempt to honour the institution that shaped me, and my parents; the two people who made it possible for me to belong to it.

Cast of Characters

Ruksaana
Roop Lata
Lala Raghuvendra Singh
Dr. James Miller
Principal of Mayor College
Secretary to Principal of Mayor College
Principal of Boon School
Principal of St. Pal's
Principal of The Dilly - Dally College
Students
Teacher 1
Teacher 2
Teacher 3
Wajid Bhai
Mrs. Vimla Ghosh
Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore
Mahatma Gandhi
Sarojini Naidu
Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose
Pandit Nehru
A 'Chief Guest' from contemporary India
Dhyanchand
Amrita Sher Gill
Major General Raman Singh (Son of Lala Raghuvendra Singh)

Setting

The action of the play takes place over discreet time periods. From the early 1920s to the present time.

The action takes place in five areas in the auditorium.

The two narrators – Roop Lata & Ruksaana are stationed somewhere amidst the audience.

Right stage the interactions with & in – between the heads of various schools transpire. This space has five chairs and a table which can be alternatively be used as an office and a meeting room.

Left stage, the scenes from Model school today are played out. The set has three to four school desks and a platform (which represents the cemented base of a large tree)

Up stage (right), on a raised platform is the space where Lalaji meets the dignitaries who visit the school. The school of today, and this area face each other diagonally so that a conversation is pictured between these two spaces, that are distant in time, but cohabit in thought.

Upstage (left) a spot for individual actors.

Act 1

Lights come on to show Ruksana & Roop Lata talking to one another. They are dressed as housewives in Delhi, of their respective religion, would be. They start talking.

Roop Lata: *Arre tujhe kuch pataa bhi hai… Lalaji Ne School Banaya Hai?*

Ruksana: So?

Roop Lata: *So?? Kya matlab so? Kahan 'SO'on, aur kyun 'SO'oon?? Yeh kaisa atpata jawaab hai?*

Ruksana: *Arre! So maane… maane… To…*

Roop Lata: *'So' maane 'To'??! achcha jaise uss geet mein hai na… jo sowat hai so khowat hai… parr… (thinks) … lekin tune phir 'To' hee kyun nahin kaha???*

Ruksana: *Arre baba maine Englis mein 'So' kahaa tha… tu naheen samjhe gee…*

Roop Lata: *'So' mein samajhne waalee aisee kya baat hai… bade ayee English bolne waali… 'So' to Hindi hee hai…*

Ruksana: *(Irritated) hmmph… humpty dumpty…*

Roop Lata: *Kya?*

Ruksana: *humpty dumpty… had a great faults… ab bataa… yeh to englis hee hai na… kyun? Kya hua?*

Roop Lata: *Haan theek hai… itna dikhawa karne ki jaroorat nahin hai… main naheen jaantee kya… jabse tera lalla uss Englis school mein jaane laga hai, tabse bahut chapad karne lagee hai tu englis mein… par ab zyada din naheen hai… mera lalla bhi englis school mein jayega… phir main kahoongee aur tu suniyo… bade ayee… err… kya bolee thi… haan… tu hogee haddi dandi…*

Ruksana: *It is humpty dumpty… aur aisa kaunsa school aa gaya hai jo englis mein taleem dega tere lalla ko…*

Roop Lata: *Kyun tere lalla ko naheen mil rahee…*

Ruksana: *Woh toh iss liye kyunkee uske abba sarkaree naukar hain… woh bhi sex-ton offier…*

Roop Lata: *Yeh kya hai bhala…*

Ruksana: *Tu naheen samjhegee… bahut bada auhada hai sarkar mein… sirf aise gine chune afsaron ke bachchon ko englis school mein, englis balakon ke saath padhne ka mauka diya jaata hai…*

Roop Lata: *Issiliye toh main keh rahee hoon… ke Lalaji Ne School Banaya hai?*

Ruksana: *Toh isme kaunsee bade baat ho gayee! Ab thekedaar aadmee hai school banane ka theka mila hoga…*

Roop Lata: *Arre naheen, waise naheen… Lalaji ne khud ka school banaya hai… aur kuch waqt pehle kakshayen shuru bhee ho chukee hain, suna hai ki wahan humare dareebe, ya ballimaran ke kissi bhi balkan ko bhartee karwa sakte hain… aur usse sabse badhiya englis padhayee karne ko milegee…*

Ruksana: *Yeh sab afwahein hain… aise thodai na hota hai… ab kal ko Lalaji koi aspataal banayenge, toh yeh thodai hoga ki who khud hee usse chalane lagenge…*

Roop Lata: *Par aisa hee hua hai… woh devender bhai hain na… jo inka kapde ki dukaan mein haath batate hain… woh Lalaji ke liye bhi kaam karte hain… unhone, poori kahanee sunayee hai inko… ki yeh sab hua kaise…*

Ruksana: *Achcha… toh bata…*

Roop Lata: *Ab tu toh jaantee hee hai ki Lalaji ne pichle kuch saalon mein kitnee taraqquee kar lee hai… angrezon ne jabse dilli ko phir se Rajdhani banane ka faisla kiya hai… tabse aadhe se zyada nirmaan ka theka Lalaji ko hee toh mila hai…*

Ruksana: *So toh hai… kitnee raubdaar haveli khadee kar lee hai Darya Ganj mein…*

Roop Lata: *Haan… toh ishee kee ainth mein lalajee ne tay kar liya ki unka chota beta englis school mein padhkar vides jayega…*

Ruksana: *Ab paisa waale hain… kyun na dekhein aise sapne…*

Roop Lata: *Ranee! Sapne hum jaise log dekhte hain… paise waale nahin… unhone toh tay kar liya… bas… par sirf englis school kafee naheen tha unke liye… unhein toh apne lalla ko sabse achche school mein padhana tha… aur daulat jitnee bhi ho… badhiya school mein dakhile ke liye… sifaarish toh chahiye… toh who gaye Dilli ke commissioner, woh Dr. Miller Saheb hain na… unnke paas…*

Fade out

Fade in Right stage

Lala Raghuvendra Singh has come to meet Dr. James Miller. Dr. Miller is sitting and looking at something far away…

Lalaji: Good morning Dr. saab.

Dr. Miller: Ah! Dear *Lalaji*, wish you a very good morning *(accented English, a bit difficult to comprehend for Indian English speakers)* how are you doing?

Lalaji: Err… I am doing the back side of the viceroy's… new palace.

Dr. Miller: *(bewildered, then understands, then… sniggers)* well we should all be glad you are not doing the back side of the viceroy… do sit, please.

Lalaji: Thank you sir.

Dr. Miller: *(… goes back to looking afar)* Do you see that woman scything away and collecting grass…

Lalaji: *(looks)* yes sir, some villagers have not yet relocated, but don't worry, that will happen soon… after all we are needing whole of Raisina hill…

Dr. Miller: …*(wistfully)* And turn this lush grazing pasture into grandiose blocks to house our administration… and where will she go…

"Behold her, single in the field,

Yon solitary Highland Lass!

Reaping and singing by herself;

Stop here, or gently pass!"

… Wordsworth…

Pause

I wonder so often, about the limits to which we will go to sustain our colonial vanity… *(turns to speak to Lalaji)* but forgive the ramblings of a soon to retire *'English Gora Saheb'*, tell me *Lalaji* … what can I do for you?

Lalaji: Sir it was regarding my younger son. He is to be admitted…

Dr. Miller: Oh dear me! Is the young one all right? What has happened?

Lalaji: No sir. He is in good of health.

Dr. Miller: Then pray… what admission are you referring to?

Lalaji: Sir admit to school sir.

Dr. Miller: Oh I see, you wish for him to commence his schooling. That is a fine thought. Do tell me though, how I can help.

Lalaji: Sir you are knowing that I am a simple thekedaar… so If I could get reference letter from you, he can be admitting to any school sir.

Dr. Miller: I would be honoured *Lalaji.* Please give me a day. You can have the letter collected tomorrow.

Lalaji: A thousand thank you sir… and why collected. I will be coming myself. Allow me to take leave sir.

Dr. Miller: It is my pleasure *Lalaji* … but if you don't mind, may I ask which school are you thinking of?

Lalaji: Of course you can ask sir… he is only your son…

A strange look from Dr. Miller, but Lalaji continues

…Sir as I was saying… I am thinking of only the top schools of country - either Mayor College in Ajmer or Boon school in Dehradun. If for some reason it is not working out, then I am willing to go far to other good schools like St. Pal's in Darjeeling or the Dilly - Dally College in Indore… and then send him to London to become bachelor… and then, a master.

Dr. Miller: Well… as long as one is a bachelor, one is one's own master… and the day bachelorhood ends… *(sigh)*… anyway *(turns back to Lalaji)* this is very good *Lalaji*. Quite Capital *Lalaji*! Capital!

Lalaji: No sir. No such good school in Capital.

Dr. Miller: *(Smiles)* … no no, what I meant was that this is a good decision… *(thinks)*… but if I may… for all its worth… advise you to ensure that the young one is not kept bereft of the deep, humanitarian traditions and knowledge of your country *Lalaji* … there is much that these schools will teach of modern European ways, but remember, it is only through the acquisition of an education that strengthens your child's roots; will he find meaning and joy in his life.

Lalaji: *(Dr. Miller's words have had an effect, but Lalaji has not fully understood…)* Thank you Dr. Saab, I shall remember this. Good Day sir.

Dr. Miller: Good Day *Lalaji*

Slow Fade

Slow Fade In to Ruksana & Roop Lata

Ruksana: *Yeh Dr. Miller toh bade bhale manas nikle…*

Roop Lata: *Aur naheen toh kya… tune dekha hai kissi gore saheb ko itni hamdardi aur izzat se baat karte hue?*

Ruksana: *Toh phir kya hua? Kya Lalaji ne agle din jaake chitthi lee?*

Roop Lata: *Kyun naheen lete? Lalaji ne yehi toh thaaan rakhkha tha ki woh achche school mein hee admission karvayenge apne lalla ka…*

Ruksana: *Toh kya chitthi ke bal par ho gaya admission…*

Roop Lata: *Woh chitthi lekar unn saare schoolon mein gaye jinka zikr unhone Dr. Miller saab se kiya tha*

Fade Out

Fade In to Lalaji standing and talking to the Secretary to the Principal of Mayor College. The Principal is seated a little away. There is a Banner above him that says –"Mayor College." For each school that Lalaji will visit, this device will be used to communicate the name of the school to the audience.

Secretary: *(Reading through a piece of paper in his hand)* … this will do very well Singh Saab… err… I heard your car outside… was that a Ford…

Lalaji: No a Studebaker six. I just had it shipped from America.

Secretary: I have never seen one, after your meeting with Sir, would it be possible to see?

Lalaji: Certainly sir. After the 'successful' completion of the meeting I must be adding.

Secretary: Well I wouldn't doubt it.

They both laugh

Secretary: This way sir.*(Announces)*His Excellency Raghuvendra Singh.

Principal: Gets up to greet him. Welcome Mr. Singh to the Eton of India. Welcome to Mayor College. I do hope the trip from Delhi was not much of an inconvenience.

Lalaji: For one's child. Inconvenience is nothing.

Principal: How wonderful to hear such words from a parent. I can see that your son… err…

Lalaji: Raman. Raman Singh.

Principal: My apologies, how could the little prince's name not come to mind.

Lalaji: Yes he is little prince.

Principal: The prince of the realm I am sure.

Lalaji: Well. *(thinks)* Prince of my heart.

Principal: Such poetic poise Sir, it is confounding how someone with your eloquence has not studied at Mayor…

Lalaji: My education has happened with brick and mortar…

Principal: Brick and mortar… brick and mortar! What a surreal simile to explain the practical education that a successful man requires… giving the prince a formal education at Mayor seems to be a simple task, seeing His Excellency's erudition here…

Lalaji: Here? Where?

Principal: I beg your pardon.

Lalaji: Where is his excellency!

Principal: His… his what… where? … *(peals of laughter)* and such fine wit to go with it… what an honour to meet you sir. What an honour!

Lalaji: So should I take it that admission is final.

Principal: Was there any doubt sir. I shall have the paperwork completed and the Secretary shall intimate you on further formalities and logistics. There is one question though.

Lalaji: Please…

Principal: It's only to address some, well frankly… and err… this is my view; archaic sensitivities that some of your brethren have… are you a Chandravanshi or a Suryavanshi?

Lalaji: I'm sorry… I don't understand.

Principal: I meant, are you a Chandravanshi or Suryavanshi Rajput?

Lalaji: Well, we are not even Rajputs. We are from Punjab and that too a…

Principal: I am sorry to interrupt… but you are Shri Raghuvendra Singh…

Lalaji: Actually, in Delhi I am known as Lala Raghuvendra Singh, or just, *Lalaji.*

Principal: *Lalaji*? *Lalaji*! Oh I see. Well Lalaji *(with some asperity)* as I had mentioned, the Secretary shall be in touch with you. Thank you for coming. Have a good day sir.

Lalaji: Certainly. Good day to you as well.

Lalaji leaves. As he is leaving, the Secretary who is walking towards him is suddenly called for by the Principal.

Secretary: Well sir. I hope you had a…

Principal: *(shouts)* … Kelkar!!

Secretary: *(pauses)* … well sir, I am afraid I must go in. Shall speak with you later…

They shake hands and Lalaji exits the stage. Secretary enters Principal's cabin.

Principal: Kelkar. How can you send in someone without checking his antecedents?!

Secretary: Well, he did come in a Studebaker six, and his name… and he was carrying a letter from a senior servant of His Majesty's Government…

Principal: I don't care if it's a letter from King George himself. This school has been built to serve India's princely and upper class… ONLY… I hope that's clear… not the *'Lalaji's* that abound in its business fraternity…

Fade out.

Fade in to Ruksana & Roop Lata

Ruksana: *Tauba Tauba. Kitna badmash aadmi nikla…*

Roop Lata: *Kyun? Tu kya samjhee thee… itnee aasaanee se kaam ban jaata…*

Ruksana: *Par Lalaji chiththee bhee toh le kar gaye the bade saaheb kee…*

Roop Lata: *Arre tu inn gore logon ko nahin jaantee… yeh ek taraf hamdardee aur insaaf kee baatein karte hain, aur doosree taraf us hee insaaf kee aadh mein - zulm… aur humare samaaj ko baant kar… hum par hukumat…*

Ruksana: *Sahee keh rahee hai tu… naheen toh yeh muththee bhar angrez hum sab par raaj kaise karte…Par yeh toh bataa, ki kya uss mue…err… 'secreet teri' ne Lalaji se school mein dakhile ki baat kee…*

Roop Lata: *Arre kahaan, aur jab kuch dinon tak Mayor College se koi jawaab nahin aaya, Lalaji Dehradun chale gaye*

Fade out

Fade in to Lalaji meeting the Principal of Boon School. They are taking a stroll. The Principal is probing, Lalaji is being a bit evasive; so as to get his son the admission he desires.

Principal: …So what do you do in Government…

Lalaji: I am not in Government…

Principal: But you said you do Government work… even Dr. Miller mentions how you have been a great servant of the Raj and a pillar of support to him and his family personally.

Lalaji: That is true.

Principal: I am a bit confused then, are you with the Military?

Lalaji: I work for them as well.

Principal: Is it a classified post.

Lalaji: They all say my work has lot of class.

Principal: *(A bit exasperated)* Are you with the Civil service then. I would wish to add that most Civil servants in India send their sons to Boon.

Lalaji: Yes that is what I am trying to say. I am doing civil construction for the government.

Principal: Remarkably civil of you, and in what capacity?

Lalaji: Well, most of my works have large capacity. For instance, the office complexes I am working on in the new capital area in Delhi can house up to 10,000 people!

Principal: *(smiles) Lalaji*, if I knew better, I would say you are being intentionally obtuse… and perhaps a bit economical with the truth. Look, we value the interest you have shown, but there is a certain, shall I say, social hierarchy that comes to Boon, and…

The two of them walk off the stage. Slow Fade.

Fade in to Ruksana & Roop Lata

Ruksana: *Toh kya saaf mana kar diya?*

Roop Lata: *Nahin, par Lalaji ne bhee duniya dekhee hai… who samajh gaye ki aise school mein, jahaan insaan ko taleem se naheen, uske kaam se naheen… balki uskee haisiyat se tola jaata hai, wahaan kaisee taleem milegee…*

Ruksana: *Ab aisee bhee kya akad, itna achcha iskool hai… aise school mein unka lalla jaata, toh unkee haisiyat hee toh badhtee…*

Roop Lata: *Lalaji kehte hain ki gyan insaan ko yeh sikhata hai ki haisiyat uske kaam aur charitra se bantee hai… naaki uske janm se ya uske baap dadaon ki haisiyat se…*

Ruksana: *Kitnee bade baat kahee Lalaji ne…*

Roop Lata: *Tabhi Lalaji ne tay kiya ki… chahe ghar se kitna bhi door ho… woh apne bete ko Darjeeling ke St. Pal's mein hee padhayenge… aur wahaan ke Father ne… …unhein dakhila hee naheen diya, unka bahut aadar satkaar bhee kiya.*

Ruksana: *Chalo… achche school mein ho gaya na dakhila!... main toh kehtee hoon unhein pehle hee wahaan chale jaana chahiye tha… yeh Father wagaira bhagwaan ke log hote hein… yeh log oonch neech, jaat paat, yeh sab naheen dekhte…*

Roop Lata: *So to hai (sarcastically)*

Fade out.

Lalaji having Tea with the Father (Headmaster of St. Pal's)

Lalaji: Thank you so much Father Terence for giving my son the opportunity to study in your esteemed school.

Father T: It is God's will my son. He so ordained that young Raman should find his schooling and perhaps his true calling at His abode.

Lalaji: But his will is done only through sir, isn't it.

Father T: We are all his instruments *Lalaji.* He willed it and I was there, and so it has come to be that you think I have done something; when I have done nothing at all.

Lalaji: Don't say that father. Even if you were here, you could have also said no. And I don't think if someone else had been here, he would have done so much for us.

Father T: My being here is His will as well, isn't it?

Lalaji: But you became headmaster and helped us sir. Becoming headmaster is all your effort sir. And you have been so kind…

Father T: *(Terse) Lalaji.*

Lalaji: Yes Father.

Father T: Drop it.

Lalaji: Certainly sir…

…So I shall take your leave then. I shall come to pick Raman myself for Diwali Holidays. Then maybe I will have honour in meeting you again.

Father T: Diwali? Well we don't give holidays for that.

Lalaji : But father it is a very important festival for us. And I'm not saying this as a Hindu, but in our business community also, Diwali is like a new year, when there is so much happening, and so much joy…

Father T: *(interrupting)* I am sure the yuletide spirit will grip young Raman around Christmas time, when we have our extended vacations… you can collect him then… for the actual new year…

Lalaji: But father…

Father T: *Lalaji.* By choosing this 'esteemed' institution as you call it young Raman has been chosen to learn and imbibe Christian virtues and verities. I am sure you want your son to prepare for global celebrations and events and occasions… and not be stuck in your outdated traditions and rituals…

Lalaji is staring hard at him.

Slow Fade (as Father T is mouthing his last dialogue)

Roop Lata: C*h ch ch ch ch… batao behen… kaisee soch rakhte hain yeh log… kya humaree soch, humare riwaaj… humaari manyataein dakiyanoosee hain! In logon ne hamesha se yehee kiya hai… pehle kartooson pe gai aur sooar ki charbee mall kar humara dharm bhrashta karne kee koshish kee… aur ab dekho… kaisee kaisee batein karte hain… aise logon ke yahaan padhne se kya laabh…*

Dekh behen… aisa naheen hai ki humare yahaan kureetiyan naheen hain… ab sati pratha ko hee dekh lo… inn angrezon ne hee toh band karaee thee…

Ruksana: *Haan par…*

Roop Lata: *…par iska yeh matlab naheen ke saaree kamiyan hum mein hain aur videshi dharma, reeti riwaazon mein hee saaree*

achchaiyaan hain… yehee baat sochkar Lalaji ne apne bete ko uss school se nikaal liya…

Ruksana: *Toh phir to ek hee bada school bacha jahaan woh dakhila karwanaa chahte the…*

Roop Lata: *Haan… aur Lalaji ne yeh mauka haath se jaanen naheen diya. Iss baar baniye ka dimaag lagaya aur khud ki jagaah… daakhile kee saaree baat… rupaiyon se karwayee*

Both laugh

Ruksana: *…toh ab yahaan kya dikkat aa gayee…*

Fade out

Fade in to Lalaji with the Principal of Dilly Dally college

Principal: Thank you Lalaji for your generous donation.

Lalaji: You are welcome. I am very happy that matters in your school are so direct and to the point.

Principal: We feel that is best, however, many in our board do not think the same way, so…

Lalaji: So, so what now! Sir. I have spent ample time and resourcing to ensure this deal goes through… and you had said there would be no conditions…

Principal: Of course *Lalaji* – there are none. It's just that such… err transactions are best conducted in a manner that appears… shall we say… less, in your face.

Lalaji: *(Irritated)* What do you mean!

Principal: It's nothing… really… here, I have written it down so that it's quite clear…

Takes out a folded sheet of paper and reads from it

This amount is to be given as a charitable donation for a chapel we are planning to set up… this small amount is to be given in kind as sports equipment… A thousand rupees as cash… while the balance can be a cheque which

will be in the name of a trust we shall be setting up for a late student…

Lalaji: *(livid)* Why am I being made to go through this circus! Sir! I am willing to pay, and you are willing to offer your services, why this pretending?!

Principal: *Lalaji* please. This is a Chief's college… one of four in the country… so please understand…

Lalaji: This is not Chief's College. This is a cheap college! *(Raging)* I have had enough of your nonsense. Why do you call yourselves schools!? You all make these big talks of giving everyone benefits of modern education – but you are only here so that only one set of people benefit from your education.

You either want to make a set of people who will only be your copies; and you want to rob rest of us of our self-respect. You want to make us feel we are less. I am not less. My children are not less.

So what if we are builders and masons. So what if we run shops or sell cloth. So what if we live within the walls of Old Delhi. So what if we are not nobles or chiefs or princes. If their time is ending in the rest of world it will end here. People like us will find education which will change this country!

Don't forget… If I can build your empire; I can build a school for my son – my son does not need your education… I will make a school that will… that will…

Principal: *(derisive)* that will what… *Lalaji…*

Lalaji: A school that one day… your school will have to become…

Blackout

Lights on!

Ruksana & Roop Lata. Stunned. Impressed. Mystified.

Ruksana: *Yeh toh khullam khulla chunauti de aaye…*

Roop Lata: *Haan…*

Ruksana: *Par… Lalaji ne school ki imaarat toh banaa lee, lekin school banaane ke liye… usse chalaane ke liye… wahaan pe sab nayee baatein sikhaane ke liye… Lalaji saadhan kahaan se juta payenge…*

Roop Lata: *Lalaji ne kissi school ko chunauti naheen dee thee. Unhone uss soch ko chunautee dee thee jo shayad humare mulk kee badnaseebee ka sabse bada kaaran hai… woh soch jo kehtee hai ki kissi insaan ka jaanm, uskee jaati woh kaam kya karta hai… uska… uska… dharm kya hai… yeh sab… uskee quabliyat aur mehnat se bada hai… ek taraf woh log… woh taqatein jo iss hee soch ko aage le jaana chahte the… aur ek taraf Lalaji…*

Ruksana: *Phir kya hua?*

Roop Lata: *Phir waahee hua jo hota aaya hai… jab bhee koi sahee baat karta hai; toh door door se log saath dene aa hee jaate hain… Lucknow se Waseem Bhai… Lalaji ke karobaar mein saathee the…*

Woh jud gaye… unhein mastery bhee aatee thee aur school ki vyavastha sambhaaalne mein bhi saksham nikle.

Kalkatta se Vimla Ghosh Madam… jo kehte hain ki humare desh ki sabse kabil adhyapikaon mein se ek hain… woh bhi Lalaji se saath aa khadee hueen… ab dekhte hain… ki is majme mein…

Gyan aur atma samman ki pehal… jo har tapke ke baalak ko badhte hue dekhna chahtee hai… kaun kaun iss pehal mein Lalaji ka saath deta hai…

Ruksana: *(to the audience) Haaaaan… Aur main aap sab logon ko bataa doon… Humare Lalaji bhi sharmaane waalon mein se naheen hain… jo bhi mahanubhaav iss school ko behtar banaane ke liye kuch yogdaan de sakta hai… Lalaji usse khud hi dhoond nikalenge…*

Slow Fade

Act 2

A large photo frame rises in between the left and up stage where the platform is kept. The photo frame is angled at 30 degrees.

Left stage has students dressed in school uniforms. They are today's students and carry the markers of today's times – mobile phones / bags / shoes / styles of clothing & hair.

Up stage on the platform, behind the photo frame, are Lalaji, a Muslim gentleman (Wajid Bhai) and a middle-aged woman (Vimla Ghosh). Actors upstage shall always be dressed in black and white and the lighting would be sepia tinged to connote the world in the 1930s.

The actors in the two areas shall communicate with one another, as if speaking to their past and future accordingly.

Scene 1

Lights come on upstage first. Lalaji, Wajid Bhai and Mrs. Ghosh are talking to each other.

Wajid Bhai: *Apko vishwaas tha Lalaji?*

Lalaji: *Khud pe itna toh tha ki badhiya imaarat zaroor khadee ho jayegee?*

Laughter

Lalaji: *(continues)* aur baaquee aap par tha Wajid Bhai…

Wajid Bhai: *Humein toh aapke hausle ne vishwaas dilaya… tabhi yeh nacheez aapka vishwaas paane ke laayak kuch kar paaya… warna humare kissi kaam ke layak hone par; toh humaree begum ko bhee vishwaas nahin hai…*

Laughter

Lalaji: *(to Wajid Bhai) aur sabse badaa kaam aapne Vimla ji se parichay karwake kiya hai. Ma'am I hope aapka vision aapko saakaar hote dikh raha hai humare MODEL school mein…*

Vimla G: *Vision toh aap hee ka hai Lalaji…*

Lalaji: *Hum sab ka hai. Hai na?*

Vimla G: Absolutely *Lalaji.* But what I meant to say is that it is the power of your vision that it has become our collective vision. That's what visionaries do, they create such a powerful, yet relatable vision that so many people see it as their own.

Lalaji: I am honoured that you see it that way. So you do see our vision coming to life in our school?

Silence

Lalaji: Please. Be frank.

Vimla G: Have I ever been anything but?!

Lalaji, a vision or a dream, however powerful is not realised until people mould their values and beliefs towards it…

Wajid Bhai: Which is what we are doing here, isn't it? We are telling them about the greatness of our culture. We are admitting children of all classes and religions so the children learn harmony. With western sciences, we are teaching them Indian values, aren't we?

Vimla G: Yes, but values are not inculcated through classroom instruction Wajib Bhai. Values and beliefs are the result of behaviour, repeatedly done, until it becomes a habit.

If we want our children to believe that all are equal irrespective of their birth or financial status, then they must behave that way with one another… they should dress that way… they should eat that way.

(excited, getting a little ahead of herself perhaps) If we want them to cherish our culture while embracing modern education then they must be taught that way, they should study that way… it is in their deeds that their future lies… We have to build systems and… and create symbols… and, well… simply put, things that they must do… if we are to channelize their energies into behaviour that makes them live up to the ideals that have created this school.

Lalaji: …*(understands, but not fully)* and who better than you to lead us there Vimlaji…

Vimlaji: I need help… we all do… and we are blessed that so many people are stepping forward to help us in this quest. *Lalaji*! Wajid Bhai! You will be so happy to know that Gurudev is coming here… to bless our school… and I sure his divine presence itself will give us so much guidance on what we have to do…

Lalaji: Your Guruji is coming. What an honour.

Vimla G: *(Smiles)* not my Guruji… the country's… in fact he is Gurudev to all of humanity…

Wajid Bhai: Gurudeb Robindronath Thakur… here! In person!!

Fade out

Lights come on, on the left side of the stage. A group of boys and girls in school uniform… teenage students. They are huddled the 'cemented tree' around discussing something…

Student1: *Yeh kya hai yaar!! what the F is this new rule guys!? Why can't we sit here?*

Student2: *Ab subah se shaam tak yaheen pade rahoge toh yehee hoga na…*

Student3: O mister! Tum baithe rehte hoge yahaan par basketball practice ke baad… we only hang out here during free periods…

Student2: Ya but you hang out na! and somebody or the other is always hanging out here… so what do you think it looks like… yeh school hai yaar!

Student4: Ya… but they are saying we can't hang out here only during school hours.

Silence

Student5: Oye Dumbo! Toh tu kya school ke baad rukegee yahaan cemented tree pe hang out karne ke liye!!

Laughter

Student1: Itnee hee problem hai humare hang out karne se toh yeh banaya hee kyun yaar!!

Fade in upstage. Gurudev has joined the three. He speaks to them.

Gurudev: Children are sensitive. They are sensitive to light, to the air to the heat, the cold. They are sensitive to walls, to shouts, to anger. They must be free. Only then will their minds be free to learn. And this is best achieved when

they are in the midst of nature. Give them open grounds, give them trees, let animals be their friends. Let them walk barefoot on the grass, let them climb trees and skin their knees. Let them stare at the clouds and stars in wonder. Let them get drenched in the rain.

Silence

Wajid Bhai: Gurudev! We shall strive to make this school live up to your words… but, but we are in the middle of a crowded city… and there are so many students… so many others want to get in… we need to make space for them. We need classrooms…

By now the students have noticed this conversation and are looking through the photo frame

Gurudev: *(with equanimity)* Then fill the walls with windows. Give them time and space to explore and experience whatever nature they find. Just like the beauty of a lotus is heightened by the dirt of the pond around it, maybe the crowded city will heighten their senses to the little bit of nature they experience at school. As they breathe in the air blessed by the fragrance of plants… they will grow strong roots like them, they will grow up to be as kind and beautiful as nature itself.

Student1: I told you guys! They had planted these trees so we could hang out around them.

Gurudev *notices the students through the frame*

Gurudev: *(perturbed)* Why are these young ones talking of hangings!?

Vimla G: They mean sitting around the trees in school. Idling away… and isn't that the danger Gurudev, the absence of discipline… the propensity to laziness, even indolence?

Gurudev: There is always danger with children. But what danger do we choose for them?

The danger that they grow up to be disciplined hard working machines OR, they grow up to be free-spirited lazy humans… though it will never come to that. I have always been more inspired in the open, idling away under a tree with friends… or even alone, rather than in rooms, listening to lectures. *(with a mischievous glint)* and so was Newton, wouldn't you say?

Lalaji: *(as if making a declaration)* This school shall choose the dangers you want for its pupils Gurudev…

Two more students enter. They are younger. Dressed in equestrian gear.

Student6: What's happening guys?

Student3: Shh… Gurudev is telling our founding fathers why we shouldn't be studying but lazing around.

Student2: That's what you are taking out of this!! He's telling us to learn more, not just in the class room, but even when we are here…

Wajid Bhai: And with your blessings, we have enough land to create the environment you envisage… but there's one thing we are already doing, we have started teaching horse riding to our students… they will know how to handle animals…

Vimla G: Well if we wanted them to know how to handle animals, we would have put them in politics… What you are saying is not entirely accurate Wajid Bhai… we are teaching horse riding because we want them to copy the skills of the nobility…

Wajid Bhai: And what is wrong with that. A horse is a fine animal, by riding one, a child will learn of discipline and grace and strength… and isn't that what Gurudev is saying, when he wants children to interact with animals?

Vimla G: I would like to hear what Gurudev has to say about that.

Gurudev: Let me ask the children…

Speaks through the frame

Gurudev: …tell me little ones… do you love horse riding?

Student 6,7: *(in unison)* Yes sir!

Gurudev: And what are your horses called?

Student6: Rani

Student7 : Black pearl

Gurudev: And I have no doubt that Black pearl is a white coloured horse.

Laughter

Gurudev: *(continues)* But such lovely names. When do you ride?

Student7: Sir we come early in the morning and then sometimes we stay back after school to ride some more.

Gurudev: Now tell me… is that all you do? Do you bathe the horses? Do you groom them? Do you massage their legs? Horses love that you know. Do you feed them? Do you clean up their droppings and take them away?

Silence. The students are perplexed. Lalaji & team realise what Gurudev has said.

Gurudev: Don't just ride them my children. Love them. Know them. Honour them.

Teacher appears.

Teacher1: Come on *bachchas*… back to your classes. You know you are not supposed to be here…

The characters on both part of the stage begin dispersing.

Fade out

ACT 2
Scene 2

Lights come on to school students at morning assembly.

A teacher appears upstage (Left) in a spot & says "Ram Nam"

Praying – "Ram naam ras peeje"

While the prayer is going on, lights appear upstage. Lalaji, Wajid Bhai, Vimla G and Mahatma Gandhi (Bapu) are sitting on the platform, cross legged. Bapu is sitting in his iconic pose. They are listening to the prayer.

The students are praying facing them.

Prayer ends.

Spot dims. Teacher leaves.

Bapu: *(With love and in awe of the prayer sung by the kids)* Nayamatma Balheenen Labhya.(to *Lalaji).* Aapke model school ka yehee motto hai na?

Lalaji: Ji Bapu…

Vimla G: Children! Can any of you tell Bapu what it means?

Hands Raised. Vimla G indicates to one.

Student gets up and speaks

Student1: Sir it means that Self Realization cannot be achieved by the week willed.

Bapu: *(Thinks. Smiles. An explanation is coming)* Very good my child. But I want to share something with all of you. As you would know, many many years ago, my belief in the justness of our rulers was destroyed when I was thrown out of a train, even though I had a valid ticket, just because I was an Indian. I too had a realization… but attaining the self, required far greater struggle…

My will was not very strong… I made many mistakes in my journey… but I told myself, if I continue to walk the path of Ahimsa and Satya, I shall overcome…

Student2: Bapu! So your will also broke?

Bapu: Many times. But coming back to the path, you all; may wish to take. Rising after falling. That is strength. So, we should simplify things… so I think my children, your motto should simply mean "the self cannot be achieved by the weak"…

By the way… do you know where this line comes from?

Silence. One hand goes up hesitantly.

Student3: Mundak Upanishad… sir?!

Bapu: Yes. That is correct. I am so happy *(jokes with the kids)* Well, truth be told, I am just showing off here. I also wouldn't have guessed. Rajaji told me before I came here.

Laughter

A boy student sneaks in. He is wearing a T-shirt inside his shirt which is unbuttoned. He sits down towards the rear of the group of students. A Male sports teacher notices him and shouts…

Teacher2: Eip… whtittz *(he is a physical education teacher)* shtap!

Student4: Sir what shut up? *Maine toh kuch kahaa hee naheen…*

Teacher2: *Mujhe pata naheen kya ki tum abhi bologe! Iseeliye maine pehe hee keh diya. Shtap! Don't answer back!!*

Student4: *Kya hua sir!*

Teacher2: *Yeh kya tareeqa hai. Ek toh late ho… aur yeh kaise shirt pehan rakhkhee hai!! Theek karo!*

Student4: *Sir abhee khatam hui hai na* football practice! *(tucking in his shirt)*

Teacher2: *Aur yeh kya haalat banaa rakhkhee hai shirt kee… press nahin karwa sakte…*

Student4: *Sir maine khud kee thee… ab itnee hee hotee hai (to Bapu) kya Bapu… aapne kaisee shirts karvadeen humare school mein… inko manage karna kitna tough hota hai…*

Teacher2: *Shtap!! Bapu se zabaan ladaata hai.* You will be punishment!! As punishment – you slap yourself! Or I will slap myself!!

Student4: *(sniggers… as do other students)* OK sir. You slap yourself!

Teacher2: What!!! *(raises his had to slap, Bapu intervenes)*

Bapu: Sir! Sir! Please. Firstly, my deepest apologies. I know I should come between a guru and shishya, but non-violence is my first article of faith, and whether this young man slaps himself or, you do it… it is violence. And this old man cannot bear much of it any more… So tell me my boy you don't like khadee…

Student4: No Bapu. We all understand why you supported Khadee and we are all with you. But for the school uniform?? I mean seriously… we are not doing Satyagraha here na. *Theek se press naheen ho paatee hai… oopar se itnee weak hotee hain… aap khud hee dekh lo… yahaan pe aadhon kee toh jeben phatee hui hain…* and then they say tie *pehen na hai…* with this material collar hee kahaan hota hai tie pehanane ke liye… it looks so shabby…

Vimla G gets up to admonish & silent the boy; but Bapu stops her

Bapu: …please… *itna achcha lag raha hai…* if this is the type of boys Model school produces, our country is in safe hands… *sach bol raha hai yeh… jis waqt kee yeh paidawaar hai… usme to sach sunayee hee nahin deta…*

(turns to speak to the boy)

My son, do you press your shirt yourself?

Student4: Yes Bapu. Every morning… I have only one shirt *(embarrassed)*… and we… we can't afford a *dhobee…* so I…

Bapu: Ah my child. You speak the truth… and do your own work… you do not need Khadee… you stand for what it stands for… I have never been prouder… but my child, everyone is not as fortunate as you are… many craftsmen are as weak as the cloth you complain about… many don't have the technology which can make the cloth so fine that it smoothens when you iron… if you wear Khadi for them… you will do a great service to the nation… so what do you say?

Student4: *(moved)* Yes Bapu. Always!

Student5: But Bapu… what about the tie?

Bapu: Well I for one didn't favour it… it doesn't suit our weather… but Jawahar and Babasaheb don't agree; Babasaheb anyway doesn't agree on many things with me… so wear it only if absolutely necessary…

Students cheer and take off their ties

Bapu quietens them. Does a namaskar and prepares to leave.

Vimla G: Children! Shall we sing another prayer for Bapu…

Wajid Bhai: *(to Vimla G)* Vaishnav Jana Toh?

Bapu: Allow me. Children. I want you to join me in prayer. And I choose this prayer, not only because it is one of my favourites, but I want every student of Model school to believe that in the eyes of God, all his children, whatever their religion, are the same.

He shuts his eyes and commences singing. The students, taken aback at first, join him soon.

Abide with Me – First two stanzas

Bapu gets up to leave. All four begin to leave.

Student3: Bapu!

Bapu: Yes… aah… my Upanishad loving child…

Student3: Thank you Bapu… Bapu… our school's motto line, you have explained through your words, but we all love you because you have also stood for another line from the Mundak Upanishad…

Bapu: Which is…

Student3: *(quotes from the Upanishads)*

Satyameva jayate nanrtam satyen panthaa vitato devyanah, Yenakramantrishyoh yaaptakaamaa yatra tat satyasya paramam nidhaanam

Bapu: Satyamev Jayate… Truth alone Triumphs… I like the sound of that… I must tell Jawahar… we will use it someday…

Fadeout in the student section

Lalaji and team escort Bapu out and Fadeout. Audience hears…

Lalaji: Thank you Bapu… you have given Model school its meaning… our school's motto has found meaning… even what we wear… Model school shall not lose your talisman… never!

Bapu: And your students have given our country a meaning… a motto… SATYAMEV JAYATE.

ACT 2
Scene 3

Fade in to a bunch of students gathered around the cemented tree; and simultaneously upstage on the characters. Bapu has been replaced by Sarojini Naidu.

The students are miming a heated discussion among themselves, while Sarojini Naidu is reciting out one of her poems in song verse.

SN: *(recites the first verse of her poem – An Indian Love Story)*

"He
Lift up the veils that darken the
delicate moon
of thy glory and grace,
Withhold not, O love, from the night
of my longing the joy of thy luminous
face,
Give me a spear of the scented keora
guarding thy pinioned curls,
Or a silken thread from the fringes
that trouble the dream of thy
glimmering pearls;
Faint grows my soul with thy tresses'
perfume
and the song of thy anklets' caprice,
Revive me, I pray, with the magical
nectar

that dwells in the flower of thy kiss"

She looks around at her audience upstage

Lalaji: How enchanting…

Vimla G: Is it any wonder that Bapu has given you the title of Nightingale of India?

SN: I have to take Bapu to task on that one. Ever since he has started calling me that, my husband expects me to stay up at night and sing for him!

Laughter

SN: I love being here. I love it that boys and girls study together. Most of the so called good schools are either boys only or girls only.

The three of them look at each other uncomfortably

SN: I think it's the best part about Model school! I know that you are imbibing Indian and nationalistic values. I know you are focussing on giving commoners the education that has so far been reserved for the aristocracy or a select section of society – all these are good things, but there is no greater service than doing this with boys and girls studying together…

The three of them look at each other uncomfortably

SN: *(continues)* …isn't it unnatural - for eight to ten hours of the day for boys and girls to be segregated. What kind of mentality will such children have!

They should grow up as they are growing up here – making friendships, and build camaraderie without thinking of gender…

The students who have been miming start speaking. The characters upstage turn to mime the conversation that Sarojini Naidu has initiated.

Student1: You're kidding right!

Student2: No man! Seriously that's what their suspension letter says…

Student3: *Kha Kassam!*

Student2: Don't be weird yaar… why would I lie about this… the letter says they have been suspended because they were found in a state of – "passionate embrace!"

Laughter

Characters upstage notice.

SN: What was that?

Vimla G: Something that is going to happen a few decades from now…

Wajid Bhai: And that's the worry you see…

SN: That young boys and girls will fall in love?

Lalaji: …that they can make mistakes…

SN: Which we all do… and shouldn't we let them make mistakes on our watch rather than later in life as some frustrated adults who haven't grown up with the opposite sex…

And if we have an Indian love story… which is the title of the poem you just heard… that begins with childhood sweethearts… how wonderful…

Lalaji: You are right… *(ingratiatingly)*… and can you be anything but… but… *(hesitates)* we have students from so many castes, and communities…

SN: Then this is the only way we will end all this!

Vimla G: Who can argue with that…

School students continue

Student4: Who was it you said?

Student5: Arre Avee and Sukanya…

Student2: Haan yaar… that duffer Avi got a little emotional and…

Student5: *Yaar yeh jo Avee aise kaheen bhi emotional ho jaata hai naa… mujhe toh lagta hai isiliye ladkiyan senti ho jaati hain…* by the way you also had a crush on him na…

Student6: I did, but last year mom ne uskee ek puranee photo dikhadee thee… we used to go in the same bus na… *ek din uskee potty nikal gayee thi jab woh P1 mein tha…* Mom took him home and changed him into Vipul Bhaiya's clothes… but before that Mom took a photo of him like that… drenched in his own… blaah!

Bas tabse guys… crush poora crush ho gaya…

Laughter

Student2: Shayad tabse Avee ghadee ghadee emotional ho jaata hai!

More laughter

Student3: 'Motional' hone se toh achcha hai na!!

Peals of Laughter

Student4: Par iss baar Sukanya koh bhee phansaa diya…

Student2: Yeh bhi koi kehne kee baat hai, obviously uss gadhe kee galtee hai - Sukku is too smart to get caught OK…

Student1: Toh yeh bhee kaunsee kehne kee baat hai! the world knows… that Model school girls are smarter than Model school boys…

Girls whistle and laughter

Student5: But you know that's because a woman's brains develop faster than a man's right?

Student1: No… women's brains develop… and men's *(pause)* don't

Girls whistle and laugh. The guys are a bit peeved, but join in the laughter soon. The kids are happy. The group is having fun.

The characters upstage have stopped their mimed discussions to look at the children affectionately.

Lalaji: *(smiling, then in mock anger)* so girls are smarter than boys… that's what they will learn

Vimla G & SN in unison – "Now who can argue with that!"

Laughter

Fade out

ACT 2
Scene 4

A middle-aged man. Handsome. Tall. In a full army uniform of a Major General appears under a spot light in a vacant area left upstage. He stands erect. As if inspecting a parade. Salutes a couple of times, to marching music.

Fade in to Lalaji, Wajid Bhai and Vimla G looking through the photo frame, with love and pride.

Wajid Bhai: Mashallah!

Vimla G: How resplendent he looks. And he's not just watching a parade go by, he's inspecting them, like a school headmaster making mental notes of what he's going to tell the boys after the parade.

Lalaji: And why shouldn't he be – he is the first Director General of the National Cadet Core of the Republic Of India.

Lights come on left stage in the student area.

Three / four young boys are sitting, standing. Morose.

Student1: Yaar mat ja buddy!

Pause

Student2: I have to go yaar.

Pause

Student3: Dude, it's not compulsory.

Student2: Yes I know. But I am clear that I want to get into the NDA, and if I am in the NCC at school I have a far greater chance.

Student4: *Yaar… Abhi theek hee toh keh rahaa hai* it's not compulsory, you'll get through! We know it man!

Student3: And even if you don't get through now, do your graduation, join the NCC in college and go to the IMA… *who bhee toh rastaa hai na…*

Student2: *Par mera raastaa nahin hai…*

Student1: *Yaar tuh karta toh hai* march past… and you also wear a beret and that… *kya bolte hain usse, jo tu sash pehanta hai…* you are learning that stuff here na…

Student3: *Aur humare paas* band *bhi toh hai poora* army type, with kilts and all…

Student2: March past aur kilts pehanke band bajaane se koi martial culture naheen banta hai…

Student1: *Tu miss nahin karega humein*??

Student2: *Kya baat kar rahaa hai yaar.* Of course karoonga… but I have to give it my best… if that means leaving Model to join a school that has an NCC battalion, then so be it…

Student4: Dammit yaar! Humare school mein NCC kyun nahin hai?

Student3: *Maine suna hai ki kuch saal pehle* Mr. Gatjoo *the, woh* manage *karte the* NCC. *Unke jaane ke baad… phir school mein* NCC *bhi naheen raha…*

Student1: *Issiliye ab yeh bhi humare saath school mein naheen rahega*!!!

Pause

Student3: *Theek hai… koi gal naheen (imitating Amrish Puri) …ja puttar… ja… jee le apnee zindagi…*

Laughter

Student4: But don't forget the musketeers…

They huddle and cheer…

One for all and all for one

Fadeout

Chorus starts singing. Light returns to see the students as a choir.

Choir Sings. While the choir is singing Wajid Bhai, Lalaji and Vimla G enter with a bespectacled man in an overcoat.

Subhash ji Subhash ji,

Woh jaan-e-Hind aa gaye,

Hai naaz jispe Hind ko,

Who shaan-e-Hind aa gaye…

Subhash ji Subhash ji,

Who jaan-e-Hind aa gaye,

Subhash ji urgently asks them to get the choir to stop singing. Vimla G makes a gesture. The Choir understands and leaves. Lights fade on the student area.

Lalaji: Netaji! We never thought you would come?

Netaji: Why? Why would I not? I want to see the future of my country…

Wajid Bhai: Which is in your hands.

Netaji: No! in theirs. But why did you think that way?

Wajid Bhai: Bapu was here. And the children have pledged themselves to ahimsa and…

Netaji: Bapu was here? Where?

Lalaji: He sat at this very spot and addressed the children.

Netaji: Steps back and bows to where Bapu sat.

Lalaji: But Netaji?

Netaji: I wish I had his courage. But I don't, so I am going to fight. And the children, and your school must follow whatever he has taught them…

Vimla G: Yes Dada, but is there nothing you wish to tell us to run this school better.

Netaji: I don't know much of schools…

Vimla G: …you have taught yourself…

Netaji: But I was a mischievous student

Laughter

Netaji: Tell them that discipline and honour come first. You can lead a life of truth and non-violence only if you have discipline. Let them live a soldier's life; and if that soldier makes Ahimsa his weapon then so be it; but a soldier they must be…

Looks around suspiciously.

I must leave.

Lalaji: You have nothing to fear here Netaji.

Netaji: I know, but I wouldn't want any harm to come to this school for hosting me…

Ashschhee… Jai Hind!

Lalaji, Wajid Bhai & Vimla G in unison – Jai Hind!

Spot comes on Maj. General Raman Singh. It is the only light on stage. He addresses the audience.

General Saab: How do we understand the value of a just and impartial exercise of authority? From where, does our patriotism originate? What teaches is restraint, honesty, truthfulness and self-sacrifice? They don't come from without! They come from within.

I learnt from my father and my teachers, that the way to reach all these ideals is through discipline, and living with honour. And both originate from one thing. Doing what you say, and saying what you do. So today, at this NCC camp to celebrate the foundation of our republic let us vow to live a life of discipline and honour. And repeat after me, the favourite cry of Netaji.

Jai Hind!

Jai Hind!

Jai Hind!

Fadeout

ACT 2
Scene 5

Lights come on to reveal Pandit Nehru being taken around school. He is going around the SUPW block, escorted by Lalaji, Wajid Bhai & Vimla G.

Similarly, a 'chief guest' is going around the SUPW block in today's time escorted by two students in blazers wearing 'Prefect' badges.

A commentary is playing in the background.

Commentary :-

As you can see the Chief guest is being escorted by two Prefects…

The Chief guest is looking very delighted at the efforts done by the school students…

He is stopping at the table where the woodwork team is showcasing their work. Shubham and Aarti have recently done created a wooden sculpture… without using wood…

That is, they have used recycled material only…

The Chief guest shakes their hand, and smiles…

He is nodding as Shubham is explaining the thought behind the work…

The chief guest is now asking a question…

There is laughter…

This is what Model stands for… innovation and fresh thinking which can interest all those who are…

And now the chief guest is looking at a mechanical model created by the Robotics department…

The robotics department recently won second prize at a symposium on… err… robotics conducted by the… robotics department of IIT Delhi and is doing great work on… robotics… led by the teacher in charge of… robotics…

We move to this year's prize-winning project of the book club that has started the program books for all…

The Chief guest is flipping through one of the old books that have been restored by this initiative…

He has paused on a particular page…

He is reading a few lines…

Well, we all want to know what the Chief Guest is reading…

And yes… it seems he is telling the students what he has read…

The students have got a pat on the back…

The chief guest has moved on and is now going to enter the hall…

But wait, something else seems to have caught the Chief Guest's eye…

It is the water purification project of the Chemistry Club…

The students are explaining how the system works…

How dirty water enters the… the different pieces of chemistry lab equipment and how clean waters comes out of the other end…

The Chief guest has picked up a glass of water to taste…

There is some commotion, it seems He has tasted the impure water by mistake…

But they are laughing about it… so no harm done… that is the joy of science…

And now the Chief guest is having another glass of water…

Yes, this is the right glass… well it should be…

Anyway, he is now led to the microphone where he will share his views.

Pandit Nehru starts speaking in his 'Tryst with Destiny' speech style. The new age chief guest is mouthing the same words.

Panditji: A few years ago,

Lalaji established this school.

And even today,

The school retains its edge.

It's creation,

Is something to treasure,

Very Substantially.

When ignorance and superstition,

Are being battled every hour,

Model school is showing the nation,

The path to freedom.

Such a school is established,

Rarely in History.

Known for its cultural,

As well as scientific temper.

Where the soul of students,

Long suppressed,

Find utterance.

Clapping

Chief Guest leaves

ACT 2
Scene 6

Lights come on to reveal four or five boy students sitting in hockey gear and carrying hockey sticks. Coach (Teacher3) enters.

Teacher3: *Kya hua boys yahaan kyun baithe ho? Why aren't you practising?*

Student1: *Aap khud hee dekho na sir… humaree field aaj phir cricket waalon ko dedee hai…*

Student2: *Aisa kyun karte hain sir hockey waalon ke saath?!*

Teacher3 sits down with the students

Teacher3: Ok. So you guys know about Dhyanchand?

Student3: Lagta hai hum hee jaante hain sir, aur koi naheen jaanta hoga…

Teacher3: C'mon boys… don't be so negative.

Student4: *Sahee toh keh rahaa hai na sir! Aap school mein kissi se bhee poonch lo… aadhe se zyaada ko pata hoga ki… ki… Yarra Prithviraj kaun hai… par kissi ko bhi nahin pata hoga ke Indian hockey team ke gyaarah players ke naam kya hain…*

Teacher3: *Toh gal dasso 'yaara'… yeh kaun yaara hai… aur kiska yaara hai… (sniggers)*

Student3: *Sir KKR ka player hai… aur uska naam hai Yarra…*

Teacher3: *Chalo chaddo Yaara ko apne Prithviraj ke saath!*

Main Dhyanchandjee kee baat kar rahaa tha naa… tumhein pata hai, Dhyanchand kaee saal pehle Model school aaye the

The teacher and students freeze and lights come on upstage to see Dhyanchand, flanked by Lalaji, Wajid Bhai and Vimla G making a speech at school.

Dhyanchand: *Main achcha toh door kee baat hai… zara saa bhee bol naheen paata… ishee liye apnee baat stick ke zariye karta hoon…*

Laughter

Par maine suna hai ki aapke master log yahaan stick ka istemaal naheen karte… toh yeh zimmedaaree aapkee bantee hai ki stick uthayein…

Laughter

Arre main hockey stick kee baat kar rahaa hoon… aur mujhe yeh dekh kar khushee hai ki Model school ke chhaatra itne maze se hockey khelte hain.

Wasim Bhai ne mujhe aapke school ki soch se avgat karaya. Kaise Vimla Ji ke netritva mein, Lalji kee soch ko - Bapu, Gurudev aur Panditji jaise logon ne aashirwaad dekar iss school ka taur tareeqa… aur maksad banaya… ushee ke chalte, main aap sabse ek nivedan karna chahoonga.

Jis tarah se… bharat ke naami schoolon par kuch hee khaas logon ka kabza hai… uss hee tarah, cricket, jo main samajhta hoon ek bahut khoobsoorat khel hai, uskee bhi wahee haalat hai.

Raja rajwade… bade businessman ya phir afsar… ya jo videsh mein padhte hai… wahee cricket khelte hai…

Agar aap log chahenge toh cricket bhee sirf Mumbai ya Riyasaton mein naheen, desh ke kone mein khela jayega… dekhiyega… ek din cricket se hee bharat ka naam hoga…

Freeze

Students unfreeze

Student2: *Oh teri! Toh se sab unka karaa dharaa hai ki ab humare school mein sab cricket hee karte hain…*

Teacher3: *Yeh ghalat baat hai… Woh isliye karte hain kyunkee humaree team badhiya hai… jeetatee hai… aur bahut saare students cricket khelte hain… tum log bhi apne game ko itna badhiya karo ki sab hockey khelna chaahein… simple!*

Student3: *Kaise karenge sir? Humein tournaments mein toh bhejte naheen hai – yeh kehke ki hum haar jaate hain…*

Teacher3: *Haarne mein koi sharm naheen hai, par taiyyaree toh jeet kee karo??!*

Student4: *Sir ghoom phirke baat waheen aa gayee na… taiyyaree kahaan karein agar field available naheen hai toh?*

Teacher3: *Tab tak running karo. Exercise karo. Spot dribbling karo. Agar din mein field naheen miltee toh shyam ko khele. Par ruko mat.*

Student1: *Sir padhai bhee toh karnee hotee hai…*

Dhyanchand's speech continues

Badee mushkilein jheleen hum logon ne… paise the naheen… naahee jeetne par milte… bas yeh khwaab ki jo thaan kar nikle hain usse poora karnaa hai… aap toh jaante hee honge… humaare paas achche joote naheen the… toh kya hua, nange pair khel liye.

Har school mein yehee sikhaaya jaata hai ki pehle padhai, phir khel kood. Par sirf Model school mein maine dekha hai… ki yeh faisla students ke haath mein hai… pehchaano… pehchaano ki aapka lakshya, rujhaan, chaahat, sapna – kya hai… aur phir usse apna pehla lakshya naheen… ek maatra lakshya banao… chahe who padhai ho ya khel.

Dhanyawaad.

Speech ends. Everyone applauds.

Fade out

ACT 2
Scene 7

Fade in to two girls wandering onto the set. A young woman upstage – Amrita Shergill and a teenage schoolgirl downstage. The student is wearing the salwar kurta version of the uniform. They are walking similarly. They are lost. They talk slowly. With pauses. Dreamily.

ASG: This place is so vibrant.

Student1: This place is so dead.

ASG: I'm so glad I came back.

Student1: I'm so happy I'm leaving.

ASG: *(pulls out a letter and stares at it)* Why does Jawahar send letters?

Student1: *(pulls out a letter and stares at it)* Why did I get this letter from Williams College?

Another student joins her. She creeps up from behind and hugs her suddenly.

Student2: Hey!!... congratulations!

You made it.

Kya hua? Why so glum? This is what you wanted. Isn't it?

ASG: This is what I wanted. Isn't it?

Student1: I don't know. Mom & Dad always said that there's no point studying in a school like Model if you can't use it to get out and study abroad.

ASG: If mom and dad had got me here when I was a student, I would have probably never left India.

Student2: But even you used to say that you will discover yourself as an artist abroad.

ASG: The colour. The noise. The bold ambivalence of this land. I have truly discovered myself as an artist here.

Student1: Yes I know.

Student2: Achcha baith. Chal bataa, what's bugging you?

Student1: Today, our bus took a different route to get to school. We came via Amrita Sher Gill Marg…

Student2: So?

Student1: Yaar it was so beautiful. Like I was passing through a canopy of beauty… I just realised that being here is like having an umbrella… which I will lose… and I don't want to…

Student2: You won't. And you know, that's actually the point about studying at a school like Model… it's like your own personal umbrella… so if it rains and you don't like it… comeback; but go there and find out for yourself if your art is here. After all, art is where the heart is.

Student1: That was so cheesy na.

Laughter

ASG: But would I have discovered this about myself if I had not gone abroad?

Two girls come along and tease Students 1 & 2.

Student3: *Kya hua behenji. Foreign jaaogee… please kapde thode dhang ke pehenna wahan… humare school ki naak mat katwaa dena…*

Student2: Why don't you take a flying…

Student1: *Jaane de naa yaar…*

Student4: Jaane de babes…

Student3: *Jaane de… but agar chalee gayee toh yeh chanchagiri kiski karegee…*

Student2: Saali…

The two girls rush off laughing among themselves.

Student2: *Log band naheen karenge na… doosron ko judge karna…*

Student1: I'm a Modelite… do you think I care!

ASG: But they won't stop judging me. Who cares! And I hope every girl here… and everywhere in the world says this whenever someone raises a finger at them… "do you think I care"

Leaves. As do the girls on the other side. As she is leaving, Lalaji, Wajid Bhai and Vimla G cross her.

Lalaji: … who was that?

Wajid Bhai: Wasn't she that… that painter… *kya naam hai uska… zubaan pe aate – aate reh gaya…*

Vimla G: Amrita Sher Gill!!

Wajid Bhai: Haan!

Vimla G: Lets go catch her. I'm sure we will all learn something from letting her interact with the students here…

They go out calling out for ASG.

Vimla G: Excuse me… Amrita… Amrita…

Fadeout

ACT 3

The headmasters of the four 'leading schools' are gathered around the meeting table. They are from Mayor College (MC), Boon School (BS), St. Pal's (SP) and Dilly – Dally College (DDC)

MC: …so it's agreed then, shall we make the declaration…

BS: Yes, I believe it's the only way forward if our schools have to survive in the India after independence…

Notices that DDC is chuckling

Have I said something amusing?

DDC: No, I was just remembering what *Lalaji* had told me, some twenty years ago… "that he will build a school that we will all have to become"

SP: He has certainly proven to be true to his word…

BS: I for one have no qualms in admitting that Model is now the model for us…

MC: …Certainly, and not just in changing our admission policy to make our schools more inclusive and diverse, but in our pedagogy as well… we can no longer be English Public Schools running in India… we have to become Indian Public Schools…

Pause

DDC: …Might I suggest we call this gathering, and subsequent ones, by this name – The Indian Public Schools Congress"…

BS: Let's avoid using the word 'Congress'… it might get too political…

MC: Maybe… 'Conclave'

BS: Yes that sounds fine.

SP: So it's settled then, the Indian Public Schools Conclave…

DDC: Should we read out the declaration then.

MC: Certainly.

Begins to read

We shall focus on educating the Indian public through first class schools whose general training shall be designed to prepare students of ability for positions of leadership and responsibility in all walks of life…

His voice fades away

Spotlight on ***Lalaji*** *standing upstage and continuing the speech*

Lalaji: …To create Indians, who are citizens of the world, but children of India…

Who are the elite, without being elitist…

Who lead with belief, yet follow with faith…

Who know how to demonstrate their might, but know in their heart, that right makes might…

Who know how to harness nature, and have the wisdom to bow to her…

Who strive to eliminate differences, but value and respect them as well…

Who are obedient, but independent… who never let their obedience cloud their judgement…

Who don't shirk from a fight, but have the skill and wisdom to win without fighting…

And should they have to fight, fight fair…

Who play to win, but for whom the glory of sport transcends winning or losing…

Who speak the truth… even if their voice shakes…

May they live in a world…

Where…

The entire cast has come on stage and mouths the following words in unison…

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high,

Where knowledge is free…

Where words come out from the depths of truth…

One person speaks

Where each one of us has the strength to be ourself…

Nayamatma Balheenen Labhya

BLACKOUT