

Swati Arora

Be a Little Careful: Women, Violence, and Performance in India

In this article Swati Arora analyzes a contemporary Indian feminist performance, *Thoda Dhyaan Se (A Little Carefully)*, 2013, by framing it in the spatial ecosystem of the city of Delhi and exploring its engagement with feminist discourse and the national imaginary of India. It highlights the workings of the cultural economy of the city, which is defined by its spatial contours as well as the privileges of caste, class, sexuality, and ethnicity, and at the same time explores the heterogeneous nature of the country's feminist movement through an intersectional perspective. Swati Arora argues that the concerns raised by *Thoda Dhyaan Se* are limited to urban, middle-class, and upper-caste women and overlook the oppressive realities of women from non-urban, lower-class, and lower-caste backgrounds. With conversations around gender focused through campaigns like #MeToo and #TimesUp, it is important to contextualize the voices that are articulated and those that are excluded. Swati Arora is an Andrew W. Mellon postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape. Her work exists at the intersections of theatre and performance, feminist theory, critical urban studies, post/de-colonial theory, and visual cultures. She completed her PhD at the University of Exeter and is a co-convenor of the International Federation of Theatre Research.

Key terms: gender, caste, violence, feminist theatre, Delhi, urban space, Mallika Taneja.

CONCEPTUALIZED and performed by the Delhi-based artist Mallika Taneja, *Thoda Dhyaan Se (Be a Little Careful)* was first performed at the Stein auditorium in Delhi on 16 December 2013, exactly one year after the gang rape of 23-year old Jyoti Singh.¹ It was presented as part of *Jurraat* (to dare), a national campaign concerning violence against women, and is a witty satire that criticizes the correlation between women's attire and their safety, and the patriarchal advice that cautions women to take responsibility and protect themselves from sexual violence in India.

The performance was born out of Taneja's own experiences of being a single woman in the city and navigating the anxiety of safety in public street space on a daily basis. Its first international recognition came in the form of the ZKB Acknowledgement Prize at the Theater Spektakel in Zurich in 2015, and it has since performed at such festivals as Les Urbaines in Lausanne (2015), the International Theatre Festival of Kerala (2016), Alchemy at the Southbank Centre in London

(2016), the Short Theatre Festival in Rome (2017), and most recently at the Women of the World Festival in Brisbane (2018). The production is in its fifth year and continues to receive invitations and critical acclaim from across the globe.

In her discussion of the application of cultural materialism to understand the workings of theatre industries in urban environments, Jen Harvie has shown that 'what we can and cannot do is profoundly conditioned – or constrained – by the material conditions in which we try to do it'.² However, she continues, 'It might indeed be *useful* to recognize how theatre and urban cultures are socially oppressive rather than wishfully to think that they are inevitably sites of liberation just because we want them to be; recognizing their limitations might usefully help us to address those limitations.'³ This requires an urgent reconsideration of social agency and ways of thinking about how theatre practices navigate the hegemonic socio-political ideologies of neoliberal capitalism.

Following Harvie, Taneja's performance is discussed here as a product of the cultural and political climate of India as well as that of the material urban environment of the capital city of Delhi. The feminist politics of *Thoda Dhyaan Se* is revealed as in tension with the privileged conditions of its production and reception. In this article I draw on Henri Lefebvre's groundbreaking exploration of space in *The Production of Space* (1991), both in its adoption of a spatial trialectic and in its critique of capitalism and the role of the state as an institution of power. Thus, I have adapted Lefebvre's two sets of spatial trialectics (representations of space, spatial practice and representational space; and conceived space, perceived space, and lived space) to develop my own trialectic that identifies and addresses specific aspects of performance in the urban public spaces of Delhi.

My trialectic – affective space, geographical space, and discursive space – makes use of Lefebvre's socio-political understanding of space for analyzing the *situatedness* of theatrical street performances. Affective space refers to the space of stories and the space of questions that inspire the artists to make the work they do; geographical space denotes the physical space in which the performances are created, as well as the spatial code of particular sites; while discursive space includes the visible and invisible spaces of power.

The simultaneous operation of these three components of space as well the multidimensional aspect of each of the components contributes to the critical 'liveness' required for my performance analysis. It opens up a possibility to explore how this social aspect of space can become a creative and aesthetic dimension through which the repressive political and social marginalization is negotiated and interrogated by the performative aspect of theatre.

This article is thus an invitation to identify the ways in which a performance event is caught in the complex spatial network of the city. An analysis of the internal interaction between the three dimensions of my trialectic offers the possibility of exploring the

contradictory yet productive tensions between the operating forces. It proposes that even when the art work intends to be subversive in its political orientation, it can be seen to be entangled in a web of spatial structures by virtue of its geographic, ideological, social, and political affiliations. Further, the discussion highlights the heterogeneous character of the contemporary phase of the feminist movement in the country by using an intersectional perspective, which pays close attention to the role of region, class, caste, sexuality, and ethnicity in determining the ability to be heard, beyond the ability to speak.⁴

While not denying its significance for the feminist discourse in the country, I argue that the concerns raised by *Thoda Dhyaan Se* are limited to urban, middle-class, and upper-caste women and exclude the oppressive realities of women from non-urban, lower-class, and lower-caste backgrounds. The visibility and popularity that Taneja's performance has claimed can be said to be a consequence of its location – in the national capital region – that is inextricably embroiled in an ideological endorsement of the national symbolic, even when the national state is not necessarily benign. The discussion throws light on how the neoliberal market ideologies function by multiplication of images of the majoritarian aesthetic – upper-class, upper-caste, Hindu – in the Indian context.

AFFECTIVE SPACE

Be a Little Careful begins with a dark, bare stage, except for a spot in the centre where piles of clothes are placed carelessly on two wooden chairs. A few seconds of silence pass before Taneja appears from upstage left and walks towards the stage centre with slow, confident steps. The light reveals her to be dressed only in her underclothes. She stares at the audience, as if looking into a mirror. With her hands on her waist and her profile to the audience, she is composed and self-possessed. Taneja's examination of her neatly toned body slowly changes into admiration. She switches profile, continuing her sharp



Mallika Taneja
in *Be a Little
Careful* as 'she
begins to
envelop herself
frantically in
all sorts of
clothing'.
Photo: David
Wohlschlag.

gaze at the audience. Another long pause follows.

This entire sequence does not last for more than two minutes, but one can sense that the audience feels otherwise. There is an eerie, uncomfortable silence in the auditorium. A few people are heard coughing. Another minute passes before Taneja has finished admiring herself in the mirror. The sharp centre spot changes to a bright ambient stage light and, suddenly, she begins to envelop herself frantically in all sorts of clothing. A scarf is used to cover her midriff, the ends sealed with a knot. Several

other layers follow, one scarf over the other. Many knickers and shorts of various sizes are then worn to make sure that 'no one points fingers at her later' in case 'anything goes wrong'.⁵

The performance is about the patriarchal concern for a woman's 'safety' when she is outside her home. Taneja quotes her father, who, like any other father of the Indian middle class, insists that his daughter has to 'be a little careful' when she steps out of the house. It is the 'responsibility' of every woman to 'protect' herself by following certain unwritten rules, she tells us.⁶ The patriarchal

discourse around protection of women's bodies is repeated as she puts on many layers of clothes, of different colours, sizes, and fabrics to make herself 'rape-proof'.

The sentences gradually lose the measured tone of the opening as the volume, pitch, and rhythm of her speech increases. Soon after this, they become phrases repeated like frantic chants. The figure of the confident woman who had entered the stage and admired herself with pride transforms into an anxious, insecure, and infantilized girl who pays heed to the cautions of her father. Her slow, careful choice of clothes in the beginning becomes absurd as Taneja loses all sense of aesthetics, symmetry, and coordination. Each piece of clothing becomes a wall necessary to guard her from the outside world.

After Taneja has repeated her father's words, she shares a secret with the audience: there is a party at her office later that evening. She picks out a red and white floral dress with great excitement, but stops herself, saying, 'Par iska yeh matpal thode hi hai ki aap kuchh bhi pehen ke chale jaayenge!' ('But that does not mean you can wear anything!') A special, celebratory occasion certainly demand special attire, but that does not give you the 'choice' to dress 'inappropriately', she mutters.⁷ She wears her favourite floral dress, but only after her body has been covered with several layers of mismatched and ill-fitted garments together with hand gloves.

The absurdity of the image is made clear when she concludes by covering her head with a helmet, the final addition to her armour. Before she can step out of the house, she has ensured that her body is rape-proof. She asks the audience: 'Main kaisi lag rahi hoon?' ('How am I looking?')

The Patriarchal Discourse of Femininity

Be a Little Careful is a sharp critique of the social and psychological restrictions imposed on urban middle-class women, who are expected to perform their femininity in ways that conform to the patriarchal discourse of

respectability and safety. It satirizes the strategies of control used by families and well-wishers who seek to 'protect' women's bodies from the dangers of the street in metropolitan spaces in such a way as to utilize the affective space of performance.

This aspect of my trialectic refers to the space of stories and the concerns or questions that motivate the artists to create the work that they do. Affective space places the body of artists, poets, and revolutionaries at the centre as they engage with non-hegemonic forms of creative practice and social resistance. It is thus the only dimension in the trialectic that offers agency to the body of the artists and to the performative potential of theatre practice itself. Further, it is a generative space that explores alternative forms of socio-spatial reorganization, as well as being a space of memories and a heterotopic space, with a potential for challenging the repressive tendencies of the establishment.⁸

In *Be a Little Careful*, Taneja's act of wrapping her semi-nude body with layers of clothing to make it 'rape-proof' mocks the middle-class belief that equates a fully clothed body with safety – the falsity of this belief being proven by two recent rape incidents that inspired Taneja. In both cases, the survivors were single women from middle-class backgrounds who were used to navigating the city spaces on their own terms and who were both fully dressed and accompanied by men. Using humour and irony, Taneja's presentation of her body challenges the culture of victim-blaming and shaming that places the onus of safety on the woman and which conveniently excludes from its narrative the structural violence that encourages patriarchal objectification of the female body.

After almost a year and a half of performing across India, Taneja went on stage absolutely naked for the show's first international performance in Zurich in 2015. On the European stage, a naked female body might not be very uncommon, but a naked Indian woman performing on stage as a protest against gendered violence garnered a lot

of media attention and publicity. Taneja's first naked performance in India took place at the International Theatre Festival of Kerala (ITFoK) in January 2016, to an intimate audience at the black-box Natayagruham. Since ITFoK, Taneja has continued to perform the piece naked, mostly in institutional festivals and at small, intimate venues in Delhi, and the length of the performance has increased from eight to twenty minutes. For the performance that forms part of *Jurrat, Thoda Dhyaan Se* was due to be played outside at the Munirka bus stop, but the organizers cancelled these plans at the last minute as they feared it would be too provocative and dangerous.

Nakedness as Protest in *Draupadi*

The question of representation of nakedness and its use as a mode of protest is vexed, especially in the Indian context, albeit not exclusive to it. Renowned Manipuri director Heisnam Kanhailal's adaptation of Mahasweta Devi's short story *Draupadi*, in which Sabitri Heisnam appears naked on stage as the character of Dropdi, is a case in point. Devi borrows the title of her story from the character of Draupadi, the polyandrous wife of five Pandava brothers in the ancient Indian Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*. Towards the end of the tale, the Pandavas lose Draupadi to the Kauravas, the enemy step-brothers, in a game of dice. When she refuses to come to the court, the Kaurava Prince Dushasana is asked to drag Draupadi by her hair in full view of the public. His efforts at disrobing Draupadi are countered by Lord Krishna appearing mysteriously in answer to Draupadi's prayer. When Dushasana tries to disrobe her by force, the length of Draupadi's sari becomes never-ending, and the exhausted Dushasana eventually gives up.

Devi's *Draupadi*, however, is set against the Naxalite peasant rebellion that took place in the Naxalbari region of West Bengal in the 1960s. It takes place with the revolt in the background by lower castes against their exploitation by rich, upper-caste landowners, which included sexual harassment of tribal women, under the aegis of Armed Forces

Special Forces Act (AFSPA).⁹ Under special privileges provided to the Indian army for combating terrorism, this controversial Act has provided impunity to its officers, who have been accused of sexual violence in Kashmir, Manipur, and Chhattisgarh.

When Kanhailal adapted Devi's story for the stage in 2000, the character of the tribal protagonist Dropdi was played by his sixty-year-old wife Sabitri. Towards the end of the play, she appeared naked on the stage, questioning and challenging the idea of feminine virtue as well as drawing attention to the repeated cases of rape and violence on Manipuri women through AFSPA.

Dropdi refuses to cover herself when asked to do so by the army commander and inverts the narrative of feminine virtue and shame ascribed to women's bodies. Dropdi screaming 'confront my body' at the soldier in one scene is said to have inspired the protests in Imphal in Manipur in 2004 against the Indian state.¹⁰ Thus, Deepti Misri writes: 'The efficacy of Draupadi's protest lies precisely in its ability to hijack the hermeneutics of rape by calling the patriarchal state to account on its own discursive terrain' and claims that 'the naked protest tauntingly punctures the triumphalist structure of rape-as-power by recoding rape as an unmanly act of cowardice'.¹¹

When a group of Manipuri Meitei women staged a nude protest against the cruel rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama Devi by the Indian Army in front of the Kangra Fort in Imphal in 2004, the entire nation witnessed the power and resolve of those women's bodies as they became a weapon of political resistance. Furthermore, if Queen Draupadi needs a male saviour figure to protect her in the *Mahabharata*, the protagonist in Devi's feminist version is a tribal woman who does not aspire or hope for such a thing.

In her foreword to the English translation, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues:

Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine (in this case it would have been godlike) comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops.¹²

The protest by Meitei mothers similarly punctures the image of the Indian state as a benevolent guardian by exposing its acquiescence in crimes of gendered violence. Their terms of engagement with processes of law and justice are divorced from those of the Indian constitution, as laid down by upper-caste men in 1950.

Displaying the Naked Female Body

Considering the narrative of shame that is associated with the naked female body in India, a display of an absolutely unclothed female body on stage is an act of defiance that is undertaken in helplessness. In a media interview, Taneja is quoted as saying that her inspiration for using a naked body for protest came from the Meitei mothers.¹³ The space afforded by the naked body of Taneja, however, is dissimilar to the one occupied by the naked protest that occurred in Manipur in 2004, even though women in both cases had to resort to spectacle as a mode of protest in order to be seen and heard. Taneja's well-toned body is the body of a cis, straight, abled woman, and does not belie the time and effort that is spent on it to make it presentable in public. Her arms, legs, and armpits have been shaved, and her toned body has undergone intense workouts in order to become ready to be gazed at.

Taneja explained in an interview: 'I have body issues like everyone else.'¹⁴ The Meitei women who staged the protest outside the Kangra fort, by contrast, were middle-aged mothers with hairy, unshaved arms and legs, and loose skin around their waists. They protested against a state-authorized crime, a gang-rape case that had not received a hearing in court or resulted in any prosecutions. After more than a decade, the Supreme Court of India directed the government to pay one million rupees as compensation to Manorama's mother.¹⁵

Samik Bandhopadhyay argues that if 'theatre/ performance is the product/expression of the actor's body, so the body is the product of a culture defined as a way of living. . . . The body of the community, more than an agglomeration of the bodies of its indivi-

duals, carries its political and cultural history in itself.'¹⁶ The Meitei women reacted to the use of rape as a torture inflicted on the vulnerable bodies of marginalized communities by using their bodies to challenge the idea of the state as a protector of women's right to be safe. Taneja's performance, however, lies within the space of the capital city, where the refusal to allow her to perform on the streets shields her naked body from perceived or threatened violence.

More recently, the rape and murder of Asifa Bano, a tribal Muslim from the occupied and highly militarized region of Jammu and Kashmir, by five Hindu men – a retired government official and four police officers – highlighted, yet again, how sexual violence and rape are inextricably linked to the workings of caste, class, and religion, and repeatedly deployed for communal politics in India.¹⁷ Bano was abducted when she was feeding her horses in the Kathua district in Jammu's mainly Hindu area in order to punish her nomadic Bakerwal community and to deter them from using Hindu land.¹⁸ This was yet another incident of Hindu nationalism's violation of women's bodies in order to define itself, demoralize minority communities, and destabilize resistance.

Taneja's performance activism continues to engage with the desire of urban women to be able to walk on the streets without fear. She organizes an annual midnight walk through the city, inviting people to join her in this endeavour through an open call published on her Facebook page.¹⁹ Through finding a group of interested men and women and walking with them, Taneja echoes the invitation of Shilpa Phadke and others to envision a better and safer city for women:

Imagine an Indian city with street corners full of women: chatting, laughing, breast-feeding, exchanging corporate notes or planning protest meetings. Imagine footpaths spilling over with old and young women watching the world go by as they sip tea, and discuss love, cricket, and the latest blockbuster. Imagine women in saris, jeans, salwars, and skirts sitting at the *mukkad* reflecting on world politics and dissecting the rising [shares on the] Sensex. *If you can imagine this, you're imagining a radically different city.*²⁰



Women protesting against gender violence at Jantar Mantar on 16 December 2013. Photo: Swati Arora.

Problems of the Privileged

In writing about the gendered nature of urban spaces in the country and Mumbai in particular, Phadke and her co-authors discuss the nature of the street as a space. Highlighting the pejorative connotations of the term 'loitering' and its masculine associations when translated into Hindi – *lukka*, *lafanga*, *vella*, *tapori*, *bekaar* – they lament women's lack of access to the pleasures of the public street space. *Why Loiter?* encourages women to embrace the rhetoric of 'fun' over 'safety' and to take ownership of public spaces and public streets through the acts of sipping tea and discussing cricket and politics. Yet, as with Taneja's performance activism, by asking women to indulge in carefree abandon on the streets, 'loitering' refers to the lifestyle of middle-class, upper-caste women whose experience of the urban is one of leisure, not because their daily survival depends on it.

What Taneja's performance misses, then, is the impossibility of dis-embodiment walking from its contexts. It excludes the fact that the desire for fearless occupation of spaces

does not negate the body who attempts it. The intent to roam the streets of Delhi in Taneja's various initiatives overlooks the effects of the markers of class, caste, and religious identity that privilege Hindu, middle-class, Brahman, urban women's bodies over others. The bodies of Manorama Devi and Asifa Bano were marked by their ethnicity and religion, and their experience of the streets is inextricably tied to them. However, the concerns of Taneja's performances are the concerns of urban women like her – middle-class, educated, liberal, English-speaking, university-bred, financially independent, and living in the capital city of Delhi. By excluding the narratives of sexual violence against minority communities, *Thoda Dhyaan Se* fails to engage critically with the structural issues that assail these women and, consequently, alienates them as potential audiences.

The feminist demands of *Thoda Dhyaan Se* end up becoming reduced to 'choice' politics, whereby sympathy towards freedom and safety is limited to middle-class, upper-caste women in metropolitan spaces. Its mode of 'occupying' the urban, construed as a radical and liberating act, overlooks the concerns of minority women of different castes, religion,

and socio-economic background, who inhabit public spaces in very different ways, either out of 'compulsions of economics' or due to infrastructural gaps such as lack of toilets.²¹

Taneja's act does not represent the concerns of Adivasi, Dalit, economically poor women from ethnic minorities, women with disabilities, or female bodies that inhabit different sexual orientations. Her cultural capital, enhanced by the attention of the mainstream media, inscribes middle-class metropolitan concerns as universally valid across the country and neglects the intersectionality of class, caste, and religion. It also excludes the LGBT community, where the concerns of queer and transgender people might not be premised on visibility politics at all.

Thoda Dhyaan Se has represented India internationally and has invited empathy and anger from middle-class audiences in differing measures, but it is imperative to recognize that the issues raised by Taneja's performance, although valid and urgent, represent only urban metropolitan concerns.

GEOGRAPHICAL SPACE

The second component of the trialectic – geographical space – refers to material space, including architecture, performance venues, and institutional sites, as well as the 'spatial codes' and inbuilt privilege, or lack thereof, that shape one's understanding of a space and what takes place within it.²²

In the case of Delhi, the spatial structure of the city continues to be influenced by the decisions made following Indian independence in 1947, when the new government defined very closely the cultural agenda of the postcolonial nation in symbolic and material terms. The location of 'Indian culture' was planned within the boundaries of New Delhi, originally constructed as the capital of the British Empire between 1911 and 1931 and designed by Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker. This particular space was redesigned meticulously in an effort to take control of the physical and cultural space of the capital.²³

The cultural nodal hub of the city, Mandi House, continues to exist adjacent to New Delhi and it is constitutive of prominent national cultural organizations and institutions that provide artistic and pedagogic training around 'Indian culture'. Sangeet Natak Akademi, or the Academy of Theatre, Dance, and Music, was set up in this area in 1956. Soon after, both the Lalit Kala Akademi for fine arts and the Sahitya Kala Akademi for literature were established. Besides these, the National School of Drama was set up in 1959, Kathak Kendra in 1964, the Kamani Auditorium in 1971, and the Shri Ram Centre for Performing Arts in 1975.

These buildings are barely two miles from the Rashtrapati Bhavan (the President's house) and the India Gate, making explicit the complicity of the cultural buildings in the political ideologies of the time. This part of the city, therefore, affords an authority and visibility that other spaces do not, and embodies India's modernist ambitions, with implications for performance events held at these locations.

The Stein Auditorium, where the first performance of *Thoda Dhyaan Se* took place in December 2013, is part of the India Habitat Centre (IHC) in Lodhi Colony. The Habitat Centre was intended to be an office space for the Housing and Urban Development Corporation Limited (HUDCO) and other non-profit organizations, and was gradually transformed into an urban design project in the hands of the American architect Joseph Allen Stein, the chairman of HUDCO.

Conceived in 1993, IHC hosts offices of almost forty organizations, along with a multi-purpose auditorium named after Stein, art galleries, an amphitheatre, and fine dining restaurants. Even though the IHC does not exist within the boundaries of New Delhi, this space is a luxurious hub of cultural activity for the upper- and middle-class inhabitants of the city. The courtyard spaces in between the brick and cement buildings are lined up neatly with trees and flowering plants to complete the illusion of a city within a city.

Yet, the unusual quiet and cleanliness of the space is an anomaly in Delhi, betraying

what the streets look and feel like in most parts of the city. Since the visitors here are either Indians holding blue-collar jobs or foreign tourists, the space has been created to showcase an image of Delhi that reflects the orderliness of European cities.

Taneja's performance at IHC launched the week-long *Jurrat* campaign that focused on advocating freedom and safety for women of the country. In keeping with the nature of the venue, the audience comprised the city's university-going intelligentsia, who had become aware of the campaign through social media. Similar venues to host *Thoda Dhyaan Se* include the Goethe Institute in Delhi and such educational institutions as the Jawaharlal Nehru University and various colleges under the University of Delhi. The performance continues to be invited to high-profile festivals in Europe and Australia.

Taneja strives to expand the outreach of her piece to spaces outside New Delhi and to the private space of homes of her friends and colleagues. She does not charge the audience for her performance at these events. However, entry is limited to invitations circulated through social media, and hence is mostly confined to friends and acquaintances with a similar cultural capital. Taneja has also performed at small, independent venues that are slowly carving their niche in the cultural life of Delhi, including The Basement in Hauz Khaz, Bakheda in Saket, and Studio Safdar in Shadipur.

Expanding to Public Spaces

These venues are artistic initiatives that allow for showcasing new, radical acts and aim to reach out to audiences in peripheral spaces. They do not lie within the boundary of New Delhi and, thus, are not afforded the institutional privilege and media attention that the centre of the city invites. On the other hand, they are free of ideological implications and influences that come with such associations and are, therefore, capable of more subversive potential by virtue of their location in the peripheral spaces of Delhi.

Thoda Dhyaan Se articulates the dangers of being seen in public spaces as a woman and

demands, with a fiery spirit, being allowed to do so. However, Taneja has confessed that all the venues in which she has performed have been 'protected' spaces – that is, enclosed spaces with private audiences – although with media access to disseminate information about it.²⁴ The only exception has been a performance at Jantar Mantar.

The play has been labelled 'provocative' and has been restricted to non-street, private spaces that do not allow for a spontaneous audience lest it spark off controversy or violence of any kind.²⁵ As noted above, the scheduled performance at the Munirka bus stop, where Jyoti Singh had boarded the bus in December 2012, was cancelled for fear that it was too dangerous. This undermines the intention behind *Thoda Dhyaan Se*, which is to create fearless freedom for women on the streets, since the nature of the performance has made it impossible to present it in the public space of the streets.

Taneja is also the founder-director of Lost and Found Trust, a non-profit organization that 'aims to seek out new spaces within the city – unseen, unnoticed, and undercover – for artists and audiences to make contact with each other', and 'hopes to contribute towards nurturing more engaged and empathetic citizens, for a secular and more tolerant society'.²⁶ Supported by the Goethe Institute, the Trust aims to expand the cultural spaces of the city beyond the boundary of Mandi House to create 'new neighbourhoods while building a community of audience, friends, and supporters'.²⁷

As part of this, Taneja has managed to present theatre, music, dance, and storytelling events in public parks, spaces which are usually only used for wedding and festival celebrations a couple of times and left dormant for the rest of the year. This initiative thus adds vibrancy to the community centres in each locality by bringing children and families together and encouraging them to participate in these free events. Taneja has also organized events in Pitam Pura, Sarita Vihar, Vasant Kunj, Dwarka, Chittaranjan Park, and Rama Krishna Puram, and is working on reaching out to more peripheral zones. These venues are not street spaces, but

enclosed within community buildings and parks, and so highlight again the increasing unavailability of the street for cultural ventions. This is in contrast to the 1970s, when the street served as a radical stage for protests, as Maya Rao, Anuradha Kapur, Rati Bartholomew, and other Delhi-based artists addressed gender violence with passion.

As the site of national law-making institutions and authorities, New Delhi was also the focal point for the legislative wing of the women's movement in the 1970s. Many demonstrations were organized on Parliament Street and street theatre took on a renewed significance to bring attention to the structural and social conditions detrimental to women.²⁸ Two female ensembles based in Delhi – Theatre Union and Buland Natya Manch – were the forerunners of making street theatre plays specifically aimed at legislative changes.²⁹ Radically political feminist theatre in the hands of performers like Maya Rao, Anuradha Kapur, and Rati Bartholomew, and then in the 1990s Amal Allana and Vijay Mehta, addressed instances of violence against women, and the fury and persistence of people's power initiated a change in judicial and democratic laws to make them more gender-sensitive.³⁰

Anita Singh and Tarun Tapas Mukherjee's *Gender, Space, and Resistance*, and *Acting Up* by A. Mangai, are the most recent additions to the increasing repertoire of theatre scholarship by Indian women themselves.³¹ Mangai explains: 'Delhi being the national capital is a valid spatial marker and, further, it does seek to provide a forum for various trends in the country'.³² She identifies:

A recent moment in history during which gender concerns came to be foregrounded in public life and social movements, and initiated some truly radical departures in theatrical practice. . . . Anuradha Kapur, Maya Rao, and Tripurari Sharma, in short all those who are committed to women's theatre, are inheritors of this moment in time.³³

The reference here is to the Delhi rape incident in December 2012, which sparked debates on gender and public space not just in the country, but also across the world. It is pertinent to note that the three women

Mangai mentions as stalwarts of the feminist theatre movement in contemporary India are all based in Delhi and have been affiliated with the NSD, a government-funded body set up in 1959. In terms of the spatial location of both Delhi and India, the visibility, authority, and financial support continues to be afforded to theatre that takes places in the centre of the capital.

Threats to the Use of Public Spaces

Thoda Dhyaan Se imagines alternative modes of inhabiting and experiencing public spaces, but Taneja's work does not involve walking through the unsafe and dangerous public space of Delhi, instead offering 'heterotopic' spaces where the act of walking is imagined and critiqued.³⁴ The shift between spaces – from outdoor streets to protected indoors – is also symptomatic of the larger issue of the democratization of spaces in India. Since the election of Hindutva leader Narendra Modi as Prime Minister in May 2014, regressive campaigns like 'Love Jihad', the 'Anti-Romeo' squad, and the recent beef-ban across North India have been prevalent, and increasingly so since the appointment of the hard-line Hindutva advocate Yogi Adityanath as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh in March 2017.³⁵ With state planning policies and neoliberal capitalism taking over public spaces, and religious fundamentalism striving to limit women's mobility, Taneja's inability to perform in public spaces, due to either the decision taken by the organizing bodies or individual restraint, is also symptomatic of the current nationalist discourse that is threatening to shut down all forms of dissent and occupation of public spaces.

Just as the spatial implications of different venues in Delhi became evident in the media coverage and cultural value accorded to Taneja's performance, the significance and visibility given to different geographical locations within the country enhanced the politics of spaces on the periphery such as Manipur. Within the masculine nationalist space of the India, Delhi is framed as the stage where political events are picked up by the media, amplified in their dimensions,

and consumed by the larger public. Starkly different artistic, social, and political responses to the gang-rape incidents in the two cities also point to the differing ways in which the gender discourse operates within the national boundaries, and how it varies between the capital city and the marginal space of Manipur.

Even though both Delhi and Manipur became sites of crimes of a similar magnitude, if not higher in the case of the latter, the fact that attention was given to Delhi points to the media bias that restricts visibility and consequently outrage to metropolitan spaces. Different treatment accorded to the gendered violence in the two cities highlights the ways in which neoliberalism, capitalism, nationalism, and militarization construct the idea of India as a nation. The women from Manipur have no faith in the legal system or the nation state since both have failed them repeatedly.

The support and publicity the Delhi gang-rape incident received through the media helped to put pressure on the government to take swift action and also brought in the legal changes recommended by the Justice Verma Committee.³⁶ The court sentenced the rapists to death within a year of the complaint being lodged.³⁷ The othering of the lower-class and uneducated rapists and the punishment of the death penalty also highlighted the selective outrage of the middle class – concerned to save and protect its own women, while women from peripheral spaces still face routine sexual assaults.

As Joanna Kadi reminds us, ‘Speech and silence are worthy of the most intense political analysis,’ before urging the need to ‘examine the spaces where speech happens, examine the spaces where silence is enforced’, since, ‘in many cases, silence is left for the oppressed’.³⁸ And, even if speech is articulated as a shriek let out in sheer desperation, as in the protest by Meitei women, it falls on deaf ears. There is value in the discussions that have taken place because of *Thoda Dhyaan Se*, but it is imperative to recognize that the scope and outreach of the performance is limited to metropolitan spaces.

The events in Delhi during that cold December of 2012 and the months that followed had a precedent in the women’s protest movement that erupted in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a response to the failure of the Indian state to effectively address instances of violence against women. The anxieties and hopes created after ‘the Emergency’ – when, between 25 June 1975 and 21 March 1977, then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed self-rule on the country, suspended all civil rights, and censored the press – manifested themselves in a ferocious articulation of the demands for civil rights.

The crisis of the Indira Gandhi government gave rise to new social movements, concretized the women’s movements, the Dalit movement, including the founding of the Dalit Panthers in 1972, the Naxal Movement of the 1970s, and the founding of the Bahujan Samaj Party (Majority People’s Party) in 1984, along with movements for workers’ rights, as well as tribal and environmental movements across the country.³⁹

The thrust of these movements was towards challenging the hegemony of the state and the reclaiming of not just social and economic control, but also of the cultural sphere where dissent could be articulated.⁴⁰ High-profile events such as the Shah Bano case in 1986, the immolation of Roop Kanwar in 1987, and the 1989 Mathura rape case provoked national agitations to force the state to address the issues of gendered violence, including divorce rights, the practice of *sati*, custodial rape, sexual harassment in the workplace, and the dowry system.⁴¹ Such events and the discourse surrounding them highlight the inner workings of the discursive space, the final element of my trialectic, and the various networks of affiliation that constitute it, including institutional affiliations, published discourses, associations with political parties and governmental networks, the academic world, the mainstream media, and legal discourses.

Previously, it was the social reform movement of the early nineteenth century that

borrowed from the Victorian sensibility to model the Indian woman into a good wife and companion for the westernized, privileged man.⁴² It was within the framework of Hindu revivalism and reformist organizations like Arya Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj that the subordination of women was confronted, and where oppressive social customs like child marriage and *sati* were to be eliminated through the education of Hindu women. However, the patriarchal notion of women as devoted, self-sacrificing wives and mothers remained unquestioned.⁴³ Maitrayee Chaudhuri further argues that 'the reformers belonged mostly to the upper castes, that they were predominantly male, and that the specific problems addressed and the mode of addressing them were very often restricted by region and caste location'.⁴⁴

Educational impetus during this period created a group of educated women who later contributed to the growth of women's organizations between 1880 and 1930, but this was almost exclusively confined to the urban centres. The setting up of the Indian Women's Association in 1917 and the All-India Women's Conference in 1926 were crucial in encouraging women's active political participation and mobilizing them to claim their legal rights. However, yet again, the modernization project under colonialism was restricted to serving the nation by propagating the wider patriarchal project and benefiting women from upper castes and classes while poor and unprivileged women were sidelined.⁴⁵

Rebirth of the Feminist Movement

While the rebirth of the feminist movement in the 1970s was provoked by local struggles against violence – rape, dowry deaths, and custodial killings – they were 'initiated by urban middle-class professional women (for the most part)'.⁴⁶ It is ironic, too, that the demands of a separate political space for the Dalit women were, yet again, brought to the forefront by upper-caste women.⁴⁷

In terms of performance, male playwrights and directors dominated the urban

theatre in India, while the subject matter was limited to questions of the home and belonging, desire, existentialism and absurdism, denoting the pervading influence of the lives and practices of male European directors.⁴⁸ The revival of the women's movement in the 1970s gradually gave visibility to the efforts of women playwrights and directors, who had existed on the fringes in the cultural industry of the country.⁴⁹

The pre-Independence rhetoric around developmental politics, as inspired by the European feminist movement, was transformed when the focus shifted to grassroots activism in order to educate women and mobilize them to take decisions concerning their body. The family as a site of oppression was discussed and debated for the first time, and the slogan 'The Personal is Political' became the guiding precept. The force and momentum of the struggle, however, was particularly dominant in urban areas.⁵⁰

Furthermore, Mary John has observed that the women's movement in the city and the country at large is marked by 'heightened institutionalization':

Feminism now has a marginal presence in the syllabi of different disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, while women's studies centres are proliferating across the country under the fiat of the University Grants Commission. Institutionalization has congealed around the term 'gender', as state, NGOs and women's organizations take on various tasks in its name.⁵¹

The passionate engagement at the grassroots level that characterized the women's movement earlier has been forced to limit its outreach to the safe space of academia. Since the women's movement, from its inception, has been dominated by middle-class, upper-caste women living in urban spaces, the legacies of its character continue to define the protest, activism, and theatre that takes place in the capital city of Delhi today. Taneja's location in Delhi, her middle-class background, and her cultural capital afford her invitations from academic institutions and national and international festivals, and the resulting media attention continues to accelerate her celebrity status.

She told me that she was 'bombarded' with phone calls from journalists who wanted to interview her.⁵² Whereas, even after the Meitei women's protest in 2004 and Irom Sharmila's sixteen-year hunger strike, AFSPA continues to be in place.⁵³ This also points towards an elitism of media coverage and to the workings of manipulative marketing strategies, where the central capital city and its citizens' fury is amplified and gets immediate attention while the periphery is conveniently obscured.

The nation and its narratives have always been fraught with gender violence. As discussed above, women's bodies have repeatedly become the battleground on which religious and national wars are fought. During periods of communal strife, rape has been consistently used as a weapon, with women becoming the embodiment of the nation state and its 'difference' from the other.⁵⁴ Whenever Indian national identity is conflated with Hinduism, women of Muslim and Sikh background have borne the brunt of majoritarian political warfare, including during the Partition of 1947, the Sikh violence in 1984, and the Godhra massacre of 1992.⁵⁵

The rape and stripping of Dalit and Adivasi women and women from Manipur and Kashmir is not uncommon, and has been carried out routinely to curb dissidence against the national state. The gang rape and murder of Singh in 2012, then, 'demonstrates the typical model of feudal patriarchy clubbed with capitalist hegemony'. Shalu Nigam continues: 'It took place in the busiest street of the capital where increasingly predatory sexual culture permeates the notion of seemingly emerging modernity,' and 'the neoliberal forces which tend to reassert patriarchy in its new and virulent form are evident in this case'.⁵⁶

A city that is competing with European cities on the global map is increasingly becoming a city where public spaces are reserved for rich, Hindu, upper-caste men, with political conditions becoming worse under the current Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is also the Hindu Nationalist leader. The rhetoric of modernity and devel-

opment disguises the deeply entrenched fear and hatred of the 'other'. On 5 May 2017, the Supreme Court of India upheld the death sentence for the four men accused of gang-raping and violating Singh. While the decision sparked celebrations across India, it was also criticized for being influenced by the 'tsunami of shock' caused to the 'collective conscience' of the country, where selective middle-class anger was assuaged by picking the 'bad' men who were poor and belonged to lower castes.⁵⁷

In complete contrast, the media attention and celebrations were completely missing a day earlier, when eleven men were sentenced to life imprisonment by the Bombay High Court in the case of Bilkis Bano, who was gang-raped and fourteen members of her family murdered during the 2002 Godhra riots in Gujarat, which were targeted at Muslim communities living in the state. While it took fifteen years for Bano's case to be heard, Singh's abusers were convicted within five years through a fast-tracked court.

One significant outcome of the passionate and sustained demonstrations of 2012 was the government setting up the Justice Verma Committee to provide recommendations in the legislative wing and the Constitution. A widespread climate of anger and accompanying demonstrations also led to changes in the Indian Penal Code that had been in place since 1860, bringing changes to rape and dowry laws. This was also reminiscent of the introduction of the Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Act of 1983, after the public fury over the rape of a young tribal girl named Mathura by two policemen in Maharashtra.

Conclusion

However, despite the swiftness, commitment, and dedication with which the Justice Verma Committee worked five years ago, the ordinances released by the government failed to live up to the expectations of the civilian population. They exclude any provision made for sexual assault against women in conflict zones and perpetuate the legacy of violation in the name of counter-terrorism.⁵⁸

There is value in embracing the intention behind the inception of *Thoda Dhyaan Se* while not denying the limitations of its production. The saleability and popularity of *Thoda Dhyaan Se* disguises the ambivalence of its affective reach. One needs to be wary of the mechanisms by which gender practices of dominant communities become the normative model for the entire nation by making the differences of caste, community, and region invisible. Framing Taneja's performance in the larger discursive and geographical spaces of the capital allows for a recognition of its *situatedness* within the spatiality of Delhi, as well as within the feminist theatre of the city.

Taneja's class, caste, and institutional associations invite audiences with similar backgrounds and positions. But in its articulation of the desire of highly individuated, liberalized woman, the feminist articulations in *Thoda Dhyaan Se* fail to elicit solidarity from women whose lives and realities suffer from patriarchal violence in markedly different ways. It is, therefore, of value to acknowledge that the concerns raised by *Thoda Dhyaan Se* are not representative of a pan-Indian feminism, and that the artist is a product of a gender discourse that is distinctly urban in its ideology and outreach.

Thoda Dhyaan Se is well intentioned in its aim to address the systemic and institutional rape culture and the misogynist attitudes towards women in India. However, it ends up sidelining the differing histories of oppression, where the question is not always of a regulated sexuality by the middle-class patriarchal culture. It focuses on the notion of empowerment through choice and exposure of body as a liberating feminist strategy, but fails to unpack how that choice does not always exist in a vacuum but is a façade created by neoliberal capitalism in the process of commodifying and sexualizing women's bodies. Taneja's performance offers potential urban imaginaries for women, but the terms of engagement are limited to women with similar cultural and economic backgrounds.

Repeated invitations to international festivals and educational institutions point

to the fact that *Thoda Dhyaan Se* is mostly being consumed by middle-class, English-speaking, university-bred, heteronormative, and also white audiences with cultural capital. A campaign that took the shape of a national movement in India in 2013 has been overtaken by the limits of its discursive space; and both the geographical space and the political intensity of affective space are in danger of getting diluted as the class character of the movement intensifies.

In this article I have aimed to highlight the need to acknowledge the tensions between the ways in which different sections of Indian society identify with the city's spaces, and also bring to light how the concerns of feminist theatre play themselves out in the cities, and its urban demands are addressed and negotiated. With the power and visibility that it affords, New Delhi has been instrumental in channelling the anger and resentment at the government's failure to address the gender concerns appropriately in 2013.

If street plays were a powerful mode of participating in the feminist movement and their demands for legal and structural changes in the 1970s, the gender discourse today is increasingly centred around the right to mobility and choice in politics, with theatre performances restricted to mostly enclosed venues. There is thus a danger of the feminist conversations in India being co-opted as celebratory without being inclusive.

Careful attention to intersectional workings of gender is critical for performance practitioners as they strive to keep up with the momentum of the international conversation on gendered violence. A recognition and critical understanding of differential spatial structures could aid and, hopefully, expand and democratize our relationship with theatre and its spaces.

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