
WaterLogs

A Study of Water Crisis and Theatre

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Abstract

This creative-critical thesis seeks to answer the question ‘How can creative, theatrical interventions help reform and redirect contemporary, urban water imaginaries?’. The critical section of the thesis is a study of three play scripts dealing with water crises written by Indian theatre makers, *Thaneer! Thaneer!* (2001) by Komal Swaminathan, *Sordid* by V. Balakrishnan (2019), and *Plan B/C/D/E* (2021) by Meghana A.T. This thesis uses conceptual metaphor theory to read these texts and demonstrate how we make sense of, rationalise and materialise water. It argues that these scripts offer insights into what constitutes urban water imaginaries in contemporary India, i.e., how people relate to, think about and use water, and how such imaginaries transform and are transformed by social, political and cultural institutions and systems. The creative section of the thesis, three scripts that have been written over the last four years, picks up interesting ideas and themes from the critical work and continues the study of contemporary water imaginaries. The scripts use different dramaturgical lenses to examine various kinds of water crises: *Flood City* is a series of linked playlets that focus on the survivors of a catastrophic storm; *Lost Waters* is a site-specific audio play about urban development, river pollution, and how we classify and make sense of the natural world; *Theertham* is a stage play that follows the story of an impoverished widow and her daughter who learn, amid an approaching drought, that their house sits on top of an enormous, untapped freshwater aquifer. The creative and critical components thus seek to contribute towards contemporary ecological movements in India working to transform people’s relationship with water and the natural world.

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Part One: The Critical Project

Water babbles in languages we do not fully comprehend, but instead of the violence of translation – into concrete embankments – we might do better just to learn to listen.

Neimanis, Thinking with Water, 2012

Introduction

A confession: I am terrified of water.

This has been the case ever since I was a child. What was behind this fear? I cannot be sure, but I keep returning to a photograph. It was in a heavy encyclopaedia kept on a low bookshelf in our third-floor apartment in Chennai. In the afternoon, when a gentle sea breeze cooled the house and everyone took their naps, I would look through large colour photographs of forests, giraffes, and snow-covered peaks delighted and a little in awe. But when I reached the centre awe turned to fear. Calm blue, glum indigo, strange navy, and where the image sought to gain depth, a shadowy black. The ocean as seen from within. I knew, with the certainty of a seven-year-old, that if I looked at this photo for too long or touched the page the solid paper would turn liquid and I would fall into endless waters, lost forever.

It is a strange memory, but it leads me to think about how little water, apart from the piped variety, featured in my childhood. [Mridula Ramesh \(2021, p. 1\)](#) writes that ‘Water is an intrinsic part of our planetary DNA. *[But]* Water’s omnipresence has also been its undoing.’. The simple fact of water’s ubiquitousness makes it that much harder to think about. For me, this is certainly true. The Bay of Bengal dances along the coast of Chennai, but I rarely attended these dance recitals. The sea did not feature heavily in my imaginings of my home city. Neither did the three rivers that flowed through Chennai nor the quickly disappearing lakes and distant reservoirs. Instead for me, like for many people living in urban India, water is known via pipes, the man who delivers bubble tops, cartons of clear plastic bottles, and water lorries that trundle through our streets. All these ways of knowing water are not the same, but they are characterised by a conscious or unconscious, willing or forced, distancing from ‘natural’ water.

The only ‘natural’ water that held any place in my imagination and memories was the monsoon. Rain clouds, and the shock of thunder, standing under trees after a storm to shake the branches and make it rain all over again, paper boats in puddles, and being sent out into torrential rains with a stick of soap, rubber chappals and not much else... It is not surprising then that when water does once again enter my imagination– and perhaps the imaginations of many people in Tamil Nadu– it is a monsoon storm that brings it, violently, home. Water rushing into homes and destroying lives that took decades to build, people swept away by rivers running through the streets, roads caving in, sewage rising and flowing from taps, electrocutions...¹ The government blamed the 2015 floods on the unexpected intensity of the rain. They called it an unforeseeable ‘once in a hundred-year storm’.

However, journalists, scientists, and civic institutions pointed out that the 2015 rains that brought several districts in Tamil Nadu to a halt, the capital city Chennai included, were not unprecedented. Parts of the city face some amount of flooding almost every year, and the city as a whole has ‘drowned’ before.² They further argued that decades of human action (building over water bodies, out-of-date manmade drainage systems, and completely ruined natural drainage systems) and inaction (a failure to open the sluices of one of the city’s main reservoirs in time) were the real reasons the city had flooded ([Sekhar, 2001](#); [Ramani and Srinivasan; Jayaraman, 2015](#); [Ge, 2019](#); [Raman, 2021](#)). In the years that followed, scientists and activists have written extensively about how such flood events are symptomatic of a larger water crisis

1 Safe in my hostel room in Mumbai, I could only watch and listen to accounts of the floods from my family and friends in Chennai. They got through it relatively unscathed, being lucky enough to live in tall apartment buildings, or houses that were not close to rivers and filled in lakes. Many high rises and rich neighbourhoods were badly affected by the floods though. For a more detailed account of the floods see [Ge, 2019](#).

2 ‘In October 1943, Madras experienced its worst floods in living memory. An unrelenting downpour that lasted around six days led to breaches in tanks and canals and swollen lakes and rivers and rendered thousands homeless and resulted in loss of lives and property.’ ([Frederick, 2011](#))

that also manifests as water stress, drought, biodiversity loss, and the increased spread of waterborne disease (Ramesh, 2021; Ge, 2019; Seenivasan, 2015; Kumaraswamy, 1984).

These writers and researchers were saying that the 2015 floods would not be the last water event to throw the city into large-scale disarray, and they were not wrong. In the decade that followed, Chennai has faced varying degrees of localised flooding and water stress including a terrible drought in 2019.³ It was after these two water crises that my interest in water grew. Being a playwright, I was keen to find examples of theatre that responded to such a crisis. Despite the frequency of water crises and the plethora of research coming out of Chennai specifically there was, at the start of my research, a paucity of plays and performances dealing with water crisis specifically. In his pivotal work on literature, politics, and climate change, *The Great Derangement* (2016), Amitav Ghosh writes that future generations will look back to our times and wonder whether not just our politicians and policymakers but our writers and artists were ‘deranged’ for failing to engage with climate change.

He suggests that creative work, as much as scientific reports and studies, are part of the ‘discourses’ or ‘boundary-making projects and practices through which the contours of phenomenon become meaningful, intelligible and sensible’ (Neimanis, 2017, p. 183). Ghosh (2016, p.12) adds that we need to think of ecological crisis as ‘a crisis of culture and thus of imagination’. This idea of ‘imagination’ and the role it plays in how we build societies, think about nature, and face challenges dominated my earliest thinking around the thesis. It forms the core of the question I seek to answer: ‘How can creative, theatrical interventions help

³ This event was the result of a bad monsoon, but it was made worse by the fact that ground water supplies in so much of the city were hitting all-time lows. Rapid urbanisation, which included laying concrete and tar over earth, meant that when it did rain the underground aquifers were not being properly recharged. A massive rain event should have recharged the aquifer, but built-up areas have increased and open land for water percolation decreased leaving a lot of the rainwater to run right back into the sea or evaporate.

reform and redirect modern, urban water imaginaries?’. In the following sections, I describe how I developed a conceptual framework using the idea of the water imaginary, lay out the methodology I employ in the three analysis chapters, and provide a brief structure of the thesis.

Conceptual Framework: The Water Imaginary

My conception of a water imaginary has been significantly influenced by three thinkers. In this section, I will summarise their theories and highlight what I have found particularly useful for the analysis I am undertaking.

What is a water imaginary?

Ivan Illich ([1985, p. 4](#)) writes that ‘not only does the way an epoch treats water and space have a history: the very substances that are shaped by the imagination – and thereby given explicit meanings – are themselves social creations to some degree.’ Illich suggests that across time, people have held cultural or societal imaginings of water that have in turn shaped human actions and culture relating to water and more. This is one way to begin to think about the water imaginary. Another useful concept that clarifies the water imaginary is the heuristic of the social imaginary: ‘symbolic matrixes or frameworks within which people organise their collective world, where imagination, not simply reason, plays a part in the construction of social practices with a widely shared sense of legitimacy’ ([Yepez-Reyes, 2019, p. 2](#)).⁴

⁴ First conceived of in this way, as that which determined a society’s ‘singular manner of living, of seeing and of conducting its own existence’ by Cornelius Castoriadis in his critique of Marx, who considered ‘imagination’ a “‘non-economic’ link in an ‘economic’ chain’.” ([1987, p. 132, 145](#)). According to Castoriadis, it is the imaginary that determines how society thinks about and creates reality. In the decades that followed, the concept of the ‘social imaginary’ has been critiqued, theoretically expanded, and refined in various contexts. Taylor’s ([2004, p. 23](#)) understanding of it as a ‘background’ to the lives of ordinary people lends itself well to the purposes of this thesis: “...the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that

Then a water imaginary could be understood as the symbolic frameworks within which people interact with and think about water. One final way to think about imaginaries is to see them as both process and product so that imaginaries are ‘congeries (*jumbles*) of matter and meaning – ideas entangled with material situations that offer various orientations towards thickly emergent worlds’ (Neimanis, 2017, p. 156). This upends the idea of a neat ‘framework’ and gives us more room for exploration. We might synthesise all these definitions and finally arrive at this: water imaginaries are complex frameworks of entangled ideas and material realities that give us insight into how the people and institutions of a particular era interact with and think about water.

Illich suggests that imaginaries have always changed over time, but what is interesting to him is the speed with which water imaginaries have transformed through the end of the 19th and the entirety of the 20th centuries. In his seminal lecture, and later book, *H₂O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* Illich traces the historicity of the ‘stuff’ of water by looking at the art, myth, and literature from different epochs of Western history. He is not concerned with the ‘form’ water takes on in these works i.e., their representation, but rather with exploring the historicity of these depictions. In the course of this exploration, Illich (1985, p. 7, 24) argues that all water cannot be reduced to H₂O, and to do so is to deny the existence of the ‘stable, dense, slow, and fertile watery stuff that obscurely vegetates within us’ and that ‘drenches the inner and outer spaces of the imagination’.

This water, what he terms ‘archetypal’ and the ‘water of dreams’, he associates with mythic rivers, the waters of creation, fountains of youth and so on. For Illich, the transmogrification

are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations”. For a more detailed history of the term and its various theoretical formulations see Veronica Yepez-Reyes (2019), and Chris Hudson and Erin K. Wilson’s 2019 work, ‘Revisiting the Global Imaginary: Theories, Ideologies, Subjectivities (Essays in Honour of Manfred Steger)’.

of such archetypal water into ‘neutral’ H₂O, a process that has accelerated in the last century, interferes with our ability to imagine, to allow cultural meaning to take root, and to understand the historic continuity of the cultures to which we belong.⁵ This is because, for Illich ([1985, p. 25](#)), H₂O, a chemical fluid, is ahistorical, lacks specificity, and does not possess archetypal water’s ‘nearly unlimited ability to carry metaphors’. Archetypal waters are the carriers of our metaphors for life, death and love, while H₂O ‘which industrial society creates’ is dead water that is empty or rather has been purposefully emptied of meaning ([Illich, 1985, p. 7](#)).

Linton agrees with and extends Illich’s argument. In his book *What is Water?* ([2010](#)) Linton offers us a detailed explanation of how H₂O came to be, and what the last century made of this new chemical fluid. By tracing the path of ‘H₂O’ from its discovery in European laboratories, to its position within the growing science of hydrology, and hydrology’s subsequent ‘discovery’ of the water cycle, he demonstrates how H₂O transforms into what he calls ‘modern water’. Modern water, Linton ([2010, p. 8](#)) goes on, possesses certain traits that make it manageable and therefore very attractive to ‘modern’ people:

One virtue of modern water is that it is not complicated by ecological, cultural, or social factors. This has made it relatively easy to manage. Another virtue of modern water is its universality – all waters, in whatever circumstances they may occur, are reducible to this abstraction. A third virtue is its naturalness – not only may all waters be reduced to H₂O but the product of this reduction is understood to constitute water’s essence, its basic nature.

For Linton, ([2010, p. 13-14](#)) it is this abstract, measurable, chemically knowable ‘modern water’ that became the ‘dominant way of knowing water’ in the West in the middle of the 20th century. And since it exists on ‘the presumption that any and all waters can and should be

⁵ The essay itself is an examination of the different significances water and watery imagining have played on, mostly, Western culture. Illich gives us a poetic journey of water from its primordial role in the creation of the world/universe in various cultures, to the centrality of the eternal well of memory in Greek, and other, oral traditions, through its use and significance in various rituals of purification, blessing and absolution, and eventually to its transformation into H₂O.

considered apart from their social and ecological relations', modern water was easily transformed into 'global (modern) water' and exported far and wide in the decades that followed, thus becoming the 'hegemonic' global mode through which people *must* think about water. What Linton describes is a very specific kind of water imaginary that has its origins in the West but has successfully spread across the world. We will refer to it as the modern water imaginary. An additional facet of this imaginary is its relationship to the 'global water crisis'.⁶

The 'global water crisis' as it is understood (or imagined) by international agencies and national governments must be seen as an extension of modern water so that such global water crisis is better understood as a global 'crisis of modern water' because '[i]n contrast to the way the water crisis is often presented – that is, as a measurable consequence of fixed water supplies and growing human populations [...] modern water itself establishes the epistemological conditions that inevitably give rise to crisis.' ([Linton 2010, p. 23](#)). Linton follows the trajectory of such modern water crises and makes clear how during the early years, when the problem was usually a lack of fresh water – the 1960s in the US were a particularly fecund time for water policy and hydrological management in this matter – the easy solution was to simply discover new sources of freshwater to exploit.

But towards the end of the 20th century, with the export of modern water leading to larger populations exploiting more fresh water via what Neimanis ([2009, p. 167](#)) calls 'new hydrological technologies', the global water crisis, still most concerned with a lack of water, becomes first and foremost about limiting consumption. Think posters captioned 'Save water

⁶ In 2023, the UN World Water Development Report warned of 'Imminent risk of global water crisis'. The same book also states that 2 billion people did not have access to clean drinking water, 3.6 billion lacked access to clean sanitation and 2.3 billion lacked access to basic hygiene services. Surely, just considering those facts, the 'global water crisis' is already here? ([UNESCO World Water Assessment Programme, 2023](#))

save life’ or ‘Every drop counts’.⁷ Neimanis makes a crucial addition to our understanding of the water imaginary by extending Linton’s reading of modern water to include how,

Rising sea levels, melting ice caps, parched interiors, rogue storm surges and strange weather, rapid aquifer depletion and massive-scale water choreographies through irrigation, dam-building, and riparian ‘straightening’ all remind us that our current epoch’s radical terraforming is often explicitly the work of water – and that these are labours in which we humans are variously entangled. (2017, p. 160-161)

This extension into what she calls ‘Anthropocene water’ expands modern water imaginaries to account for the relationship between climate change and the hydrosphere. In such imaginaries there is certainly an awareness of how Anthropocene waters are manmade, but also an awareness of the uncritical expectation that these waters are the responsibility/fault of all people everywhere (Neimanis, 2017, p. 163).

Neimanis suggests that Anthropocene water in crisis, like modern water before and alongside it, determines how nations and global institutions respond to various aspects of climate change. The trajectory of water that she, Linton, and Illich have traced has parallels in the Indian context. Indigenous water management systems existed in precolonial India, and were often displaced by the ambitious plans of British colonial forces to rationalise water in India via canal irrigation, reservoirs, and piped water projects between the late 1800s and early

⁷ Neimanis (2009, p. 167) uses the term ‘new hydrological technologies’ to describe the paradox of water crisis where,

While popular opinion assumes that the world is running out of water, the total amount of water on earth is in fact basically unchanged since prehistoric times. But this does not mean we do not have a crisis of freshwater supply: around the globe, on every inhabited continent, streams and rivers run dry, lakes are drastically shrinking, and deep and ancient aquifers are being critically depleted. This water is not disappearing, but being transformed and rerouted, most often in ways that render it unusable for our current human and many companion species’ needs.

1900s ([D'Souza, 2006](#)).⁸ These projects were meant to counter the erratic monsoon patterns that led to drought and reduced revenue from the colonies and, in some instances, to make significant improvements to the living conditions and economic activity of urban and rural populations.

It then makes sense that these projects, and other similar projects initiated in various colonies around the world, set the tone for the water projects of the USA post the world wars which in turn set the tone for newly independent India, with 'new access to water' occurring via diverted and dammed rivers, and later borewells ([Roy, 2021, p. 569-570](#)). In the last three decades, we have seen different parts of the country undergo great ecological stress that manifests in several ways including water scarcity/drought and flooding that are worsened because of climate change and shifting monsoons ([Prabhu and Chitale, 2024](#)). The account of water that we have traced through these three thinkers gives us a usable, if not granular, picture of the transformation of water imaginaries in India from the late colonial period to the present, leaving us with a contemporary Indian water imaginary that seems bleak in its neutrality and unapproachable in its emptiness. After all, what stories can the dead waters of modernity tell us?

Illich believed that such waters held no deeper truths for us, but both Linton and Neimanis disagree. Linton ([2010, p. 5](#)) asks us to consider that 'every instance of water that has significance for us is saturated with ideas, meanings, values, and potentials that we have conferred upon it', and Neimanis writes ([2017, p. 185](#)) that '...traditional waters and

⁸ I am certainly clustering a wide variety of hydrological practices here, and it should be noted that each instance of colonial intervention into water practices was motivated by differing needs and ecological landscapes, and that the results of each of these practices were complex. For more on colonial water practices, refer to "Water in British India: The Making of a 'Colonial Hydrology'" by Rohan D'Souza ([2006, p. 621-628](#)).

anthropological waters both emerge from ‘various intersecting material practices and possibilities’.⁹ This begs the question, does modern water, emptied of more traditional meaning, stay empty? ⁹ Or to ask it as Illich might have: what metaphors have we unwittingly put into ‘empty’ modern water? This thesis argues that we might find answers to these questions by studying theatrical texts about the water crisis with an ecocritical lens formulated using Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT).

Methodology: Crafting an Ecocritical Lens with Conceptual Metaphor Theory

In her popular essay “‘There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake’: Toward an Ecological Theater’, Una Chaudhuri writes ([1994, p. 24](#)) that naturalistic theatre (what she calls ‘naturalism’) in the West is complicit in the transformation of nature into fodder for the expanding dreams of industrialisation because despite ‘asserting the deterministic force of the environment, naturalism concealed the incompleteness of its definition of environment’ and that by purely concentrating on the ‘social web’ of human lives naturalism built ‘a fragile edifice that could sustain itself only at the cost of actively ignoring the claims of the nonhuman.’ Chaudhuri ([1994, p. 23](#)) is particularly critical of the ‘metaphorizing capabilities’ of such naturalistic plays that emptied the ‘specifically ecological meaning’ of images of nature (‘cherry orchards, wild ducks and polluted baths’) and instead used them to emphasise and mirror the emotional and psychological journeys of human characters on stage.

Other critics have pointed out that Western theatre in its entirety has trouble delivering effective narratives about ecological and environmental issues because ‘Theatre’s function as a theatron (or site of looking) for the analysis of heightened and destructive human passions and emotions necessarily turns the spectatorial gaze away from the materiality of the external world.’ ([Lavery and Delijani, 2015, p. 6](#)). This point is well made. We do need more texts

⁹ We can also understand this meaning to be what Neimanis terms ([2017, p. 159](#)) ‘social content’.

directly addressing non-human beings, thus bringing them back into social imaginaries that exist at an ever-increasing distance from the natural world. And yet, while the three plays I am analysing – and the three I am writing – are ecological, it could be argued that they are more concerned with ‘tracing the impact of the environment on human beings’ with the crisis being merely a backdrop (Lavery and Delijani, 2015, p. 6).

However, I do not believe that their focus on human drama means that they offer lesser insights into contemporary climate crises. I take my cue for this thesis from Lavery and Delijani (2015, p. 8) who engage in a critical praxis that seeks to ‘widen the scope of our enquiry and to look back to extant texts, reading them with and against their environmental and ecological grain’.¹⁰ Lavery and Delijani and the other scholars in *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd: Ecology, the Environment and the Greening of the Modern Stage* (2015) employ a variety of methodologies that ‘[grasp] the environmental and ecological significance inherent in the Theatre of the Absurd.’ (2015, p. 9) Their analysis investigates how several texts of Absurd theatre complicate ‘the so-called exceptionalism of the human subject in crisis’ by playing with ‘a new form of human subjectivity [...] characterized, moreover, by weakness, vulnerability and uncertainty’ (2015, p. 12).

But how does one undertake such a reading of texts that directly reference and employ ecological crisis in their dramaturgy? And what is the value of such a reading? This thesis answers these questions and contributes to the field of ecocritical theory by studying three texts to uncover what human drama can tell us about various kinds of water crises. The first two texts, *Thaneer Thaneer* (2001) or *Water!* by Komal Swaminathan and *Sordid* (2019) by V. Balakrishnan, are concerned with water scarcity, the consequences of resource depletion on human communities, and the relationship between people and their governments. The third

¹⁰ See also Chaudhuri’s ‘Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama (1995).

and final text *Plan B/C/D/E* (2021) by Meghana A.T., is a lecture-drama premised on the writer-performer entreating audiences to help her plan for rising seas and the imminent flooding of Mumbai and various other coastal cities across the world.

I am particularly interested in how these three texts have a different relationship to metaphor from Chaudhury's 'metaphorizing' of nature. But first, how and why does naturalism deploy metaphors that neutralise nature? Theatre is an exercise in making sense of reality – it can reflect society by showing us how we (humans) are 'getting along' and prompts us to wonder 'How can we get along better?' (Bogart, 2020), and by '...open[ing] up a new conversation with audiences' (Nottage in Stratton, 2017). I would argue that it is theatre's fluency in both metaphor and metonymy that allows this. The metaphoric has to do with our ability to sense similarity and employ substitution, while the metonymic is concerned with our ability to see contiguity and context (Jakobson, 2009, p. 41-42). We will discuss metaphor in some detail but let us begin with the other 'pole' of language: metonymy.

Metonymy is understood to be 'a figure of language and thought in which one entity is used to refer to, or in cognitive linguistic terms 'provide access to', another entity to which it is somehow related.' (Littlemore, 2015, np). Jakobson argues that metonymy plays a role equal to metaphor in the development of not just language and discourse, but human behaviour. In theatre, the most widely used kind of metonymy is synecdoche, where the part stands in for the whole. So in any play:

...a room [stands in] for a house, a tree for a wood, a family for a nation. For every object or person or place specified onstage, we sense the presence of those not there; every onstage suggests an offstage and the limitations of the form place symbolic weight onto everything populating the stage. (Waters, 2011, p. 205)

It is interesting to note that both naturalism and realism tend to heighten metonymic aspects of theatre with sets, costumes, speech, and action becoming very specific and 'real'.

Jakobson points this out when he notes ([2009, p. 43](#)) that ‘it is the predominance of metonymy which underlies and predetermines the so-called ‘realistic’ trend’. A heightening of metonymy allows a narrow and precise focus that in naturalistic theatre seeks to simulate, not precisely reality, but reality as it is conceived in ‘the orderly bourgeois world’ ([Ghosh, 201, p. 21](#)). This is Chaudhuri’s problem with the use of metaphorized nature within plays such as *The Cherry Orchard* or *Wild Duck*. In naturalistic productions, the symbolic weight, that metonymic power of the orchard and the duck is emptied, and replaced with meaning that illustrates the emotions, desires, and journeys of human actors. They cannot be themselves. The problem of such an emptying of metonymy has been addressed within Western theatre with the rise of symbolism, non-dramatic performance, and contemporary drama that eschews realism and often structure, character, and plot.

This we will discuss in more detail in the third chapter. For now, I want us to think about whether the only solution to this petrification of metonymy is to do away with dramatic structure entirely. The texts we are analysing were written in India and so are not exactly a part of the tradition Chaudhuri is critiquing. However, the influence of Western dramatic modes on urban Indian theatre especially cannot be denied, and so I believe that using these texts to further theorisations about the relationship between dramatic structure, metaphor, and ecology is not without merit. I argue in the chapters that follow that these scripts are ecologically alive works, not because of their pared-down use of synecdoche or their refusal to metaphorize nature, but rather because they are explorations of various ecologically potent metaphorical concepts connected to water crises. Before we delve into what a metaphorical concept is, let us consider metaphors themselves in the context of theatre and performance.

Generally speaking, a metaphor is a linguistic device that deals with ‘the perception of similarities or correspondences between unlike entities and processes, so that we can see,

experience, think and communicate about one thing in terms of another’ (Semino and Demjén, 2016, p. 1). It is an ‘essential building block’ in theatrical language, pivotal to the ‘particular kind of iconic communication’ that takes place between theatre-makers and audiences (Bogart, 2022). Consider that powerful moment when Lady Macbeth must wash the blood off her hands. The act functions practically but can easily be read and played as a failed attempt at cleansing her conscience – which is how we now understand the term ‘to wash the blood off my hands’. Or in Girish Karnad’s ‘Naga-Mandala’ where the play uses a folk story with gods, snakes, and magic roots as a metaphor for the modern gender expectations within heteronormative relationships in India.

We see then that in theatre metaphor functions on multiple levels, sometimes shedding light on a single moment of drama, and at other times supporting the narrative structure and intent of the entirety of the play. In this thesis, I study the latter and argue that this is how metaphorical concepts function within theatre and performance. Now, what is a metaphorical concept? Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 5) argue that certain metaphors, more than others, play a large role in determining ‘what we do and how we understand what we are doing...’. They term these ‘conceptual metaphors’ and the theory surrounding it has come to be known as Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). Conceptual metaphors underlie the ‘ordinary conceptual system’ and allow us to gain an ‘understanding [of] one domain of experience (that is typically abstract) in terms of another (that is typically concrete).’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 13).

Within the realm of CMT, not every metaphor is a conceptual metaphor, but every conceptual metaphor can and usually does produce a variety of linguistic metaphors. If we were to take the conceptual metaphor ‘time is money’, we arrive at phrases such as ‘I *wasted* a lot of time today’; ‘My time’s *worth* more than that’; ‘I *spent* all day cleaning out the garage’, etc., Here

conceptualising time in terms of money influences our understanding of and relationship to time. CMT also stresses that not every domain can be understood in terms of every other domain. Different kinds of restrictions determine how domains relate, but one particularly interesting restriction is that as per CMT more abstract domains called the ‘target’ tend to be mapped onto more concrete domains, known as the ‘source’ (1980, p. 16).¹¹

In the case of ‘time is money’, we understand time to be the abstract target, while money is the concrete source. In the thesis that follows, I make the argument that such conceptual metaphors, far from being ‘dead’ in modern water as Illich suggests, are being recalibrated so that watery metaphors concerned with the flow of memory, creation, or the washing away of sin float atop modern waters, made insoluble, while metaphors related to power, ownership, hierarchy, and risk become entirely soluble and change the very way we think about water. However, if, as CMT claims, conceptual metaphors are never formed by the concrete being mapped onto the abstract, what might we understand when in the following chapters I argue that the three texts in question shed light upon ‘Water as Power’, ‘Water as Commodity’ and ‘Water as Risk’?

Contrary to the conclusion that these are not conceptual metaphors in the first place, I suggest that they are examples of how our very conception of what is abstract and what is concrete has shifted, with water becoming more abstract than power, commodity, or risk, and that this is connected to our rapidly changing relationship with the natural world. In the next three chapters, we will concentrate on how theatre helps establish, upend, and transform these new conceptual metaphors that have become so central to how we make sense of reality. We will

¹¹ This term ‘mapping’ is quite interesting, and we should understand it to be the process by which one domain is explained/made sense of in terms of the other. To try to understand this for ‘time is money’ we could note that both time and money are precious, and usually limited in quantity, making it necessary to be careful about how one uses it. This seems to me one possible way to map one onto the other.

also pay close attention to how all three writers ‘play’ with modern water imaginaries, particularly their challenge to the ‘natural’ modern water imaginary where ‘Water is life’ and their suggestion that such an imaginary is superficial and warped.¹²

This is not to suggest that water does not have life-giving properties, but rather that the life-giving properties of water are so ubiquitous in thinking and language that it becomes near impossible to think about water and water crisis outside of its terms. The texts I am analysing recognise that ‘The very systematicity that allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another will necessarily hide other aspects of the concept.’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 10) and show us how beneath the bland conceptualisation of ‘Water is life’ lie more insidious imaginaries made up of metaphorical concepts such as ‘Water as power’, ‘Water as commodity’ and ‘Water as risk’.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into two parts. This first is concerned with a critical study of theatre texts to better understand the composition of modern water imaginaries. The second is a set of creative works that respond to ‘modern water imaginaries’ as they materialise in Chennai. These creative works are centred on Chennai but do engage with water crises in ways that I believe have resonance for audiences across the world.¹³ I address the creative element in some detail in the section ‘Notes on the Creative Project’ and so will use the remainder of this

¹² I take this formulation of the modern water imaginary from Neimanis’s (2017, p. 176) insight that ‘aqueous imaginaries are emergent [...] with no guarantees.’. Her argument shows how ‘Water is life’ might be part of the imaginaries of activists and organisations seeking water justice but can also be repeated by ‘consumable units’ and ‘popular discourse of water’ more broadly’ (Neimanis, 2017, p. 155).

¹³ I understand resonance as Anne Bogart does when she writes (2021, p. 8), ‘Resonance is the opposite of alienation, which is the inability or impossibility to enter into a relation with another or to form a meaningful relationship of mutual understanding and interaction with the immediate surroundings or with fellow human beings.’

introduction to explain the structure of my critical chapters. I had mentioned that the first two plays I analysed deal with drought: *Thaneer Thaneer* (2001) is a searing indictment of the role the government plays in aggravating water scarcity, while *Sordid* (2019) looks at water scarcity caused by diverting water away from rural populations towards urban centres.

Drought, water scarcity, and water stress are real issues that plague millions around the world to varying levels of severity, however, as pointed out before, the terms in which we understand such crises need rethinking. As Linton puts it (2010, p. 193), ‘the water crisis has been mostly taken for granted as an inevitable and obvious consequence of growing human populations, increasing affluence, and limited physical water supplies.’. We can see how this commonly held belief about the water crisis, i.e., water is a scarce resource, leads to solutions that either involve finding new supplies of water or restricting the use of water in the first place. Both situations, whether they involve governments charging more money for water or finding ‘ingenious’ solutions such as seawater desalination plants, are contingent on people being further distanced from water.

Such solutions fail to see how water scarcity and drought might be linked to other kinds of crises including floods, and water pollution, and I am reminded of journalist P. Sainath’s (1996, p. 335) comment that,

...at the best of times, the press has viewed drought and scarcity as events. And the belief that only events make news, not processes, distorts understanding. Some of the best reports on poverty suffer from trying to dramatize it as an event. The real drama is in the process. In the cause.

It is the drama of this ‘process’ that both texts highlight. The first chapter, an analysis of *Thaneer Thaneer*, studies the composition of modern waters in India, and in Tamil Nadu particularly. In this chapter, we will see how the play disturbs idealised narratives of traditional, pre-colonial water imaginaries untouched by inequality and suggests, through the

effective use of dramatic tension, that ‘water as power’ not only has a long history in Tamil Nadu but also fed into and built the region’s contemporary water imaginaries.

The second chapter, a study of *Sordid*, extends this understanding of ‘drought’ by looking beyond bureaucratic regimes of water towards the gender relations that come to dominate water-stressed regions. In this chapter, we will study how *Sordid*’s interest in character and desire, staples of drama, complicates ‘water as commodity’ and traces the impact of such commodification on the bodies of women. The final chapter of this thesis is an analysis of *Plan B/C/D/E* (2021), which moves away from drought towards ‘flood’, but specifically towards the catastrophic flooding expected from sea level rise.¹⁴ We will be studying how this text, while not exactly a ‘play’, continues to use dramatic modes to discuss how ‘water as risk’ fosters urban planning measures that make it far easier to forget or ignore ideas of equality and social justice.

These three plays taken together present us with a clearer understanding of how modern water has infiltrated contemporary water imaginaries, particularly urban ones. In studying them, I hope not only to shed light on what we think about water but *how* we think about water.

¹⁴ This play script is yet to be published. The author shared a copy with me that was written in 2021, and this is where I have pulled all my quotations from, barring some from a video of a performance she also shared.

Chapter One

In the drought-ridden village of Athipatti, a stranger arrives. At first, the villagers, who desperately hope for either rain or assistance from the state government situated in not-so-distant Madras (now Chennai), cannot believe that this stranger will solve their plight. But they are desperate, and so grudgingly trust him. When he does find a new water source for them, the villagers are empowered to take a moral stand against the apathetic political powers that have ignored their situation. But these powers prove far too terrible to withstand and eventually both the stranger and the village's water source are lost. This summary of the social drama, *Thaneer Thaneer* or *Water!* by Komal Swaminathan suggests a bleak play that is more a warning than a message of hope. And yet, following its first performance, the play garnered immense popularity, going on to be performed some 250 times, and it was adapted into an award-winning film.

Swaminathan wished to make theatre that inspired 'Physical and mental revolt', and the play was termed controversial, with 'radical' depictions of resistance that made it difficult to stage. ([Santhanam, 2012](#)).¹⁵ Until 2013, plays in Chennai required police approval or a police license under the Tamil Nadu Dramatic Performance Act of 1954 (based on the colonial Dramatic Performance Act of 1876) which outlines guidelines that theatre-makers had to follow if they wanted their shows staged in the state. Police were allowed to stop shows mid-performance, arrest the makers and performers, and seize props, scenery, and costumes. The police only approved the license for *Thaneer Thaneer* a few hours before the inaugural show because of its 'revolutionary content' ([Bhatt, 2021](#)). It is true that in *Thaneer Thaneer* the main driver is

¹⁵ The play makes some references to 'Naxals' (termed left-wing extremists by the Indian government) and contains some references to violent revolutions.

revolt – the villagers of Athipatti revolt against their governments, their class and gender positions, and their general lot in life. In doing so, they regain some sense of their value.

In setting and substance, the play speaks to national and global movements where communities are demanding their right to clean water, smog-free air, fertilizer-free lands, access to forests, and more. The play and later the movie – which the play’s translator ([Shankar and Swaminathan, 2001, p. xix](#)) writes inspired residents in Pondicherry and Bangalore to organise and demonstrate for the right to clean water – have come to be seen as ‘canonical’ texts of realist Tamil drama. In Chennai, the play was revived in English and Tamil by the Madras Players in 2012 and 2016, and in Tamil by Lalitha Dharini, Swaminathan's daughter, in 2021 because of its continued relevance.¹⁶ The play’s unabating popularity also speaks to how central water is to political discourse in Tamil Nadu which is ‘... the only state in this country where the opening of a reservoir is a political act.’ ([Ge, 2019, p. 85](#)).

This might seem at odds with the suggestion I made in the introduction that people in Chennai are disconnected from water, but the ‘waters’ of political discourse in Tamil Nadu – the waters that make headlines and are represented in *Thaneer Thaneer* – are not the same as Illich’s ‘dream’ waters. Some examples of the waters I am referring to would include the waters of the Cauvery River which are at the centre of an ongoing, heated, battle between Tamil Nadu and the neighbouring state of Karnataka, or the waters being drawn from large desalination plants despite the ill effects they have on seawater salinity and marine life ([Panagopoulos and](#)

¹⁶ I am examining this text many years after its writing, and in translation- the 2001 English translation by S. Shankar, published by Seagull Books India. The difficulty of achieving faithful translations of theatre scripts is something that Shankar ([2001, p. ix](#)) admits to, writing that ‘...the play presents the reader with dialectal variations of Tamil virtually impossible to represent in English without sounding very artificial’ and that his solution was to ‘render the play in more or less uniform English’. This does mean that the depth of cultural context, literary allusions, and linguistic richness have not all made their way into version I read.

[Haralambous, 2020](#)), or the ‘water’ that is released from reservoirs to farmers, especially during bad monsoon years. These ‘waters’ are complex and should be thought of as ‘...an indigenous system that deserves to be investigated in its own right’ ([Linton, 2010, p. 57](#)). We could argue that the waters we are examining in this chapter are one of the ‘many alter-imaginaries still flow in modern/Anthropocene water’s undercurrents’ ([Neimanis, 2017, p. 169](#)).

Then in the following sections, we will see how the waters which haunt the drought-ridden world of *Thaneer Thaneer*, manifestations of what I term ‘water as power’, are manifold and created by enjoining water imaginaries old and new. We will first look at how the narrative arc of the play clarifies ‘water as power’ for audiences by highlighting some of the more obvious components of the contemporary water imaginary in India. Then we will concentrate on the play’s use of comedy to deal with the controversial and ever-present topic of ‘river linking’. We will also see how the play offers us a seemingly positive manifestation of ‘water as power’ only to subvert this via dramatic action. In doing this, the play both references traditional power structures and shows us how ‘water as power’ became a mainstay of political discourse in Tamil Nadu.

The Modern Water Imaginary in India

Early in *Thaneer Thaneer* the villagers of Athipatti ask Vaithalingam, the schoolteacher, to read to them from the newspaper. Vaithalingam obliges and reads out news about the war in Afghanistan and film stars in Madras. When the villagers press him for news about the drought ruining Athipatti, he says that they need not worry for the ‘Garland Canal Project’ is underway.

Vaithalingam: Here it is. [...] Canals should be dug from the Ganga so that the rivers of India are joined together. Not only will water be brought to dry regions but the danger of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra flooding will be gone. The Prime

Minister said that as part of this project, a canal should be dug to Athipatti in Thirunelveli district, so the village gets water. ([Swaminathan, 2001, p. 6-7](#))

Though no longer called the ‘Garland Canal Project’, plans for interlinking rivers across India are ongoing and have a long history. It was first suggested in the 19th century by British engineer Arthur Cotton. A critic of the railway networks being built across India at the time, Cotton believed that an efficient, well-managed irrigation system of interlinked rivers would serve to bring much-needed water to thousands of destitute farmers across the region and act as a network of waterways that could be used for transportation and trade ([Pillai, 2017](#)).¹⁷

While Cotton’s ideas were never taken seriously by his fellow countrymen, they did survive him. Bandhyupadhyay and Perveen ([2004, p. 5308](#)) traced the continued proposal of river-linking projects as a solution to situations of famine and drought between the 1900s and 1970s.¹⁸ At present, such projects continue to exist under the Ministry of Jal Shakti¹⁹, a new portfolio created during the Bharatiya Janta Party’s (BJP) second term in power; and most recently in 2021, India’s Union Finance Minister sanctioned money for several river-linking projects despite the lack of statutory clearance.²⁰ The very idea that river systems might exist

17 Cotton saw the railways as destructive and useless to a vast majority of Indians. For the ecological impact of connecting India via railways see Das on ‘Colonialism, Development, and the Environment: Railways and Deforestation in British India, 1860-1884’

18 In 1970s the former irrigation minister Dr K.L Rao proposed the ‘National Water Grid’ and in 1978, Capt. Dinshaw J. Dastur published the booklet ‘The Garland Canal Project: Answer to India's flood, food and unemployment problems’, The captain suggested a ‘4,200 km long Himalayan canal and 9,300 km long southern garland canal and the connection between the two systems through two pipelines passing by Delhi and Patna.’ Then again in 1982 the National Water Development Agency was constituted as an autonomous body to study river interlinking feasibility. ([Bandhyupadhyay and Perveen, 2004, p. 5308](#))

19 This combined the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, and the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation.

20 The government announced ‘the implementation of the Ken-Betwa Link Project, at an estimated cost of Rs 44,605 crore, will be taken up. This is aimed at providing irrigation benefits to 0.9 million hectares of

in a state of ‘surplus’ or ‘deficit’, the idea that rationalises interlinking projects as solving for ‘water that is lost to the sea’ ([Prabhu, 2003 as cited in Bandhyupadhyay and Perveen, 2004, p. 5310](#)), has its origins in modern water. Specifically, in the ‘basic water balance equation for river basins’ ([Linton, 2010, p. 133](#)).²¹

Through this reference to the river-linking plan early in the play, we get a sense of the water imaginary Swaminathan is critiquing and how within such an imaginary, recurring problems of floods and droughts that affect various parts of India are purported to be unsolvable without infrastructure-heavy, technology-based solutions, such as the linking of 37 rivers across the country. Moreover, the play is highly critical of how infrastructure-heavy solutions blindly embrace scientific solutions while simultaneously failing to follow scientific processes such as rigorous studies and testing, peer-reviewing the efficacy of solutions, and research into the local effects of technologies. Just consider how in the case of river linking the logic of surplus and deficient river basins was found to be inherently faulty.²²

Despite this, in the last fifteen years, river linking has been presented again and again to the people of Tamil Nadu as *the* solution to drought and better agricultural output.²³ In 2021, the then Chief Minister inaugurated the Cauvery-Gundar River linking project, which is meant to

farmers’ lands, drinking water supply for 6.2 million people, 103 MW of hydroelectric and 27 MW of solar power.’ ([Ghai, 2022](#))

21 They further describe this as a simplistic equation, ‘ $P = E + R$ where P represents precipitation, E represents evaporation, and R represents runoff.’ ([Bandhyupadhyay and Perveen, 2004, p. 5310](#))

22 The very ‘methodology for working out whether or not a river basin has any ‘surplus’ water’ suggested by the central government’s working group for the interlinking plan is based upon ‘an unpublished paper’.’ ([Bandhyupadhyay and Perveen, 2004, p. 5310](#))

23 The 2016 Pattiseema Left Irrigation project linking the Krishna and Godavari rivers was supposedly the first phase of this project. While it was lauded for the remarkable speed at which it was completed and for the water it brought to distressed farmers in the region, the project has also faced problems related to water storage, reduced water carrying capacity, and corruption. ([‘CAG slams Andhra gov’, 2017](#))

connect six districts, irrigate hundreds of thousands of acres, and bring water to lakhs of farmers ([Kumar, 2021](#)). We see here a real-life instance of ‘water as power’ with the promise of water being closely linked to winning and keeping political power in the region. What is interesting to note is that ‘water as power’ works in both directions. Governments authorise and enforce large projects on varied populations whether it benefits them or not, but other political actors, including labour unions and civic groups, also demand such projects because they believe they are the only solution.²⁴

Thaneer Thaneer is critical of such infrastructure-led relief and Swaminathan uses humour in his critique. When the men of the village rejoiced at the news of the interlinking project, Vaithalingam snaps that he is joking because “There’ll be no water in Athipatti even during the time of your grandchildren” ([Swaminathan, 2001, p. 6-7](#)). Interestingly, Swaminathan’s first forays into theatre took place within the Sabha theatre system in Chennai known for its particular brand of comedy.²⁵ Sabhas are cultural organizations that fund, support, and oversee the performing arts in Chennai. They also decide what counts as ‘good’ and ‘high-quality’ art. While there are arguments made to recognise the ‘egalitarian’ origins of such sabhas ([V. S., 2011](#)), theatre history scholar Kristen Rudisill ([2007, p. 4](#)) has argued that the ‘sabha theater genre is, in many aspects, a Brahmin theater’.

24 We see this in the Cauvery-Gundar River linking project, with farmers in the region demanding that the project be sped up despite the project facing opposition, not in the least from the very villages the government claims it will benefit.

25 Such theatre, according to Rudisill ([2012, p. 277](#)) are characterised by

‘patronage by sabhas, with their middle-class, usually Brahmin, audience base; a central theme concerning marriage alliances and/or married life; scripted witty dialogue with a thin plot and one-liner jokes, often including language jokes that code-switch between Tamil and English; a socially conservative message; and an “amateur aesthetic” that involves minimal sets, costumes, and lighting, and two-hour evening or weekend matinee performances.

Swaminathan eventually disagreed with and broke from the patronage of such a system, but *Thaneer Thaneer*, as we will see, is still enmeshed in the structures of class and caste perpetuated by the Sabha. I would also argue that the kind of comedy popular in the Sabha theatre of the post-Independence period left its mark on Swaminathan. But where the Sabha used slapstick comedy, with the character of the ‘fool’ often being assigned to non-middle-class persons who do not behave and think as they should in a given situation, Swaminathan eschews the slapstick in favour of comedy borne of dramatic tension. The ‘fool’ for Swaminathan is anyone with a blind belief in authority, and authority figures themselves. So, while Vaithalingam does not know whether the science behind such a plan is sound, he has quite correctly summarised that such plans have nothing to do with poor people in rural hinterlands such as Athipatti.

It is the play’s blending of comedy and realism that makes the story of the villagers of Athipatti feel both urgent and relatable to audiences across different eras. Writing primarily between the late 1950s and the mid-1990s Swaminathan, like many artists of the time, witnessed firsthand the failures of developmental policies in independent India. In an interview with India Today, Swaminathan described how the plot of *Thaneer Thaneer* rose out of his own experiences visiting Ettayapuram village, Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu where even some twenty years after independence, running water was still a distant dream ([Shankar and Swaminathan, 2001, p. xix](#)). In the play, tellingly also set in Tirunelveli, the little reprieve afforded to the villagers of Athipatti finally comes not from the government, but from the outsider Vellaisamy.

Vellaisamy is a criminal and, on the run, but he is also a ‘good person’ inclined to help when he sees people in difficulty. It is he who suggests a technologically simple solution: a cart and pair of cattle paid for, jointly, by the villagers. He offers to drive the cart to the nearest stream

and draw water for the village. After some initial resistance, the plan goes ahead. For a brief time, the villagers are no longer thirsty. They have banded together and finally *done* something about their situation. From their initial attitudes to the drought they face, we might conclude that despite their distance from the capital, the villagers of Athipatti do understand water to be ‘modern’ in the way Linton describes it. For them water is not just scarce, but exists only beyond the village, in far-away Madras, and briefly, in the distant North, where the river Ganga flows. This is despite the fact there is a stream of fresh water only several miles away.

This distance between the people of Athipatti and water should be understood as modern water’s desire to ‘not (be) complicated by ecological, cultural, or social factors’ ([Linton, 2010, p. 8](#)). Swaminathan’s narrative makes what Linton calls a ‘fictional independence’ of people from water a central obstacle that he wants both the play’s characters, and real people, to overcome, not through dependence on powerful political actors, but through the expression of their ‘right’ to water. Does this imply that any new water imaginaries the play seeks to build are rooted in neoliberal ideologies? This is possible given that Swaminathan was writing and staging the play in the late 1970s and early 1980s. At this time, the effects of neoliberal policy i.e., the promotion and early implementation of radical free-market policies were already being felt in India, though it would be another ten years before the IMF and World Bank formally ‘globalized’ the nation ([Guha, 2024](#)).

Having Vellaisamy and the villagers find a solution to the drought by themselves follows the usual beats of dramatic action. Characters want something, but characters are blocked from achieving their want, so characters undertake various strategies to achieve their goal. The actions of the characters do line up perfectly with a shift in water management that was underway in India post-1970. This shift was influenced, in part, by World Bank and IMF policies and involved returning control of water resources to local communities ([Agarwal and](#)

[Narain, 1997](#)). However, as we will see, Swaminathan is sceptical about the extent to which democratic structures within India can support people acting on their own, and his narrative encourages us to think about how policies that encourage both ‘independence’ and ‘tradition’ essentially seek to reduce the government's involvement in and responsibility over local water management.

Traditional Water Imaginaries

In the arid and semi-arid regions of Tamil Nadu, it is recorded that approximately 41,123 tanks – mostly built between the 7th and 10th centuries, though some date back even further – can be found ([Department of Economics and Statistics, 2022-23](#)). These tanks were part of a water system built to make the most of a variable monsoon season and work either as standalone water bodies fed directly by the rain (non-system tanks) or as part of a chain of water bodies connected to larger streams and rivers by canals (system tanks) ([Palanisami and Easter, 1983](#)). For centuries tank water irrigated agricultural lands, provided water for drinking, bathing, cooking, cleaning, and ritual purposes, regulated flood waters, recharged ground water, and created rich wetland ecosystems for humans, birds, fish, and various kinds of plant life ([Janakarajan, 1993](#)).

Such systems of tank irrigation have fallen out of use with only 19% of agricultural land being irrigated by tanks in 2005, as compared to the 39% recorded towards the end of the 1970s ([Aubriot and Ignatius Prabhakar, 2011, p. 330](#)). Tank revival projects have seen some improvement in water management practices in Tamil Nadu. Then is solving the state's various water crises simply a matter of returning to more traditional water imaginaries? We will see how the play suggests that there is nothing simple about this idea, and that ‘water as power’ has historicity. Vellaisamy's plan gives the villagers a greater degree of water security, but it is not a permanent solution.

When a member of the ruling political party in their district, Naicker, visits Athipatti to ensure that his candidate – who belongs to the same caste as most people in the village – has the villager's votes in the upcoming local election, the villagers dare to ask him why the candidate has done nothing about their water situation. Naicker brushes them off, first stating that it is out of his hands and then making vague promises that their problems will be solved by the next five-year plan (another reference to the river interlinking project). Angry and tired of this apathy, the villagers insult Naicker and en masse refuse to vote for his candidate. As a result, Naicker's candidate loses the election, and the villagers receive some sort of justice.

But the play is also keen to show us that the complexities of deploying such democratic strategies are numerous, and not without consequences. Since his candidate loses by a small margin of votes, Naicker blames the loss on the people of Athipatti and seeks revenge for what he sees as their caste betrayal. He destroys Athipatti's water cart, has Vellaisamy beaten up, and threatens more of the same for anyone else from the village who dares approach the stream. As a result, the village is thrown into disarray: some are hopeless, and others want to rise in violent revolution, but once again, Vellaisamy offers the villagers a creative solution. He suggests that they dig a canal linking the distant stream right to the village's dried-up pond.

The villagers, now unified in their desire to solve their water problem, and in their hatred of Naicker, agree. Tragically, this plan is also foiled by Naicker who reports the illegal canal to the state. The state sends in the police and an engineer from the Public Works Department (PWD) to stop them and capture Vellaisamy, who we learned earlier in the play, was on the run for the murder of his 'boss' (a man to whom he was an indentured labourer) and his wife. The play ends not long after this. There are several points to unpack but let us begin by noting that Vellaisamy and his solutions, particularly that of a canal that revitalises a village pond

(tank) harken to a traditional water imaginary where the community is in direct contact with the water they need.

While he moves in opposition to such self-sufficiency, Naicker's destruction of the cart, banning Athipatti residents from the stream, and later informing the state government about the canal also harkens back to traditional imaginaries. We could understand his actions as expressions of how water systems are what David Mosse terms ([2003, p.23](#)) 'repositories of symbolic resources'. While tanks and canals are technologically simple earthen infrastructure, the larger water management systems that they are part of are complex and embedded in caste and lineage, not just at the village level, but at several levels of social organisation and polity ([Ramasamy, 2014](#)). Tanks were a result of different kingdoms expanding into southern Tamil Nadu to bring more land under the plough and increase the political reach of various rulers.²⁶

The vast systems that exist now were built over centuries, and the 'instrumental dimensions of the (tank system) technology is inseparable from its social and political meaning' ([Mosse, 2003, p. 31](#)). Within the play, we see some version of these 'social and political meaning[s]' as it might play out in more contemporary settings. We do see it in Naicker, but even earlier in the play, we get a hint of how caste impacts water imaginaries when a reference to a Pariah (Dalit) community is made by Vaithalingam. He says "There's a well two miles from here. It had a little water. Seven or eight low caste pariah families live there. No one from our village would go there to get water." ([Swaminathan, 2001, p. 16](#)).

He then beckons a young Pariah (lower cast) boy to come before them. This boy drags himself along the ground, having recently lost the use of his legs. Vaithalingam reveals that he was

26 'Tank irrigation development can itself be considered as having long been a strategy to forge upward links between local Maravar chiefs and their political overlords and the reigning kings, from whom they secured titles, water rights, grain shares, honours and political legitimacy' ([Mosse 2003, p. 66](#)).

poisoned by fluoride found in the water of the Pariah well. Despite this clear acknowledgement of the situation of the Pariah families, there is no mention of them benefitting from Vellaisamy's water cart and no more mention of their participation in the digging of the canal and clearing of the pond. Mukul Sharma's (2017, p.163) work on water and Dalit memories shows that water in India has a long history of being used 'as a means to exert control over others. It has been a traditional medium for exclusion of Dalits in overt and covert ways'. Historical accounts and folk traditions also make it clear that when constructing tanks, 'the labor [...] was, in general, politically and ideologically controlled and even coerced by the elites [*from Dalit and Tribal communities*] since the early medieval period' (Shah, 2008, p. 665).²⁷

Considering this history of the tank system – and of 'water as power' – we can understand Naicker using water as a means to mete out punishment for caste betrayal, maintain his honour, and build political clout as a result of his strong identification with the power structures of the caste system.²⁸ Despite the play's failure to explore the caste dynamics of 'water as power' more fully – an unwitting commentary on the limits of the progressive and Marxist movements in India – through the character of Naicker, the play does offer a critique of caste-based power structures and how they are embedded in bureaucratic systems built on a politics of belonging and othering (think caste hierarchies and lineages, but also communal

27 Shah's anthropological study was conducted in the neighbouring state of Karnataka amongst the Vodda community. Using folk traditions, she argues 'tanks in the Vijayanagara period were not constructed collectively by communities. Instead, elites extracted the Voddas' labor through some form of coercion.' (2008, p. 665)

28 The idea of honour as related to caste must be understood as a form of respect higher castes expect from subordinates. It requires lower castes and subordinates knowing and acknowledging power relations, and most vitally is a way of controlling non-elite bodies and practices. For more on this consider reading: 'In the Name of Honour: Comprehending Honour Killings in India' Critical Edges, 2020. <https://criticaledges.com/2020/09/26/in-the-name-of-honour-comprehending-honour-killings-in-india/>.

differences) that embrace ‘development’ and ‘modernity’ only so long as they can be navigated via such hierarchies.²⁹

For instance, one of the first things we learn about Naicker is from one of the characters who says, “He is one of the most powerful men in the region. The collector, the MLA, and ministers– he has them all in his pocket. Other important officials too and scared of him.” ([Swaminathan 2001, p. 27](#)). Naicker believes he is owed both respect and unwavering compliance in the form of a vote for his candidate from the people of Athipatti because of their caste ties, and because of the position or power that he holds within the social and political structures of the region. While the play portrays the breakdown of such ties – Naicker does not solve the villagers’ water problem despite their shared caste – there are plenty of real-world examples from within the world of water policy that showcase the opposite.

Studies show that while the revival of tank systems through participatory irrigation management was implemented at the village level, actual water users’ associations (WUAs) were entrenched in existing caste hierarchies, and ‘dominated by politically powerful farmers’ ([Lingappan and Balooni, 2018](#)). Then WUAs mostly attracted ‘those who have a vested interest in enjoying the status of an elected member or in making money, not necessarily those genuinely interested in managing irrigation tanks’ ([Aubriot and Prabhakar, 2011, p. 337](#)). It was further found that in meetings held to discuss the management of tanks people who were either from economically poorer and/or lower caste communities could not participate in decision-making or speak up in the presence of elites. If caste boundaries are broken, there

29 Swaminathan was not a card-carrying member of the Marxist party but did admit to being influenced by Marxist texts. The controversy around the play which led to it being almost banned had to do with the ‘pro-Naxalite’ sentiments that existed within the text. The then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu viewed the Naxalites as political extremists ([Shankar and Swaminathan, 2001, p. xv-xvi](#)).

are usually swift and violent repercussions for non-elites ([Aubriot and Ignatius Prabhakar, 2011, p. 337](#)).

Therefore, we must see Naicker as not simply a villain, but as a manifestation of ‘water as power’ i.e., a modern water imaginary that is rooted in historic, culturally sanctioned violence and that desires water to remain uncomplicated in terms of location, social relations, and culture. This, *Thaneer Thaneer* shows us, is what lies at the heart of modern water imaginaries in India.

The many imaginaries of modern water

The return to traditional systems of agriculture and natural resource management is not a purely ideological formulation by the powerful. It is also a result of the lived experiences of populations who have suffered at the hands of modern technologies and the nation-building ideologies that promoted them (the fight against GM seeds, machine trawlers in the oceans, and so on). However, as the play suggests, we must be suspicious of totalising ideologies that would paint pre-modern, pre-colonial traditions as having belonged to an egalitarian rural idyll. Such ideas come from both colonial records of the village as a self-contained and self-sustaining system, ignored by rapacious Indian kings, as it suited the colonial take-over of agricultural systems ([Mosse, 2003](#));³⁰ and from the post-independence state’s desire to define itself as being – as always having been – technologically and culturally modern.³¹

30 Mosse further observes that the state (both colonial and independent) has always tried to fit rural communities within whatever social theory serves its goals.

31 Consider how government officials and even institutions in charge of knowledge production have, over the last ten years, made all kinds of claims about the technological advancements of Hindu culture (another totalizing phrase) as proof of the superiority, purity, and ‘modernity’ of Indian (read Hindu) knowledge systems and practices.

Consider for a moment the role of the state within the play: it is ultimately through the state's formulations of the modern water imaginary that violence is inflicted. In theory, democratic states hold resources in trust for their people and are meant to act in their best interests, but when the actions of groups directly challenge state hegemony – like the villagers of Athipatti who try to close the gap between themselves and the water they need – the state reacts violently, all the while claiming to act in the best interests of the general public. We see this in the final scene of the play when the Engineer from the state government introduces himself saying, “I’m a government official. I’m doing my duty. Telegram after telegram is being rushed to the collector. He has been informed that this whole village is conspiring against the government.” ([Swaminathan, 2001, p. 62](#)).

The interests of the public are, however, defined within narrow frameworks that allow resources and wealth to continue to be acquired within longstanding hierarchies of power. Thus, while the state largely claims to distance itself from some kinds of traditionalism (communal, caste, and gender divisions) it is constituted by people (like Naicker and his political candidate) who not only use and thrive off these older systems but rework purportedly egalitarian civic structures to their own ends. The villagers of Athipatti do challenge such an imaginary, but as we have noted before, their counter-imaginary is not entirely free of ‘water as power’. *Thaneer Thaneer* is concerned with progressive ideas such as revolt against an oppressive state and seeing labour as ‘living’ not ‘dead’.

However, in its failure to engage with the ‘peculiar kind of *body history*’ ([Rao in Malreddy, 2015, p. 134](#)) inherent in Dalit labour we see the play's limited representation and engagement

with Dalit water imaginaries.³² This limitation also exists in the play's representation of women in such landscapes of water scarcity. Interestingly, despite the play having only one female character – Sevanthi, the schoolteacher's daughter – it is still considered a ground-breaking and feminist work of theatre.³³ Sevanthi is pivotal to the unfolding of drama: she offers Vellaisamy sympathy, she puts down money to build the water cart first, and towards the end of the play, she rejects her husband, a police officer intent on capturing Vellaisamy, by taking her thali (the chain that Hindu women traditionally wore to signal they were married) and tossing it at his feet.

While radical at the time, this throughline does not address how 'water as power' effects women. In the next chapter, we will be looking more closely at the relationship between modern water imaginaries and subjugated female bodies by seeing how V. Balakrishnan dramatizes modern water imaginaries, here coalescing into 'water as commodity', in his 2019 play *Sordid*.

32 Full quote: 'Ambedkar's views on caste appealed to 'a peculiar kind of body history' (italics in original; Rao 45) in which the Dalit/untouchable labourer was seen as the product of an ideological double bind: 'of the body as value, and the body as dispossessed and disposable life' (53).' (Malreddy, 2015, p. 134)

33 I do wonder if this is also a result of the legacy of the film *Thaneer Thaneer* (1981) which makes Sevanthi the central character and gives her more to do.

Chapter Two

Someone is banging on my bedroom door. The kind of urgent banging I had not heard since my schooldays when I was still asleep, but the school van was just around the corner. But I'm 27 now, it is a Saturday, and there is no earthly reason for waking up at 5 in the morning.

‘Open the door!’ my mother yells. ‘There’s water, but for just an hour. Open the door!’

Oh.

I scramble out of bed and let them in, my mother and the giant green bucket that has been in our family for decades. It is big enough for me to sit in and I am 175cm tall.

‘I don’t know how, and it was probably shady,’ she says, ‘but the man in 2F got a water lorry to come. We can let the water run for an hour in the morning for the next few days.’ She opens the tap and water – not muddy brown, not smelling strongly of chlorine – gushes out. ‘Every man in this place is an idiot. They were going to send it away because our tank got full. Send it off with a third of water left in it. They don’t have to worry about dishes or clothes, no? I told them ‘Nothing doing’. They’re waking everyone up so they can collect it. And if that idiot above us tries to tell me we’re hoarding water, I’ll give him a kick.’

Not one to argue with my irate mother, I nod along. We watch the bucket fill up. ‘When will this end?’ she asks. For us? Around October, when the first good monsoon arrives. For people living in areas without piped water connections, without borewells, without shady contacts... it never ends. Not really. ‘Water problems’ just exist in various degrees of stressful over the course of the year. That year, 2019, incidentally the year that *Sordid* won the Hindu Playwriting Award, the situation was so bad that the government was left scrambling. A very brief and not particularly objective analysis of government reactions:

In 2019,	first	but the government	And then
January	Reports of massive drought facing South India published, ³⁴	says	drinking water supply to the city is cut by half. ³⁵
March	24 districts are declared drought-hit, ³⁶	hires 100 more lorries to tackle supply delays ³⁷	temperatures hit the high of 39.2°C. ³⁸
May	water levels in four major city reservoirs: 0.3 TMCft (Thousand Million Cubic Feet) Actual total capacity: 11.5 TMCft, ³⁹	says ‘There is no need to panic. [...] we have a robust distribution system that addresses the needs of the public.’ ⁴⁰	we hear ‘In North Chennai’s Kasimedu, residents rush with buckets to the water tanker that comes once in a week.’ ⁴¹
June	a woman is stabbed in the neck over a water dispute, ⁴²	says ‘If there is water shortage in one place, the media friends blow it up as a big thing.’ ⁴³	It just keeps on going....

Table 1. The Drama of Drought in Chennai

The above table is not an objective, scientific analysis – there were undoubtedly people in the government genuinely trying to help even as their colleagues and bosses insisted there was no drought and that things would be better once the monsoons arrived – but it does give you a sense of the general... mood in the summer of 2019. The table is also reflective of only a small portion of the drought-affected regions. Apart from mentioning that there are 24 other districts also facing

³⁴ (Jamwal, 2019)

³⁵ (‘Drinking water supply’, 2019)

³⁶ (Muruganandham, 2019)

³⁷ (Lakshmi, 2019)

³⁸ (‘Chennai break all-time record of March’, 2021)

³⁹ (‘Summer of Despair’, 2019)

⁴⁰ (‘Summer of Despair’, 2019)

⁴¹ (Chaturvedi, 2019)

⁴² (Marchand, 2019)

⁴³ (‘TN CM Palaniswami’, 2019)

drought-like conditions, it does not delve into what the drought was like for people living in non-urban areas. This is because in 2019, most people in Chennai, myself included, were not thinking about where lorries, whether privately owned or from the government, were getting their water from. We were not thinking about how the government, in its eagerness to ensure Chennai would have enough water until the North-eastern monsoons arrived, and private suppliers, in their eagerness to make a profit, were drawing heavily from water sources that were not within the city limits: distant rivers, borewells in farmlands, lakes hundreds of kilometres away, and so on. And we certainly were not thinking of the effects of such activity on the landscapes water was being taken from.

In June 2015, a Reuters article reported that the men of Danganmal village in Maharashtra, ‘a cluster of about 100 thatched houses set on an expanse of barren land’, married a second or even third time so that their first wives would have help with the arduous process of collecting water from distant streams and wells ([Siddiqui, 2015](#)).⁴⁴ The article also reported that these ‘paanibais’ or water-wives were widowed or abandoned and so were grateful with the arrangement because it gave them a home, food, and the right to exist legitimately and without (much) fear of sexual violence.⁴⁵ This article was later picked up and reproduced by both Indian and international newspapers and magazines. This reportage, and reports about the physical and sexual violence women faced while fetching water from distant sources were part of what inspired *Sordid*.

44 This was the case for 66-year-old Sakharam Bhagat, when his wife Tuki could not manage everything. His second wife, Sakhri, a paanibai, would fetch the water, while Tuki managed the house. But when Sakhri fell ill, Sakharam had to marry again. This third wife, Bhaagi, took over water duties while the other women managed housework.

45 The paanibais themselves were not interviewed, and so it was the ‘husbands’ and their first wives who said the paanibais benefitted from the arrangement.

Balakrishnan, founder of Theatre Nisha in Chennai, wrote the play, intending it to be a ‘story of survival that speaks to ‘sacrifice and struggle’ ([Gowri S, 2019](#)). This survival story also portrays the consequences of ‘water as commodity’ by invoking a type of waterless geography common across rural India. Further, by choosing the lived-in bodies of poor and resource-dependent women who already face the worst consequences of ecological disaster as its *mis-en-scene*, the play challenges modern urban imaginaries that encourage us to believe that paying for water means that we do not need to consider where water comes from, especially in periods of stress. Let us begin by unpacking what the terms ‘commodity’ and ‘commodification’ mean when used in relation to water.

The Commodification of Water

If we understand a commodity to be ‘an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind’ ([Marx, 1992, p. 125](#)), that can be exchanged for something else, commodification is the process through which commodities acquire ‘exchange value’ in addition to ‘use value’ because of the existence of a market that determines the price of that commodity. In reference to water, such ‘commodification’ has gained significant attention in the last three decades, both in reports and policy papers citing it as the only realistic way to manage ‘water scarcity’ (remember the ‘crisis of modern water’ we explored via Linton), and in newspaper articles and academic work that deems such privatization as a threat to the right to clean water ([Prakash, 2021](#)).

In such discourse, private water supplies created through new and innovative technologies and distribution systems will right the wrongs of ‘free’ or ‘subsidised’ government water infrastructures. However, as Swyngedouw ([2007, p. 206](#)) argues,

A common misunderstanding is to equate public ownership with free goods and a non-commodified form of service delivery. Irrespective of the public or private nature of service delivery, large-scale water distribution (in the form of irrigation or urban water) is fully commodified and has been for a long time.

Swyngedouw ([2007, p. 206](#)) believes that the ‘water question’ is then not about commodification i.e., whether or not water has been commodified, but rather about who pays for the investment required to turn water into ‘a ‘useful ‘thing’’, and who decides who has access to it. Certainly, in India, despite states still being responsible for the provision of drinking water, water for irrigation, sanitation etc., the profusion of bottled water, water lorry, and bubble top suppliers suggests that water is not solely a public good.

Add to this that privatisation continues to be discussed as the only real option for functional water delivery mechanisms despite the miserable failure of real-life attempts at privatization post the 2002 revisions to the 1987 National Water Policy, which focused on viewing water as an ‘economic good’ and birthed many of the Public-Private Partnerships that did not work ([Purohit, 2014](#)).⁴⁶ Commodification does show us how ‘water as commodity’ manifests within state imaginaries and offers some explanations as to why privatisation holds such sway. But let us complicate ‘commodification’ further. Christoph Hermann writes ([2021, p. 23](#)) that commodification is not simply ‘a specific state of affairs’, but rather a set of varied ‘processes that exist in capitalist society’.

Hermann argues ([2021, p. 30](#)) that we need to separate the process of commodification into ‘formal and real commodification’ and see them as, respectively, representing the ‘starting and end point’ of that process. Formal commodification, he writes ([2021, p. 30](#)), begins with goods or services being given a ‘market value’ while real commodification ‘implies market value dominates use value— form or content are adapted to maximize profit. So formal commodification was the intent of the 2002 water reforms in India, and the recent

46 ‘Delhi Government is utilizing the widespread public discontent over the lack of adequate, good-quality drinking water and of sanitation services to pave the way for full-scale privatisation of the DJB.’ (New Delhi, Water Privatisation-Commercialization Resistance Committee, 2021)

establishment of ‘water markets’ is an instance of real commodification.⁴⁷ Hermann ([2021, p. 32](#)) adds a third ‘fictitious commodification’ which is another way to ‘subordinate use value to a quantitative indicator’. Fictitious commodification, he argues, has been used across the world to make public sector services that were traditionally non-competitive and not required to turn a profit part of ‘quasi-markets’ where providers face pressure to ‘increase output’.

This third kind of commodification precedes formal and real commodification. For example, it is fictitious commodification when state budgets are cut to ‘improve efficiency’, leading to a drop in the quality of state services and a situation where ‘users lose faith in the public option and long for a private alternative.’ ([Hermann, 2021, p. 33-34](#)) In India, where the constitution makes no argument for water being a fundamental right of citizens (though courts tend to understand that the right to water is covered under the right to life provision in the constitution), and where municipal bodies in many cities do not consider the provision of piped water as a ‘public duty’ but as a ‘contractual service’ contingent on the ‘availability of funds’ and ‘proximity of (water) supply’, we can see how the situation is ripe for such fictitious commodification ([Iyer, 2009, p. 254-255](#)).

We might add that another effect of such outlooks and methods is the accepted uneven spread of services across locations (urban versus rural as a broad example, but of course even within urban or rural areas further differentiation occurs). As we will see in the following section, *Sordid’s* invocation of waterless geographies enables us to better understand such commodification.

47 Where we have ‘water futures’ listed on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME) in 2020, thereby ‘opening up a new phase of global financial speculation for water.’ ([Branford and Borges, 2022](#))

Waterless Places

Suki: In the summer months, the heat is so severe that wells run dry and cattle die... But why am I telling you? You are from somewhere close... you know the situation...you know it...you will know it soon... ([Balakrishnan, 2019](#))⁴⁸

Set in an unnamed village where the only source of water is a small stream that leaks out of a dammed river some several hours away, *Sordid* follows the fates of two paanibais, Jhuri and Kali as they negotiate their place in the household of Tukaram, a subsistence farmer, and Suki, his first wife. The play begins with the arrival of the newest wife Kali. Recently widowed, Kali's uncle arranges for her to be 'safely' remarried to Tukaram. In exchange for this safety, Kali is to take over water duties from Jhuri, the first water wife. However, Kali's unexpected talent for growing crops means that Tukaram, and a reluctant Suki, decide to keep her working in their fields. A bitter and angry Jhuri does everything in her power to have Kali fetch the water in her stead, leading to mounting tension between the characters, and to the play's tragic end.

Despite the text's ambivalence to specific locations – no village name or region is mentioned – 'place' is key within *Sordid*'s dramaturgy. At the very start of the play, as Suki greets Kali she says:

Suki: Come... Come... Come inside [...] There is no water source in the village. They have a dam on the river, the government tank comes once a month. We get water from the river bend, a few hours away [...] The only solution is to walk to a well or to a river. Carrying vessels to fill up with water. Neither are close by. It can take up to 4 hours to go there and return home. ... ([Balakrishnan, 2019](#))

Balakrishnan sets up conflict on numerous levels within the play, but the first and most crucial conflict takes place between people and the landscapes they inhabit: 'There is no water source in this village'. The missing water and the human community trapped as a result are the source of the play's dramatic energy. Events do not simply unfold in this water-scarce geography, but because of it. The waterless geography of *Sordid* resembles, even if not exactly replicates, the many

48 While the play has been published, I gained access to a rehearsal script from the writer in early 2022 and have used it for all quotations and analysis.

drought-prone areas, parched despite their proximity to a dam, familiar to even the most casual consumer of Indian news and current affairs.⁴⁹

Dams get considerable media coverage, either as the harbingers of progress, or as the destroyers of whole communities and ecosystems. The latter kind of coverage rightly cites the displacement of indigenous populations, the negative consequences for local ecosystems, the occurrence of disastrous flooding, and diminished groundwater downstream as more than enough reason to reassess and eventually put an end to large dam projects. The play adds ‘failed delivery of development promises’ to this list when Kali reveals in scene eight that people in that region ‘did not protest the building of the dam, the resettlement of so many villagers, and inundations of their fertile fields’ ([Balakrishnan, 2019](#)) because a pipeline from the dam to the village had been promised. In the end, the pipeline was never constructed, and the villagers were left to fend for themselves.

The waterless geography of *Sordid* makes the point that mega-dams, which exist to help with irrigation, hydroelectric projects, industrial work, and run large cities that are often hundreds of kilometres away, do not provide for the communities and ecosystems right around them.⁵⁰ Such abandonment connects back to the first chapter and ‘water as power’, with aid for drought relief (as in *Thanner! Thaneer!*) or fair access to local resources and space (as in *Sordid*) being

49 In just the last ten years there have been many reports of such situations: Denganmal near the Bhatsa dam ([‘A Wedding Just’, n.d.](#)); Paithan village near the Jayakwadi dam also in Maharashtra ([Purohit, 2012](#)); the Andipatti administrative block in Tamil Nadu near the Vaigai dam, ([K. R., 2015](#)); Mundathikode gram panchayat in Kerala where the local dam (mostly likely the Vazhani dam) did not have enough water for people in the area ([‘India: Getting Water’, n.d.](#)); several villages near Tehri dam, Uttarakhand who have to pay large sums of money for water ([Aggarwal, 2019](#)); Una and Bilaspur districts in Himachal Pradesh near the Gobind Sagar Lake formed by the Bhakra Dam ([Mohan, 2017](#)) are just a few examples.

50 Even when the government set up water delivery systems, they are often unreliable, such as infrequent water lorries, or dangerous in the long term, such as water pumps and borewells.

dependent on whether communities have significant political and/or economic power and whether this power can stand against the needs of the closest urban settlement. There has been a significant amount of writing about how modern urban centres are considered to have parasitic relationships with non-urban and peri-urban areas.⁵¹ Dams, salination plants, and borewells built outside the city's borders, far away from well-off urban populations, are the infrastructure of such parasitic relationships and might be understood as a way of 'accumulation by dispossession'.⁵²

In the 1960s the Chennai Metro Water Board purchased riparian rights in two nearby districts ([Sengupta, 2017](#)). These rights allowed the government to either sink wells and draw out water for the capital city, or for farmers who already had wells to sell water to the government. Over the decades this has led to farmers, who are dependent on groundwater for their own livelihoods, facing water stress and seeing poor crop yields, even as Chennai demands for water only grow even more untenable. Such riparian rights are exactly why, while certain populations in urban centres like Chennai will never face Day Zero, drought is a seasonal reality for the rural characters of *Sordid*. The play thus provokes, with its first lines of dialogue, 'water as (a fictitious) commodity' that is dammed by the state for those who can pay. Those who cannot, must fend for themselves.

51 Bert Hoselitz ([1960](#)) coined 'parasitic' cities; Ray Pahl ([1970](#)) writes about how governments, via 'urban managerialism' allow capitalists to take control of urban centres; in David Harvey ([2009, p. 234](#)) writes that 'Parasitic cities are vulnerable unless the urban elite has strong ideological, economic, or military control over the surplus producing population.'

52 Eric Swyngedouw ([2005, p. 83](#)) uses the term to describe the main method used in the privatization of public water supplies in the UK. He further states that this privatization sat within the narrative that states as providers of public services had a high rate of failure, so 'privately owned and market organized production is invariably portrayed as leading to the most optimal output and the most socially desirable distribution of value.'

But what are the effects of such ‘accumulation by dispossession’? And what are the consequences of water conceptualised as commodity?

Devalued Labour and Fetishized Bodies

There is a tendency within great drama, for villains to be as compelling – sometimes more compelling – than heroes. Dramatic form, with its emphasis on characters, their desires and motivations, often creates villains who are ‘terribly’ human, that is who are terrible in ways that audiences often find uncomfortably relatable. In *Sordid* we see this in Jhuri, the angry, and often obscene first paanibai. She is initially positioned as a scheming villain, interested in only her own salvation. We learn early on that she is having an affair with Tukaram, despite the real threat of Suki, the first wife. It is further suggested that she coaxed Tukaram into acquiring a second paanibai and convinced Suki of the benefits of such an arrangement. However, when Kali arrives and does not take over her water fetching duties, Jhuri is furious.

She refuses to be cajoled into having sex with Tukaram saying:

Jhuri: Raand! Only reason she is allowed in this house is to fetch water. How dare she talk her way out of it! Am I a chutiya to be walking for 12 hours each day, so your family can wash their bums? You better talk to Suki and get that raand to fetch water. *I have done my share, and now I am tired.* ([Balakrishnan, 2019](#)) (Emphasis mine)

In contrast to Kali’s steadfast honesty and decency, Jhuri is an easy character to dislike. But as the play shows us, her villainy arises from physical and emotional exhaustion, and she, just like Kali deserves our compassion. Jhuri, much like Kali, married into Tukarams family after losing her husband. After several years of being a paanibhai, she believes that she has ‘done her share’ and now deserves a rest. She describes the cost that fetching water has had on her when she says “Yes, my hair has gone, my blood has dried, my periods are untimely, and I have back and neck pain. I walk 12 hours each day and you want to know if there is any problem?” ([Balakrishnan, 2019](#)).

One way of understanding the toll of the labour undertaken by the paanibais' – the difficulty and repetitive nature of it, the physical agony of water collection, the long-lasting health conditions – is to consider the parallels with Marx's 'workers' who also do work that is a 'shortening of their lifespan' ([Fromm and Marx, 2013, p. 83](#)). Like the worker, a paanibai does the work because she must. And she lives in the hope that her deteriorating body will eventually exempt her from work i.e., a younger, more able paanibai will take over her role. This tells us that 'water as commodity' replicates the exploitative relationship that Marx describes ([Fromm and Marx, 2013, p. 83](#)) as existing between capital, labour and workers where a worker is purposefully estranged from his or her labour to the extent that 'the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker'.

But Marx's description of the origins of such estrangement – he sees it as a result of the economic arrangements of capitalistic societies – does not account for the fact that the labour of women and, in India, the labour of lower caste groups have always been devalued.⁵³ We see this in the play as well: despite Jhuri's overworked body being undeniable proof that she has paid her dues within the system created via the fictitious commodification of water, she, like Marx's workers who are either worked to death or penury, cannot easily escape her water collection duties. Unlike Marx's labourers, who might get rest if the stars align, Jhuri, even when Kali is finally sent to collect the water, does not get to rest (as she says, 'Rest at home my ass!') because she is still expected to take part in household chores and childcare.

These expectations are placed upon Jhuri because it is taken for granted that such work is 'women's work'. Social Reproduction Theory describes this discounting of indispensable

53 Within Indian societies, the labour of lower castes for upper castes also does not fit the Marxist model, because such labour is placed within structures of purity and defilement, meaning that "Dalit labour remains unaccounted for both in its dead and living forms, having been suspended in a body history that cannot be reified by the tools of European reason and its secular history." ([Malreddy, 2015, p.135](#))

‘affective and material labor [...] often performed without pay’ ([Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 21](#)), that includes but is not limited to, housework, education, child-rearing, etc., as a devaluation of women’s labour despite it being the work that creates the very conditions necessary for the pursuit of market goals i.e., wealth accumulation. This tells us something more about the water imaginary created via ‘water as commodity’: it is dependent on the devaluation of women’s labour and therefore is inherently patriarchal. This was clear to see during the 2019 drought in Chennai. My mother’s disparagement of ‘idiot’ men who send away water lorries points to a wider pattern.

It is predominantly women who do the work of collecting water by organising buckets in bathrooms and kitchens, lining the streets waiting for water lorries, or filling water up in school to carry back home. A 2016 UNICEF report found that a worldwide aggregate of time spent by girls and women fetching water is approximately 200 million hours ([‘UNICEF: Collecting water’, 2016](#)). In Asia, according to the same report, most rural women spend an average of 21 minutes per day collecting water, and urban women 19 minutes. That is a conservative average when you consider that the paanibais from the newspaper article mentioned earlier could take anywhere between 4 and 12 hours to collect and bring home water ([Siddiqui, 2015](#)). Even supposedly egalitarian water management systems that seek to ‘include’ women, often uncritically accept that water is women’s labour and indeed rely on the recreation of accepted gendered labour divisions to be successfully implemented ([O’Reilly, 2011, p. 52](#)).

And like Marx’s labourer, the women who fetch and carry water gain little to no benefit from the duty they undertake. In addition to the time they sacrifice fetching water – time they could have used for education, enterprise, and leisure – women are also more adversely affected by health complications that arise from limited or no access to water. All of this makes them economically and socially vulnerable, adversely affects their mental health and keeps them dependent on the men in their family. Additionally, it has been shown that both within India and globally, women, especially poor women who are directly dependent on water, land, and forest resources for their

livelihoods and survival are the worst affected by natural disasters, lack of access to resources/resource depletion, and climate change ([Sardar and Kanjilal Bhaduri, 2022](#); [Roy, 2018](#); [Osman-Elasha, 2012](#); [Terry, 2009](#)).

Whether it is a disaster area, or regions being systemically destroyed by infrastructure interventions and resource exploitation, or regions facing extreme climatic events,⁵⁴ women, with their ‘limited access to and control of environmental goods and services [...] negligible participation in decision-making’ and ‘inability to decide how environment benefits should be distributed and managed’ ([Osman-Elasha, 2012](#)), suffer dire consequences which include, but are not limited to, the worsening of their physical and mental health, the loss of their material possessions, and the increased probability of sexual violence ([UN Women, 2009](#)). The play also addresses this last consequence by showing us how ‘water as commodity’ also created opportunities for the bodies of women to be fetishised as sex objects.

Early into the play, Jhuri reveals that ‘soldiers’ have set up near the river bend and harass the paanibais. When Tukaram asks whether he and the men of the village need to intervene she downplays the incident saying that they only ‘tease’ the women and that they also help as they prevent fights at the river bend. Only when Kali, unable to escape her role of a paanibai, goes to the river bend and returns empty-handed do we learn the truth:

Kali: Suki, they are fearful-looking men. They wait for lone women... After the woman has collected the water and is starting to walk back, they stand in her path. The woman in fear of losing the water stays motionless. These men unbutton her blouse, and grope her... Then they button back the blouse, and the woman moves away as if nothing happened... ([Balakrishnan, 2019](#))

The danger of these men who are not ‘our soldiers’ and Kali’s desire to never have to leave the house and farm do echo certain discourses within ‘women’s safety’ in India that deem

⁵⁴ Increasingly natural disasters are compounded by resource depletion – think of landslides in storm season due to deforestation.

homes safe and the outside dangerous for women (thereby legitimizing keeping girls at home). But the scene is also showing us how women can come to re-enforce the patriarchal power structures drawn out by water as commodity.

When Kali pleads not to be sent back to the river bend, Jhuri insists that the river

Jhuri: ... is the only way we have had access to water... our bodies for water... *(takes her dupatta off)* See me whore ...see my dried skin... my wrinkles... my bald head... see my legs all knotted up... my knees broken... I have pawned away every inch of my body to fetch water... what are you complaining about... it's a random incident... ([Balakrishnan, 2019](#))

While Jhuri's difficult experiences allow her to accept this commodification of her own body, to think of it as unavoidable, the younger and more idealistic Kali insists that '...no one can touch my body without my permission.' However, instead of being able to participate in such thinking, Suki and Jhuri only suggest that Kali treat such incidents as 'mistakes', 'accidents' and finally as a 'fate' that 'every daughter of this village' has endured. What we have here is an example of how imaginaries of modern water impact and strengthen wider structures of power such as gendered division of labour, class structures, and capitalistic rationalities, thus determining how and when people have agency over their own lives.

Kali is an example of a character who has desires and interests outside of her role as a paanibai, but when she attempts to pursue these interests by refusing to fetch water from the river bend, Suki threatens her with violence. The village's decision to allow men to 'acquire' paanibais could be read as an act of kindness to ease the work of fetching water for the legitimate wives of the village and to 'protect' vulnerable widows. But as Uma Chakravathi notes ([2018, p. 78](#)) in her analysis of the 'wide regional variations in widow remarriage practices' across caste groups, such seemingly progressive practices of widow remarriage (or in the case of the play, polygamy) did not come to exist within certain lower castes groups because of 'a recognition of her [women's] sexual

needs” but rather because of higher castes seeking to “utilize the productive and reproductive labour of widows’.

This fits within the material relations of the caste system i.e., the provision of labour and services of various kinds by low castes to high castes. Similarly in the play, the village’s decision to allow second and third marriages, while not clearly embedded in caste, fits within patterns of in-group versus out-group labour distribution and resource sharing. People from the village get a higher share of resources and more protection than people from outside the village. Even though paanibais are not necessarily outsiders, their widowhood makes them less able to claim any benefits. It also highlights how, while gender relations are far from egalitarian in India, the patriarchy is not merely a question of female subjugation by men, nor is it an inflexible monolith. Consider that in the play, Suki is not an equal partner in her marriage, nor an equal member of village society – Tukaram says that if water were not such an issue, Suki and other women, would not be allowed ‘free tongues’.

He further says that they would not make demands of their husbands and that the benefit of multiple wives, he goes on, ought to be ‘To make children with... To have fun with... They came with money and at least a few cows... sometimes with a piece of land... ~(but) now, they come with mouths to be fed!’. And yet, this does not mean Suki is powerless. She wields considerable power over Kali and Jhuri so long as her household stays mindful of the village rules regarding the role of the paanibais. When her husband insists on keeping Kali working in the fields, Suki reminds him of the order of things in their village saying, “You know unless Kali does what she is supposed to... the village people will not agree to her being in our house... *paanibai* must carry water...already there are murmurs. [...] The village elders will not agree to this arrangement. They will voice their objections soon.” ([Balakrishnan, 2019](#)).

We might understand this rule as an example of what Chakravarthi ([2018, p. 80](#)) terms ‘graded patriarchies’ because, as she notes in her study of widow remarriage and how high caste groups regulate the bodies of low caste women, ‘The apparent difference in widow marriage and widow mating patterns between the high castes and the low castes can lead to the conclusion that there were different patriarchies according to the respective caste status of a group.’. This suggests that when seeking to achieve a particular end, patriarchal power is flexible in how it creates cultural norms. This flexibility is what allows a village where traditionally second and third wives would not be acceptable, to welcome paanibais. They are a means to surviving the drought. It also allows Jhuri, a woman whose role within the family and village hierarchy is limited, to have power over Kali and Jhuri.

Both the paanibais are deferential to Suki in all things because that know that she could carry out her threats of terrible violence – her threatening to kick Kali out of the house and village if she does not fetch water, and threatening to “kill her (Kali) and her unborn child” when she suspects her husband of having an affair – with impunity if they are seen to be transgressing village mores. Such power is allowed to the first wives because it suits the existing values of the village: maintaining reproductive continuity and ensuring a continuation of family and caste lineages. Throughout the play, we have seen that ‘water as commodity’ creates the possibility, indeed the necessity, for women to be placed within social categories that are stultifying. In the play, women are either married or ‘highway whores’ ‘cast down women’, ‘randi’ (prostitutes).

But the category of married, especially married as a paanibai is twisted and turned toxic because it is impossible for Jhuri to deny Tukaram sex, and for all the paanibais to refuse the soldiers. This in turn has a toll on the relationships the women can have with each other. Kali cannot be friends with Jhuri or seek comfort from her until she too has undergone the violence Jhuri has faced already. We also see that ‘water as commodity’ materially depletes the women: Kali’s 5000 rupees is taken from her the moment she marries Tukaram as dowry. And despite

them giving up their labour and time, the paanibais have no recourse to fair compensation, and hence no way out of their situation. Earlier in the play, there was a suggestion how the disasters mega-dams wreak on the areas surrounding them can range from ‘big’ issues like water scarcity in surrounding villages and ecological collapse to smaller, ‘unintended consequences’, such as the death of Kali’s husband, who died in an accident while working at the dam.

We can certainly understand the practice of keeping water wives as mimicking capital-driven resource extraction and depletion, while the delegitimization of women’s labour also contributes towards environmental violence inflicted in the ‘passive voice’ ([Nixon, 2011, p. 131](#)). This is the note on which the play ends. Initially, Jhuri refuses to help Kali and insists that she has already suffered enough. However, when Kali accidentally walks in on her and Tukaram, Jhuri, fearful of Suki’s rage rushes off towards the river bend alone, essentially offering to fetch the water so long as Kali keeps quiet. Kali, worried that Jhuri will encounter the soldiers if she is alone, accompanies her to the river bend. On their way, she promises Jhuri that she will never reveal the truth to Suki.

But even as both women finally see eye-to-eye, they are stopped by the soldiers camped out near the river bend and sexually assaulted. They return home, unable to process the violence done to them and only able to imagine their lives going on in much of the same fashion. In this moment, the play changes its mode of address with Jhuri suddenly talking to the audience directly:

Jhuri: We were walking past the four milestones which will take us back home... We will empty the water in the water drum. We will get food, *roti* and *subzi*... We will play with the kids... We will stretch our legs... Suki will tell us about the doctor and his medical camp... We will giggle over how he insists to stick the needle in everyone’s bum and then makes the bum jiggle as he applies the medication on the needle prick... We will sleep... And no one will notice that our blouses were open... ([Balakrishna, 2019](#))

Jhuri's closing lines speak directly to urban audiences and highlight the consequences of 'water as commodity'.

Consequences that those of us with 'full stomach[s]'⁵⁵ can only imagine as nightmare scenarios that might affect us in some dystopian future. But what we fail to acknowledge is that even though they do not impact us such situations are already in effect, 'attritional' and 'exponential' results of ecological collapse, what Nixon terms [\(2011, p. 3\)](#) 'slow violence'. The script's closing lines suggest that both women have been/will be consumed by their roles as paanibais and so consumed by 'water as commodity' which applies the logic of economics not only to water that is already property but also, via the creation of waterless geographies, to 'unclaimed' water as well.

55 From Guha and Martínez Alier [\(1998, p. 99-100\)](#) critiquing the idea that environmental preservation was an export of the American century that had as its prerequisites an economic prosperity that elevated the conditions of the working class. But the prosperity that allowed this, Guha and Martínez Alier point out, was a result of extraction, industrialisation and economic transformation of colonies around the world.

Chapter Three

Thank you so much to [venue/organisers] for giving me the space to conduct this very important brainstorming session, and many, many thanks to all of you [audience] for joining me today! I'm really glad you are going to help me prepare for the climate crisis.

Plan B/C/D/E, Meghana AT, 2021

In the first two chapters, we engaged in critical analysis of play scripts that attempted a certain ‘wateriness’. Jamie Linton ([2010, p. 4](#)) offered us a particularly useful tool for such aqueous thinking when he described the source of all our conceptions/abstractions of water as the meeting of ‘water process’ and ‘social processes and practices’. Using this framework, we saw how seemingly neutral ‘modern water’ produces metaphorical concepts that inverse comprehension via metaphor, with what is abstract determining what is concrete. This is why we are interested in how Komal Swaminathan problematises ‘water as power’ in *Thaneer Thaneer* and how V. Balakrishna complicates ‘water as commodity’ in *Sordid*. In this chapter, we will continue our analysis of modern, urban water imaginaries by studying how Meghana AT’s ‘plans’ to deal with sea-level rise and the concurrent flooding of Mumbai in the performance *Plan B/C/D/E* (2021), effectively stage, and problematize, ‘water as risk’.

Risk, understood simply, is the potential that something bad might happen. For something to be risky means that it possesses an element of uncertainty. Much of modern risk management is concerned with quantifying both the likelihood and severity of harm when risky situations do go bad. Such ‘individual’ views of risk as quantifiable and ‘multifactorial’ with ‘each factor having a potential weighting which can be calculated’ suggests that it is possible to predict and offset risk through appropriate calculations, such as those utilised by actuarial science ([Denny, 2005, p. 17](#)). It is such calculation that allows risk management to be monetised via

payments and compensation (insurance) and materialised via various kinds of risk-counteracting infrastructures (think seat belts or earthquake-proofing buildings).

While there is some value in such an approach, it fails to acknowledge the cultural specificity of risk, that ‘risk is not an objective, measurable concept, but is socially, culturally, and politically constructed’ ([Denny, 2005, p. 22](#)). Does this simply mean that the individual approach to risk needs to account for a wider range of cultural precepts and values? Mary Douglas ([2003](#)) suggests that quantifying more kinds of risk across cultures is not enough, and rather risk (and risk mitigation) needs to be understood in relation to issues of ‘justice’. Consider the situations presented in both *Thaneer Thaneer* and *Sordid*. What criteria of justice and equality determined that the villagers of Athipatti required no assistance in mitigating the risk of that water crisis in their village? Similarly what ideas of justice determined that the water needs of the woman and men in *Sordid* were not as important as the needs of whomever benefitted from damming the nearest river?

Ulrich Beck ([1992, p. 19](#)) theorises that such situations are a result of modernity which signalled the ‘change from the logic of wealth distribution in a society of scarcity to the logic of risk distribution in late modernity’.⁵⁶ For Beck ([1992, p. 21](#)), the scientific and technological advancements of the last two centuries have meant that ‘modern’ risks are unlike anything humanity has previously faced because they are not bound by temporal or spatial constraints and can ‘escape perception’. In such scenarios, human societies are preoccupied

⁵⁶ This is of course his famous proposition that we live in risk societies. Beck (1992, p. 23) addresses the justice element directly when writing about ‘social risk positions’ which follow the inequalities of class and wealth, but he asserts that because risks arising from modernization have a ‘boomerang effect’ they ‘break up patterns of class and national society’. His assertion here is that even the rich and powerful are not always safe from such risks. However, he also notes that such risks do produce ‘new international inequalities’ ([1992, p. 23](#)).

with preventing, minimizing, dramatizing, or channelling the risks ‘systematically produced as a part of modernisation’ while also safeguarding those same processes of modernisation ([Beck, 1992, p. 19](#)). But risk mitigation within this scenario ignores the fact that development policies are implemented based on ‘standardized public ideas about justice’ which tend to favour certain groups and categories of people. Then in many societies, even purportedly just ones, factors such as income, race, gender, caste etc are factors of ‘relative exposure to risks of most kinds’ i.e., people in lower income groups or other marginalised groups will always be exposed to more risk ([Douglas, 2003, p. 5-6](#)).

This idea that modern human societies are preoccupied with mitigating risk while concurrently ignoring the questions of justice that then arise is the basis of the metaphorical concept of ‘water as risk’⁵⁷. My reading of *Plan B/C/D/E* looks closely at ‘water as risk’ and suggests the following characteristics:

- 1) ‘Water as risk’ devalues justice
- 2) ‘Water as risk’ champions scientism
- 3) ‘Water as risk’ seeks out convenience

We will look at each of these characteristics in the following sections and try to work out how ideas of risk and modern water have mixed in the last century. But to begin with, let us understand the overall structure of the performance.

⁵⁷ While ‘risk’ is most often associated with dangers, or with the possibility of danger, it is also closely associated with the rewards that come with taking on/facing danger. David Denny ([2005, p. 11](#)) points out that this capacity for risk-taking has been considered by some to be the underpinnings of the ‘scientific’ and ‘exploratory’ prowess of the West in the last four hundred years: ‘From this position, risk becomes a driving force for change in a world where anything can happen.’ This is something I have not explored in this chapter.

Performance Structure

The performance begins with Meghana introducing herself as a theatre maker and anthropologist from Mumbai with severe climate anxiety. If/when the Arabian Sea rises high enough, she tells audiences, that large parts of Mumbai, her hometown, will be underwater. She needs to decide on a course of action, or a ‘plan’ to fix everything, because no one else will. And she wants the audience to be a part of the decision-making process.⁵⁸ First, she presents the audience with Climate Central’s ‘Coastal Risk Screening Tool’ to help them make a more informed decision.⁵⁹ This website allows users to view a map illustrating various, projected coastal flooding scenarios that have been created using data about global temperature, pollution, rates of ice melt and so on.



Image 1: Climate Central Homepage

⁵⁸ The show has travelled across the country and has been performed online for international audiences. While much of the play remains rooted in Mumbai, Meghana usually takes time to explore the city she is visiting and the hometowns of audiences via the interactive map, and by encouraging them to share ideas and stories.

⁵⁹ Climate Central is an organization dedicated to better communication of climate change data: <https://coastal.climatecentral.org/>

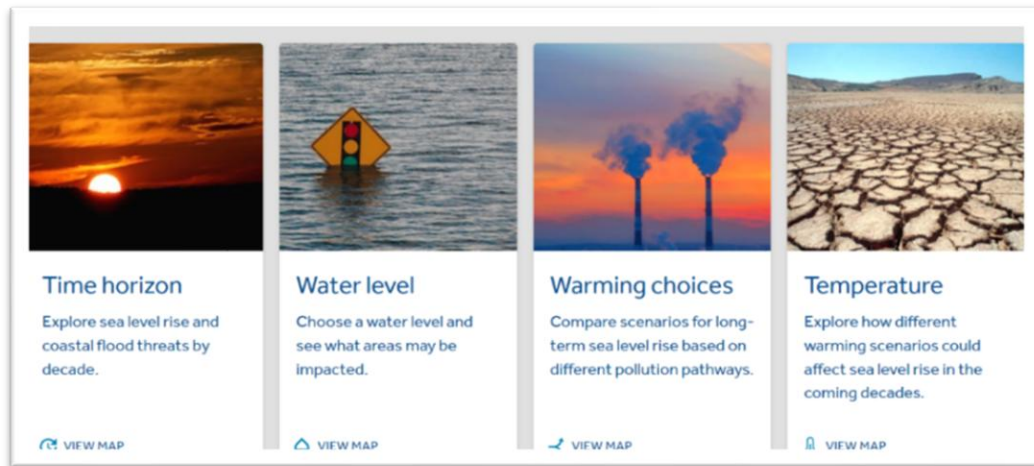


Image 2: Climate Central Homepage

Using this resource, Meghana offers the audience three different maps of Mumbai, each a prediction of what rising sea water will do to the city in 2050. One map predicts a best-case scenario where global temperatures do not rise by very much and so most of Mumbai stays safe. A second map predicts a worst-case scenario, where everything that can go wrong, does go wrong, and as a result, the city is mostly underwater. A third and final map presents the audience with a ‘medium’ case scenario where significant parts of the city are flooded, but a good portion of the city is still above sea level. Once they have seen these maps, it is up to the audience to decide how the performance will unfold:

Meghana: I don’t know which future is coming for me. It could be any of these three! So, I thought, I’ll ask for help. [...] So, let’s take a vote! Everybody vote for which map they think is most accurate, and then we will focus on just that map for today. Majorityyyyyy wins! ([Meghana AT, 2021](#))

Once a map is chosen by the audience, Meghana presents her three plans to save Mumbai. Though audiences usually only hear three plans, the performance script includes five plans in total:

- 1) ‘City of the Swamps’
- 2) ‘Build the Wall’
- 3) ‘Artificial Mangroves’

- 4) 'Leave Bombay for four months'
- 5) and 'Move the city to another place'.

Meghana decides which three to present the audience with based on how worried or anxious the audience is at the start of the performance, as that determines whether they are able and willing to participate in the discussions and debates that will crop up during the performance. By this point, it should be clear that, unlike the two scripts we have already looked at, *Plan B/C/D/E* cannot be categorised as either a work of social realism or a modern drama. Meghana, the writer/performer, usually begins by sheepishly admitting to her audience that they are not there to watch a 'show' about surviving climate change but rather to participate in a 'brainstorming session' about surviving climate change.

Performance versus Drama

While 'brainstorming session' is not an inaccurate way to describe *Plan B/C/D/E*, I have used the term 'performance'. Within Western theatre 'performance' refers to works that subvert 'deterministic' staged realism and naturalism which were popular modes of dramatic theatre in the West at the turn of the 20th century.⁶⁰ Such works seek to 'operate beyond the confines of the conventional text, the theological stage, and traditional semiotic' ([Heuvel, 1992, p. 49](#)). This often involves a rejection of playscripts, of dramatic structure having to end in catharsis, and of character and plot ([Lehman, 2006, p. 21](#)). Examples of such non-dramatic or post-dramatic performances would include the work of practitioners such as the Wooster Group or

60 While critiques of realism and naturalism often lump them together, it is worth noting that while they share some characteristics, there are differences between them. Realism on stage can be traced back to 19th-century developments in Western theatre that sought to enable the direct observation of human behaviour on stage. Naturalism, as Andrew Burton ([2022, np](#)) writes, is also concerned with lifelike reproductions, but is more concerned with the distinction between 'revealed (divine) and observed (human) knowledge'. In effect, performance is rejecting realism's notion that human behaviour can be understood through linear narratives and questioning the power and extent of rationality as a mode of creating knowledge.

Forced Entertainment, but equally, we can see the influence of performance on playwrights such as Caryl Churchill and Badal Sircar.

This transition from drama to performance that has been identified by theatre critics and theatre makers in the West does not have a perfect double in the Indian context where the domination of text-based theatre was never total with storytelling and folk traditions being a common, and vital element of various ‘modern’ theatre traditions. But, as Ashis Sengupta writes ([2022, p. 18](#)), there is an Indian post-dramatic theatre that arises as a deliberate move ‘to invigorate and pluralize the language of Indian urban theatre’ and, a crucial distinction from the West, to turn away from ‘realism as a baggage of colonial stage practice’ and the ‘fairly homogeneous’ post-independence "theatre of roots" movement. This theatre, in my view, grew as a response to the challenges of a rapidly ‘modernising’ nation that underwent seismic changes during globalisation.

Plan B/C/D/E is a recent addition to such a collection of post-dramatic Indian theatre. But the distinction between dramatic theatre and performance, in both Indian and Western contexts, belies how various theatre practices inspire and borrow from each other. ‘Texts’ which were seen as the realm of dramatic, realist theatre, were held in direct opposition to performance, when in reality, performance practitioners do create texts, just using methods different from those of playwrights. Performance does not eschew all the structures and games of theatre but rather considers such games worthwhile ends in and of themselves.⁶¹ Then the ‘binary

⁶¹ Forced Entertainment’s 2011 production *Tomorrow’s Parties* has two actors fabulating future scenarios that are wistful and absurd. While the performance takes on a form of its own, it is not hard to imagine it starting off as a theatre game or warm-up where actors are encouraged to respond to prompts and/or each other with small ‘what if’ scenarios that have built-in conflict and tension.

simplifications’ of text versus performance might be better understood as ‘dialogic (that is, as an association of different logics) rather than as mutually exclusive’ ([Heuvel, 1992, p. 52](#)).

An example of such performance relevant to this chapter would be Stephen Emmott and Katie Mitchell’s 2012 show *Ten Billion* where the audience watched, not an actor but rather, a prominent British scientist as he delivered a lecture on the consequences of overpopulation and resource depletion. This show had none of the usual trappings of drama, the scientist merely delivered a plethora of research and statistics alongside his grim predictions for the future of the planet. Such performance has come to be called ‘lecture drama’ a category that tries to bridge the pedagogical divide between text and performance. After all *Ten Billion* was not a dramatic play, but it had a script that followed a certain narrative structure— Emmott’s research and lecture on the consequences of the human population growing to ten billion. The ‘lecture drama’ recognises that the mixing of the dramatic and performative makes for an effective dramaturgical strategy when seeking to stage ecological crises.

And as we will see in the following sections, *Plan B/C/D/E* embraces a similar dramaturgy in its reimagining of sea-level rise. For while sea-level rise is seemingly one of the best-understood consequences of climate change – with the launch of the satellite TOPEX/Poseidon in 1992, scientists have been able to get continuous information about sea levels and we know without (much) contestation that the global sea level rose by ‘20 cm from 1901 to 2018’ ([Khojasteh et al., 2023](#)) and that human action is the driving force behind this acceleration ([Miller et al., 2020](#)) – wider public recognition of what sea-level rise truly means for a population is debatable. Especially amongst elites living in coastal cities who have some protection against eroding coastlines, forced migration, higher chances for prolonged flooding, and species and livelihood loss.

It is this gap in experience and knowledge that Meghana addresses by blending performance and drama. Plan B/C/D/E can be characterised as a performance as it has no interest in character-led dramatic narrative and consciously uses tools such as personas, varied modes of exposition, autobiography etc. But it also uses some dramatic techniques such as building expectations and delivering reversals. For example, the overall structure of the performance does share similarities with traditional narrative progression i.e. inciting incident, conflict, and resolution/catharsis: sea level rise might destroy Bombay, *so* Meghana gathers a group of people to brainstorm how to save the city, *but* finding solutions is not so easy, which Meghana demonstrates by complicating and troubling the roles that both she and the audience play. Let us consider the first of her plans to better understand how and why she does this.

Justice Devalued: Survival of the Richest

In this thesis, when we use the word justice, we understand it as a fair treatment of people in line with the legal and moral precepts of society, but we are also thinking, more specifically, in terms of distributive justice, which has to do with the fair distribution of the ‘benefits and burdens of society’ ([Capeheart and Milovanovic, 2020, p. 37](#)). It is ‘distributive justice’ in particular, that all five plans from the performance address, but for this section, we will concentrate on the plan to live in the ‘City on the Swamp’ and the plan to ‘Leave Bombay for 4 months’ to understand how ‘water as risk’ encourages a neoliberal worldview in which survival of the richest is not only a requirement but a mandate.

In the plan, ‘City on the Swamp’, Meghana suggests that when the sea comes for Mumbai, it would be best to do nothing to stop the flooding of the city and instead:

Meghana: We live a life of “adjust karlo”; Houses in the red areas get a bit taller, and people move out of the lower floors. Basically, bottom 2-3 floors are uninhabitable only for a few months of the year, so they can move to the topmost floors. There is a system of dinghies or coracles to get to the land part. We become a city full of mini ferries. ([Meghana AT, 2021](#))

Meghana goes on to suggest that people may have to move, the rich to less flooded parts of the city, while everyone else will have to leave the city. She adds that this might not be the worst situation since Mumbai is already too crowded. These comments alongside plans to have people use stilts to avoid the dirty water, and have more people vaccinated against malaria are made with cheerful indifference. This behaviour might seem at odds with Meghana's earnest desire to save the city, but this is not the first or last time the audience encounters such callousness.

Early on, Meghana admits that she created the performance to help assuage her climate anxiety. Then while showing the audience data about Arctic glacier melt rates and the resulting predictions for the severity of coastal flooding across the globe, she says '...but the important question is: how does this affect me as a Mumbaikar?' (2021) While character is a staple of conventional drama, performance makers often utilise 'personas' which occupy 'an ambiguous middle ground between fiction (character) and reality (actor)' that are 'highly contextualised self-presentations specific to the actors' performance situation.' (Auslander, 2015, p. 65). The performer is both themselves and someone else/the other, with the elements of both 'self' and 'other' being carefully curated. We will discuss the element of 'self' in the following section and stay with the 'other' for now. In *Plan B/C/D/E* the other, who we can call 'Meghana the Planner', is both earnest about wanting to save Mumbai, but naïve and callous about how to go about it. These disparate traits exist for a good reason.

One of the common difficulties faced when communicating climate change science is having people engage with data and information that can seem dull and/or terrifying. Having a guide that is too serious and/or openly confrontational can lead to a performance that drives away more people than it convinces. So 'Meghana the Planner' is understandably relatable, her pop culture references are on point, and her willingness to laugh in the face of the horror of climate

change is reassuring. Meghana the Planner invites the audience in and creates an environment that allows them to engage with such issues, all the while saying, ‘I am like you’. But the callousness of Meghana the Planner also mirrors the audience. While they are interested and concerned enough to show up to events about climate change, they are also often urban elites who do not, yet, have to face the consequences of the climate crisis.

In the previous chapter, we discussed how water scarcity is an occasional or perennial problem in urban areas depending entirely on social position. Plan B/C/D/E makes the same point about flooding in the plan to ‘Leave Mumbai for 4 months’ by referencing the decades of flooding that Bombay has faced because of the monsoons ([“Mumbai: Heavy rains”, 2022](#); [“Maharashtra Rains”, 2005](#); [Pandya and Ganguly, 2024](#)). The ‘4 months’ here refers to the months when the flooding is at its worst, June through September. Meghana the Planner justifies this plan by saying ‘We will have to evacuate when it starts flooding anyway. So why not pre-empt it and evacuate beforehand? Just leave in May to be on the safe side.’ ([Meghana AT, 2021](#)). By conflating monsoon flooding and flooding due to sea-level rise, Meghana makes a powerful point: when Mumbai flooded during the monsoons the people who suffered the most did not come from the same social position as many people in her audience.⁶²

The people who are evacuated in such flooding do not live in high rises and hilltop mansions and the option to ‘evacuate’ early is not easily available to everyone. The performance acknowledges this by following the suggestion to flee the city saying, “Does anyone own a house in any holiday area- or do you have a favourite holiday area where you might want to go and rent a house? Let’s check if that place is also viable or not.” ([Meghana AT, 2021](#)) This comparison of evacuating a flooded city to going on an extended holiday is not as hyperbolic

⁶² We see the converse of this in the 2015 floods in Chennai where the situation grabbed attention precisely because it affected more affluent neighbourhoods in the city.

as one might imagine. Meghana points out that leaving a city during extreme weather has a ‘long colonial history’, with British colonial officers and merchants retreating to cooler hill stations during the worst of the summer, and it is true that aspects of middle and upper-class culture in India have colonial roots and so contain intrinsic biases about who must bear the burden of societal risks.⁶³

A more recent manifestation of the privileges of the rich in times of crisis can be seen in the 2024 Ambani wedding that took place during the monsoons. The wedding, with famous guests from across the world and open displays of wealth, had the government creating infrastructure and using government manpower to manage the event even as parts of the city were knee-deep in water ([Zeeshan, n.d.](#); [Shih and Gupta, 2024](#)). Writing about the disastrous floods of 2005, responsible for killing over a thousand people in Mumbai, Parthasarathy ([2009, p. 118](#)) points out that the mainstream media laid a majority of the blame on the state, but in doing so,

the unequal burden of the disaster on those who are poor and marginalized, the role of exclusionary social processes, and the role of partisan state policies which favour infrastructure development for the rich over basic municipal services [were] sidelined in public debates, and hence from governmental and policy responses to the disaster.

So, while the upper middle class and upper classes were furious about floods disrupting normal life, they could not see and/or could not own up to how their sense of normalcy (requiring efficient sea-link roads or sea walls for example), played a role in creating the conditions for such terrible floods.

63 Leela Fernandes ([2006, p. 2](#)) writing on the origins of the middle class in India points out that the middle class was formed as the result of historical processes that began during colonial rule where Indians working within British administrative services and other colonial systems could have access to ‘specific kinds of socioeconomic resources such as access to English education and modern forms of professional employment.’

Meghana the Planner's callousness is then also the callousness of urban elites who have not had to worry about Mumbai flooding annually. This callousness is evidence of how 'water as risk' devalues justice by deeming phenomenon risky only when certain populations are in danger. The performance thus wants to make clear that the audiences' status and positionality impact how they think about planning for climate change. The performance reiterates this imbalance of power during this same plan when Meghana talks about how Indians are very comfortable with people needing to walk hundreds of kilometres to get home, alluding to the hundreds of migrant workers who did just that when lockdowns were declared during the pandemic in 2020; and later when suggesting the plan to 'Build a Wall' and 'Create Artificial Mangroves'. In the next section, we will see how such a devaluation of justice is helped along by overemphasising the benefits of scientific and technological advancements in countering the ill effects of climate change.

Scientism Versus Science

Early in the performance, not long after presenting audiences with information from the Climate Central webpage and before she allows them to vote for the scenario, they think is the most likely, Meghana asks, "Who here trusts climate scientists?" ([2021](#)). She goes on to explain how worst-case predictions for Mumbai changed between 2019 and 2021 because of errors in data. Her intention is not to undervalue or debunk climate science but rather to make a point about how sea-level rise and the systems used to predict it are complicated because questions of when and by how much the sea will rise not only depend on global temperatures, but also on government preparedness, pollution, and a variety of geographic factors. Or as one audience member thoughtfully chips in: "...science is a self-correcting subject, there's a possibility it's not accurate." ([Meghana AT, 2022](#)) This is an important distinction to make because as Beck ([1992, p. 155](#)) argues in his study of risk societies:

Science is one of the causes, the medium of definition and the source of solutions to risks, and by virtue of that very fact it opens new markets of scientization for itself. In the reciprocal interplay between risks it has helped to cause and define, and the public critique of those same risks, techno scientific development becomes contradictory.

This idea of ‘scientization’, related to the concept of ‘scientism’ is an interesting one for us to consider in relation to ‘water as risk’ and water imaginaries in general. Scientism is commonly understood to be the view that the natural sciences alone can provide ‘a satisfying and reasonably complete account of everything we see, experience, and seek to understand’ ([Hughes, 2012](#)).

Since climate change deniers, misinformation, and the difficulties scientists face in communicating the science of climate change are unfortunate truths we cannot ignore ([Treen et al., 2020](#); [Sharman and Howarth, 2017](#); [Anderson and Huntington, 2017](#)), let me be clear that I am not looking to deny that the scientific process has given us a variety of insights into the workings of the universe, or that resultant technologies have been beneficial, or that science and technology play a big role in mitigating the dangers of climate change. What I am interested in exploring is how science’s ‘analytical power stops short of investigating the main driver of planetary change, the human factor, because ‘What humans believe and value, how we organize ourselves, and what we invest to achieve our goals are factors that lie largely outside scientific calculation.’ ([Holm et al, 2012, p. 979](#)).

I am interested in how scientific processes are reified within human institutions and societies so that scientific truths, often bound to specific conditions, as in the case of laboratory findings, are used to enact undemocratic policies, justify imbalances in power, and push irresponsible development onto communities that, if given more autonomy, might seek out better alternatives. I would like to stress that I am not making an argument against rationality, which we might view as the foundation of science, but rather trying to ferret out what allows rationality to be misapplied. I am interested in this because there is a need to understand what

effective science communication, especially regarding climate change, should look like and do. Meghana's performance, I argue, suggests that such communication must do more than grab our short attention spans: it must champion the autonomy of affected populations while encouraging wide interest, engagement and participation.

Now we will look at how scientific thinking manifests through 'water as risk' in the plans to 'Build a wall' and create 'Artificial Mangroves'. In the first of these plans, Meghana introduces sea walls as an excellent option to prevent flooding in Mumbai, citing the levees of New Orleans and the systems of dykes in the Netherlands as instances of sea walls succeeding. But even as she raves about sea walls, she says this:

These levees failed during Hurricane Katrina, but they recently had a hurricane Ida in 2021 and they did an almost perfect job of protecting the city from flooding, so we know they work. This is the whole system of the Netherlands, and it is almost always successful. (Emphasis mine) ([Meghana AT, 2021](#))

Here we see another side of Meghana's persona. If Meghana the Planner is the 'other' of the persona, the underlined section of this quotation gives us a glimpse of the aspect of the 'self' in the persona, 'Meghana the Creator' if you will.

The delivery of this line seems to, even as it praises wall building, sow a small seed of doubt that can destabilise the very plan she is suggesting. Instilling uncertainty and doubt in the audience are essential characteristics of performance. After all, performance seeks to upend what is taken for granted. Here we see a specific way in which performance does that through persona: Meghana the Creator punctures the narrative tension built by Meghana the Planner. What do I mean by this? Meghana the Planner's desire to save Mumbai is not unlike the dramatic convention of giving a character a desire/goal that drives action and narrative in the play. But by adding the 'almost' in the above quotation Meghana the Creator problematises and complicates the desires of Meghana the Planner. This is crucial to create space for the audience to question and disagree with what is being suggested.

In this plan, space for questions is especially important because while the porosity and fallibility of even the best-constructed walls lie at the heart of plenty of stories, our enthusiasm for them is hard to dampen. This was obvious in the Bangalore performance when the audience stayed bashfully silent for several minutes when asked whether they knew any reasons why a wall might not be the right solution. When the audience did finally respond it was interesting that their initial reaction was to wonder and worry about costs, material and timelines, not whether a wall can counter sea level rise given the size of Mumbai and its geography. But how effective have sea walls been in countering flooding and erosion in the country?

Consider as an example, the state of Kerala where out of the 590km coast, 310km have sea walls built to prevent the erosion of beaches ([John, 2018](#)). Even as some communities are grateful for such interventions, others have come to see such walls as ambitious but unwieldy technologies that ultimately did more harm than good. Most of these walls were built before 2000, but erosion continues to take place in 39.12% of the state's coasts ([Parvathy et al., 2023](#)). Some of these eroding areas do not yet have sea walls, but interestingly they also did not have high rates of erosion before walls were built in neighbouring parts of the coast. Recent reports have shown that sea walls do not solve the problem of erosion so much as transfer the problem further up or down the coast ([“How Kerala's seawall”, 2023](#)).⁶⁴

The National Green Tribunal directed coastal governments to stop building sea walls and look to solutions with less environmental impact ([“National Green Tribunal”, 2022](#)), an acknowledgement of how factors such as sand mining, dam building, ocean dredging, and

⁶⁴ To the north of Kerala is the state of Karnataka, which also suffers from severe erosion. Some argue this erosion has been worsened by sea walls in Kerala while others point to Karnataka's own sea walls as a big reason for increased erosion ([Rodriguez, S., et al., 2008, p. 2](#)).

pollution contribute significantly towards coastal erosion and flooding. And yet there has been no pause in the proliferation of such walls all along the coast because the ‘solid grey reassurance of seawall granite is at the heart of seawall politics.’ ([Pillai, 2022](#)).⁶⁵ The argument made by many state governments is that communities are demanding these walls, but what they fail to elaborate on is that such walls have for decades been sold as a valid and workable solution to stop coastal erosion and flooding by governments, keen to be seen addressing the problem head-on.

And so, such walls continue to hold allure, as they did for the audience in Bangalore. Why was this the case? We can understand sea walls to be both borders, lines between ‘here’ and ‘there’, and infrastructure, physical systems or facilities that, in this case, work to keep the ‘there’ away from or out of the ‘here’. Both borders and infrastructure work on multiple levels. All borders are ‘combinatory’ i.e., traced ‘on the land’ but also in ‘juridical texts, governmental practice and cultural symbols.’ ([Shields, 2006, p. 225](#)). Infrastructure, similarly, can be ‘composed as much of steel and cement as “nature,” laws, social histories, and political practices.’ ([Anand, 2017, p. 6](#)) This tells us that the allure of the wall is not just in its ‘material or concrete’ properties (the safety from the rising sea it provides), but also in the cultural and civilizational aspects it allows to flourish: walls, as both borders and infrastructure, have and will continue to be sites through which various kinds of groups make space and claim rights within cities.

In the show, Meghana performs one such claim to the city when she says that if the wall was built, there would be several benefits apart from flood prevention:

65 Dozens of new walls have been proposed in just the last two years, including, but not limited to, 42 sea walls across the state of Maharashtra ([Arora-Desai, 2022](#)) and a 14-crore rupee wall in Tamil Nadu ([Fernando, 2023](#)).

We can build stairs to get to the top of the wall (or maybe an escalator), and we can sit there and watch the sea view. They could even build a toy train that goes along the length of the sea wall for us to get a lovely view of all that we lost when the sea came to take revenge. ([Meghana AT, 2021](#))

This plan is viewed as acceptable despite the shakiness of the science around sea walls because ‘...our city *will look and feel the same*’ ([2021](#)). But there is a question underlying her wistful dreaming: the ‘same’ for whom? The seawall as Meghana the Planner sells it, promises survival, specifically the survival of Mumbai as the ‘city romantic’, suggested by her imagining ‘sea views’ and ‘toy trains’. With regards to Mumbai, such a sense of the city is produced, in no small part, via cinema that actively seeks to reflect the aura of the city. But at the same time ‘life in the city too takes on a cinematic form, with ordinary moments like sitting at Marine Drive or catching a crowded bus in the monsoon becoming “filmy.”’ ([Krishnan, 2023](#)).

The widespread consumption and enjoyment of Bollywood films do mean that the ideals built through viewership can cut across social position, but the ability to make real or live such imaginings is also determined by social position. Urban elites can dip in and out of the city romantic, and transform urban realities to suit their tastes, often at the cost of the communities who perform the labour that ‘makes’ the city i.e., keep the city running.⁶⁶ Then the seawall as Meghana the Planner portrays it, is not built for *all* affected communities, but primarily, to accede to the interests of urban elites. From our previous lessons on the reality of sea walls, we see that industrial entities and political communities who either stand to benefit from building the wall or who benefit from governments continuing to ignore other factors that

⁶⁶ This ability for urban elites to ‘dip’ into the city, both physical access to city infrastructure and make use of the city imaginary, is touched upon again in Meghana’s plan to rebuild Mumbai elsewhere and to leave Mumbai for several months in the year.

cause or worsen flooding and erosion: climate change, pollution, sand mining, coastal development etc.

This is what lies at the heart of the ‘contradictory’ nature of techno-scientific development that Beck sees as characteristic of risk societies and connects back to how ‘water as risk’ devalues justice. In the performance, while Meghana delivers the line about the romance of the sea wall blithely, it is not without bite, slyly poking fun at an audience who might be convinced that such qualities make sea walls a good solution to battle sea-level rise. The audience does seem to pick up on this, with an audience member in Bangalore finally asking, ‘Who will live there?’ i.e., within such a walled romantic city ([Meghana AT, 2022](#)). Meghana’s response is offhand and unconcerned and needles the audience to discuss the question further. Who will access the walls? Where will displaced populations, such as native fishing communities, go?⁶⁷

For my part, I wonder what Mumbaikers will remember when they think about ‘everything lost when the sea came to take revenge’? ([Meghana A.T, 2021](#)) The cinematic bungalows and streets of black and white Bollywood? Old colonial buildings? Expensive high rises? By provoking such questions from the audience, the performance also asks us to think about how justice and risk are connected, how plans that are disconnected from the experiences of large swathes of the population might put those populations at risk, and to wonder whether such plans would put us, the audience, at risk, and if not, to ask ‘Why?’. The performance also addresses how such plans rely on people thinking of ‘water as risk’ and embracing scientific thinking that is propped up by romantic notions of what the city is and how one participates

67 I’m thinking here of Koli fishing communities who have fought long and hard to reside by the coast and work in the ocean ([Barnagarwala, 2024](#))

in urban life. In the next section we will see how in addition to romantic aesthetics, convenience too encourages scientism, and how ‘water as risk’ prizes convenience.

Convenience versus Conviviality

In his landmark collection of essays on the philosophy of social ecology, Murray Bookchin ([1996, p. 6](#)) makes the argument that the fallacy of ‘conventional reason’ – the term he uses to refer to ‘instrumental’ and ‘analytical’ forms of reason – is that it is entirely reliant on the principle of identity, or ‘*A equals A*, which means that any phenomenon can be only itself and cannot be other than what it is or what we immediately perceive it to be, at any given moment in time’.⁶⁸ This principle, which seeks to establish things and phenomena as ‘fixed with clear boundaries that are immutable for analytical purposes’ is incredibly useful for practical matters such as bricklaying, or machine building, but, he points out ([Bookchin, 1996, p. 7](#)), becomes problematic when contending with ‘processes of becoming, or how a living entity is patterned as a *potentiality* to phase from one stage of its development into another’.

We might look at Meghana’s plan for ‘Artificial Mangroves’ – “You’ve heard of artificial bees. You’ve heard of artificial trees. I propose: artificial mangroves!” ([2021](#)) – as a standoff between the potentiality of real mangroves and the principle of identity that would be employed to create the, as of now entirely fictional, artificial mangroves. We can read this plan as an exploration of what might encourage governments to promote a rigid application of conventional reason within complex situations such as climate change mitigation and

68 Bookchin seeks to use dialectic reason, sans Hegelian ‘absolute idealism’, to establish an ecological movement that ‘rightly distrusts conventional reason’, ‘bring[s] coherence to ecological thinking, and ‘dispel[s] arbitrary and anti-intellectual tendencies towards the sentimental’ and the ‘anti-rational’. He calls this ‘dialectic naturalism’ and believes it ‘provides the basis for a living ecological ethics’ ([Bookchin, 1996, p. 15](#)).

conservation. Meghana begins by asking us to consider the ‘inconveniences’ of real mangroves:

Meghana: Mangroves are really horrible if you think about it. They smell, they take up SO MUCH SPACE that could otherwise be used to build luxury building complexes with sea views, they are old, they are not pretty, they can be a breeding ground for mosquitoes - I could go on. ([2021](#))

On the other hand, she says ([2021](#)), artificial mangroves could imitate and replace real ones precisely because they can also protect Mumbai from sea level rise but ‘will not smell because we can choose some essential oil scents to put on them’; will be ‘much smaller’ and free up space for buildings and maybe even an amphitheatre’; will look nice because ‘we can paint them whatever colour we want so we are not limited to green and brown, which are nice colours but honestly it’s getting repetitive’; and will even have ‘Wi-Fi’. More tellingly, in her Bangalore show, Meghana adds that the question of how such machine mangroves are created is not her problem (and by extension not the audience’s) because someone will undoubtedly ‘science’ it ([2022](#)).

Such artificial mangroves are an example of the ‘naturalization of the artificial’ ([Chaudhuri, 1997, p. 78](#)) via ‘industrial productivity’ which emphasises replacing man’s ability to create and connect meaningfully with the promise of machines who create for man ([Illich, 1973, p.10](#)). From fake houseplants to entire island systems being created for the ultra-wealthy ([Hirschfeld and Fisher, 2022](#)), such fake nature is machine-made to require minimum human input. In the case of fake houseplants, they need neither care nor attention, and an artificial island is an imitation of coastal dwelling for the ultra-wealthy that requires on the part of habitants, no specific skills or location-specific knowledge to survive. Both are valued for their convenience and their imitation of nature, with convenience coming at the expense of ‘conviviality’ or the ‘autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment’ ([Illich, 1973, p. 11](#)).

With this plan then, the show pushes audiences to consider how we rank and value the natural world, and when and why we are willing to replace complex ecological systems with human-made ones. While there are no instances of actual artificial mangroves being built, let us look at the rehabilitation and replanting of real mangroves to better understand the manmade versus nature debate that Meghana sets up in this plan. The loss of mangrove cover in India has been significant, as seen in the extreme example of Kerala where 95% of mangrove cover was lost in the last three decades ([Sreelekshmi et al., 2021](#)) or the Sundarbans where 138.4 sq.km of mangroves were lost in the same amount of time ([Bera et al., 2022](#)). It is now widely acknowledged that mangroves create and are part of complex ecosystems that host a variety of organisms ([Onrizal et al., 2020](#)) and that their loss has huge repercussions on these ecosystems and the humans dependent on them (Yamamoto, 2023; [Dhyani et al., 2023](#)).

So, when, in 2023, the Indian government announced the plan MISHTI or the ‘Mangrove Initiative for Shoreline Habitats & Tangible Incomes’ to rehabilitate and improve the state of mangroves in India ([Krishnamurthy, 2023](#)) the policy was lauded. But while there could be definite benefits to such rehabilitation, the failures of past mangrove rehabilitation projects ([Primavera and Esteban, 2008](#)) tell us that significant challenges lie in wait. One set of challenges that are acknowledged by organisations seeking to rehabilitate mangroves is the failure to involve communities who live in and around mangroves despite their in-depth knowledge, for example, knowing how different mangrove species adapt in different zones. However, attempts to set this right will not be enough if mangroves are not seen as being part

of, and emergent within wider ecosystems that are endangered by pollution, reduced water flow, sand mining etc ([Dale et al., 2014, p. 595](#)).⁶⁹

As one audience member of the Bangalore show points out, ‘Aren’t mangroves really important for fish and stuff?’ ([Meghana AT, 2022](#)) We can then see how the instinct for artificial nature that Meghana highlights during the performance shares similarities with attempts at conservation that fail to seek a more holistic vision of the endangered environments, and/or are unwilling to engage with the emergent qualities of such lifeforms because they are viewed as having little or no exchange value within the framework of a market economy. Within such a perspective the ‘real’ (nature for our purposes) is first and foremost a ‘standing reserve’ of resources that are ‘revealed’ to us through technology ([Heidegger, 2013, p. 5-24](#)).⁷⁰ But as we have seen matter, living and non-living, is resistant to manipulations that arise from the simplistic classifications of conventional reason, and recreating and curating nature for our convenience, and at such scales, has all kinds of adverse outcomes.

We might even understand the climate crisis as a series of large and small manifestations of how A is not only A. A river is more than flowing water that can be simply dammed/straightened/buried, a forest is more than a collection of trees that can be cut down, and mangroves are more than smelly flood barriers that can be replaced by technology. But such perspectives are inherent to the congeries that make up both modern water imaginaries and the imaginaries of Anthropocene waters. Like modern water, the constructed nature of

69 As was the case in Tamil Nadu, where the loss of five mangrove species that offered greater resistance to the ingress of the sea was a result of the Cauvery River arriving at its delta almost completely devoid of water and resulting in higher soil salinity. ([“TN loses 5 mangrove species”, 2019](#))

70 “Air is now set upon to yield nitrogen, the earth to yield ore, ore to yield uranium...” ([Heidegger, 2013, p. 15](#)).

Anthropocene water is hidden, usually under the threats and ‘risks’ of various kinds of climate crises. But as Meghana has shown us in the three plans we have examined here, ‘it is the inability on the part of an individual or group to comprehend or grasp the nature of uncertainty and develop strategies to deal with or manage it, that creates situations of risk’ ([Parthasarathy, 2009, p. 111](#)).

The fallout of this inability is multiplied by a failure to account for the inherently complex nature of, in this case, seawater. It allows, even necessitates, that actions informed by ideas of justice be easily discounted and devalued. Through these three different characteristics, we might agree that ‘water as risk’ allows water-based crisis to be understood more clearly in terms of individualized risk management systems, and so is not connected to ideas of social justice. Within such individualized risk narratives, in searching for an objective or neutral calculation of risk, the risky action is reduced to either insurance or compensation. There is no need to deal with the cause of risks because there is a system to do that for you, and in a sense, the promise of a happy ending, or at least adequate compensation if an unhappy one.

It is this happy ending that Meghana moves away from, simultaneously moving away from the catharsis/resolution model of drama because, as the performance shows us, there is no simple resolution. Instead, *Plan B/C/D/E* ends on the suggestion that the work of the audience, and the work Meghana needs to do herself, is only just beginning. This combining of techniques from both performance and drama is how Meghana creates moments of realisation and reflection for the audience, and as we have seen, essential for the emergence of not one but several stories about sea level rise and climate change that challenge the problematic risk narratives underpinning mainstream discourse around the issue. *Plan B/C/D/E* wants people to pay attention to ‘risk’ and make sense of it, not just via the facts and opinions of politicians and, supposedly, scientists, but via their own experiences.

Conclusion

One goal of this thesis has been to understand how theatrical intervention can impact contemporary water imaginaries. Ecocritical analysis of Western theatre has emphasised the need for theatre to address ecological crisis and the environment directly, urging theatre makers to centre the ecological and not simply use it as the backdrop against which human drama plays out. There is a lot to be said for both creating new work in such a way and for reading and re-presenting existing theatre texts from an ecological standpoint. This thesis has concentrated on texts that are both ecologically aware and primarily concerned with human stories. My analysis has been a demonstration of their merits, particularly, how through their presentation of human drama within situations of water crisis, they look below the surface of contemporary urban water imaginaries and see what we make invisible or take for granted about water.

These three chosen texts agitate the placid, stillness of modern and Anthropocene waters which, when confronted with crisis reverts to being understood only in terms of 'Water is life', a simplification of water in crisis to either the absence of water or the presence of too much water. In doing so water takes on a neutrality or a sense that 'water is just water'. But as we have seen in the preceding chapters, water never simply 'is' when it comes to people. In keeping with Linton, Neimanis, and Illich's arguments, water must be understood via the socio-cultural frameworks that produce it. And so, our analysis of *Thaneer Thaneer* presents us with several interesting ways into contemporary water imaginaries where water is equated with power. The text further complicates the 'modernity' of modern water by showing us how such imaginaries rest not only on processes of modernity and modern technologies but also on modern reifications of premodern hierarchies and power structures.

Our reading of *Sordid* shows us how ‘water as power’ both engenders and is engendered by processes of commodification. *Sordid*’s use of character-driven drama highlights the struggles of rural women faced with contemporary imaginaries that force them to suffer greater danger, health risks and sexual exploitation, and cements the idea that ‘water as commodity’ is inherently patriarchal and reliant on the devaluation of the labour of women. We also saw how the most brutal consequences of such commodification are felt by rural populations, who reap little to none of the benefits. This questioning of who benefits and who suffers within different contemporary water imaginaries, while present in all three texts, is most directly examined in our last text *Plan B/C/D/E* which addresses how unequal water relations persist and multiply in urban centres so that the risk of either too much or too little water is placed upon the urban poor.

It is no coincidence that in many Indian cities, large proportions of the urban poor are migrants from smaller towns and villages hopeful of making their livelihoods in the city. This text thus offers us an understanding of how Anthropocene waters mix with modern water to produce an imaginary that is, at its core, ignorant of and inimical to issues of social justice. Each of these texts challenges existing water imaginaries and encourages audiences to think about ‘water crisis’ as more than a mere absence or presence of water. They show us the human actions and inactions that have created such a crisis and recreate how the consequences of such crises are not corrective actions by society, but often the solidifying of imaginaries where water is associated with power, money, and risk. This then makes such imaginaries inescapable for whole swathes of the population.

The texts achieve this by utilising a theatrical language – with language referring not only to what language is spoken (the dialogue) onstage, but also the visual elements, sound, lighting, blocking, and story/plot – that is ‘dramatic’ while also maintaining certain singular

characteristics. This is most evident in our discussion of *Plan B/C/D/E* and its use of the style of lecture-drama. *Sordid*, while following a more traditional narrative structure determined by character, is marked by the sparseness of sets, costumes, music and even dialogue. The ‘directness’ of the text creates a deep sense of anxiety that makes it difficult to look away from the cascading consequences of such manmade water scarcity. This is especially true in the final scene where Jhuri and Kali suddenly speak directly to an otherwise unacknowledged audience, marking the viewers not as confidants, but as belonging to the group of people who cannot ‘see’ what is being done to women like them.

Thaneer Thaneer is, dramaturgically, entirely different as well. While there is a central dramatic thread within the text – will Athipatti get water or not – the pacing is decidedly undramatic, with a significant amount of stage time spent on establishing the relationships and hierarchies that exist within such a village and incisively commenting on the period’s explosive politics. The play was produced at a time when the Sabha system dominated the burgeoning Tamil theatre culture of Chennai⁷¹, and Swaminathan, who had experience creating ‘comedies’ for this institution, hoped also to ‘challenge the oppressive mediocrity and uniformity bred by the system’ ([Shankar and Swaminathan, 2001, p. xvi](#)). *Thaneer Thaneer* uses comedy to create an ‘incisive satire of elite social groups’ ([Shankar and Swaminathan, 2001, p. xv](#)) and challenge an imaginary suggesting that the widespread availability of piped water is a assured result of rapid industrialisation and modernisation.

In the last year, in India alone, we have seen numerous instances of water crises with flash floods, urban subsidence due to groundwater exploitation, and Day Zero scares. While the

71 This system, while initially beneficial in its support of the arts (particularly its encouragement of experimentation and support of ‘amateur groups’) eventually ‘encouraged a conformity and superficiality’ ([Shankar and Swaminathan, 2001, p. xiv](#)).

texts focus on the Indian situation, even more specifically the situations in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, I do believe that this research is pertinent to situations of water crisis around the globe. For one, I believe this analysis makes clear that a wide variety of dramaturgies can be employed to create theatre that addresses issues of climate change. This analysis also contributes towards eco-critical theory, offering the lens of conceptual metaphors to read theatrical texts and demonstrate how we make sense of, rationalise, and materialise various aspects of the natural world. These conceptual metaphors reverberate across different levels of human society, impacting not just our day-to-day, individual interactions with the ecologies we inhabit, but the institutional and systemic processes that are responsible for shaping and destroying those ecologies.

Finally, we have seen how the three texts highlight the relationship between water crisis and social justice. The victories and tragedies of the host of characters we met were indicative of the costs of such crises and call for compassion on the part of the audiences. Such compassion is key to altering contemporary imaginaries – ‘to find a way out of the individualised imaginary in which we are trapped’ ([Ghosh, 2016, p. 181](#)). It allows us to see water crisis, indeed all ecological crisis, as not just a destruction of our means of survival (what Bookchin calls a ‘crassly instrumental’ view of the ecological crisis we face⁷²), but as painful instances of human and planetary suffering. In doing so, I believe these theatre pieces are contributions to widening ecological movements working hard to create alter-imaginaries of water.

72 He argues that it is ‘crassly instrumental’ to suppose that human care for the environment arises only because ‘humanity’s abuse of nature subverts the material conditions of our own survival’. Additionally, such a view ‘is another warrant for undermining the natural world provided only that we can find adequate substitutes, however synthetic, simple or mechanical for existing life forms and ecological relationships.’ ([Bookchin, 1990, p. 74](#)).

This question of alter-imaginaries and how they may allow us to live more meaningfully with our natural environments is at the heart of my creative work, and I will be discussing it in the second part of this doctoral project.

Part Two: The Creative Project

Imagine that...

A cyclone hits our City, rivers break their banks. People watch, not because lives and livelihoods are being swept away, or because streets and homes are flooding, but because it is a magnificent transformation and a good reminder that we do not know the muddy, meandering rivers of our City as well as we think we do.

A particularly scorching summer creeps into our City in May, and people do not wait, looking in vain for the arrival of water lorries from distant places, but gather around our still full wells and water tanks to thank the giving sky, the receiving earth and our farsightedness.

Imagine that we, in our City, learn that how we think about water can shape water, and are still able to think about ourselves as belonging to water, instead of it to us.

...Imagine that.

Notes on the scripts

The critical element of this thesis looked at how a selection of play and performance scripts created in India question and problematize modern water crises and the contemporary urban water imaginaries that foster such crises. The creative element, made up of the following three scripts, is my addition to a corpus of environmentally engaged texts that highlight locally relevant narratives of climate and ecological instability with a view to assist community-led action against climate change. The scripts also seek to have global relevance, with issues they address such as economic development, resource extraction, use, and distribution, and disaster mitigation plaguing communities across the world. Each script uses a different type of theatrical language or dramaturgy to address these issues as they unfold within the paradigm of ‘water crisis’.

So, you will find that my first script, *Flood City* uses structural conventions borrowed from the canon of ‘Epic’ theatre, while script two, *Lost Waters* is an audio-drama that is site-specific, and my final script, *Theertham* is a character-driven stage drama. This variety was a conscious decision that I made at the start of this project because I was eager to try writing in styles I had never engaged with before. It was also a decision that allowed my writing process to take inspiration from and be informed by a variety of sources: plays and performances, the scripts I analysed for my critical project – their themes, stylistic choices, and dramaturgy – the theory I utilised in my analysis, particularly the theory I used to build the conceptual framework of water imaginaries, and the research I accessed on issues of flash floods, droughts, and sea-level flooding.

My scripts were also informed by primary research, fieldwork, and interviews I undertook in Chennai, and several professional development experiences made available to me as a PhD student. I will elaborate on these influences when discussing each of the scripts individually,

but the earliest provocations for the creative project were two journalistic non-fiction texts, *Rivers Remember* (Ge, 2019) and *Everybody loves a good drought* (Sainath, 1996). These texts were amongst the first that showed me how natural disasters involving water possess a second side: a human side that ‘makes’ the water of a water crisis. They also led me to other books and journal articles, many of which were not in my area of expertise: ecological history, hydrology, urban planning and development in Chennai, river habitats, state governance, environmental laws, and so on.

Every text I encountered expanded my knowledge of the subject areas, and some of them also gave me ideas for scenes and characters for my scripts. For example, an early academic text, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* taught me that contemporary government thinking on ecological issues has roots in British colonial rule that, when it came to India, prioritised the ‘elevation of commercial over subsistence uses, the delegitimization of the community, and the abandoning of restraints on resource exploitation’ (Gadgil and Guha, 1996, p. 116). But the same text also spoke about how concurrent cycles of flood and drought in the Madras Presidency in the late 1800s were linked to prior cutting down of local forests for railway carriages– the loss of those trees led to soil erosion and rainwater running downhill instead of being drawn into the earth (1996, p. 120).

This became one of the earliest scenes I wrote for *Flood City*. While it did not make it into the draft here, the core idea it addressed i.e., the logic of exploiting one area for the benefit of another, a colonial logic that we have made our own in contemporary India, stayed with me until it found its place as a central issue in my third script. I tell you all of this because, in addition to my research question around urban water imaginaries, I began this project hoping that I could present some part of the plethora of humanities and social sciences research on water crises in India to theatre audiences. As you will read in my reflection on the first play,

this goal did not make writing *Flood City* an easy process. However, it did ensure that I looked widely when searching for the subject of each script.

But my scripts were not just created out of a desire to present modern water imaginaries as they are, but to challenge them and suggest alter-imaginaries that mixed other ways of knowing water and modern concerns of social justice. These alter-imaginaries were influenced by Neimanis's ([2012, p. 4](#)) work on the different modalities or 'hydro-logics' of water i.e., water's 'ways of being - movements or modes of relationality, sociality, endurance, becoming'. In her work, she identifies six primary hydro-logics:

- 1) 'gestationality' or the life-giving properties of water
- 2) 'dissolution' or 'power to transform, and wash away, in terms of flood, monsoon, hurricane or tsunami'
- 3) 'communication' where water circulates 'material'
- 4) 'differentiation' refers to how water is 'constantly emerging as difference, shaped by different rates, speeds and pathways of flow, but also by the different mixtures of particulate matter, chemical compounds or entire colonies of other bodies'
- 5) 'archive' which includes how water remembers and creates conditions for 'repositories of memory'
- 6) and 'unknowability' or water's skill at evading calculation ([Neimanis, 2013, p.30-33](#)).

These modalities have been with me since early in this project and were pivotal to my understanding of what water, if given a voice in the scripts, might say and how it might behave. And so, the waters of the plays you are about to read function on multiple levels: as setting and scenery, as a driver of action, as an obstacle, as a friend, as monster... In the following section, I will elaborate on this, summarise the scripts and discuss the process of writing each of them.

Play One: Struggling to find the subject

Flood City follows several characters trying to find their way back to the City from where they were displaced by a catastrophic storm. This narrative throughline, identified as six different interludes takes place on a boat lost in unknown waters and is interwoven with scenes from each character's past. These character scenes touch upon matters related to the City's water infrastructure and show us how the characters participate in and suffer because of imaginaries that view the environment as a resource primed for extraction and water as a thing that can be controlled. This situation is very loosely based on the 2015 floods in Chennai, which are now generally acknowledged to have been worsened by careless urbanisation and a failure to respect the watery ecology of Chennai.

What made the floods truly catastrophic was a decision on the part of politicians and government officials to open the sluices to Chembarambakkam dam, one of the city's major sources of fresh water, without appropriate flood warnings issued to people in high-risk areas. I had initially hoped to create a verbatim storytelling performance about the 2015 floods in Chennai, with my research being supported by interviews with flood survivors recorded in newspapers and the book *Rivers Remember*. I had permission to use sections of the book within the play as well, but when I realised that people were not eager to relive their experiences of the floods, I was forced to reconsider my plans. As a result, I struggled with early drafts of *Flood City* – and there were many before the one you are about to read!

I struggled with finding a subject, finding a narrative, and wanting the play to exist in the present, past, and future all at once. Characters came, transformed, and then left all with me feeling like I had little control over them. I can now see how structuring the characters, relationships, scenes, and questions I wrote in my first year was difficult because there were simply too many of them. The fact that I could not decide on a name for the play – in the last

three and a half years this play has been called *The Storm*, *The Drowned*, *What the Waters Took* – should have alerted me to the fact that I was trying to force enough material for three scripts into just the first one. Several of those early scenes and characters found their place in scripts two and three, but at the time it was quite difficult to know what to keep, which thread to follow, and which to put aside.

All of this led me to think more deeply about why I had been drawn to verbatim theatre in the first place. Over time I realised that what had drawn me to the verbatim form was the way it engaged the communities in which the action of the plays took place. I wanted to create theatre that engaged communities in Chennai the same way. Theatre that made them think about flash flooding, which happens with increasing frequency whatever the strength of the monsoon, differently. But verbatim was not the only way to do this. Community theatre was another potential path. I wrote this current draft of *Flood City* knowing that I want it to be produced as a community theatre project that brings together theatre makers, community members across social class, and organisations leading the work on climate change resilience in the city.

In India, community theatre takes many different forms, not unlike the situation in the U.K.⁷³ I had plenty of examples of community-engaged work to draw on: the Jana Natya Manch which specialised in amateur left-wing Hindi theatre in Delhi, the Budhan Theatre founded by Mahasweta Devi and G.N Devy in Gujarat that is devoted to staging plays created by the Chhara community⁷⁴, and Badal Sircar's Third Theatre in West Bengal that sought to bridge

73 Here I am referring to the many kinds of community theatre that seem to have existed in the U.K including the celebratory promenade theatre of Anne Jellicoe, or the more political, 'popular theatre' of John McGrath that. While these theatre makers were quite different in their approach to the politics of community theatre, they certainly share the idea that there is a value in creating location and audience specific theatre that local communities participate in. ([Nicholson, 2016](#); [Weston, 2020](#))

74 A denotified 'criminal' tribe in India that faced and continues to face considerable discrimination because of this colonial-era classifications.

the gap between urban and rural populations by doing away with the proscenium, were all theatre groups with community-based or community-oriented creative practices. All these groups are known for certain staging and dramaturgical styles, but they are also known for making theatre that can quickly adapt to any situation and that leaves plenty of room for the audience to participate.

Keeping this in mind, I set out to write a structure that can be easily altered during production, with participants bringing in new information, perspectives, and narratives that expand and sharpen the show. This was not a decision I reached easily. Acknowledging that a script is, always, a limited text, has been a huge learning in my process for this first play. Two theatre texts helped me find my way through this problem. The first was Neel Chaudhuri's *Taramandal* (2011), an adaptation of Satyajit Ray's short story 'Patol Babu Filmstar'. *Taramandal* is about dreams and disillusionment, and a masterclass in character-led storytelling, but I was interested in its use of short, narratively disconnected, but thematically connected scenes. While I knew this script well, having seen a college troupe's production of it in Chennai and regularly using it in writing workshops, that first year I could not reconcile the serious and 'real' nature of my subject area with the whimsical, bittersweet, and comic tone of *Taramandal*.

So early structures for an anthology-type play were abandoned and I set about trying to write a monster of a three-act drama called '*The Storm*'. This was a fraught process. Luckily for me, while working on a redraft of this play for my final submission, I realised the value of the short, disconnected scenes I had written and abandoned in my first year. As I was herding them into something that resembled a script, my supervisor recommended I read Brecht's *Fear and Misery in the Third Reich* (2009). Brecht used a collection of small 'playlets' that were thematically linked to draw attention to and critique the realities of the German people

in the years following the ascendancy of the Nazi party. Here then was an excellent example of the anthology structure successfully used to address difficult, dire situations.

The fact that the structure allows for numerous voices and perspectives with scenes being in dialogue with each other despite there being few recurring characters, was particularly interesting and guided my structuring of *Flood City*. I also borrowed a few presentational ideas from Brecht. *Flood City* is a series of titled scenes that take place in various locations interspersed with ‘Interludes’ on the boat, and my characters go by their occupation (Fisherwoman, Engineer) or relationships (Daughter, Husband), not by their first names. For Brecht, not using names seems a part of the many strategies he employed to create an ‘Epic’ theatre that engaged audiences without letting them forget the unreality of what they were watching, no matter how familiar it seemed: ‘Everyday things are thereby raised above the level of the obvious and automatic’ ([Brecht 1964, p. 92](#)).

When you consider that this entire thesis project has been about seeing and understanding water as more than it is, it occurs to me that the hydro-logics I have been so interested in are not so different from the logic of ‘alienation’ applied in Brechtian theatre, i.e., making the familiar unfamiliar. Such alienation, I would argue, was crucial to much of the community theatre practices that I have witnessed and engaged in, both back in India and in the UK. The process of devising, writing, designing, and performing community theatre requires challenging commonly held beliefs or ‘truths’. I am excited to see how this draft of *Flood City* would lend itself to a community theatre endeavour back in Chennai.

Play Two: Writing about what is absent

Lost Waters is a site-specific audio drama set on the bridges, footpaths, and roads that pass alongside and over the final sections of the highly polluted, biologically dead River in the City before it flows out into the sea. The play is made up of a series of audio recordings that flow

into the protagonist's life and interrupt his job editing together an audio-tour/public consultation about a new multi-level expressway being built along and *in* the River. These recordings – snatches of conversations from the protagonist's past and present, voices of people who have lived around the River, and a mysterious voice responsible for the interruptions – challenge the narrative of the public consultation and seek to reveal what people in the City have misunderstood about their River.

For this script, I was inspired by three plays I watched/read/listened to during my thesis. In my first week in the UK, I attended a UEA student production of my supervisor's play *Voices of the Reeds* ([Waters, 2021](#)) where a host of historical characters led audiences around the lake on UEA's campus and told us about the effects of climate change on RSPB Strumpshaw Fens in Norfolk. Later, I read a draft of the site-specific play *Murmurations* ([Waters, 2021](#)), created with Tangled Feet theatre company, that guides audiences through a nature reserve and tells them stories from and about that landscape. I also listened to *And While London Burns* ([2006](#)), Platform's 'operatic' audio tour through London which is a commentary on climate change and the complexities of the oil economy.

The energy of such perambulating performances, their successful transformation of fact into narrative, and how being 'on-site' required audiences to be present, convinced me that creating a site-specific audio play would best serve my goal with play two: to create something that made people look at and contend with what they do not know about the Coovum river in Chennai. I grew up about fifty metres from the Coovum and had always known it to be a polluted and dirty river. In fact, in my school days the word 'Coovum' was synonymous with smelly and unwashed, but I had never considered why the Coovum was so dirty. Until 2015, when the floods forced years of sewage and garbage out into the sea and for a brief few weeks gave us a flowing river, I had not thought that the Coovum could do anything other than sludge its way through the city.

In the years following the flood, having gained experience in autoethnographic research as a ‘flâneuse’ in Chennai for my masters’ research project, and later working as a tour guide, I grew aware of how spaces can be made and unmade through creative and artistic interventions. For this script I wanted to create a theatrical experience that recreated ‘places from the past, or [places] that have been left behind, [that] can be glimpsed through performance-related projects as part of a palimpsest of personal narrative; quotidian, dull and embedded places [that] might be defamiliarised and re-envisioned’ ([Mackey, 2016, p. 107](#)). However, I was not interested in creating ‘audience-flâneurs’ who are ‘unmarked by the traces of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and geography’ ([Heddon and Turner, 2012, p. 226](#)), who can simply move through the space and learn about it as objective outsiders.

So when I went home to Chennai for fieldwork in May of 2023, I planned to walk along the Coovum and search for the ‘spheres of relations’ that might mark such a river space in the city. I tracked down experts on local history, biodiversity, and governance to try to hear as many stories about it as I could. I was lucky to be able to talk to a local naturalist, and then to a historian and writer, both of whom had participated in a project to map the Coovum to its source.⁷⁵ But to my disappointment, neither had stories for me, and what facts they could give me were sparse. For instance, no one could tell me about the communities that might have lived along the Coovum over the years, or what plants, birds, animals and insects had lived in and around the Coovum when it was a healthy, living river. No one could tell me why the Coovum looked so radically different in different maps of Chennai drawn across the centuries.

⁷⁵ This project involving amateur historians, students and naturalists had several interesting results including a directory of temples along the Coovum. I only mention this because the Gods don’t feature in my play, but this book and the concept of the spiritual force of the Coovum certainly inspired the character of ‘The Voice’.

Also, no one could tell me, definitively, why Coovum clean-up plans kept failing. In a similar vein, walking along the river revealed little information about how people interacted with it because a) people were not allowed to interact with the river amidst the construction and/or river clean-up activities going on, or b) people did not want to interact with a river that was so dirty. The early days of fieldwork left me frustrated and quite close to giving up on the Coovum as the subject of the second script. Luckily, in May I spoke to a retired civil servant who worked closely with the city's Public Works Department in the 1990s and early 2000s⁷⁶. Ms. Santha Sheela Nair had plenty of information about the Coovum for me, including the detail that the river was 'biologically dead' because since the mid-1900s all the river's water has been diverted into reservoirs outside the city. From there it is piped into the city as drinking water.

What we saw as the 'Coovum' was almost entirely sewage. This detail, and the story of urban drainage and sanitation that she told me, led me to reach out to historians Dr Aditya Ramesh of the University of Manchester and Dr Bhavani Raman of the University of Toronto who, since 2015, have been researching the history of water in Chennai. They were just coming to the end of their British Academy project that used maps, images, and documents sourced from various archives, to create a detailed and surprising account of the Coovum's history.⁷⁷ They invited me onto their project as a research assistant and gave me access to their research for my play. I used this research as the foundation of my semi-fictional narrative about how contemporary policymakers and publics misunderstand certain fundamental truths about the River.

⁷⁶ Incidentally she worked on making sure rainwater harvesting systems became mandatory in Chennai in 2001. Her insights on this proved interesting for my critical work.

⁷⁷ Their project, 'Archives and Maps of Water: Environmental Justice and Cartography for a Coastal City, Chennai 1800-present' 2021-23 will be releasing videos I worked on about this research shortly.

The actual research gathered information about the Coovum from documents and maps, but in the audio play, I chose to reveal ‘truths’ about the River through the stories of ordinary people who interacted with it. These stories tell us the River might not be the perennial river residents of the city assume it to be, that its course and flow were, partly, colonial creations, and that ‘city making’ which assumes ‘complete’ knowledge of landscapes and ecologies leads to various kinds of tragedies, the least of them being flash flooding during the monsoons. Early into writing *Lost Waters* I had decided that though set in the real geography of Chennai and concerned with the Coovum river, the script would only talk about ‘The City’, an unidentified urban megapolis with distinctly Chennai-like elements, and ‘The River’.

This was because the play was so clearly a critique of current development projects in Chennai that I worried no theatre company would take it on unless there was some pretence that it was about another place. The images and maps that accompany the text are meant to focus the fuzziness of the audio narrative. However, choosing to do this allowed me to write about water crises in Chennai more easily.⁷⁸ The stories of *Lost Waters* are a challenge to Chennai’s real-life beautification and development projects that are supported by the facts of the ‘dead’, and therefore devalued, river that must be revived. These projects do not account for the human and non-human experiences of such a space and so fail to see how the river is something greater, and more complicated than what we currently imagine.

My plans to produce this play include involving an NGO known as the Chennai Climate Action Group to help find voice actors in both English and Tamil from the climate activist community. They have also offered to try to track down some of the communities who were moved from the Coovum over the years which might make up for voices I felt unable to

⁷⁸ After writing *Lost Waters*, I decided to carry ‘The City’ forward into *Theertham* and back into *Flood City*.

fictionalise: accounts of flooding in the slums along the Coovum, and the lives of freshwater fishermen who worked the river before such fishing was made illegal. My ideas for future productions of *Lost Waters* have been influenced by my work with the theatre company Limbik. I undertook a placement with them between 2024 and 2025 as a researcher and dramaturge. I assisted their community research and development process in Norwich, Sheringham, and Cromer for their site-specific, audio project *Edgelands* (May-June 2025) and their staged adaptation of Aristophanes' *The Birds* (2026).

In *Edgeland* a guide takes audiences around Sweet Briar Marsh in Norwich pointing out interesting birds, insects and plants. She is completely unaware of the half-human half-animal creatures that inhabit the space, and of the mystery of a missing woman that voices from the marsh tell her audiences about. The parallels to *Lost Waters*, the first draft of which I finished in the summer of 2023, are obvious, and I found working with Limbik useful for my second draft which embraces unanswerable questions more readily. It was also instructive in how to hone such audio narratives for live performance and how physically present actors can contribute and elevate the script. The script you will read is for an audio experience, but I am in conversation with a theatre director back in Chennai who is interested in creating a version of the play where physically present actors take on some or all the narrative burden and lead audiences along the path using mics and headphones. This could further urge the audiences to look at and contend with the Coovum and what we have made it.

Play Three: Writing about 'there'

*Theertham*⁷⁹ is a satirical look at resource extraction as it takes place on the edges of the City, in suburban spaces that are 'valueless' because of their postcode and people. Set during a year

⁷⁹ Meaning holy water, especially the holy water offered to people at temples i.e., water blessed by the gods. Also, a connotation of 'sweet' and 'pure' water.

of ‘no monsoon’ the story follows a middle-class widow and her daughter who receive an unexpected windfall when it is discovered that their old well sits above a deep and large freshwater aquifer. But the windfall also brings trouble: people are willing to act unscrupulously to make the most of the aquifer amidst the unfolding drought, leaving the widow, her daughter, and the people of the region to deal with whatever consequences follow. The script turns urban, middle and upper-middle-class narratives of prosperity in India on its head by making plain how social position determines whether a ‘crisis’ is an opportunity, or just in fact, a plain old crisis.

In early 2024 I sat down to work on *Theertham*, determined to write a character-driven stage comedy that addressed drought and water scarcity, particularly Chennai’s reliance on water tankers coming from agricultural areas on the edge of and entirely outside the city. I wanted to touch upon three critiques of urban water practices with this script. The first critique was that urban development takes place so quickly and with such little oversight that, despite the existence of laws and plans to oversee urban expansion, there is a failure to ensure that concretization i.e., the increase of concrete infrastructures such as apartments, flyovers, and roads, is matched by a sustainable expansion/continued existence of green cover and water infrastructure. Older tanks, wells and lakes are often destroyed or filled in to create land for apartments ([Sekhar, 2001](#)).

The second critique was that there is a dismissal of the water rights, hopes and dreams of communities who are on the peripheries, especially when, the lives and livelihoods of the urban elite are at risk during a ‘crisis’ ([Findlay 2019, np](#)). The third critique was that transporting ‘plentiful’ and ‘unused’ rural groundwater into ‘dry’ urban landscapes discounts how water builds and contributes towards complex ecosystems in which we humans are but one set of players. While the specific details in *Theertham* have no basis in real-life events,

Chennai's expansion into the surrounding countryside and the subsequent exploitation of groundwater, and my experiences in North Chennai during my fieldwork were the inspiration for the play.⁸⁰

Though my PhD placement was with Limbik, I was also meant to work with 'Other Media' a non-governmental organisation in Chennai specialising in issues of climate justice and climate policy. Despite having arranged to do this placement alongside my fieldwork and developing an extensive six-week workshop plan, the placement fell through because of visa restrictions. Leaving aside the problems this creates for international students seeking to create networks back home (in the country the UK government is so keen we eventually return to), this meant breaking trust with an organisation I had been keen to work with for some time. Rather than do that, I volunteered with them in between my fieldwork and provided them with the workshop structure I had already created.

The resulting performance, *Oru Oorula Oru Aaru* (*There once was a river*) (2023) drew on stories and memories of different communities in North Chennai and their struggle to have more say in how their region is developed. This struggle is especially evident in Ennore, North Chennai which faced the terrible consequences of Chennai 'modernising' with the region being rezoned since the 1950s to support the heavy industries and port activity that a modern, industrialised, and global 'Good City' required ([Bremner, 2023](#)). Co-written and delivered by the children from the workshop, *Oru Oorula Oru Aaru* asked audiences to think about the challenges (declining fisheries, polluted drinking water, and unbreathable air) of people in

⁸⁰ That is 'water farms' being set up in a residential area; water diviners and engineers working together in companies that dig borewells and sell tanker water to the highest bidder; and a year of absolutely no rain.

North Chennai and to imagine a ‘Good City’ made/remade by the region's human and nonhuman inhabitants.

In the conclusion to the critical chapters I mentioned that the plays I analysed allowed a reorientation of our understanding of ‘water’. I would add that they also change how we think about ‘crisis’. We see in *Plan B/C/D/E* and *Sordid* how ‘crisis’ becomes a permissive rationality that allows us to consider/plan futures that sacrifice the poor and disenfranchised, and that make human bondage a necessity of survival. We are already seeing across the world, a rise in ‘elected’ leaders who use crisis, and the promise of ‘handling’ crisis, to enact increasingly authoritarian and neoliberal modes of government. Within such contexts, I found myself thinking deeply about what dangers theatre makers face from contemporary imaginaries that value wealth and endless, capricious consumption.⁸¹

Walter Benjamin writes ([2007, p. 148](#)) that storytelling is a dying art because we no longer value how ‘half the art of storytelling [is] to keep a story free from explanation’ and, more recently, Byung-Chul Han observed ([2024, p. 3](#)) that the ‘deluge of information’ that marks modernity overpowers and ‘suffocates’ our narrative instincts and traditions because ‘information pushes to the margins those events that cannot be explained but only narrated’. Crises prioritise explanation and information, often at the cost of nuance. Understandably, we seek to avert crises and believe that information is the only need of the hour. But when we live in societies of endless crises, when crises become ‘a political technique of government’ ([comité invisible 2014, np](#)) it is easy to see how people can come to believe that art must offer facts, or a literal rendering of facts, and not communicable mystery intended to encourage

81 That is to say how are the arts as a whole susceptible to world views that support ‘crisis’ as a way of life so that ‘the dull concern with survival, the economic worry about not having enough, the feeling of having an unsustainable form of life, is not something that will come after the catastrophe, but what already drives the desperate struggle for life of each individual in a neoliberal regime.’ ([comité invisible, 2014, np](#))

what Han ([2024, p. 2](#)) calls the ‘long, slow, lingering gaze’ that accompanies a story well-told.

This was a vital lesson that my time in North Chennai taught me: Other Media’s research on local lives, histories, and ecologies was not information or data, but rather narratives from people living in the region. Keeping that narrative alive allowed us to create a show that offered counsel to audiences. Not counsel in the sense of a set of solutions, but rather counsel that ‘suggests how *a story is to be continued*’ ([Han, 2024, p. 10](#)) so that audiences, many of whom were from North Chennai, expressed a desire to keep on narrating their version of the ‘Good City’. My time on this project also showed me that any creative process is inherently about reflection and the purpose of research within a creative context is ‘to develop new knowledge, to challenge old beliefs and to speculate on the “what ifs” of our concepts and processes’ ([Stewart, 2007, p. 125](#)).⁸²

It was in writing *Threertham* that I first, and most consciously, embraced writing as more than just explanation. It was only after writing the current draft of *Theertham* that I was able to return to *Lost Waters* and *Flood City* and put aside my desire to make everything ‘literal’. I have come to believe that if theatre is to have a capacity to carry, draw attention to, and subvert the contemporary metaphorical concepts that underpin ecological crisis it must have space for the mystery that lies at the heart of all stories and narratives. These three plays highlight what I consider to be pivotal moments in Chennai’s history of misusing and misunderstanding water, but without resorting to only a pure narration of facts. What I have not explained, what

⁸² This is a blog post I had the pleasure of writing for their project and access to their blog if it is of interest: <https://storyofennore.wordpress.com/2023/08/16/field-notes-from-the-good-city-drama/>

in truth I cannot explain, reflects my ambiguous relationship to water and my desire to engage with it more deeply.

While I never expected that writing a thesis about water would cure me of my phobia, I also did not expect water to leave the mark it has. Thinking about water almost constantly for three and a half years does that I suppose. It is not unlike double vision. I see water as it appears, but I also see a ghostly twin floating just along the surface... This is what I hope the following plays do in their life beyond this doctoral thesis, that the waters that now reside in these scripts converse with and through audiences and haunt them long after the stage goes dark.

Flood City

Characters

Fisherwoman	40s, head of the house, determined
Reporter	30s, internet famous, naïve
Engineer	20s, fresher, eager
Grandmother	70s, ran a canteen, lonely
Boy	Early teens, opportunist, angry
Husband	50s, General Counsel for the City, craven

The Chorus is possibly a recording or a single, live voice through some kind of distortion program that makes it sound not quite human.

Hyacinths	Young, florets that colonise water bodies, great sense of humour but terrible desire for world domination
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These characters appear only in the flashback scenes and can be doubled by the main cast.

Wife	50s, an advocate, sharp
Councillor	40s, keeps things running, smug
Neighbour One	50s, concerned
Landlord	40s, opportunist who's fooling no one
Concrete King	50s, richest person in the country, temperamental
Assistant	20s, networking type, enterprising
Deputy Chief Secretary	50s, bureaucrat, 'Live small, live well'
Junior Official	30s, worker bee, 'Who you know matters'
Daughter	Mid-teens, curious, worried

Author's Note: The play's structure is flexible and can be used to 'contain' alternative scenes between other characters created by community groups depending on what is most relevant and pertinent to their own experiences of water crisis.

Interlude I

The stage is dark when the sound begins: the susurrations of water. Lights blink on and off as the Chorus speaks, giving us a sense that the stage is made of endless waters. With this the sound of rushing water: it is terrifying, it is angry, it is the sound you hear before death. The stage goes entirely black.

The light reveals a watery space, grey-blue and all-encompassing, not unlike the sea. There is a single vallam⁸³ and nothing else. The vallam is old, but sturdy, with an ancient-looking motor. A woman, the ENGINEER, leans out of the vallam, staring down into the water, her face inches from its surface as if she is trying to peer in. She wears a backpack and desperately clutches one wooden oar in her hand. The other oar lies in the vallam.

The Engineer is nervous, and a bit scared. There's a sound from near the stern. She rushes there, nearly falling in: she has not found her sea legs. When there she notices the engine and a small bottle of golden liquid, petrol/diesel. She is about to try to work the motor when a figure heaves itself out of the water and onto the boat. The Engineer screams and grabs the oar, ready to swing, but it is only the FISHERWOMAN who catches the oar before it smashes into her head. She glares at the Engineer.

ENGINEER

Don't look at me like that! You said ten minutes. You've been gone ages! I thought you'd died! *(The Fisherwoman says nothing)* What took you so long? *(Silence)* Do you know where we are?

FISHERWOMAN

No.

ENGINEER

You said you only had to swim in the water to know how far we were from land. That the salt in the water would tell you if we were north or south of the Port—

FISHERWOMAN

We're south of the Port, but there is a lot of sea south of the Port.

ENGINEER

What about the fish? You said a single fish could tell you exactly where we are. Are we lost? How are we going to get back to the City?

FISHERWOMAN

How would you have gotten back to the City if you had killed me with the oar?

⁸³ Tamil: A long fishing vessel used in the sea.

ENGINEER

I wasn't going to kill you. You- you surprised me! I thought you were... a shark.

FISHERWOMAN

A shark?

ENGINEER

I was scared. You were gone so long!

FISHERWOMAN

I was gone seven minutes. Do you know how I know? I can only hold my breath for seven minutes.

ENGINEER

It... felt longer. It's being out here. Time doesn't feel the same when you're out at sea... I've heard people say that. (*The Fisherwoman grabs an oar*) Where are we going?

FISHERWOMAN

West, like before.

ENGINEER

We've been going west for ages...

FISHERWOMAN

We're in the ocean, City's to the west.

ENGINEER

Are you even sure that's west?

FISHERWOMAN

They don't teach the Head Engineer of the government how to tell east from west?

ENGINEER

A Head Engineer isn't a cartographer, why would they—

FISHERWOMAN

I'm teasing. West is that way. What are you waiting for? Take the other oar.

ENGINEER

Wouldn't it be faster if we used the engine?

FISHERWOMAN

Your arm is hurting Ms. Head Engineer?

ENGINEER

You don't need to say it like that.

FISHERWOMAN

Why? You are the most important person in the whole government, no?

ENGINEER

If you're sure we're going west, why not use the engine?

FISHERWOMAN

It's broken. Can the Head Engineer fix it at least?

ENGINEER

I'm a civil engineer, not a mechanical—

FISHERWOMAN

Then row.

With a glare, the Engineer takes the other oar, and they row, the Fisherwoman easily, the Engineer awkwardly.

ENGINEER

You're in a worse mood than before. What did you see down there?

FISHERWOMAN

Nothing.

ENGINEER

Nothing interesting?

FISHERWOMAN

No. There's nothing there. No fish, no seabed, just cloudy water I don't know...

ENGINEER

Is that very bad?

FISHERWOMAN

Not knowing the waters you're on... It's the fastest way to get yourself killed.

Beat.

ENGINEER

You sure know how to kill hope.

FISHERWOMAN

If you still had hope after waking up on a plastic door in the middle of nowhere, you must be a fool. But then you do work for the government.

The Engineer does not know how to respond to this and keeps rowing. The vallam exits. The ripples it creates spread out washing the stage clean. This transitions us into the next scene without a blackout.

Arbitration

A birthday party for a political bigwig in a large hotel room, the kind they always rent for conferences and wedding receptions. There's nothing very lovely about it, but you get the sense that a lot of money has been spent furnishing it. In one corner of the room, the HUSBAND, 50, dressed smartly, is adjusting his tie and his WIFE, 45, in a gorgeous sari, watches impatiently. They have between them a present, small, and a flower bouquet, large.

HUSBAND

Why did they pick this tie? I'll look like a fool if the photo shows up in the paper.

WIFE

You're not important enough for your photo to show up in the paper.

HUSBAND

Why this colour?

WIFE

I didn't ask you to wear it.

HUSBAND

I was trying to do something nice. For you.

WIFE

Wearing a tie is you doing something nice for me?

HUSBAND

A tie your parents gave me.

WIFE

Thank you. You're so thoughtful.

HUSBAND

You know I can't stand this colour.

WIFE

Go to the podium, and give him this stuff. Our reservation is in an hour, and Mount Road will be jampacked in this rain.

HUSBAND

You have to come up there with me.

WIFE

No.

HUSBAND

How will it look that you came all this way, and then refused to wish him?

WIFE

I didn't want to come all this way, we were never meant to come all this way.

HUSBAND

But you're here now and what will it look like if you don't even wish—

WIFE

I'm not coming. I'm getting a drink and—

HUSBAND

The wives don't usually drink at these things. Openly.

WIFE

I'll hide under a table. That'll solve two problems. You can say you couldn't find me.

HUSBAND

You're being unreasonable.

WIFE

I'm being—?! I— I wanted to get to *my* birthday dinner, that my parents came to the City for, that I made plans for—

HUSBAND

We'll get there. I promise. And you will love your present.

WIFE

Go up on stage.

HUSBAND

This is about the case, isn't it? You've been in a foul mood ever since the verdict and picking fights over little things—

WIFE

Leaving my parents waiting at the railway station for two hours, in my mother's condition, was not a small thing. And that was just yesterday. All year you've been inconsiderate and—

HUSBAND

I got caught up in a meeting yesterday. Before that when have I—

WIFE

You didn't pay the school fees on time.

HUSBAND

I thought you were doing that.

WIFE

You were supposed to get a new battery for my laptop.

HUSBAND

But I did get it!

WIFE

Last month, after I had already replaced the battery. I'm not just angry about the case. I'm angry that you are never there anymore. The moment you started working for these political thugs—

HUSBAND

But you are angry about losing the case!

A man enters. The COUNCILLOR, early 40s, dressed in the politician's uniform: a white shirt, a white mundu⁸⁴, and a silk shawl. He carries a drink in each hand.

COUNCILLOR

Vakil⁸⁵-sir, Vakil-ma'am welcome. I'm glad to see both of you here, celebrating the Chief's 60th birthday. Please have a drink. Ma'am, someone told me you like cocktails. Try this, our bartender is from Tokyo and a genius.

WIFE

Thank you but—

84 A single uncut piece of white starched cotton men wear around their waists.

85 Lawyer in Malayalam and Tamil.

COUNCILLOR

It's to celebrate your birthday ma'am. Have to toast you also. 50 is a big year.

WIFE

You told the Councillor that it was my birthday?

COUNCILLOR

Try the drink, ma'am.

WIFE

You weren't at Court when they delivered the verdict.

COUNCILLOR

No point by then, was there?

WIFE

Since you knew that you were going to win?

COUNCILLOR

They called you the 'Tiger' at law school no, Ma'am. Always goes for the throat, no? I had too much work to do for the Chief ma'am. I had left the case in your husband's expert hands. How's the drink?

WIFE

Excellent. The line for the stage looks long, so we should—

COUNCILLOR

As if I would make Sir and you stand in line. Finish your drinks and I'll take you right up.

HUSBAND

Thank you! See?

WIFE

We have another event.

COUNCILLOR

You have to stay for dinner! There's Chapala Vepudu⁸⁶ on the menu. Chief's favourite.
You've tried it, sir?

HUSBAND

Oh yes, one of my favourites— uh but no time today. We'll miss our reservation.

COUNCILLOR

I'll have some brought to you right now.

WIFE

There's no need.

COUNCILLOR

This is the freshest sear fish, ma'am. Caught less than an hour ago and brought straight here
by helicopter. Had to make some use of the hotel's new helipads, no?

WIFE

I thought they were for flood relief measures.

COUNCILLOR

Since it's already there— ah, now, try this. The Chief won't eat anything unless it's been
dead for less than an hour. Just like your crocodiles, ma'am.

HUSBAND

I don't—

COUNCILLOR

Try it while it's hot Sir. Ma'am your argument in court nearly won me over. But it wasn't all
that stuff about flooding and drought—

HUSBAND

It's delicious but we don't want to be late and the line is long.

COUNCILLOR

Sir, I told you. I'll handle it. Enjoy the drink. No, ma'am, that didn't feel urgent. But I was
moved when you let that scientist talk about the crocodiles. And that baby crocodile picture!

⁸⁶ A style of cooking fish popular in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh.

I showed my wife, and she was ready to burn the plans for the elevated expressway right then and there.

WIFE

I didn't use any baby crocodile pictures.

COUNCILLOR

Didn't you? My mistake. That scientist must have mentioned them—

HUSBAND

He did! He talked about how the railway would disrupt the river's fish populations and the uuhh effects on the baby crocodiles. Maybe you looked up the photos later?

COUNCILLOR

That must be it. For such bloodthirsty beasts, the babies are cute, eh? I told the Chief also about that, and he was saying he had no idea there were crocodiles in the middle of the City.

WIFE

That river isn't in the middle of the City.

COUNCILLOR

Soon enough. The City Metropolitan Area Expansion must... expand.

HUSBAND

I've finished my drink. Why don't we—

COUNCILLOR

But ma'am is still drinking.

WIFE

You go without me.

COUNCILLOR

Are you worried because of the case? It's a sign of maturity, being able to meet the opponent after defeat and hold your head up high. No one will hold it against you ma'am.

WIFE

No?

COUNCILLOR

You were doing your job. Though I hope you were paid as well as sir. I heard you were one of the highest paid junior advocates in the country. Before you married sir and gave all that up.

WIFE

You seem to know a lot about me. Research on the enemy?

HUSBAND

The case is over now, so no enemies here!

WIFE

I did it for free.

COUNCILLOR

Oh? Friends of yours then?

WIFE

No. I can't resist a compelling case.

HUSBAND

Chellam—

WIFE

Illegal construction, flouting of environmental policy, and the harassment of ordinary people by elected leaders. Hard to resist. *(To her husband)* We are getting late.

COUNCILLOR

I know that tone. My wife has that same tone when she's irritated with me. We won't delay you anymore. But I have one question. See my wife, she's over there, in the green sari. She's waving. She's very keen on a career in politics. But she says she will have to join the opposition because she doesn't like our colour scheme. At first, I was very against it, but then I saw you in court, not your first time facing each other, and everyone knows you've been happily married for twenty years. So, I thought I would ask, how do you manage it?

Silence

HUSBAND

This is a one-off sir, we don't usually face each other. Not good practice.

COUNCILLOR

Competitors in law school, and for some years afterwards. It's a famous story in legal circles, no? A romance. Though ma'am won more cases, eh?

HUSBAND

We haven't faced each other in years.

COUNCILLOR

Until now. You had some anger you needed to take out ma'am?

WIFE

A court case and an appeal are a lot of work when I could just make him sleep in the guest room.

HUSBAND

Appeal?

WIFE

Maybe the Chief won't want a picture with me hm? Might look bad when you lose the appeal and have to scrap the plan.

COUNCILLOR

Oh, the Chief will have no idea who you are ma'am unless I tell him. He's too busy for lawyers. But you have a point... Now that you're filing an appeal, we're back to being enemies huh? Joking, joking. I wouldn't have thought a kutty⁸⁷ NGO like that would be this much trouble. The Supreme Court? Mcch... Maybe get it arranged for January? Good time of the year to visit, my wife likes the cold.

WIFE

The judges decide that.

COUNCILLOR

I'll talk to the Chief and see if he knows any judges who can do us a favour. Ah, he's calling me. Sir, keep an eye out, I'll wave when I can take you up. Ma'am, maybe next time?

WIFE

⁸⁷ Small or tiny.

I doubt it.

The Councillor smiles thinly and exits.

HUSBAND

Chellam, why didn't you tell me you were appealing?

WIFE

Why didn't you tell me they were looking into me? All those details, that background— did you know?

HUSBAND

Of course not. The case was high profile and—

WIFE

Yes, let's talk about the case. How did he know about that stupid baby crocodile photo?

HUSBAND

I don't know what you're talking about.

WIFE

I did have a photo in my file, but I didn't use it because it seemed silly. Who would care about crocodiles in this City of sharks? How did he see the photo when I didn't use it?

HUSBAND

How would I know?

WIFE

The file was only on my laptop. The same laptop you suddenly decided to get a new battery for.

HUSBAND

Are you saying this? ... You lost the case because it was never going to win. And it won't win in an appeal. The expressway will transform the City's economy, and no judge is going to rule against that.

WIFE

Don't argue the case with me. I know the case. I also know that every expert I wanted mysteriously cancelled right before their court dates. We suspected someone was telling them about our case, and it was even suggested— but I defended you.

HUSBAND

Who do you think I am?

WIFE

I don't know. I don't recognise you anymore. Coming to something like this, shaking hands with that thug...

HUSBAND

It's my job.

WIFE

No. This is not your job. You think I'm angry at you all the time, but if I couldn't call up this anger, I'd be a weeping mess. What's happened to our lives? You promised me the sun and the moon and the stars when I would have been happy with dirt, and now... now it feels like I won't even get dirt. I'll get... nothingness. Empty space where we should be, our family, our life...

There's a big commotion offstage and a loud dance number starts to play. They are both quiet for a beat.

WIFE (Cont.)

Can we please leave?

HUSBAND

I... I should at least leave this with the Councillor. Wait I'll catch his eye—

He tries to and is ignored.

HUSBAND (Cont.)

He's annoyed about the appeal. I have to make sure I meet him and—

WIFE

I'll see you at dinner. Or at home. Sort this out. We'll talk about... this marriage tomorrow.

She exits and leaves the Husband with the present. The music changes again. Even faster, the party lights come on, changing colour rapidly. He waits through all this, present and flowers in hand. The colours eventually merge into blue, the music to an oppressive low thrum that finally, once the watery light has engulfed everything, fades out.

Interlude II

The vallam floats in. The Fisherwoman and Engineer row. A third person, the REPORTER sits shaking.

ENGINEER

Please, can we stop? I can't feel my arms.

FISHERWOMAN

I could try to catch us something.

ENGINEER

I'm starving... *(The Fisherwoman pulls out a small net and casts it)* Should I try again, with him?

FISHERWOMAN

He's in shock.

ENGINEER

Obviously. He was clinging to that rock for who knows how long? *(To the Reporter)* Hi? *(The Reporter flinches)* You're okay now. You're safe.

REPORTER *(Mumbling)*

Is this... hell?

ENGINEER

He spoke! What did you say?

REPORTER

This is hell, isn't it? I'm being punished.

ENGINEER

No! You've had a bad shock—

FISHERWOMAN

What are you being punished for?

ENGINEER

Shh! This isn't hell. You're not dead.

FISHERWOMAN

Yet.

The Reporter lets out a strangled cry and starts praying furiously in a low voice.

ENGINEER

Sir? Sir, you're not dead. You're alive, we saved you.

FISHERWOMAN

Here, let me. *(She gives him a shake)* Ayya, you're not dead. We're lost at sea.

REPORTER

At sea?

ENGINEER

That's right. So, sit calmly and—

REPORTER

But I wasn't anywhere near the sea.

FISHERWOMAN

You were washed out here, like us, by the storm.

REPORTER

The storm... It took down a tree and hit the transistor. The man at the electricity bureau said it would be back in a few hours, so I decided to nap. They couldn't blame me if the video wasn't in time. I hadn't slept all night. I was at my office. On Joseph Street.

FISHERWOMAN

Joseph Street's beside the river. Maybe he—

REPORTER

When I woke up, the current wasn't back, and I went downstairs to see if anyone else had electricity. There was water on the street, knee-high. The street always floods when it rains, so that wasn't odd... but... there were these voices. Calling out from the river. Like children, calling for their parents, but when I went closer, I couldn't see anything and then something pulled me in.

ENGINEER

Something?

REPORTER

Demons. They were demons that tricked me! *(He starts shaking)*

ENGINEER

Okay, it's okay. No demons here now. She's a Fisherwoman, this is her boat. I'm the Head Engineer with the City Works Department. You're safe. She's taking us back to the City. We're safe.

The net gives a pull and this startles the Reporter who screams and starts praying fervently.

FISHERWOMAN

Big catch, I think. *(She pulls it up with effort)*

ENGINEER

It's just a fish. Just fish that we can eat. You must be hungry?

The Reporter won't stop praying. The Fisherwoman pulls a pressure cooker lid out of the water.

ENGINEER

... That's strange.

FISHERWOMAN

If we had the bottom and a fish... and a fire I suppose.

ENGINEER

Are you keeping it?

FISHERWOMAN

(With a look the panicked Reporter) We might need it.

ENGINEER

Give that here! We're not going to hit him.

The Fisherwoman shrugs, picks up the oar and hands the other to the Reporter the other one and they row out. The water drops away once they're no longer in sight.

Promises

Night. The vallam stands empty on the shore, we hear the sea, perhaps even see a bit of it. There is light rain and any thunder we hear is at a great distance. The Fisherwoman enters with a bottle of petrol. She fills the engine of the vallam and then exits. A young girl, early teens, DAUGHTER sneaks in, climbs into the boat and hides under the nets. The Fisherwoman enters with another bottle of petrol and some water. She does not notice her daughter and begins to push the boat out into the sea. But then a little sneeze blows its way out from the boat. The Fisherwoman stops.

FISHERWOMAN

If there's a demon in my nets, get out now. I beat demons up.

DAUGHTER *(Still hiding)*

I'm not a demon. I'm a good spirit, here to bless your journey.

FISHERWOMAN

In that case, I'll put you in a bottle. I have a nice Kissan⁸⁸ jar just big enough for you.

DAUGHTER *(Sitting up indignant)*

You can't put good spirits in bottles Amma! You know they'll curse you then!

FISHERWOMAN

I'll curse you if you don't get out of the boat. *(The Daughter settles in further)* Kanna, I have to leave now—

DAUGHTER

‘Only desperate fools go to the river mouth in a storm like this.’

FISHERWOMAN

Very good. You sound exactly like your Athai⁸⁹.

DAUGHTER

It's not safe.

FISHERWOMAN

If you stand on your toes you can see the river mouth, it's that close. I'll be fine.

⁸⁸ A common brand of Jam in India

⁸⁹ Aunt, usually your father's elder sister.

DAUGHTER

They say it's the storm of the century.

FISHERWOMAN

Every storm seems to be like that these days. But look, it's not so bad now.

DAUGHTER

It's dark.

FISHERWOMAN

Better for catching fish.

DAUGHTER

Periya Allu⁹⁰ won't be happy with you. He said all the boats were to be ready to help rescue people if it flooded.

FISHERWOMAN

Periya Allu is never happy with me. But when I bring back enough to feed us all for a week, and the City gives him bonda⁹¹ for his help, he'll be glad. Kanna, enough is enough, out.

DAUGHTER

Take me with you.

FISHERWOMAN

So your Athai can boil me alive?

DAUGHTER

I'm old enough. All the boys get taken out—

FISHERWOMAN

I promised I would take you, and I will. But not in a storm like this.

DAUGHTER

I thought the storm wasn't so bad.

90 Elder fisherman, usually in charge of teaching youngsters.

91 Zero/Nothing.

FISHERWOMAN

... Too clever someone has become.

DAUGHTER

I can help.

FISHERWOMAN

I won't be gone long.

DAUGHTER

If you die, I'll be an orphan.

FISHERWOMAN

What's your father then? A potato?

DAUGHTER

What if they never let him come home?

FISHERWOMAN

They'll let him come home. They said he could be back as early as this summer. But I'm not going to die. Have I ever been in even *this much* danger before?

DAUGHTER

Athai says you're overconfident.

FISHERWOMAN

Your Athai is supposed to be teaching you maths, not complaining about me.

DAUGHTER

She puts you in our word problems. If one overconfident fisherwoman brings back two bags of fish after two hours of fishing—

FISHERWOMAN

I'll stop bringing back any fish and we'll see what she says. Come on. I can't waste more time.

DAUGHTER

Do you promise you'll come back?

FISHERWOMAN

As if I could stay away.

DAUGHTER

If you come back, I'll make you tea. With as much sugar as you like.

FISHERWOMAN

I don't need bribes- ey, ey what's this? What's this?

DAUGHTER

I'm scared you won't come back.

FISHERWOMAN

Kanna, Chellam, my little light. Don't be scared. I promise I'll come back. The storm is quiet now, see? I'll be there and back before that thunder- (*Distant thunder*) reaches us. Okay?

DAUGHTER

Is this because the landlord was angry?

FISHERWOMAN

Have you heard that? He just talks big. Go, go finish studying and in an hour start making me tea with five teaspoons of sugar!

The Daughter is about to exit, and the Fisherwoman pulls her back in for a last quick hug. The water creeps in over them and when the scene goes dark, the thunder, suddenly, is much closer.

Interlude III

The vallam has two new occupants. The Grandmother and the Boy. The Engineer helps the Grandmother with the Boy who is unconscious. The Reporter is still praying.

ENGINEER

What happened to him?

GRANDMOTHER

A fever. He needs his medicine. *(From the powse⁹² at her waist she pulls out a strip of tablets, and from a plastic packet at her feet she pulls out a small lunch box and then a bottle of water)* Hold his face steady.

REPORTER *(Stops praying)*

Is that food?

GRANDMOTHER

A little. You can have it.

ENGINEER

Aa-a! You can share the food with everyone after you help.

REPORTER

Help with what?

ENGINEER

Take over rowing.

FISHERWOMAN

No, thank you.

ENGINEER

Let him do some work!

FISHERWOMAN

No coordination. I can tell. And I don't mind him having the food. Lime rice is not my favourite.

⁹² A little pouch made by tucking a bit of the sari you are wearing into the underskirt's waistband and then knotted.

The Boy suddenly pushes the Grandmother and Reporter away.

GRANDMOTHER

Kanna! Shhh. I don't know why it's so bad. He's had medicine...

REPORTER

There's a cut on his leg.

GRANDMOTHER

A cut?

REPORTER

It looks bad...

GRANDMOTHER

When did that happen?

REPORTER

It might be infected.

GRANDMOTHER

He needs a doctor. Can you take us to a doctor?

REPORTER

No doctors here. We're lost at sea.

GRANDMOTHER

How can we be lost at sea? You just rescued us from my home.

FISHERWOMAN

Amma, you lived near the coast? The terrace we found you on was near the beach, maybe?

The Boy lets out a whimper.

GRANDMOTHER

Please help him.

ENGINEER

I have a little hand sanitiser in my backpack. We can use it to clean the cut.

REPORTER

That's not going to be enough— ey give that back.

ENGINEER

Get the sanitiser and help!

REPORTER

... Fine. Where is it?

ENGINEER

Front pocket.

FISHERWOMAN

Amma, where did we find you? Where was your house?

GRANDMOTHER

Eravathoor.

ENGINEER

This... this is Eravathoor?

REPORTER

That's only a half hour from the City Centre.

ENGINEER

That can't be right. Eravathoor isn't near the river, it can't be this flooded.

The Reporter roots through the backpack, not the front pocket.

REPORTER

I can't find it.

ENGINEER

Look properly.

REPORTER

I'm not a child. There's a bunch of folders, a textbook and *(pulls out a red envelope)* 'Head Engineer, City Works Department'— a letter for you?

The Engineer barrels into the Reporter and in her rush to get the envelope out of his hands, she fails to secure the oar properly and it drops into the water and floats away.

FISHERWOMAN

Get the oar!

REPORTER

I'm not getting back in there!

GRANDMOTHER

If you go closer, I can reach it.

Before they can manage it, the oar sinks. The Fisherwoman curses and gets ready to dive in after it.

ENGINEER

Don't! If it's flood water, it'll be dirty, maybe dangerous.

FERRYWOMAN

We can't lose that oar.

They get into the water.

REPORTER

What's the big deal? She has an engine and we're near the City Centre so—

ENGINEER

This is your fault.

REPORTER

You dropped the oar. I was looking for sanitiser. What is in the letter anyway? Looks important.

ENGINEER

It's none of your business. And I said front pocket. *(She pulls out the sanitiser and gives it to the Grandmother)*

REPORTER

I don't know why you're making that face. Eravathoor used to be a lake you know? It always floods badly. But the City Centre won't be like this. We just need to go there and get to the flood safety zone, in the new Grand Hotel. There are helipads there.

GRANDMOTHER

There might be a doctor?

REPORTER

For sure. A medical station. Clean clothes, more food... We just need to go to the Centre and everything will be okay. You'll see.

The Engineer says nothing, and they wait for the Fisherwoman. The stage goes dark.

The Interview

A sparse, expensive room with nothing but two chairs and cameras set up so that both chairs are in focus from multiple viewpoints. A large window shows us how high up we are and that it is a rainy night. A woman in a very stylish sari stands to one side on her phone. She's ASSISTANT to the CONCRETE KING who is in one of the chairs, also looking very stylish, but with a hint of ruggedness that is carefully cultivated. The REPORTER sits in the other chair. He is not as well dressed, but his youth and charm make up for this. He has a small tablet he uses for notes and to control the cameras. The audience knows the camera is rolling when their lights are on. Alternatively, there's no need for cameras, and certain stage lights coming on can indicate that the camera is rolling.

During certain points of the interview the Assistant mouths along the King's answers. The audience shouldn't notice this early on.

Cameras on.

REPORTER

If you're a regular viewer of Channel Nous, you know that this channel is dedicated to serving up unfiltered, unbiased news that takes you to the heart of any story. Some of you might know that this is my 100th video, and I just wanted to take a moment to be grateful to everyone who has supported this incredible journey – a journey I never dreamt possible when I left journalism school! 1.2 million subscribers, a hundred videos and today... today I have the– THE– man everyone is talking about. I don't even know where to begin, so let's just go to the hot seat: please sir, say hello to my Nous Community.

CONCRETE KING

Hello Nous. Happy to be here.

REPORTER

The Concrete King is sitting across from me. Philanthropist, empire builder, someone the Maharishi of Saranath⁹³ called the humblest man *he* has met, AND as of four days ago THE richest man in the country. Sir... what a journey you've been on. How are you feeling?

CONCRETE KING

Grateful. But also bewildered.

REPORTER

You're being humble Sir.

93 Maharishi or 'Great Sage'. Sarnath is a town said to have connections to the Buddha. Today it is in the Indian state Uttar Pradesh which is a significant centre for right-wing Hindutva politics.

CONCRETE KING

You don't set off on a path thinking things like 'One day I'll be the richest man in the country'. I've always said the money is a by-product of the work. The work is what's important.

REPORTER

And what work! But I don't want to get ahead of the story. I like a good linear structure. You probably haven't seen my videos Sir, but –

CONCRETE KING

Now who is being humble? You might be news for the younger generation, but I'm young at heart. I'm one of your 1.2 million subscribers.

REPORTER

Sir! I'm honoured, Sir.

CONCRETE KING

Everyone should want unbiased, unfiltered news. (*Right to the camera*) There's my personal endorsement.

REPORTER

Thank you, Sir! It means so much. (*Pause*) I want to talk about the tremendous success of your business and how it has been a key player in every major infrastructure and housing project in the country in the last decade. But as a fan you know I always begin my interviews with the foundation of society: family. And there isn't a lot out there about your family Sir. I've seen all kinds of speculations. Ready to clear that up?

CONCRETE KING

People love scandal, but it's no big secret. My father was a small business owner, and my mother was a housewife. I'm just a simple boy from The City. Same as you, I hear.

REPORTER

City, born and bred. And your father ran a recycling centre? Was he a big influence Sir?

CONCRETE KING

I learned a lot watching him. But it was my mother who taught me how to make something out of nothing. Whatever the state of my father's business, and there were some lean times, she managed to put a decent meal on the table. We don't give enough credit to how managing a house is just like running a business. I learned so much from her. They both passed a few years ago.

REPORTER

I'm sorry Sir, but they would have been so proud of you. Just as proud as your uncle is.

CONCRETE KING

My uncle?

REPORTER

Your father's brother? He was a very successful builder himself, though he retired some years ago. I interviewed him and he's sent a special video congratulations—

The King doesn't raise a hand or look at her, but the Assistant knows she is wanted and steps in.

ASSISTANT

Can you pause the recording, please?

REPORTER

What? Oh of course. *(Camera off)* Sorry Sir, is there a problem?

The King ignores him to have a low, furious conversation with the Assistant. Then he walks off stage.

REPORTER (Cont.)

What's happened? Is something wrong?

ASSISTANT

No, nothing to worry about. He just needs to use the restroom. Can we just have a check-in?

REPORTER

Yes, of course.

ASSISTANT

This isn't a problem at all, and there's, like, no need to change anything, but that question about his uncle wasn't there in the pre-interview sheet you sent.

REPORTER

No, that lead came up yesterday, and I managed to track him down despite the rain, which was no easy feat let me—

ASSISTANT

Uh-huh, uh-huh... well done. And what did he say?

REPORTER

It wasn't anything negative! He said good things. I was planning on using a small clip to show how Sir was family-oriented and—

ASSISTANT

No, I know. I completely understand. It's so... holistic, which is what we love about your interview style. But you should know that... Ja—sir and his uncle don't get along.

REPORTER

But he said such lovely things. (*Checking his notes*) About Sir being hardworking from a young age, how Sir worked for him right after college, and how he financed Sir's business—

ASSISTANT

Yeah. See, sir's uncle is very old. And a bit sick. None of that last part is true.

REPORTER

Really?

ASSISTANT

Uh-huh. It's Alzheimer's. Or dementia. I can't remember which. Sir wanted to get him admitted, but they fought and now don't talk to each other. It's very emotionally painful for sir, which is why – while I don't want to tell you how to run your interview like there are no editorial notes from us really... It would be good if we skipped his uncle and concentrated on sir and his parents, for the family background and then just get into how the business is doing well now, and the richest man stuff. Okay?

REPORTER

Of course. I hope sir isn't—

ASSISTANT

Don't even worry about it. It's not a thing. He went to the restroom, that's all. Don't even mention it when he comes back. Just keep going. He likes that kind of focused professionalism. Just move on.

The King comes back in, takes his seat and waits. The Reporter rushes back to his seat.

REPORTER

Sir uh—

ASSISTANT

Just start the cameras.

Cameras on.

REPORTER

...Now Sir, we come to the business itself. You've had quite the journey. From a small builder to the preferred company for government and international contracts. And in just ten years. How have you managed it?

CONCRETE KING

With a lot of hard work. And of course, I only work with the best. Our enterprises have the best and brightest from our country's top universities and colleges. None of this foreign university hiring for me. I always say there's perfectly good talent right here. It's why we opened the university three years ago. Many of our engineers, architects, and even our accountants are graduates, and they are topline.

REPORTER

Amazing. Now let's talk about a few projects that have changed The City's landscape. First, the Symiot Building in the City Centre— a state-of-the-art public-private hospital facility that is also doing cutting-edge medical research. The Chairman of the hospital said that without your vision the hospital would not have existed.

CONCRETE KING

The Chairman is very kind. But it was his vision that drove it. I merely helped him achieve that by designing and building the best hospital money could buy.

REPORTER

But when the project started it was just meant to be a small private clinic in the City Centre. How did you make it this state-of-the-art hospital sir?

CONCRETE KING

I, saw, the moment the project came to me, that the government should be more involved. And I knew that with the right pitch, we could convince the government to partner with us.

REPORTER

And what was the pitch, Sir?

CONCRETE KING

A good pitch is a marriage of the dream and the practical reality. In this case, the practical reality was that the government hadn't opened a new hospital for the public in fifteen years. The dream was to see if a government hospital could attract topline doctors and researchers. I pitched that along with designs for a building anyone would want in their City.

REPORTER

The Concrete King strikes again. Sir, a small aside— how did you get this nickname? ‘Concrete King’? You don’t make concrete?

CONCRETE KING

It was a name from the cement companies I do business with because I’m their best customer. *(Deprecating laugh)* But maybe I should go into concrete manufacturing?

REPORTER

You would thrive Sir. You said in another interview, Sir, that concrete is a miracle substance.

CONCRETE KING

It offers protection against anything. And it makes the impermanent permanent. A plan for a building is a dream until you pour that concrete in.

REPORTER

Speaking of dreams, your latest project is very ambitious. I’m referring of course to the expressway connecting The City to our neighbour, The Other City. This is going to cut commute by two hours—

Again, the King and the Assistant have their almost invisible interaction.

ASSISTANT

(To the Reporter) Please stop recording.

REPORTER

What—

ASSISTANT

Please stop.

Cameras off.

CONCRETE KING

What is he playing at?

REPORTER

Excuse me?

CONCRETE KING

First my uncle and now—

REPORTER

Sir, I didn't know about your uncle—

ASSISTANT

Please, sit. He isn't talking to you.

REPORTER

But—

CONCRETE KING

'He's got the largest youth following in the state' so he thinks he can do whatever he wants?!

REPORTER

Second largest.

ASSISTANT

Please, stop talking. These were honest mistakes Ja-sir. I vetted him myself. He is not interested in journalism like that. Right?

REPORTER

I am a journalist—

CONCRETE KING

See!

ASSISTANT

Sir, everyone has their little vanities, but he's not a 'catch you' journalist. You're not trying to cause scandal for views?

REPORTER

No, of course not!

ASSISTANT

Honest mistakes. Sit, be calm. I'll handle everything. *(Taking the Reporter aside)* You'll refrain from asking about the City-Other City Expressway. There have been all kinds of... rumblings about it and sir is tired of talking about it.

REPORTER

I wasn't going to talk about the protests. I thought this could be a chance for Sir to clear the air.

ASSISTANT

Sir doesn't need to clear the air. It's the people making the accusations that should explain themselves. Now maybe we skip to discussing the richest man thing?

REPORTER

He seems angry.

ASSISTANT

He's a consummate professional, the moment the camera turns on. But he also doesn't like too many mistakes. So watch yourself. Ready? Fabulous. Here we go.

The Reporter is nervous as he takes his seat, fumbling through his tablet. He swipes across questions, uncertain.

CONCRETE KING

Why isn't the camera rolling?

ASSISTANT

Please, start.

The Reporter fumbles with the tablet. Camera on. But as they speak it is apparent there is something wrong with the mics. They sound as if they are underwater. There are at least two exchanges like this in which the Concrete King seems like his charming, personable self, and the Reporter is trying to mask how unnerved he is. Suddenly, glancing at his tablet, he realises something is off. The cameras go off and—

REPORTER

Sorry, sorry, there's something wrong with the mic setup. I must have put in the wrong— uh the program is... Just give me a minute... see the camera is working fine, but... what's happened?

ASSISTANT

Is it recording?

REPORTER

Fuck, sorry, uh it's off. The light's just blinking because... I don't know, but I'll fix it!

He talks as he tries to fix this but when the lights come on, the audio is garbled. The cameras turn on and off with no success.

CONCRETE KING

Tell him to stop that. It's giving me a headache.

The Reporter apologises and the camera stays as he keeps trying. The sound of the King and the Assistant comes and goes even as the lights do not.

CONCRETE KING *(Slightly garbled)*

This is why I wanted an actual journalist.

ASSISTANT *(Garbled)*

You know how you get with real journalists. It's better with someone like him. He's personable across demographics and known for wanting to be liked. He's nervous around you. Try to smile at him. *(Her phone gives off a series of beeps)*

CONCRETE KING *(Crystal clear)*

If that's the wife asking why we're late, you take the blame.

ASSISTANT *(Crystal clear)*

No... It's the lawyers. They couldn't quash the concerns about the expressway's environmental impact. They're going with an independent government agency before approval.

There is a pause. And then the Concrete King loses it. He swears, yells, calls someone, threatens to have someone else killed, and throws things. But everything he says, everything he does is heard by the audience and the cowering Reporter. And right as the King ends his call, the lights come on indicating the camera is working. There's a deadly silence.

CONCRETE KING

You bastard!

REPORTER

Shit, Sir I didn't mean to— I *(trying to switch it off)* It just came—

CONCRETE KING

SWITCH IT OFF!

ASSISTANT

Let me help. *(She grabs the tablet and messes about even as the King glares, unable to speak now he knows he's being recorded. The lights go out finally)* There. It's handled. I'm deleting it—

CONCRETE KING

This interview is done you little worm. And if you think you can be a hero, some big whistle-blower –

REPORTER

No Sir! I don't–

CONCRETE KING

That's right. You should be scared. You're a rat. Worse, a parasite using the successful to puff yourself up. Some journalist! (*His phone rings, he answers*) Hi, my chellam, I saw, but don't worry. I'm not missing your party for those backward-thinking paithyakaris⁹⁴. I'm on my way. (*To the Assistant*) Take care of this. I want that interview out first thing tomorrow.

The Concrete King exits, reassuring his wife lovingly.

ASSISTANT

Unfortunate. But you lasted longer than a journalist would have. You should be proud of yourself. Come on, get up. Powerful people live with their stress up here you know. It was nothing personal. Now I've deleted that last video on this, but I see you've got a Camera to Cloud software set up. I need you to log in to your cloud account and delete it from there as well. And I need to see you do it.

REPORTER

... He threatened to have those protestors killed.

ASSISTANT

Stress up to here, remember? He wouldn't hurt a fly. Delete it. Then you must stitch the interview together. I know it wasn't everything you wanted but I can send you a B-roll from the Richest Man award ceremony and some other stuff, and you can make it ten minutes. I'll send over a longer written interview you can post on your blog. Say he was too busy to sit down for more than a few minutes. We'll corroborate that, say Sir wanted to talk to you for hours and hours but work is work. Okay... Chop chop. I don't have forever.

REPORTER

I– I don't–

ASSISTANT

I thought you were too earnest to resort to blackmail.

REPORTER

94 Loons, but very definitely in the feminine.

I'm not blackmailing you!

ASSISTANT

Then delete the video. *(He stays still)* Look it's simple. Delete the video and prove you're on our side.

REPORTER

Those things he threatened? Were they true? He said he'd made other people pay and... there was that woman who went missing—

ASSISTANT

Look... I like you. I am a fan of your work. I'm a little sad about how all this went. But as much as I like you, I feel it's important for you to remember what you are, what sir is, and what you can hope for out of this.

REPORTER

What?

ASSISTANT

I have to go. *(A series of buzzes on her phone)* He's texting me like mad. His wife is very upset if I miss their parties. Thinks of me as their daughter, which is sweet no? I mean she has nothing to be worried about, he's such a devoted husband, but still some wives... Now I'll send you a list of... presents we're happy to give you in exchange for deleting the file. You have about an hour to let me know which you want. You won't be allowed to leave before you do. I could say bad things will happen to you if you try, but I wasn't dead wrong about you. You won't try. You're just a bit surprised. Don't like loud sounds maybe? *(The Reporter does nod)* That's it. You're not the type.

REPORTER

I'm not what type?

ASSISTANT

The type to play hero you know? Now, you calm down. Order some juice if you want. Maybe dinner? I'll take this tablet. You can text me your login details when you're ready. I promise I won't peek at anything else you have on your cloud. Byee.

She bows out her namaste and exits tablet in hand. The Reporter is left in the mess of the room.

Interlude III

The lights, which give us a sense of the quickly descending night, reveal the vallam still surrounded only by water. The Grandmother naps. The Boy is now awake, but still feverish. The Engineer and Reporter row, as the Fisherwoman keeps an eye on where they're going. There is a faint rustling all around them and the Fisherwoman calls for them to stop. As they do, the Reporter panics.

REPORTER

We should be able to see something by now. We've been rowing for hours.

ENGINEER

You kept stopping every two minutes.

REPORTER

My shoulder is hurt. She should row.

ENGINEER

She's navigating.

REPORTER

She's navigating wrong. We should have seen something by now. The Celebration Arch alone is ten stories high. The hotels are taller.

FISHERWOMAN

Unless everything is under us.

ENGINEER

That would mean the City has drowned.

REPORTER

The storm couldn't have done that.

FISHERWOMAN

Maybe it wasn't just the storm.

REPORTER

What do you mean?

FISHERWOMAN

Head Engineer, any ideas?

ENGINEER

Why would I know?

REPORTER

You do work for the government. Was the storm bad enough to sink the City?

BOY

Ey⁹⁵, talk quietly, you'll wake her up.

REPORTER

Don't talk to me like that.

FISHERWOMAN

Let him be.

BOY

As if he could do anything to me.

FISHERWOMAN

Do you need medicine?

BOY

Don't wake her up! She needs her rest... She's very sick herself. Give me the water.

REPORTER

Speak politely to your elders.

BOY

Alright thatha⁹⁶.

REPORTER

Thatha?!

BOY

Give me the water please, thatha.

REPORTER

Amma, your grandson—

BOY

95 Disrespectful interjection commonly used when annoyed.

96 Grandfather

Leave her alone!

REPORTER

Huh, scared of her, huh? Maybe she'll teach you some manners. *(He gives the Grandmother a gentle shake, but she sleeps on)*

BOY

Leave her alone. *(Throws whatever is at hand at the Reporter)*

REPORTER

I'm trying to get medicine for you, you rascal. We should have left him in Eravathoor.

BOY

Eravathoor? You found us in Kattancheri.

ENGINEER

But that's north of the City Centre.

REPORTER

He's just saying things now— she told us Eravathoor—
There is a faint rustling all around them.

BOY

Did you hear that?

HYACINTHS *(Disembodied)*

Poor, dear parents. Tricked by the waters, lost with nowhere to go.

REPORTER

It's the voices— the demons are here!

HYACINTHS *(Disembodied)*

Bubbling, babbling, quarrelsome water,

Gurgling, gobbling, crook-some water.

ENGINEER

Who are you? Who said that?

HYACINTHS *(Disembodied)*

Rotter of crops. Spreader of disease. Sinker of cities.

ENGINEER

Look!

The lights come on to reveal a short pillar, uneven, but atop it stands a figure, half in shadow. The pillar is surrounded by floating plants, and hyacinth florets in light pink, delicate and unassuming. A tendril of the plant has wound itself up the pillar.

REPORTER

What is it? A statue?

FISHERWOMAN

No— it's a man.

As they get closer, the figure on the pillar speaks.

HUSBAND

Stop! Don't come any closer.

FISHERWOMAN

Are you hurt?

REPORTER

Those voices— I heard those voices before I drowned—

HUSBAND

It's not safe.

REPORTER

Is it the demons?

FISHERWOMAN

Will you keep quiet? Ayya, the storm is over now. Come down to our boat.

ENGINEER

We're trying to go to the City Centre. We can take you—

HUSBAND

No use! No use. It's gone. All gone.

REPORTER

What are you saying?

HUSBAND

The water flooded everything, and we nearly didn't escape—

BOY

Who is we?

HUSBAND

We were on top of the hotels, the flood safety zone, but the water just kept rising and rising and there were boats— fishing boats taking people to safety. But it's no use now. We crashed; the others had to keep going. To escape them.

BOY

What are you talking about?

FISHERWOMAN

Ayya, can you tell me where we are? And where were the boats going?

HUSBAND

Stay back—

ENGINEER

We'll come carefully.

HUSBAND

Don't—

By this point, they're in amongst the florets, and slowly, we see the plant creep up and hold onto the boat, so it stops swaying.

ENGINEER

Do you feel that?

HUSBAND

They have you now.

REPORTER

Who has us?!

GRANDMOTHER

What's going on?

BOY

Patti, stay there—

REPORTER

Who has us?!

HYACINTHS

We do. Surprise!

The heaving mass of florets slithers up the side of the vallam and somehow, despite having no eyes, peer at the occupants. One string of florets wraps itself around the Grandmother and tries to pull her into the water. The Boy grabs hold of her and the Engineer swings wildly with the oar. They just about manage to keep the Grandmother on the boat.

ENGINEER

Get off our boat!

HYACINTHS

But we're family... *(Grabbing the oar and snapping it in two)* What's yours in ours.

REPORTER

Demons! I told you! It's the demons who pulled me into the water.

HYACINTHS

We've never seen you before. But we do have cousins spreading across the City. Might have been one of them. Just family saying hello.

ENGINEER

What is it?

HYACINTHS

You don't recognise us? We're your children. Adopted of course. We're not crazy.

HUSBAND

I told you to stay back.

HYACINTHS

Father Lawyer, we thought we had an agreement. If any more parents pass, you were to help them join the family party. Bad Father Lawyer. We nearly lost them.

FISHERWOMAN

Can you jump into the boat? We can get away—

HYACINTHS

Oh, do that Father Lawyer. We're growing tired of waiting for you to come play with us. To teach us.

HUSBAND

I can't. You can't get away. And they can't reach me here. Not yet. I'm sorry—

HYACINTHS

We just want family time. Family time with the people who let us spread into puddles and pools and still rivers of toxic filth, that fed us like nothing else could... helped us grow big and strong and gave us an appetite for more... We just want to know you better. Estranged family, reuniting...

FISHERWOMAN

We can help you— just come down and—

HYACINTHS

No one can help him. Not even you Mother... Fisherwoman. He's lost his real family under the sea, like most of you. He'd be much better off accepting our love but... oh well. We can wait now that we have all this new family to learn from. A feast of a family... Who shall we start with— grandmothers are founts of wisdom, aren't they?

BOY

Stop that!

HYACINTHS

This one... little father... no Brother thief. Sister Liar. Brother Fool... a big family to learn from.

ENGINEER

(Quietly to the Fisherwoman) What are you thinking?

FISHERWOMAN

That I wish you'd fixed the engine.

ENGINEER

I don't know anything about engines! I'm a civil engineer.

FISHERWOMAN

You didn't learn anything useful, with your fancy degree?

ENGINEER

I can try but we don't exactly have time, do we? And we don't know where we're going.

HYACINTHS

No. You don't. No whispering. This is a family conversation Sister Liar.

ENGINEER

I'm not—

FISHERWOMAN

Do you know where we could go? Where the other boats were going?

HYACINTHS

We do. But why would we tell you?

FISHERWOMAN

Family helps one another, don't they?

HYACINTHS

So how will you help us?

GRANDMOTHER

We will teach you.

HYACINTHS

What?

GRANDMOTHER

Whatever you want to know about. You said you wanted to learn from us. What do you want to learn?

HYACINTHS

You will just tell us?

GRANDMOTHER

Yes, happily. We could... we could tell you stories.

HYACINTHS

Oh, we like the sound of that. What is that?

GRANDMOTHER

Wonderful, exciting things. I could tell you the story of a thief.

BOY

And a mad woman?

FISHERWOMAN (*To the Engineer*)

The engine could be strong enough to pull us out of these vines. We'll distract it—

HYACINTHS

I said no whispering! Are you plotting escape?

FISHERWOMAN

Of course not.

GRANDMOTHER

Let me start a story—

HYACINTHS

Hmmmm... We want Sister Liar to tell us a story.

GRANDMOTHER

After my stories maybe—

HYACINTHS

No, Sister Liar has a lot she can teach us... We sense it.

ENGINEER

I'm a boring office worker—

HYACINTHS

We want a story from each of you, and in exchange, we'll even tell you where all those parents, in those boats we couldn't catch went. Or we could eat you now—

REPORTER

Just say you'll tell them a story!

HUSBAND

I'll tell you a story!

HYACINTHS

Father Lawyer! Will you play after all?

HUSBAND

I've been here the longest, I'll start. They've been rowing for so long... let them... rest a little.

HYACINTHS

So exciting. We're agog Father Lawyer. Go on.

As the Husband speaks, the Engineer, quietly, and carefully, starts looking into fixing the engine.

HUSBAND

It was my wife's birthday. We were at a party, but not hers and...

As the Engineer begins to tell her story, the water drowns her voice and then the stage, transitioning into the next scene.

The Job

An office in the City Works Department. Late afternoon. The Engineer sits at one desk working quickly, answering emails, sorting files etc. On the desk, near her, prominent, is a letter in a red envelope. We hear the rain outside. Enter the DEPUTY SECRETARY, fuming.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

The building is like a haunted house. Where is everyone else? It's not yet closing time.

ENGINEER

A lot of people didn't come in today sir, because of the storm— some trains and buses aren't working.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

Ridiculous, such panic. If I can come in, and the Secretary can come in—

ENGINEER

The Secretary hasn't come in sir. He's stuck in his house. His road is full of water and the car can't go out.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

I see. And where's the Head Engineer?

ENGINEER

He just left sir, half an hour ago—

DEPUTY SECRETARY

Disgraceful. When he knew I was still in the building.

ENGINEER

He said it was urgent—

DEPUTY SECRETARY

It's always urgent to him... I suppose, since the Secretary isn't here, I should be in his office, taking the important calls.

ENGINEER

Yes sir. But—

DEPUTY SECRETARY

That fancy coffee you make for the Secretary? Make me a cup and see if you can find a shop open and buy some biscuits. I was waiting to see the Chief all day, and they didn't even offer a cup of tea. What was this emergency the Head Engineer ran off for?

ENGINEER

He's on his way to C1 Reservoir sir. Then to V26, and—

DEPUTY SECRETARY

Those aren't our area, why is he being pulled in?

ENGINEER

With the whole day of rain yesterday and then the cyclone the week before last, they're worried about the sluice gates holding.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

He's always running off for things he should delegate. Delegation is very important, you know? Now get that coffee.

ENGINEER (*Holding out the red envelope*)

Before you go, this came for you. And a note from—

DEPUTY SECRETARY (*Visibly shrinks from it*)

What is *that* doing here?

ENGINEER

The Department of Water sent it.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

Why did you accept it? I told the entire office, that letter must not be allowed to enter this office.

ENGINEER

It wasn't me! The Head Engineer took it.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

And conveniently left.

ENGINEER

No sir, he left a request that it be stamped and signed by the Chief or you and then immediately sent to C1 reservoir.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

Don't touch that stamp! Put it back. And send the letter back to the Department of Water.

ENGINEER

... Sir told me that I wasn't to do that... Sir.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

Who is the senior bureaucrat, the Head Engineer or me?

ENGINEER

You sir, but the Department of Water won't take it back. They... uh sent a note.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

Read it.

ENGINEER

"We're not idiots. Authorize it yourself. Yours sincerely, the Department of Water".

DEPUTY SECRETARY

And the Head Engineer just swallowed that! Spineless! I'll show you what we do with such rascals. Get me the Department of Water. Someone important there. Hurry up! We'll see about this.

The Engineer makes the call, and the Deputy Secretary grabs the phone.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

Hello! Who is this?... Yes, this is the Deputy Secretary from City Works—... yes, it's about the—...What do you think— ...This is ridiculous!... I was told your department... no I didn't— ... Who said that? ... *(To the Engineer)* The Department of Irrigation, Head Secretary. *(As the Engineer makes the call)* Don't think this is over. I'll talk to them and— They cut the call. Some nerve. Be thankful you're only an intern. The nonsense those of us in power have to put up with... Is it ringing? Give it here. Get our Secretary. *(Into the phone)* Ah, hello Irrigation? Put me through to your Secretary, please?... Yes, City Works Department... Tell her this is about the letter she refused to authorize and sent to the Department of Water. Ask her if she thinks she's playing passing the parcel... I don't care who sent it to you, I'm not calling up Dams and Reservoirs, just— our Secretary never agreed to that! *(To the Engineer)* You got him?—

ENGINEER

One minute sir– I’m trying– ... Hello? Sir? I have sir, here. No sir, Deputy Sir–

DEPUTY SECRETARY

One minute – don’t let them call off. And get me their Secretary... Sir? Sorry to bother you but the letter has come here, and that fool the Head Engineer accepted it. I will send it ba– ...yes sir... yes sir... yes, I see... so you did agree to– I see... He’s tied your hands by going there.... me sir?... But you’re the Secretary, surely your authorization is needed for such an important task, I couldn’t possibly stamp– no sir... yes sir... *(He wanders offstage looking distraught and still ‘yes sir-ring’)*

ENGINEER

Ma’am? Sir is talking to Sir and – To the Secretary – no ma’am to our department’s Secretary – Yes, but I think he wants you to wait– no, of course not ma’am. You’re very busy – ...How are your daughters, ma’am?... I ... no I didn’t – ... I just asked – no one is gossiping about your daughter’s failed engagement ma’am – I didn’t even know – hello? Hello?

As she tries to call back, the JUNIOR OFFICIAL enters.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

Good morning.

ENGINEER

Sir is on a call. *(Into the phone)* Hello can I ple– They cut. Oh – *(Calls again)* You’re dripping all over the table... Hello, I’m calling for the Secretary... no not from the City Works Department... I can’t help who I sound like, can I?... Hello? They cut again!

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

Department of Water?

ENGINEER

Irrigation. Can you please not get water all over the desk?

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

This from the woman who took my umbrella.

ENGINEER

Your umbrella! I’m sorry, I left it at home–

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

Never mind. You can buy me a coffee as an apology.

ENGINEER

What are you doing?

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

Shh, it's ringing. (*Into the phone*) Yes, tell the Secretary to call the City Works Department immediately. That's an order from the Chief directly— yes the Chief of the City. (*He hangs up*) Where shall we go for coffee?

ENGINEER

What did you do?!

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

Mchhh four months you've had to learn from me and still you can't handle a call. (*The office phone rings*) Don't answer that yet. It'll be her secretary trying to see if it's a trick. But if you let her call... three or four times before you pick up, the fifth call will be their Secretary, begging to speak to us.

ENGINEER

And when she asks about the Chief?

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

Your internship ends today, no? So, what do you care? The Head Engineer will give you a glowing report for your university—

ENGINEER

Really?

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

You're his star intern. Everyone knows it.

ENGINEER

His only intern... How much you all gossip.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

It's not gossip. I was taking a personal interest.

ENGINEER

Why are you here?

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

Want to leave early and buy me that coffee?

ENGINEER

The Deputy Chief is here! And I never said I'd buy you a coffee.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

We'll tell him all buses are cancelled after 4 pm. You had fun on our coffee date yesterday?

ENGINEER

Date? That was just as colleagues. *(The office phone rings and the Junior Official stops her from answering.)* I know I'm the only girl who's worked here in years, and so the only girl you've seen in years, but don't get so excited.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

Okay, I'll treat you: for being the best, and only intern, in government.

ENGINEER

No coffee shops will be open—

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

If I find one?

ENGINEER

I won't say no to a treat, but it can't be a date. No office romances remember?

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

You're finishing today. Then it won't be an office romance... What is it?

ENGINEER

The Head Engineer told me to apply for the opening in our department.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

A job here?

ENGINEER

The vacancy for a junior engineer.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

That's an internal promotion.

ENGINEER

I would be an internal promotion... sort of (*The office phone rings and the Engineer lets it.*)

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

You don't have any experience.

ENGINEER

I have to get experience somewhere.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

You won't get the job.

ENGINEER

Why not?

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

He shouldn't be raising your hopes like this.

ENGINEER

He's not—

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

If he hires you... there's already talk.

ENGINEER

What talk?

Deputy Secretary enters, off the phone.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

Happy chit-chatting?

ENGINEER

Sorry sir! (*The phone rings, she answers*) Hello, yes ma'am, Sir is right— the Secretary of the Department of Irrigation sir.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

I don't want to talk to her.

ENGINEER

...Sir is right now a little busy. I'll ask him to call you back.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

Why did you say that? I don't want to call her back either! *(To the Junior Official)* You. Why are you trying to flood the office?

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

Lost my umbrella. *(Spotting the letter)* Is that back?

DEPUTY SECRETARY

Like a curse.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

Who accepted it?

DEPUTY SECRETARY *(To the Engineer)*

Go get us coffee. You know which kind.

ENGINEER

Yes sir.

She rushes out.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

The Head Engineer. The people at the reservoirs called in a panic so he's run off after leaving me this mess.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

Will you authorize it?

DEPUTY SECRETARY

... I have no choice. I'll sign it and hang myself.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

It won't be that bad.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

This letter is a career death sentence. It's been going around from one department to the next for the last week because no one is stupid enough to have their names or their departments associated with it.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

If the dam is too full—

DEPUTY SECRETARY

In the summer when the taps go dry, no one will remember that. The headlines will read 'Inept handling of water during monsoons causes drought'. And who will be blamed? The Chief who insisted we write it? The departments that played passing the parcel with it? Or me? The idiot who authorized it? The only idiot with his name on it.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

... Has the Head Engineer said anything about the junior engineer vacancy?

DEPUTY SECRETARY

What should he say? Interviews are before Pongal. I'll keep an eye out for your friend's son. Did he sort those arrears?

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

Yes sir, but I hear the Head Engineer promised the job to the intern.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

He can't promise anything to anyone. I'm in charge.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

Maybe he thinks you won't be in a few weeks.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

What are you saying?

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

Think about it, sir... Everyone knew to avoid that letter. But he accepts it, knowing he can't authorize it, and probably knowing that the Secretary won't come in today. He runs off and leaves you to do the dirty work... He has been undermining you for months.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

He is very ambitious.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

I think it's important you take a stand and make sure the intern has no chance at the job. That'll send him a message.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

She doesn't have a chance. But you're not wrong. *(He goes to the Engineer's desk and rumbles around in it for a minute before pulling out a stamp and stamp pad. He stamps the letter and then glues the envelope shut.)* He was the one who took the letter and caused all kinds of panic among the others. He wants to be a hero? Let him take full responsibility when it all goes sideways.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

But the stamp—

The Engineer enters with coffee.

ENGINEER

Sir? You wanted something?

DEPUTY SECRETARY

Who keeps their desks in such a state? Have you ever seen anything like it? You're lucky, the Head Engineer is writing you that recommendation. You wouldn't have passed if I had been your supervisor. Give the coffee here. And that sugar. *(As she does)* I hear you might be up for a job in the department.

ENGINEER

The Head Engineer told me to apply.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

If you're going to work here full-time you must work harder.

ENGINEER

I will sir.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

You can start by taking this letter to the C1 reservoir.

ENGINEER

Yes sir. Shall I stam—

DEPUTY SECRETARY

It's already stamped.

ENGINEER

But sir, this is the Head Engineer's stamp.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

Whose fault is it that it was so disorganized that I took the wrong one? It doesn't matter. I've signed it. Put it in some plastic and hurry over there. This is a big responsibility— are you sure you're up for it?

ENGINEER

Sir, yes sir.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

Sir, I don't think you can trust her with tha—

ENGINEER

I'm very trustworthy!

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

And how will she get there? She doesn't have a car or a motorbike—

DEPUTY SECRETARY

Take an auto. Take... 500, no, 1,000 rupees from the petty cash box. You'll need to get home after, no?

ENGINEER

Thank you, sir!

She exits, making a face at the Junior Official.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

Sir, she's not qualified—

DEPUTY SECRETARY

To deliver a letter?

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

For the job. Sir.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

She's not going to get the job. Five years working in government and still naïve?

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

I don't understand sir.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

She will take that letter right to her mentor, who will throw a fit and call me. And I will say I told her which stamp to use, and it isn't my fault she's so incompetent. After that, can he tell me to hire her? Why are you making that face? It solves all our problems.

JUNIOR OFFICIAL

... She needs a good report. To get her university degree.

DEPUTY SECRETARY

You know what they say about her and the Head Engineer. Let her make it up to him however she wants. Did you bring your car? Mine is in the shop. Give me a lift. I'll get my things.

He leaves the Junior Official there and the water pours over him and takes us to black.

Interlude V

The vallam, the pillar, the florets, they're all still there. The boat is still held by the florets and the Fisherwoman tinkers with the engine as the Engineer finishes her story. It is still dark.

ENGINEER

I... couldn't get to the reservoir in time. Flooded roads, underpasses, no autos... By the time I was anywhere close to C1 it was night, and then... then the water from the first reservoirs hit the City.

REPORTER

That's what the letter was?

BOY

Have you heard of WhatsApp? Email? Phone calls? You couldn't have just called and told him it was stamped?

ENGINEER

I didn't think—

BOY

Of course not. Why would a fool in government need to think?

HYACINTHS

Oh! We're so glad we let you tell us stories. And Sister Liar, thank you. We have you to thank for this new world. We can grow in these still, quiet flood waters that don't push and pull like the river, and don't suddenly disappear like the pond in summer. We'll learn to hunt like you do, seek out vulnerable prey and pounce. We'll grow and grow and when you are gone, we shall inherit the earth. We'll spread till we're everywhere, just like you.

REPORTER

...Megalomaniacal water flower.

HYACINTHS

We take after our parents.

HUSBAND

It's not your fault. Don't—

HYACINTHS

You're right. We should thank all of you. And all the parents out there we haven't met.

GRANDMOTHER

You have something to tell us now.

HYACINTHS

But we haven't heard from you or Brother Thief. You've been very quiet over there.

FISHERWOMAN

Ah. Let's say you are owed one more story. But you can tell us something... for example, which way were the boats going?

HYACINTHS

We can't deny our Grandmother. That way.

BOY

That's even further north? What's there?

HUSBAND

The Mount. The church there is high up! Maybe they've escaped the flooding?

HYACINTHS

And if it did? Would you abandon us?

As the others rush to reassure the florets.

ENGINEER (*Quietly*)

Is it done?

FISHERWOMAN

I can't reach the wire either. The boy has to do it. (*Addressing the florets*) Amma, why don't you tell them a story?

HYACINTHS

Yes... though we are a little tired. And hungry. Perhaps we'll do your story the old-fashioned way. (*They wrap around the Grandmother*)

ENGINEER

Children don't eat their parents!

HYACINTHS

Parents must feed their children. That was our first lesson Sister Liar.

HUSBAND

Let her go!

HYACINTHS

Would you like to feed us instead Father?

With a roar, the engine jumps to life.

FISHERWOMAN

Pull the lever, pull it now!

HYACINTHS

What's happening?

The boat gives a sudden jerk and makes some headway against the florets, but not enough with them still holding onto the Grandmother.

BOY

Push it off! Push it off!

HYACINTHS

You're trying to escape.

FISHERWOMAN

What are you doing? Use more power.

BOY

It'll pull her down. Free her!

Without warning, the Reporter pushes the Grandmother into the water.

ENGINEER

What have you done?!

REPORTER

Take her! Let us go!

The tendrils grab hold of his hand as well and the shhhing noise grows terrible. Something about how the florets would have eaten its 'parents' is made terrifyingly clear. The Husband scrambles and jumps into the water, into the florets directly, surprising them, and letting the

Grandmother scramble away. She cannot swim and it takes the Fisherwoman and the Reporter to get her to safety on the boat.

FISHERWOMAN

Go! Please, just go!

As the florets struggle with the Husband, the vallam jumps forward, and the Reporter's hand is mangled. The vallam races offstage, even as the Husband stops struggling and the florets engulf him. It is the florets that spread now, and the sound of their rustling that closes the scene.

Patta⁹⁷

A bell is heard ringing, doors opening and closing, and people leaving the building in droves. When this is over, the lights reveal a small basic kitchenette and living room, very neat except for the odd thing being totally out of place: wiping cloths folded but stacked on the floor, jars filled with bangles on the kitchen counter, etc. There's a small radio, a sleeping mat rolled up, a low plastic stool, a Tamil calendar with the festivals marked out, and a few Tamil magazines stacked nearby.

A pot of water heats up on a small gas stove. The BOY, not older than 15, scruffy, sits on the stool and GRANDMOTHER, late 70s, neat as a pin, looking ready to step out, sits on the floor examining his bloody thigh. A knife sits not far from them, but closer to her.

GRANDMOTHER

It's deep, but— stop squirming kanna. I need to see how bad it is before I can clean it. Alright, it's bleeding a lot, but I think it's not so bad even though it looks deep. I'm going to put pressure—

BOY

I can do that – Ow!

GRANDMOTHER

You hold that, while I clean it

BOY

Not Dettol!

GRANDMOTHER

It won't hurt, just a small sting.

BOY

No, I— OW! OW! Stop that you crazy, old— ow!

GRANDMOTHER

Calling your grandmother names, what have your parents been teaching you? Such a fuss, as if you were a little boy. You must be 14 at least, no? Or was it your sister who was born the year of the tsunami? I remember when you were such a small boy. You used to love sitting in my lap while I crushed spices, and you'd say 'Patti, Patti sing'. Do you remember the song?

97 A land deed, a record of rights.

BOY

What are you doing?

GRANDMOTHER

The water's ready. I'll clean this knife and make you tea—

BOY

I can clean it.

GRANDMOTHER

Shh, just sit and rest for a minute. If you jump around it'll start bleeding again.

Music plays off the radio, clearly something from the late-night playlist- techno instrumentals and, club music.

GRANDMOTHER

Such strange music they play these days. I don't understand any of it. It must be new film music. I haven't been to a film since I've come here. The closest movie theatre is two bus rides away. One more reason I can't wait to move back to the house. Have you seen it yet?

BOY

Seen what?

GRANDMOTHER

The house! Now that they've rebuilt it... Don't tell me it's still not finished. They promised it would be done by Karthigai Deepavali. I was looking forward to celebrating tomorrow in the house.

BOY

I don't know—

GRANDMOTHER

Don't know? Then why has your father sent you? *(When the Boy shrugs)* Mch, let me call him— *(Pulling out an old, battered brick phone)* Now, how do I turn this on—

BOY

No need to call him Patti⁹⁸! I was joking.

98 Grandmother in Tamil

GRANDMOTHER

Joking? What kind of joke is that?

BOY

The house looks very nice... well built. Appa will come tomorrow to pick us up.

GRANDMOTHER

Tomorrow? You'll stay the night with your Patti? Tell me what your favourite food is, and I'll cook it. Sugar?

BOY

Please.

GRANDMOTHER

Here, and have some rusk. You like rusk? Good, have lots. You're very skinny. Your mother doesn't feed you? Ah, but how could she, working in three houses like that? Is your father still doing deliveries for that pharmacist?

BOY

You haven't talked to him recently?

GRANDMOTHER

Not since he moved me here, after the fire. He's been busy overseeing the rebuilding— what colour did they paint it?

BOY

What?

GRANDMOTHER

The house. They must have painted it if we're going there tomorrow.

BOY

It's... white.

GRANDMOTHER

White? Why not some happy colour? A bright colour. I told your father—

BOY

A very happy, bright white.

GRANDMOTHER

That contractor fellow was too cheap to buy paint, no? They would have whitewashed it. I told your father to make sure they painted it– but then he’s overseen all the construction, so I won’t scold him. I’ll paint it later. I’m getting a bonus from the company this year. For thirty years of service. Moorthy sir wants all the canteen workers to put it in a government bond for three years, he says it’ll give a lot of interest, but I’ll take a little for the house. After the fire, the whole area should look bright. Let people forget everything they lost and start again. Your father’s finally settled down... I used to worry so much. His father died when he was so young and then even after marriage, every few months, your mother used to come crying about him having lost another job. I did what I could, but I didn’t want to be like all those other mothers, selling their thalis for wastrel sons who do nothing for them or their wives. Not that your father was ever that bad, but he occasionally got pulled into that goonda circle in our area and I didn’t want to encourage it. It was good when your mother found work near the port and made him move. Did him good to get away from our area. He used to be such a good student. Maybe now he’ll thrive. You’re a good student?

BOY

Top of my class. Aren’t you going to sleep soon?

GRANDMOTHER

It’s true what they say about teenagers these days. Spend the night awake and sleep the day away? I have to go to work. You can sleep if you want to. You’ll be fine to wait here till the afternoon?

BOY

You’re going now? Good, I mean... don’t worry about me.

GRANDMOTHER

I can’t do much cooking here, but I’ll leave money. Ah, before I forget– (*From the powse at her wait she pulls out a hundred rupee note. She frowns at it*) I thought there was a five hundred... (*She rustles around and manages to pull out another two hundred*) The Landlord gave me the wrong change. Mch, fine take this for now.

BOY

For what?

GRANDMOTHER

Deepavali. I know I haven’t gotten you anything for years, but your father was fighting with me then and he wouldn’t even let me buy you a shirt. Don’t spend it all on sweets. Buy some new clothes, you look like those homeless boys in that old shirt. And this is for lunch–

there's a small restaurant near the railway station. Tell them you're my grandson and they'll give you extra. I'll bring home dinner, and we can eat while we pack.

BOY

I can get started on packing.

GRANDMOTHER

What a good boy you've grown up to be. Rest also.

BOY

Patti, when I do some packing, I should know what to keep safe, and pack carefully. Are there any valuables?

GRANDMOTHER

Ah, there's not much, your father put whatever survived in storage, but my prayer lamp is silver, and that you should wrap up when packing. Then there's my thali that I wear, and there's a ring in there, but I don't know if it's gold. Your father said it was but it's a little light.

BOY

What's in the box?

GRANDMOTHER

My most valuable possession. I'll handle that when I'm back. A little sad, no, that's all there is? So much was lost in the fire— I'm still not convinced it was an accident. Those developers came around threatening us to sell our land, saying we're lucky to get any offers. As if our pattas don't matter. As if we don't know they'll take our ten or twelve small houses for a few lakhs and then build tall apartments and charge crores for each apartment... And then a month after we refuse, there's a fire? There's never been a fire in our area before, whatever the police said. Your father wanted me to sell at first, but after the fire, his tune changed. He came running to the hospital— but he must have told you all this?

BOY

I was busy... studying for exams. They didn't tell me a lot so I could concentrate.

GRANDMOTHER

Such a clever boy. Now I must be running late. No clock in here. I'll buy one for the house. Okay, kanna (*Dropping a kiss on his head*) You rest.

She takes a small bag, and her umbrella, changes her shoes and exits.

The Boy sits there drinking his tea for a few minutes, watching the door expectantly. He finishes it, hobbles to the sink, washes the cup and still watches the door. When she does not come back, he lets out a sigh and switches off the radio. He makes a quick job of searching the house, pocketing the silver lamp and, more dubiously, the ring. He considers the metal lock box which is a little too heavy and large for him to take with him. Just then a sound outside.

We hear two voices offstage, and perhaps see two men outside, soaked through.

LANDLORD

She won't be home.

NEIGHBOUR ONE

I can see a light on.

LANDLORD

This is a waste of time.

NEIGHBOUR ONE

I didn't ask you to come. *(Knocks)* Amma, are you home?

LANDLORD

She's my tenant, after all, everyone was making such a fuss, how could I not come?

NEIGHBOUR ONE

Go back to the school. *(Knocks a few more times)* Amma, the rain is getting bad, we need to leave now—

LANDLORD

You're calling a cat? *(Thumps louder)* Amma! Open up. *(When nothing happens)* I told you. The building secretary went from door to door saying be ready to evacuate when you hear the bell, even if it's in the middle of the night. She forgot to turn the light off and rushed there.

NEIGHBOUR ONE

They counted. We're one short.

LANDLORD

Maybe that son of hers finally came and took her to her new house like she kept saying.

NEIGHBOUR ONE

You told me he paid rent for the year and disappeared.

LANDLORD

Maybe he felt bad and came back.

NEIGHBOUR ONE

And didn't try to get the rent for six months back from you?

LANDLORD

He was rolling in money when he first brought her here. What's a fifty thousand to him?

NEIGHBOUR ONE

Two weeks ago, my son saw her waiting at the bus stop. When he asked her if she was alright, she said the bus to take her to work was late.

LANDLORD

So?

NEIGHBOUR ONE

It was midnight on a Saturday. And she must be 80. How can she still be working? She says all kinds of things, you've heard her. Talking about her thali being 24 carats, and having something more valuable than even that...

LANDLORD

So, she's mad?

NEIGHBOUR ONE

So, I'm saying, I don't think the son's come back for her. She's got some mental problems. He's abandoned her here. You must have a key.

LANDLORD

Not on me. And I don't have the key to my house either, it's with my wife in the school. You know. *(There's a crash of thunder)* We can't break in. Especially if she's not here. Landlords can get in trouble for that. Come on, the river is swelling like mad, and the rain isn't stopping. I don't want to have to swim to the elementary school—

NEIGHBOUR ONE

What if she's lying inside, dead?

LANDLORD

Then she'll still be inside after this storm. Come on.

The Boy waits again, and then when he is sure they're gone, he uses a hammer he finds in the vegetable basket to smash it open. He reaches in and pulls out a few laminated sheets and reads them with difficulty.

BOY (Cont.)

Ah, what I thought... Poor, crazy old woman. A new house in Eravathoor... as if.

He is about to put it away and close the box, when the door is thrown open and the Grandmother rushes in, drenched. They both freeze.

BOY (Cont.)

Patti, I was—

GRANDMOTHER

Who are you?

BOY

Patti, I—

GRANDMOTHER

I'm not your gra— I remember you! You crawled in, at the dead of night and— Thief! THIEF!

She turns and runs outside, and the Boy hobbles after her in considerable pain, patta still in hand. He drags her in a few minutes later screaming and closing but not locking the door behind them.

BOY

Stop screaming. I'm your grandson, remember?

GRANDMOTHER

Do you think you can fool me? Those developers sent you to steal my patta, no? THIEF!
(She manages to smack him on his wound and wriggle out of his grasp. But he still stands between her and the door, and she grabs the clean knife at the same time he grabs the hammer) I'll stab you again if I have to—

BOY

For this? It's not even a real patta! It's a xerox.

GRANDMOTHER

No, it's the original— THIEF! THIEF! THIEF!

BOY

Here take it! See for yourself. And stop yelling. There's no one in the building. The whole block. It's why I came... Easy, quick job I told myself. I had to pick your house first, no?

GRANDMOTHER

But— this can't be right. You... you took the real one.

BOY

And did what with it?

GRANDMOTHER

But I saw my son put the original in there, he locked it and gave me the key—

BOY

Amma, you have some mental problems, it can't be that hard to cheat you. Ey, stay back!

GRANDMOTHER

I don't have mental problems— *(She falters)* I... saw him.

BOY

He tricked you. You have to be careful of people like that.

GRANDMOTHER

Look at you, a thief telling me how not to get cheated.

BOY

I'm stealing to eat. From what you told me, your landlord's been stealing change just because he can, your son stole a whole house. And those developers stole a whole neighbourhood to build hotels. Am I that bad?

Before she can reply there's a sound from outside. We see the LANDLORD is back, and he is considering the door carefully. The Grandmother and Boy hear him.

LANDLORD

Poor old woman, even if she is dead, it's wrong to leave her there... And what if the water carries away that metal chest... and her thali too? Even if she is there, her memory is terrible. Barely remembers who I am... and she's not using that thali for anything... I should just check.

As he talks, he pulls out a key from his pocket and tries to work the door. But the Boy has locked it from the inside as he talks.

LANDLORD (Cont.)

Ey, it's bolted? Amma? Amma, are you in there? It's raining badly. You should come out to the elementary school before the water goes past our knees.

GRANDMOTHER

Go away.

LANDLORD

Don't be silly Amma, I'm here to help you.

GRANDMOTHER

If you want to help me, give me proper change for five hundred next time I ask you.

LANDLORD

I gave you the exact change. Your memory isn't good Amma. Everyone knows it. Open the door. You'll need help carrying that chest to the school.

BOY

She has help.

LANDLORD

Who's that?

BOY

I'm her grandson. My father sent me to check on her and I'm going to tell him all about this. He's a big man now.

LANDLORD

There's nothing to tell— listen open the door and I'll explain. We really shouldn't stay here—

BOY

Go away!

Landlord tries to force the door open, but the Boy and Grandmother throw their weight against it and hold him off. The thunder grows louder, the rain worse and finally the Landlord gives up and leaves, cursing them.

GRANDMOTHER

Don't get up yet. He might be trying to trick us. Are you bleeding again?

BOY

I'm okay. We should leave, soon. If the river breaks the bank—

GRANDMOTHER

You look ready to faint. Come here. I have a clean cloth.

She tries to redress the wound, and the storm rages outside. When she is done, the boy lies, a little paler and weak.

BOY

If I can nap, for just ten minutes, then we can leave. I'll help you also leave. In exchange for the lamp though. No freebies.

GRANDMOTHER

Good idea. Here, lie on this.

BOY

I'm sorry about your house in Eravathoor. There are only hotels there now. They built them so fast—

GRANDMOTHER

Shhh. Just lie down.

BOY

That thunder, listen to it... like the world is ending. *(Grandmother says nothing)* What would you sing, to your grandson? While you ground spices? Sing for me.

GRANDMOTHER

I'll sing for you...

She does and her voice holds back the storm and takes us to black.

Interlude VI

We hear the water, then the engine on the boat. Then we see them: the Fisherwoman steers, the Boy tends to the Grandmother, the Reporter clutches his injured hand, and the Engineer holds her head in her hands, the red envelope pressed up against her forehead. The water moves as it always does, but the ripples created by the boat wash outward and carry, for the first time, the remains of a drowned city: shoes, pots, bicycles, clothes, an umbrella and so on. We also see the tops of some trees, and perhaps a half-submerged streetlamp.

GRANDMOTHER

Look at all this... That's a perfectly good pressure cooker. Slow down, we can grab it.

REPORTER

For what? Are you going to make sambar?

GRANDMOTHER

When we reach land—

REPORTER

We're never reaching land. The whole world is this now, don't you understand?

BOY

Shut up. *(To the Fisherwoman)* We have been going for a while? What if that man lied?

FISHERWOMAN

He didn't. *(To the Engineer)* I'm going to shut the engine off. Grab the oar and start rowing. *(When the Engineer doesn't respond, to the Boy)* Here take over for a minute. *(She makes her way to the Engineer)* What are you doing?

ENGINEER

It should have eaten me.

FISHERWOMAN

Why?

ENGINEER

You know what I did. Or rather what I didn't do. If I had delivered it in time, none of this would have happened... *(The Fisherwoman grabs the letter and throws it away)* Don't—

FISHERWOMAN

The City flooded. It didn't flood because of you. Are we film stars to single-handedly stop such things? Don't become a martyr for something that was years in the making... This City... we built it to flood.

GRANDMOTHER

I think I see the trees getting a little higher over there.

REPORTER

So?

GRANDMOTHER

Look! Doesn't it look like land?

REPORTER

It's too far to tell.

FISHERWOMAN

Stop the engine. Let's row.

As they do, the lights shift a little, and the first glimpse of the sun, not very strong appears.

BOY

That looks like people! Hey! Hey over here! We're here! Go faster! Ey, why has she stopped?

ENGINEER

What is it? What do you see?

FISHERWOMAN

Light. I see my light.

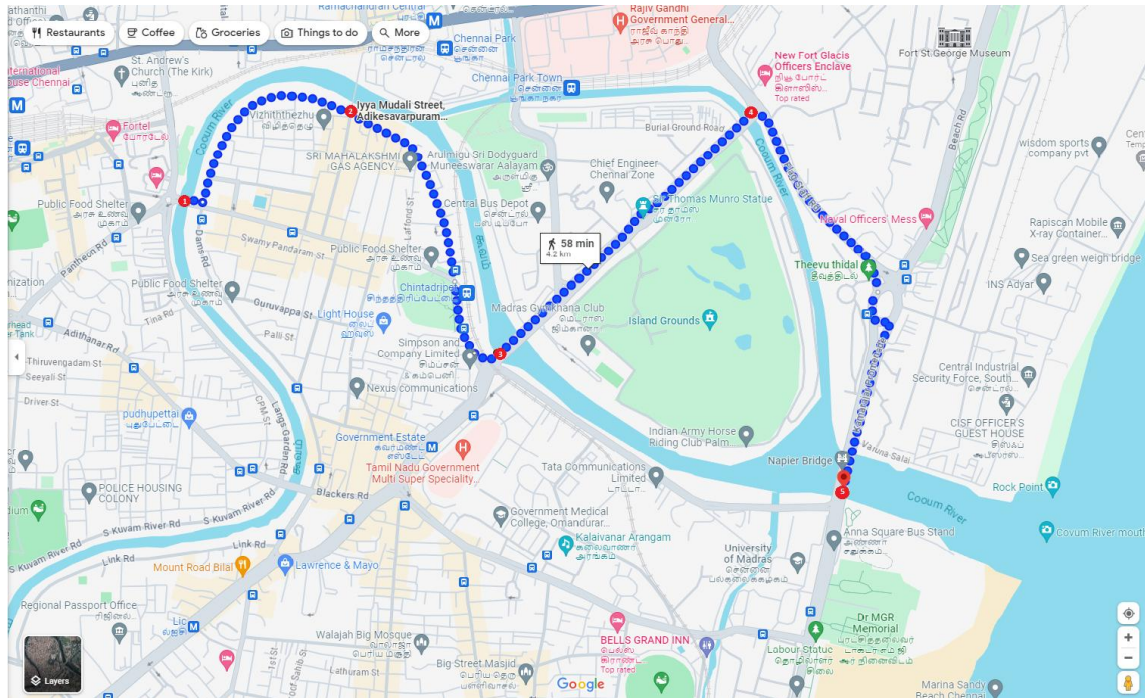
They keep rowing. As the scene goes to black the last thing, we see is the smiling face of the Fisherwoman. But the last thing we hear is the water.

End.

Lost Waters

Characters

Audio Guide/ Daniel	35, M, Smooth, Non-Descript, Reassuring
Sathish	33, M, Grieving
The Voice	Ageless, Androgynous, Hopeful
Young Sathish	13, Inquisitive, A bit of a bully
Teacher	42, F, Tired
Young Karthu	14, F, Homesick, Smart
Vegetable Seller	75, F, Intelligent, Angry
Karthu	33, Smart, Fun-Loving
Doctor	25, M, Determined
Police Constable	46, M, On a power trip
Nurse	52, F, Curious, Wistful



Map 1 Tour route through Chintadripet and Georgetown, Chennai. Sourced from Google Maps

TRACK 0

Generic Carnatic⁹⁹ instrumental music plays. The Audio Guide, to begin with, is smooth and robotic.

AUDIO GUIDE

Welcome Citizen! We congratulate you on choosing to take part in Public Consultation 762: Regarding the rehabilitation of the River through the Green City Urban Passage Project or G-CUPP.

For the full tour experience, you will walk the 4.5km route shown on Map 1. There are plenty of rest stops along the way. This will take you approximately one and a half hours.

You can also listen to this consultation from the comfort of your own home by making use of the maps, photos, and data we have provided along with this consultation. This will take 50 minutes.

⁹⁹ Classical south Indian music

At the end of the consultation, you may fill out the comment sheet and email it back to us. All your thoughts and questions will be taken very seriously.

Thank you for your participation: good citizens make a good city!

The same generic music plays.

AUDIO GUIDE This consultation begins at Location 1, the Chintadripet Bridge. In total, we will cover five locations during this consultation, each a site of important work for the G-CUPP. The consultation ends at Location 5, Napier Bridge. If walking the route provided, please do remember—

VOICE Us. Please do remember us.

The phrase 'Please do remember' repeats thrice. Each time it is interrupted by static, watery and strange.

DANIEL —please do remember— are you sure the mic's not picking up static?

SATHISH Again? ... This is ridiculous. Hold on... what is that? It can't be ambient sound... I've checked everything a hundred times.

DANIEL You know what it is? We're being haunted.

SATHISH What?

DANIEL Remember that video audition I did last year? When I exported it, it was all black and white. No idea why... Machines are mysterious.

SATHISH No, they're not. You probably put a filter on and forgot. This isn't that.

DANIEL You're being haunted by the ghost in the machine da.

SATHISH Sure. 'The Haunting of Adobe Audition'

DANIEL 'The Poltergeist of Pro-Tools'

SATHISH More like you're stepping on the wires.

DANIEL Shit! Sorry da. Do we have to record all of it from the top?

SATHISH I can fix it during the edit.

DANIEL Are you sure? It has to be top quality for the Minister—

SATHISH When I'm done with this, it'll be good enough for an Oscar.

DANIEL It's a big deal, Sathish. Millions of people will listen to it. My uncle did us both a huge favour. Take it seriously.

SATHISH I am! I've been here— six hours on a Sunday! On Christmas Sunday.

DANIEL What are you doing? I haven't finished that last take.

SATHISH It was the hundredth take, and the first 99 were fine. I've got everything I need. Please trust me and tell your uncle I will deliver it to him and his Minister by the 30th. Like I promised. Go home man, it's Christmas. Christmas dinner, family, carols...

DANIEL Are you sure it was good?

SATHISH You'll win an Oscar if they start a Public Consultation category.

DANIEL Can I hear it just— just once, please?

SATHISH Sorry, hard disks are going in my bag.

DANIEL What's the rush?

SATHISH Karthu's been downstairs for about half an hour, which means I'm this close to getting divorced. We have a dinner reservation.

DANIEL 'A dinner reservation'... for some fancy place?

SATHISH That restaurant they opened last week on the beach.

DANIEL I thought you were broke.

SATHISH She won a voucher. She's been moping at home ever since the producers pulled out of her documentary and she listens to the radio a lot. She's won us a free mattress, a mixie – that's useless since neither of us cooks – and dinner for two. She's considering making it a full-time job. Come on, you can say hi and tell her it's your fault I'm late.

DANIEL Hey, the recording light is on–

SATHISH Argh, this system is ancient. Nothing works rig–

The audio cuts and we hear that watery static. Faint. Then–

AUDIO GUIDE Please, do remember to carry enough water and perhaps sunglasses. Remember to look both ways while crossing the street and watch out for traffic. We recommend beginning early in the morning to avoid the noise and heat. When you are ready, play the next track.

Generic music plays but, in the background, faint but audible, is the water.

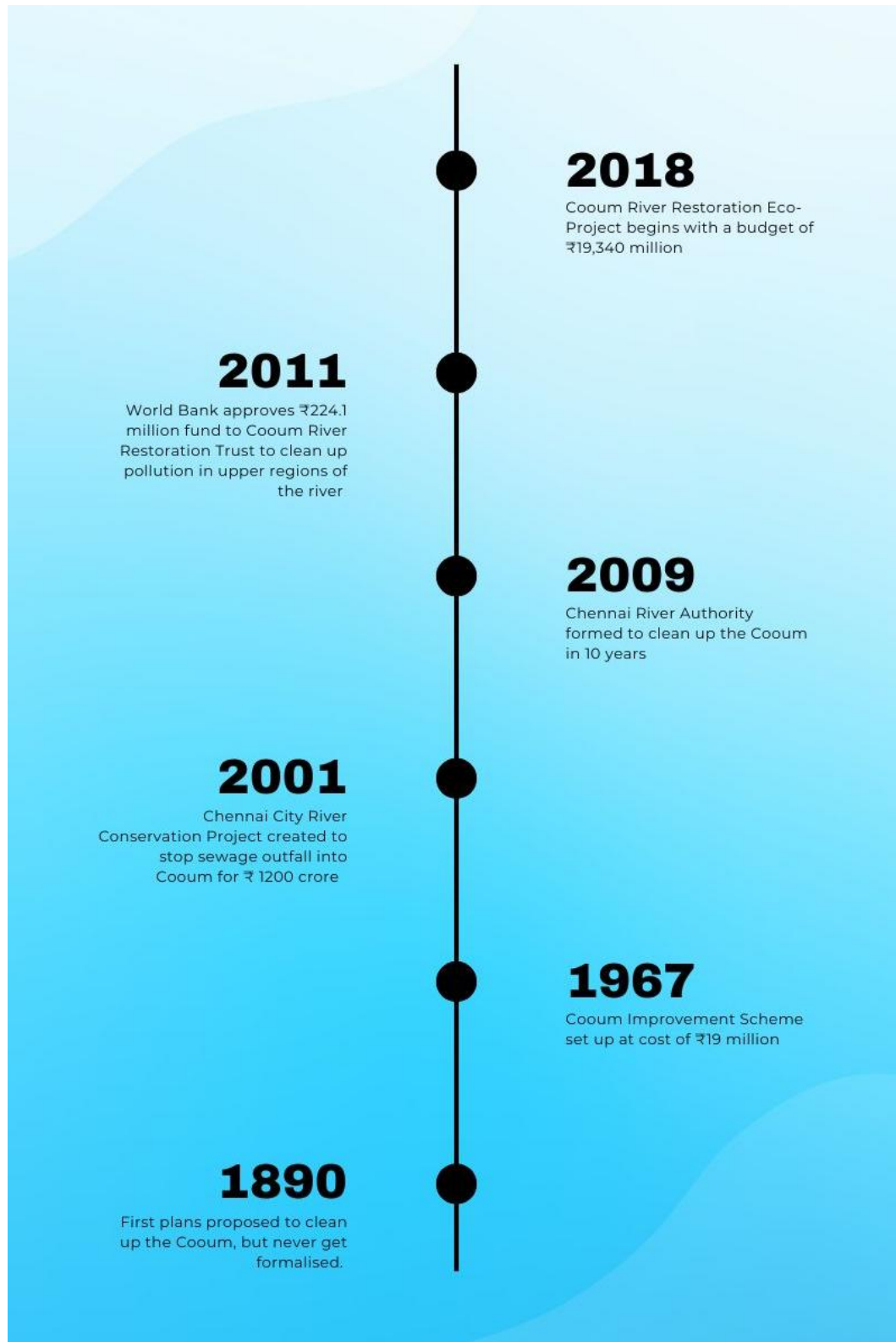


Image 1 Timeline of failed River Clean Up Plans

Chennai's lifeline waterbodies Adyar, Cooum declared 'dead' by Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board; here's why

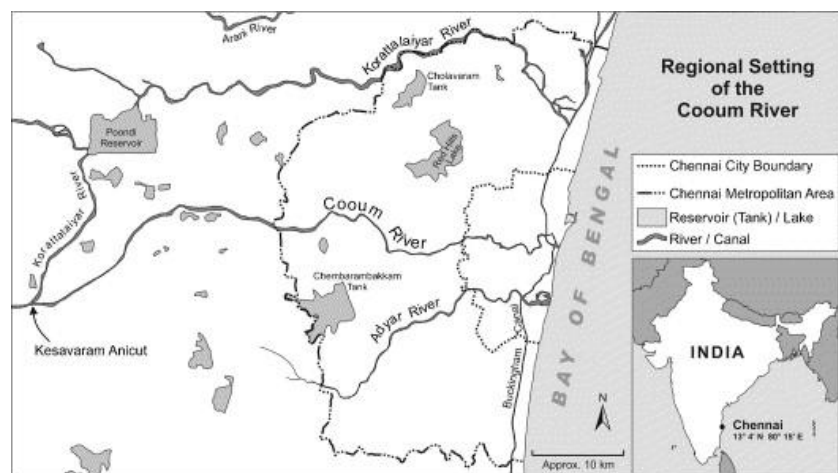
TNPCB, under the national river conservation programme, collected samples of rivers and major water bodies across Tamil Nadu. The samples were tested for 32 parameters, during which the dismal findings were received. Here is what Chennaiites need to know about the study



Curated by: Bechu S | Updated Jan 18, 2023, 16:28 IST



Image 2 River declared dead (Bechu, 2023)



Map 2 Regional Setting of the River. Sourced from Bunch and Dudycha (2004)



Cooum River during Restoration

Image 3 River amid restoration, undated. (Accessed through the 'Archives and Maps of Water: Environmental Justice and Cartography for a Coastal City, Chennai 1800-present' project.)

TRACK 1

A short burst of generic Carnatic music opens the next track.

AUDIO GUIDE You are now standing on the Chintadripet Bridge, the first stop of this consultation. At each stop, we will cover different aspects of the G-CUP including why it is necessary, its scope, and how it will alter your experience of the city.

Here we ask that you look over the bridge and down at the River.

Aren't you tired of passing by this stinking river? Don't you wish you could have a better river? A cleaner river? A river that doesn't make you want to look away? This river should flow—

THE VOICE River? What river?

AUDIO GUIDE The River-

THE VOICE I'm not there.

AUDIO GUIDE The River—

THE VOICE What do you see? What do you really see?

Soundscape shifts: the sound quality is that of a cassette tape. Location: Chintadripet Bridge, mid-morning. Cars, birds, children chattering, a school trip in a school van.

STUDENT 1 Ey, do you see that? Down there in the water? What is that?

STUDENT 2 Rocks?

YOUNG SATHISH It sort of looks like—

YOUNG KARTHU A dead body!

Shouts of shock, morbid glee, children rushing to the van window, yells of 'Where?' 'Let me see!'.

- TEACHER** All of you, freeze. Get your heads back inside the van. Sit in your seats. Not one word. Move. What did you see Karthu?
- STUDENT 1** I'm the one who saw it.
- YOUNG KARTHU** Those lumps. Down there in the water.
- YOUNG SATHISH** It's just a dead buffalo ma'am.
- YOUNG KARTHU** Would you have preferred a dead person?
- YOUNG SATHISH** If you'd been the dead person sure— Oww, oww, oww ma'am!
- TEACHER** Sathish, I've had enough of you on this trip. You will be quiet and – what is that?
- YOUNG SATHISH** Nothing.
- TEACHER** Is that a video game?
- YOUNG SATHISH** No! It's a music player, ma'am.
- TEACHER** You know you can't bring that to school.
- YOUNG SATHISH** But we're on our excursion and I thought— Maaa'aaam, I am sorry— please don't—
- TEACHER** Why is the light blinking?
- YOUNG SATHISH** It's... low on battery.
- TEACHER** Put it away and if I see it again, I'm confiscating it. Now sit down. If the van starts moving, you'll get hurt. (*As she goes back to her seat*) That's all this trip needs.
- YOUNG SATHISH** Ma'am, Karthu is sitting in my place.
- TEACHER** Isn't that a place free next to her?
- YOUNG SATHISH** But I had the window seat—
- TEACHER** Just sit! The light is changing.

We hear the bus start, the cacophony of horns that accompany a green light and then—

- YOUNG KARTHU** *(Quietly)* That is not a music player.
- YOUNG SATHISH** Did they not have MP3 players in your village?
- YOUNG KARTHU** It's been blinking red since you took it out. Why?
- YOUNG SATHISH** None of your business— shh don't call her here! I'll tell you. I'm on a police mission.
- YOUNG KARTHU** Really?
- YOUNG SATHISH** This is a recording device and I'm using it to record evidence of crimes.
- YOUNG KARTHU** What crimes?
- VOICE** The murder of a river perhaps?
- YOUNG SATHISH** Just crimes— why do you have to ask so many questions?
- YOUNG KARTHU** Some police officer you are. You don't even know what crimes you're investigating.
- YOUNG SATHISH** At least I'm not a padips¹⁰⁰. Who brings their textbook on an excursion?
- YOUNG KARTHU** We have a test next week. And stop recording me.
- YOUNG SATHISH** You're the biggest crime in this van. Studying all the time, asking questions! It's why everyone thinks you're a loser.
- YOUNG KARTHU** Stop recording.
- YOUNG SATHISH** Or you'll tell the teacher, teacher's pet?
- YOUNG KARTHU** 'There are two major kinds of rivers— perennial and non-perennial or seasonal—'

YOUNG SATHISH Read it in your head stupid. Stop ruining this for all of us.

YOUNG KARTHU If you keep that thing on, I'm going to read out loud for the rest of the trip. You won't hear any evidence of crimes. Just geography. 'There are two major kinds of rivers— perennial and non-perennial or seasonal—'

YOUNG SATHISH Shut up.

YOUNG KARTHU 'Perennial rivers run all through the year.'

YOUNG SATHISH Stop talking!

YOUNG KARTHU 'Seasonal rivers flow during the rainy season but might be sluggish or dry in the summer—' Give that back!

TEACHER Sathish! What are you doing? Give Karthu back her book and sit down—

YOUNG KARTHU If you throw that out, I'll kill you—

TEACHER Karthu, quiet. Sathish!

YOUNG KARTHU That's it. You're d—

Amid screaming, the chants of other students and the teacher's yells the audio clicks off. The water is there, building up to something. Suddenly—

AUDIO GUIDE Dead.

VOICE What is?

AUDIO GUIDE The river is dead.

VOICE That's not a river.

AUDIO GUIDE The river is dead.

VOICE No, it isn't.

AUDIO GUIDE The science does not lie. The River is biologically quite dead. The BOD or biochemical oxygen demand is a parameter that tells you how much organic matter or sewage is dissolved in water. If the BOD is high nothing much can live in that water. 'A pristine river would have a BOD measure of 1mg/litre. Raw untreated sewage contains anywhere between 200 mg/l and 600 mg/l. The Cooum has 345 mg/l.

VOICE But that's not—

AUDIO GUIDE The River was not always like this. Even today, the parts of the river that flow outside the city are healthy and full of aquatic life. For 56 km the River flows clean, but in the last 16 km, within city limits the river looks like this.

Don't worry, in addition to the infrastructure being created as part of the G-CUPP, a revival of the River is in the works.

VOICE A revival?

AUDIO GUIDE A clean-up—

VOICE This has happened before...

AUDIO GUIDE There have been several attempts made to clean the River going back to as early as the 1920s.

VOICE They failed.

AUDIO GUIDE Then in the 1970s—

VOICE All those men and women, toiled away—

AUDIO GUIDE a large workforce of labourers was used to desilt the River resulting in—

VOICE Movement, flow, for a time. But that didn't last for long.

- AUDIO GUIDE** The problem was not solved. More recently, in the early 2000s, this government too had such plans. Using—
- VOICE** Big, loud machines. Clawing, digging, metal machine.
- AUDIO GUIDE** —using modern dredgers to help improve the flow.
- VOICE** *(Sarcastic)* And how was that?
- AUDIO GUIDE** That plan too did not succeed.
- VOICE** So, what now? Bury the river? Sing a funeral dirge and—
- AUDIO GUIDE** Not to worry. We have a new plan—
- VOICE** Of course, you do.
- AUDIO GUIDE** —a new modern plan—
- VOICE** How can you plan when you refuse to see, to listen—
- AUDIO GUIDE** —a new modern plan utilising state-of-the-art technology and design that will save this river.
- VOICE** But this, that is not a river. It's sewage. And the River... you don't understand what a river is, everything that it can and cannot be. Which means that this plan will fail, like all the others—
- AUDIO GUIDE** Previous failure was due to a lack of imagination and the absence of scientifically planned interventions. The River is currently what would be called a MUPRO, or a Minimally Utilised Public Resource Opportunity. In many world-class cities, a clean river is often termed a FUPRO, or a Fully Utilised Public Resource Opportunity. Such rivers are:

- Urban nature spots
- Tourist locations
- Centres of leisure and sporting activities
- Transportation systems

Using the latest developments in river management, the G-CUPP project will turn this MUPRO into a FUPRO. And for that, we need your support citizens. Help us make this dream a reality. Help us make the River a world-class river!

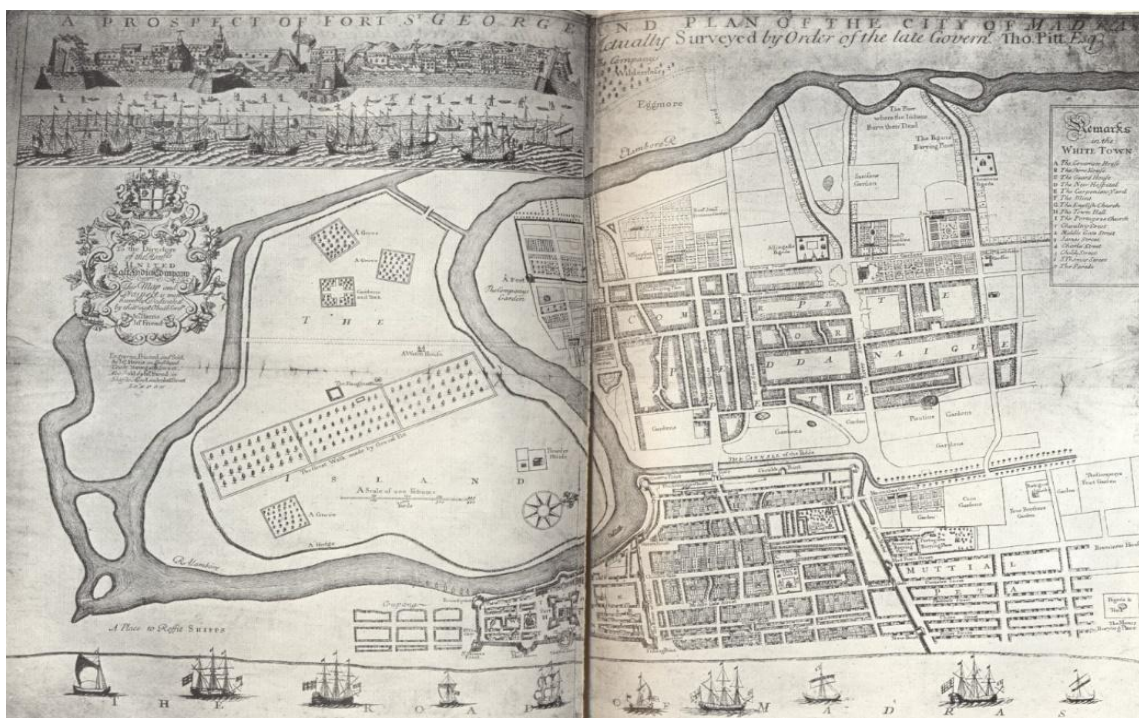
Silence. Even the watery static is quiet.

AUDIO GUIDE Please make your way to the next location, Law's Bridge in Chintadripet where we will tell you more about the history of the River and an inspired attempt to revive it. Once you reach Location 2, you may play the next track.

Generic music plays into silence.



Map 3: Madras and its Environs – 1733 and 1862. Notice the differences in the shape of the Island surrounded by the River right near the river mouth. (Accessed through my work with the 'Archives and Maps of Water: Environmental Justice and Cartography for a Coastal City, Chennai 1800-present' project)



Map 4: Prospect of Fort St. George – 1726. Notice again the shape of the river around the island and the absence of a clear river mouth. (Accessed through my work with the 'Archives and Maps of Water: Environmental Justice and Cartography for a Coastal City, Chennai 1800-present' project. Original map from Bodleian Library Gough Maps 41 No. 138 – 'A prospect of Fort St. George and Plan of the City of Madras actually surveyed by order of the late Governr. T. Pitt ...' c.1730. Accessed via the British Library)



Image 4: Firewood sellers on the River, undated, but estimated late 1800s to early 1900s. (Accessed through my work with the 'Archives and Maps of Water: Environmental Justice and Cartography for a Coastal City, Chennai 1800-present' project)

Chennai: Anti-encroachment drives along Cooum, Adyar slow

Ram Sundaram / TNN / Updated: Oct 18, 2022, 09:13 IST

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Encroachment removal drives, carried out in full swing until last year along the banks of Cooum and Adyar rivers in Chennai, have slowed down in the recent months.



Until April, around 70% of them were cleared and families, which lived here, were resettled in Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance...

CHENNAI: Encroachment removal drives, carried out in full swing until last year along the banks of Cooum and Adyar rivers in Chennai, have slowed down in the recent months.

The [Tamil Nadu](#) government, when it started to restore the two major waterways in the city six years ago, identified a total of 23,800 encroachments. Until April, around 70% of them were cleared and families, which lived here, were resettled in Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB) tenements.

Image 5: Slum rehabilitation and eviction drives done in the name of environmentalism.

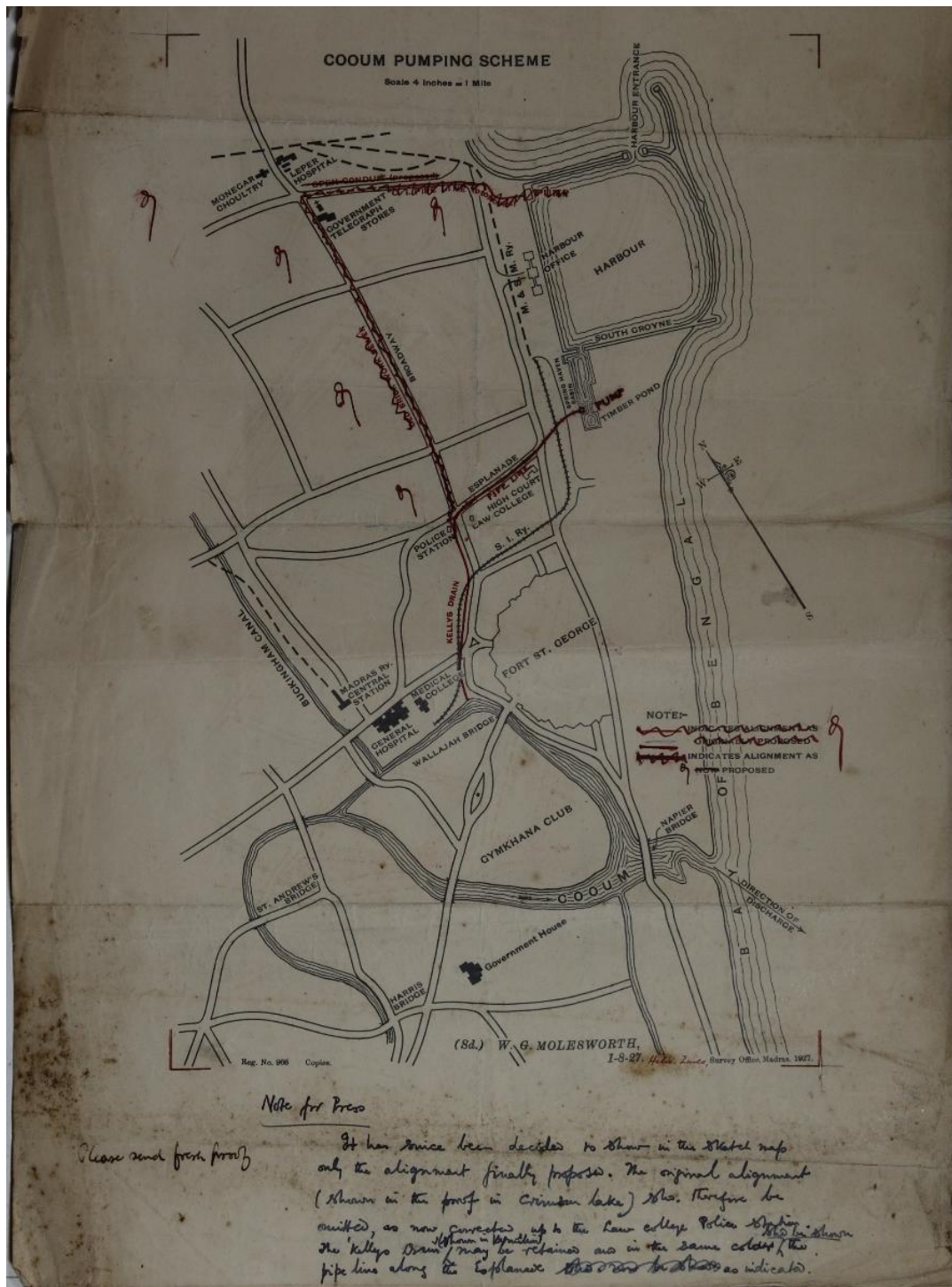


Image 6: A drawing proposing sites for the pumping scheme that would have pumped sea water into the River to flush it and improve flow. (Accessed through the 'Archives and Maps of Water: Environmental Justice and Cartography for a Coastal City, Chennai 1800-present' project)

TRACK 2

The generic music plays.

AUDIO GUIDE You are now at Location 2, near Law's Bridge on Dams Road. The neighbourhood behind you, Chintadripet, has some of The City's oldest urban settlements and once housed many wealthy merchants and traders. For several decades following Independence, you could still see big garden houses and bungalows right along the River. All these houses, we're sorry to say—

VEGETABLE SELLER No one ever says sorry to us.

AUDIO GUIDE We're sorry to say, many of those houses were destroyed. They housed many important people: influential merchants, politicians—

VEGETABLE SELLER My grandfather, who sold firewood.

AUDIO GUIDE They had beautiful houses with well-manicured gardens, and—

VEGETABLE SELLER —he had a boat. That's how he went around selling the wood. He'd cut down a few coconut trees from the banks, load it into the boat and be off. It wasn't illegal. The vellkaran's¹⁰¹ government invited people to settle here, along the banks of the river and do such jobs. All the big houses still needed firewood back then.

AUDIO GUIDE But the River was not much cleaner back then. It flowed poorly and often had a terrible smell. But then a great politician, Theagaraya Chetty, founder of the Justice Party came into the picture. He—

VEGETABLE SELLER Did well for himself and saved enough money to buy the land and build his house, right down there. He had been a farmer, down south, where the land

was very dry. When he came to the city and saw all this land right near the water he recognised—

AUDIO GUIDE

Chetty recognised, early on, the benefits a clean and flowing River would bring to the city. You can imagine—

VEGETABLE SELLER

—the keerai¹⁰² and vegetables he grew down there were so good they would sell out within an hour. Keerai grown on these banks? Can you imagine?

AUDIO GUIDE

You can imagine Chetty walking here a hundred years ago, looking out into the River and knowing that The City deserved better. Look at Paris, look at London... This too was to be a world-class city, and surely the rivers of a world-class city must flow?

VEGETABLE SELLER

When the water wasn't flowing, in peak summer, the people here grazed cattle and planted vegetables right on the river bed. Why do you look so surprised? In the monsoon, lots of water, but in peak summer? Maybe one vein of water, or fully dry even.

AUDIO GUIDE

Theagaraya Chetty decided he had to solve this problem!

VEGETABLE SELLER

It wasn't a problem. It was just how things were. Now is the problem. There's always only that black sludge in there. When it rains there's more black sludge, when it doesn't there's less, but it's still there. They should hire experts to solve that mystery.

AUDIO GUIDE

Chetty hired the British engineer Robert Bristow, of Kochi harbour fame, who believed that simple engineering could create a tidal river much like London's Thames River, right here! Then our City's River too would be a real, proper river.

102 Leafy greens

- VEGETABLE SELLER** The real issue was that even though my grandfather had a lease for thirty years, given by officials at the Fort, The City forced him out. They shut down all the firewood sellers. It was in the monsoon so my grandfather and a lot of other people who lived here fell sick. Sick, without jobs, no idea where to go. How could they have a plan for such things?
- AUDIO GUIDE** Bristow's plan involved using dredgers to clear sand obstructing the mouth of the River and then using pumps to bring seawater into the River to give it a better flow. It was a success!
- VEGETABLE SELLER** Things were very bad.
- AUDIO GUIDE** This feat was not just one of engineering but of the imagination. For without Theagaraya Chetty's ability to imagine—
- VEGETABLE SELLER** My grandfather couldn't imagine life anywhere but on the river. For nearly three years—
- AUDIO GUIDE** For several years—
- VEGETABLE SELLER** —he kept moving the family every few months, trying to find something near here.
- AUDIO GUIDE** —the pumps worked well, keeping the River in flow.
- VEGETABLE SELLER** Then finally—
- AUDIO GUIDE** —one of the dredgers broke down.
- VEGETABLE SELLER** —he got some land further down the river, across from Island Grounds a cheri¹⁰³ had come up.
- AUDIO GUIDE** New dredgers could have been bought, but already the understanding was shifting—

103 A slum

- VEGETABLE SELLER** The family shifted there. That was where I was born, many years later. I lived there for nearly fifteen years, until—
- AUDIO GUIDE** It was realised that the problems of the River's flow, colour and stench were also caused by thousands of illegal encroachments all along the river's banks. They were moved.
- VEGETABLE SELLER** They moved us near Egmore railway station, and my father got a job as a coolie. No space to grow keerai there...
- AUDIO GUIDE** There, below us do you see the fencing? This portion of the river has fencing all along it and has been cleared of rubbish and encroachments through the GCUPP.
- VEGETABLE SELLER** I moved back here in... 1992. My house was down there, near that roll of fencing. Not as well made as my grandfather's but it lasted for ten years...
- AUDIO GUIDE** For one year the fencing has been up, undisturbed. It was one of the first tasks undertaken by the GCUPP. More on that at the next location.
- VEGETABLE SELLER** I've lived by the river almost all my life, but did they ever try to clean it up for me?... No, we're the dirt they want to remove. They've sent us far away, outside the city. It's so far, I don't know how I'll come back to the market here to sell vegetables every morning. But they've built houses there, and the government is saying it won't flood. Everyone, even my children, tells me to be grateful, but should I be? Where they put us now is a marsh. In ten years, they'll tell us to get out again so they can clean that also. Or it'll all go underwater one monsoon. *(Pause)* No one said, 'Sorry we threw you out...', 'Sorry you lost your house'... That makes me angry— *(A bus roars by)* Ay, there goes my bus! You made me talk so much and now I'll have to walk some more towards—

AUDIO GUIDE –Location 3: Periyar Bridge. You need to–

VOICE Stop. You need to–

DIRECTOR Cut! Okay that looked good. Remya, you looked properly murderous and monstrous. Good work. We'll come back in five and–

The director's voice fades and there's giggling and–

SATHISH What's– who– Karthu! Okay, okay– At least let me put down the equipment–

KARTHU So that director can corner you? I only have a half hour before the hostel curfew. Gimme a cigarette, please?

SATHISH My mother's right. You're a bad influence.

KARTHU Me? You're the one bunking college to go on film shoots. How's it going?

SATHISH Not bad. I think we'll be done this weekend.

KARTHU So, I'll finally get you back?

SATHISH You saw me yesterday.

KARTHU And all we talked about was this shoot.

SATHISH Fair. How are *you* doing? How's your project going?

KARTHU Not bad. Talked to some interesting people, and made contacts... I want to go back and see if they'll say it again into a mic and camera. Is that a castle?

SATHISH What? Where?

KARTHU Over there, near that tree. *(Sathish starts laughing)* What?

SATHISH That's some government building. You're still such a villager. You'll fail your journalism degree if you report on castles in the middle of the City.

- KARTHU** I'm a promising young journalist. All my professors say so. And I'm not a villager. Really. *(Sathish keeps laughing)* Oh, get lost.
- SATHISH** Come here. Sorry. I'll buy you a bouquet of cigarettes.
- KARTHU** You're definitely the bad influence.
- SATHISH** Me? ... A bad influence?
- DIRECTOR** Ey Sathish! You're still recording, and I can hear it. Stop konjifying¹⁰⁴!
- KARTHU** You can put us in your movie. A cute couple killed by the deranged river monster.
- DIRECTOR** She's a sea monster and you're not that cute a couple. Sathish, you're wasting the battery man. If it dies—
- THE VOICE** How does a river die?
- AUDIO GUIDE** We know—
- THE VOICE** No, you don't.
- AUDIO GUIDE** We know—
- THE VOICE** If you knew, you wouldn't be mixing everything up, calling sewage a river, then calling the river dead, and throwing people out of their homes to save a river that's so much more than the river as you understand it.
- AUDIO GUIDE** We know—
- THE VOICE** What do you know?
- AUDIO GUIDE** We know you— you— you might be getting a little tired in the sun. Not to worry. The next location is near a bus stand, and you can rest before listening

104 Flirting or being cutesy as a couple.

to the track. Make your way towards Location
Three. Periyar Bridge.

Generic music takes us out.



Image 7: The bronze-winged jacana. Photo by Charles E. Sharp. Sourced from [WikiCommons](#).



Image 8: A graphic representation of the Port-Mudravoyal expressway shared by Nitin Gadkari on Twitter (X). Sourced: The Hindustan Times, April 23rd, 2023

TRACK 3

Generic music, but weak and overpowered by the watery static, the audio guide is less robotic as it tries to break through the other narrative. The generic music plays for several bars, but then the water overwhelms everything, and we hear—

THE VOICE Listen.

Bird call: it's the jacana. Once, twice, three times and then the audio, previously faint, breaks over us: a busy street, people, traffic but through it all the Nurse's voice is clear and steady.

NURSE Now look down there, over this parapet, you see there is one tree that stands out, the arms look like they're waving at us?

Right over there was where my childhood home was. Just a few meters from the river, and our kitchen looked right at it. Now look at the water, you see how low, it is? We've had a bad monsoon this year, but that year, there was lots of water, fish... Don't look at me like that. There were fish. Really. This was back in... I don't remember the year, but it wasn't long after I started working at the hospital. I cleaned the wards and the doctor's offices. My father didn't want to send me, he was very proud, but the year before had been tough. I wish I could remember the year... but I remember grey, cool mornings, the river flowing, and him, sitting there right below— what are they calling this bridge these days?

The generic music is brief.

AUDIO GUIDE —the Periyar Bridge, Location 3. Look east, towards the Bay of Bengal and you will see that already there are men and great machines at work. It is here that the backbone of all this new infrastructure is being built: the pillars that will hold the expressway into the sky. Right now, all you see are half-finished pillars, dust and concrete, but close your eyes and let me describe the structure: use your imagination and see—

NURSE A thamarai illai kozhi¹⁰⁵. They're no longer than... your forearm, bronze in colour, and long feet. You see those leaves floating on the surface of the water? Could you imagine walking on them? He walked on them easily, as if it was solid earth.

AUDIO GUIDE The ease that this piece of infrastructure will bring to citizens cannot be overstated. Phase One will be completed by—

NURSE November. Or maybe it was December. That is when they usually came. He was all by himself, but I had seen another group of them over there near the river's bend. That group had a big female bird. These birds, the females can have all the husbands they want. They choose who their mate will be, lay the eggs and then do whatever they want. It is the husband's job to build a nest and look after the eggs. You and I should learn from them...

AUDIO GUIDE Using cutting-edge, sustainable, engineering methods tried and tested in Japan and Europe, the project when realized will reduce congestion by more than half!

NURSE So, this one, our friend was trying to court her. Every morning, before my hospital shift, I'd settle on the balcony with my breakfast, and I'd watch. He'd walk around, eat, try to make a nest, then he'd call out to her. Somehow, I could hear all the things he was promising her: I'll make a good nest for our babies...

AUDIO GUIDE No more waiting around in traffic jams—

NURSE I'll feed them, protect them...

AUDIO GUIDE World-class infrastructure—

NURSE I'll take good care of them...

105 A bronze-winged jacana.

AUDIO GUIDE

A better way to experience the city!

NURSE

He was offering her everything. But she was tough to impress, and her other husbands would chase him off after some time. For days this went on until he gave up and flew off. It was sad, as sad as when a hero (in the movies) has love failure... *(Pause)* I've said enough now? For your essay? ... I haven't seen one in a long time. I don't live near here anymore, but I still work at the hospital there and sometimes I come here, but who can stand here waiting for birds? Such a stink.

I heard there was some project to make this place better. Have you heard about it? Tell me, when they finish, will the birds come back? Do these planners even know about the birds?

The audio changes.

SATHISH

We didn't know. There was no news, no warning, nothing. That night, after dinner, very average by the way, we climbed into the car and headed home. It was raining, so I was driving. When we passed by the river, Karthu did point out the water had risen, but it was December... It always rises in December.

It must have been around 11, we were halfway home, a few meters from the turn onto Periyar Bridge when I noticed that something was wrong. Water seemed to be spilling onto the road from the bridge. When we reached the turn... It was unlike anything we'd ever seen. The river was flowing over and across the railings and right onto the main road.

Central Station was close, and it was a disaster-safe zone, so we decided to try driving past the worst of the flood water and around the station. But even just on the road the water was high, and I was scared it would stall the engine. I was about to speed up, when Karthu yelled to stop, threw the door open, and ran into the flood water. That's

when I saw them. Two men, clutching onto a traffic sign for dear life, chest-deep in water. I was frozen. I watched as she talked to them, telling them to climb down and try to come to the car. They refused, saying neither could swim. They were terrified of the water. I tried to tell her to leave them. That we'd get help. But she ignored me and I saw her disappear bit by bit: ankles, knees, hips, chest, until she was a floating head... When she reached them, she managed to convince the older man to grab her hand, and the younger one to grab him and then slowly, much too slowly, they walked back.

There was a moment when a gush of water almost knocked them off their feet, but by some unearthly luck, they survived it...

I've never been that frightened in my life. I could not see, could not imagine how she would survive. She would disappear into that dark, dirty water and then I'd have lost her forever... I was still frozen as they climbed into the car. Karthu had to drive us home...

When we got to the station, to the chaos of cancelled trains, people huddling under fans trying to get dry, people washed out of their homes by the river, I hugged her and told her she must never do anything like that again... (*Rustling, something drops*) Shit, sorry Daniel, this wasn't supposed to be this long... Karthu's fine. Got a cold, but that's what you get for wading through water in December—

He cuts off when a door opens, and we hear older Karth, muffled.

KARTHU It's 3 am. Come to bed.

SATHISH Why are you up? You look worse. Please take another crocin. I'll come in a few minutes, promise. (*We hear dissatisfied muttering and then*

the door closing.) Daniel, what I wanted to say was when we got caught in the flood that night, the hard disks were in the car and uh got wet. Very wet. I thought there was a backup on the studio computer, but there wasn't. And then I thought I could recover something from the disks, and I did... but it's not right. None of it is.

The files have been corrupted in the weirdest ways, and there's this... voice that cuts in saying things... I'm not going crazy, but I haven't been home or slept in a day and I know they want it tomorrow, but can you get me an extra day, please?

I'll get it done, I promise. Call me as soon as you can. I'll be up.

Generic music comes in with force, fights a battle with the water and wins, just barely.

AUDIO GUIDE

We know you'll be excited to see the next location on this tour, so please make your way towards Location 4, Quaid-E-Millath Bridge.

Modular sewage plant gives a chance to get back clean Cooum

P Oppili / TNN / Feb 4, 2022, 13:55 IST

The Cooum River, infamous for being polluted, now has a chance to boast of clean waters. The restoration work has removal of encroachments along its bank and diverting the sewage that is released into it as components.



The Cooum river clogged with sewage in Aminjikarai

HOME / TODAY'S PAPER / NATIONAL / TAMIL NADU

Chennai's largest sewage treatment plant to come up in Koyambedu

Updated - May 05, 2014 05:43 am IST - CHENNAI

K. LAASINI



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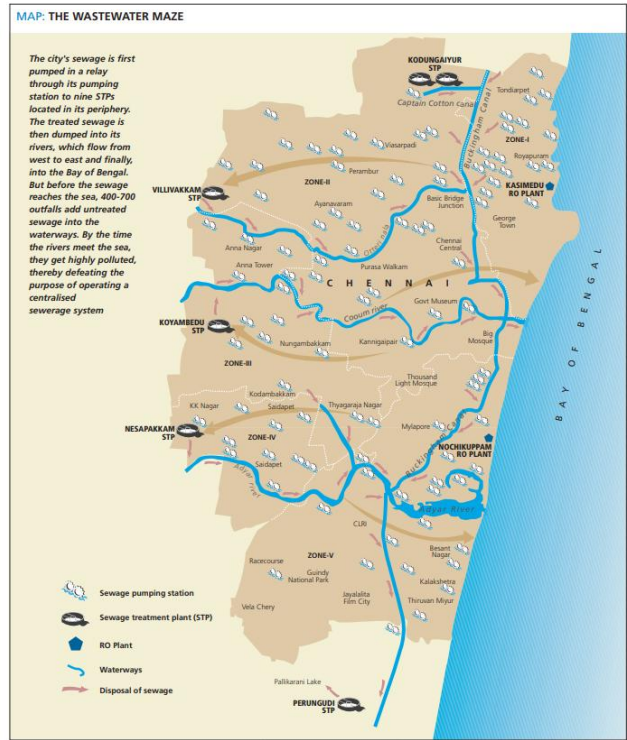
The city will soon get its largest facility for treating sewage generated in areas newly merged with the Chennai Corporation.

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Hundreds are involved in the construction of the plant, which will have the capacity to treat 120 million litres of sewage a day (mld), at Koyambedu. This will be the 13th facility of Chennai Metrowater and is expected to enhance the sewage treatment capacity from the

Image 9 & 10: Plans for sewage treatment plans that have been unable to keep up with the needs of the city.



Map 5: The Wastewater maze showing modern Chennai's sewage layout and notes the 400 untreated sewage outfalls that exist.



Map 6: A man showing sewage outfalls along the River, 1927. (Accessed through the 'Archives and Maps of Water: Environmental Justice and Cartography for a Coastal City, Chennai 1800-present' project)

TRACK 4

Generic music.

AUDIO GUIDE You are now on the Quaid-E-Millath Bridge, our fourth location. You will see that the fencing continues here, and these banks are clean. Here the river even looks peaceful, with some flow...

With a 'click' the soundscape transforms. It is the city late at night. It is quiet enough to hear slow-moving water, the occasional bat, whispering trees: peepul, neem and coral. In the distance a single bike approaches and then footsteps but soft enough we do not register them. Closer to us, to the mic, someone takes a deep breath.

DOCTOR 22nd January, 21:11. I've gotten through the fencing near Quaid-E-Millath Bridge- collection point CR9. My father thinks I'm at Atthai's¹⁰⁶ house. Atthai thinks I am at my graduation celebration. I could have been a criminal mastermind, but here I am creeping in through fences and scooping—

A resounding crash, a yell: two men struggling, a bag splashes into the water, and with a click—

AUDIO GUIDE Fencing off the banks has been a crucial first step as it prevents further encroachments. Not long after the banks were cleared, we had encroachers returning. Even after the fences went up, there were several cases of people climbing over the fence.

DOCTOR I did not climb over the fence!

POLICE CONSTABLE Troublemakers— miscreants. Making me run in the middle of the night. Coming here, jumping the fence and doing drugs.

DOCTOR I didn't jump. It was broken near the bridge. I just climbed in—

POLICE CONSTABLE Did you see the sign? ‘Entry prohibited’. Let me see what’s in this bag–

DOCTOR Just test tubes and– sir please be careful with that. It’s my father’s dictaphone and very expensive. –
DON’T PRESS–

POLICE CONSTABLE Do you want another one?

DOCTOR Sorry, sorry. I’m not trying to tell you what to do sir, but I’m only here to–

A click.

AUDIO GUIDE –discuss the next vital piece of infrastructure the G-CUPP will create. Look down to your right, towards the bank, near the bridge, do you see a pipe? Do you know what it is?

DOCTOR *(With a groan)* It’s my equipment bag sir. I’m a medical student. I study at the medical college, just there, behind us... I have my ID card– Let me find it, sir...

POLICE CONSTABLE Hurry up. Where is it?

DOCTOR I must have dropped it when you surprised me– not that it was your fault, sir!... I’m not lying. I swear sir, on my mother, I’m not lying– You can call my professor– You–

POLICE CONSTABLE Needles! For drugs? I know you medical student types. How many have I caught sneaking around outside your college, doing all kinds of things? Wastes like you are going to be doctors?

AUDIO GUIDE –must realise that for any city of this size to function, one of the most important problems to solve is that of waste. *(Pause)* We are specifically speaking of course, of wastewater–

DOCTOR A sample sir. That’s all I was doing. Taking a sample of the wastewater...

POLICE CONSTABLE For what?

- DOCTOR** For a medical experiment to... it's very complicated...
- POLICE CONSTABLE** Do you think I'm too stupid to understand? All you medical types, looking down on everyone else.
- DOCTOR** No sir, I can tell you. Can I have some water, first? My mouth is bleeding from when you—
(backtracks) from when I hurt myself... yes, I should be more—
- AUDIO GUIDE** —careful treatment to prevent public water bodies from becoming carriers of deadly pathogens leading to the spread of waterborne diseases. You know the kind—
- DOCTOR** Dengue, typhoid, diphtheria, all that is down there, sir. In that water. I'm studying how they spread. Do you remember the illness that everyone caught last December?
- POLICE CONSTABLE** How could I not remember? My daughter got it. No one could tell us what it was. And why all those people are sick?
- DOCTOR** I want to understand. Where does a sickness like that come from?
- AUDIO GUIDE** Communities living in bad conditions along the rivers, many of the encroaching settlements the G-CUPP has removed, for instance, are frequently infected by such diseases.
- POLICE CONSTABLE** From such settlements such diseases can spread far and wide.
- DOCTOR** Yes, that is what they say but-
- AUDIO GUIDE** Just think, if you have a driver or maid working in your house and they live in such a place... They can't avoid infection. And they carry it to your house, and other houses they work at. In less than a week it can become an epidemic. This was the case

with a patient zero from the 1960s, when a maid having contracted dengue, failed to take proper precautions—

POLICE CONSTABLE She worked in eight households and infected them all.

DOCTOR But why did the maid get sick in the first place? How did she get sick?

AUDIO GUIDE Living near the wastewater makes such communities susceptible to—

DOCTOR No. The diseases were created by dumping untreated sewage into the river. There are 3.9 million people in the city sir—

AUDIO GUIDE 11 million people live in this city, and—

DOCTOR And who knows how many shops, hotels, factories.

AUDIO GUIDE The city's expansion has been rapid, something to be proud of—

DOCTOR But not every litre of sewage released is treated, sir...

AUDIO GUIDE Many people, shops, and industries don't connect to the sewage line despite the government's best efforts.

DOCTOR Last year, officially 400 million litres of sewage was treated and released into the River. But 3.9 million people create much, much more sewage, sir. All that doesn't just disappear sir when we flush, so where does it go?

AUDIO GUIDE It is worth noting the government offered several schemes to help houses and businesses connect to the main sewage line. Not everyone complied. Especially in poorer neighbourhoods—

DOCTOR Not the poor sir. Not really. The river is carrying sewage made by the wealthy, the middle class, made in industries we build, in the restaurants we eat at... We're creating water that's perfect for disease-causing bacteria: they thrive down there—adapt, become stronger and harder to fight. Then they infect the poor who have nowhere else to live. But when the illness passes back up to us, we blame them...

AUDIO GUIDE But don't worry. We're on the problem! If you look down at the river—

DOCTOR Look up there, sir—

AUDIO GUIDE You'll see the foundation of a state-of-the-art STP, a Sewage Treatment Plant—

DOCTOR They've built that fence, cleared people out saying that will make it clean. But you look down at the water: that colour, that smell... Do you think that was just because of the cheris¹⁰⁷?

AUDIO GUIDE Details about the state-of-the-art STP will be published widely when ready. Once you've had a look, make your way to the next location: Napier Bridge.

The Audio Guide cuts out abruptly and we're left with only the ambient sound of the Doctor's location.

DOCTOR I must collect a sample and do tests, you see that? If I can prove that this river is responsible for the diseases, I can demand better sewage treatment and— I can... have my bag?

POLICE CONSTABLE Take it before I decide to lock you up.

DOCTOR Thank you, sir! Thank you!

- POLICE CONSTABLE** Take your sample. Do you live in the college hostel?
- DOCTOR** Me? My family has a house, there in Chintadripet. Your daughter, she recovered?
- POLICE CONSTABLE** She's better now. But still weak. She hasn't gone to school since she fell sick. But that she's very happy about.
- DOCTOR** It'll affect her for some time to come, sir. That strain was strong and only getting stronger and stronger and stronger. In fifty years, who knows what we'll need to fight it? But if she eats well, and rests, she'll get better, and I'll find a way to stop things like that from spreading. You wait and see sir.

We stay with the doctor for a moment, hear him gather his things, hear the police officer drive away, hear the river get closer, and then it goes off with a click. A watery silence. Another click, but the audioscape is different: late evening, an adhaan¹⁰⁸ in the background and an onslaught of traffic.

DANIEL *(Heavy with cold)* Hey Sathish, where are you? The tour's due in an hour and you're scaring me. You said you'd manage to fix it, right? Call me, please.

Off with a click, on with a click.

DANIEL Sathish da, my uncle is getting mad. He told the Minister he'd have it by the end of the day, so whatever is wrong fix it, please. I hope to god you don't need me to rerecord, I have this viral that's been going around. I caught it and I can't shake it. People are dying, did you hear? But if this doesn't kill me, my uncle will if you don't have that tour ready, alright? Call me back!

Off with a click, on with a click.

DANIEL Okay, I'm on my way to the studio, I'm near Quaid-E-Millath bridge, so I'll be there in ten minutes. You hear me? You have ten minutes to

108 Islamic call to prayer

finish it and have it ready on a USB stick. And seriously da, I'm never recommending you for a job again.

Off with a click, on with a click.

DANIEL ... Sathish...Listen I'm sorry, please just don't listen to the other voice notes. I'm sorry. You be with Karthu. It's just a viral, she'll recover. She has to. She's a hero da. And she's strong. All those cases we're hearing, it's old people. She'll be fine in the hospital. I'll get you a few extra days... or maybe you can just send me whatever you have, and I'll find someone else to edit it. Okay? Whatever issues you were having with the tracks being weird and extra sound, someone else can fix it. Just tell me what the file names were, and I'll get it from the studio myself. Give Karthu my love, okay?

The sound clicks off. Watery static and then silence.

AUDIO GUIDE Please make your way to Location 5. Napiers Bridge. This is the final location on our tour.

This intermittent sound finally cuts out and there is only the watery static, which plays for several minutes, even as the audience walks on.



Image 11: Chintadripetta Bridge 1803. Notice that the river area is more pastureland than flowing water. This could be a truer image of the River's ecology as 'Eri-Kulma' (Ponds and tanks) landscape, suggesting that the riverine landscape and geomorphology we have come to take for granted is constructed. (Accessed through the 'Archives and Maps of Water: Environmental Justice and Cartography for a Coastal City, Chennai 1800-present' project)

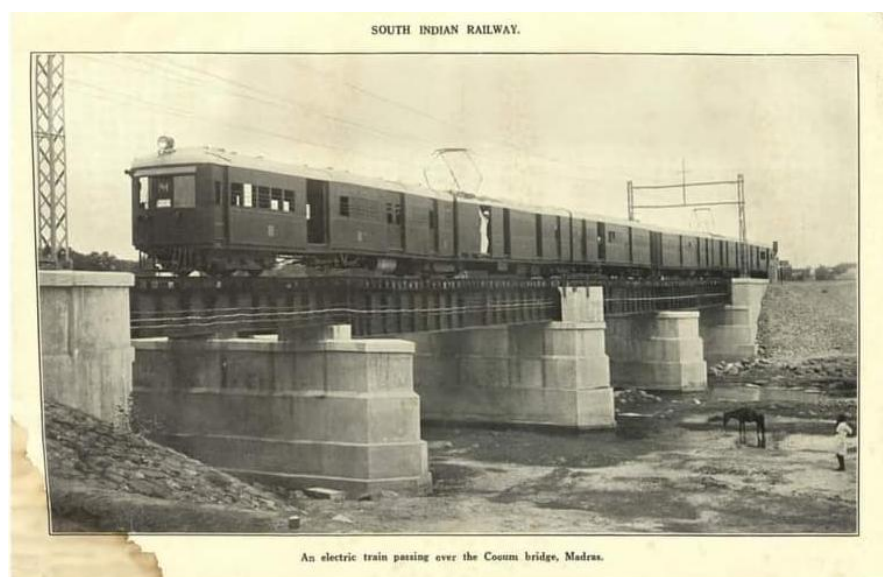


Image 12: From 'Report on the Indian railways 1932-33' this image suggests again that the River is prone to going dry and that people living around it as used to using the river bed to graze cattle. (Accessed through the 'Archives and Maps of Water: Environmental Justice and Cartography for a Coastal City, Chennai 1800-present' project)

TRACK 5

Watery static.

THE VOICE They've tried to make and make and make a river here... a great river worthy of a great city. But open your eyes and look. What is truly here?

Generic music

AUDIO TOUR Napier's Bridge is the final location of this consultation. If you look towards the sea, you will see where the River flows out to the Bay of Bengal, and to the left is the City port. This coast has always been a place of trade and commerce. In the last four hundred years, trade and commerce have brought in wealth and allowed the humble fishing and farming hamlets on the edge of a marshy, wet plain to grow into this thriving metropolis. Consistent injections of development, modern infrastructure and imaginative thinking have been key to this growth. The G-CUPP is only the latest in a long line of essential infrastructure projects that help remake the city. Have you—

Soundscape changes, the beach beside the river mouth, cars in the distance, the ocean at equal distance, a net drops into the water, someone sniffing, footsteps and then—

YOUNG SATHISH — got a death wish? She's going to notice you just walked off.

YOUNG KARTHU Get lost. What do you care?

YOUNG SATHISH I don't!

YOUNG KARTHU Good.

YOUNG SATHISH And you'll get kicked out and have to go back to that village you're from—

YOUNG KARTHU I hope they do! Who would want to be in this stupid City? There's only ever noise, and dust and dirt and sewage water. And everyone here is as good as sewage! Go away!

YOUNG SATHISH Stop it, you'll push me in! Wait... have you been crying? You look like a tomato—

YOUNG KARTHU Shut up.

YOUNG SATHISH No, really. Your face is so red... are you having a fit or something?

YOUNG KARTHU You shut your stupid— ... Are you recording me again?

A flurry of motion we hear a short struggle, the young Sathish falling with an oomph. Karthu has the recorder.

YOUNG KARTHU I'm going to throw it in.

YOUNG SATHISH Stop! I'll tell ma'am—

YOUNG KARTHU I don't care!

YOUNG SATHISH Wait! Wait... I'm sorry about your textbook.

YOUNG KARTHU And...

YOUNG SATHISH I'm sorry I told those boys to drop their ice creams on your hair.

YOUNG KARTHU Why did you do that?

YOUNG SATHISH I was annoyed... Ma'am said she was going to call my father and... I was irritated.

YOUNG KARTHU You threw the book out the window, not me.

YOUNG SATHISH You were irritating me.

YOUNG KARTHU You were irritating me first! You've been bullying all term.

YOUNG SATHISH Because you were stuck up.

YOUNG KARTHU I was not!

- YOUNG SATHISH** You didn't talk to anyone –
- YOUNG KARTHU** I was shy! And no one talked to me. The first person who talked to me was you, and that was only to make fun of my accent. I'm throwing it in –
- YOUNG SATHISH** Don't! I'll... stop making fun of you.
- YOUNG KARTHU** That's not good enough. Everyone does it now.
- YOUNG SATHISH** I'll tell people to stop. I promise.
- YOUNG KARTHU** Why should I believe you?
- YOUNG SATHISH** If I promise I mean it. And my father gave me that recorder and I don't want to lose it.
- YOUNG KARTHU** ... You have to tell people nice things about me. True things.
- YOUNG SATHISH** Like what?
- YOUNG KARTHU** That I'm not from a village for one.
- YOUNG SATHISH** Okay.
- YOUNG KARTHU** That I'm not just a padips. I can do all kinds of things.
- YOUNG SATHISH** Like –
- YOUNG KARTHU** I can swim. I'm a really good swimmer.
- YOUNG SATHISH** Sure, I'll tell people that.
- YOUNG KARTHU** And tell them I'm cool.
- YOUNG SATHISH** I thought I was supposed to tell them true things. Sorry! Don't! I'll tell them you're cool.
- YOUNG KARTHU** Cooler than Shanthi Reddy.

- YOUNG SATHISH** Shanthi Reddy is three years older and— okay okay, I'll say it. I promise I'll say all of it. Can I have it back now?
- YOUNG KARTHU** You can't forget.
- YOUNG SATHISH** I won't forget.
- YOUNG KARTHU** Swear on your parents.
- YOUNG SATHISH** I'm not doing that!
- YOUNG KARTHU** Swear on something important to you then.
- YOUNG SATHISH** I... swear on the recorder, okay?
- YOUNG KARTHU** It's just a machine.
- YOUNG SATHISH** My mother gave it to me before she... Can I have it back? Careful! You'd have slipped right in!
- YOUNG KARTHU** Thanks. Sorry. Here.
- YOUNG SATHISH** Are you staying?
- YOUNG KARTHU** Just for a minute. I want to see if that fisherman catches anything.
- YOUNG SATHISH** What's he going to catch in the River? Garbage probably.
- YOUNG KARTHU** Then I'll watch that.
- YOUNG SATHISH** You'll get in trouble if you aren't back at the bus on time.
- YOUNG KARTHU** I'll be back. Oh, it's happening!

There's a flurry of sound- the nets being dragged, the slapping of fish against each other—

- YOUNG SATHISH** They must be toxic.

YOUNG KARTHU They look fine.

YOUNG SATHISH I can't believe there's fish in the River.

YOUNG KARTHU Why not?

YOUNG SATHISH This river... come on.

YOUNG KARTHU I don't understand.

YOUNG SATHISH You're not from the City, but everyone in the City knows, it's just... not much of a river. It barely even flows most of the year.

YOUNG KARTHU So?

YOUNG SATHISH What kind of river doesn't flow?

YOUNG KARTHU Lots of rivers don't flow all the time. Back home—

YOUNG SATHISH In the village, which is green and resplendent—

YOUNG KARTHU Resplendent?

YOUNG SATHISH ...I read.

YOUNG KARTHU I don't come from a village, but in my town, some rivers come during the monsoon and disappear in the summer, leaving behind ¹⁰⁹ and grassland. There's nothing strange about it. Maybe no one in the City knows the River as well as they think they do.

YOUNG SATHISH ...Maybe. Where are you going?

YOUNG KARTHU Going to talk to the fisherman. Are you coming?

YOUNG SATHISH He looks... busy.

YOUNG KARTHU Then he can tell us that.

109 Lake/Pond usually rainfed

YOUNG SATHISH ... You're not afraid of much, are you?

YOUNG KARTHU No. You should tell people that about me too. I'm fearless...

YOUNG SATHISH Fearless is a little much... Okay wait, I'm coming.

The audio fades and all we hear for a moment is the sea, and then –

AUDIO GUIDE And that is what is coming for this City through the G-CUPP. A shining future.

Thank you for joining us on this tour. Please do email us with feedback, questions and thoughts. We cannot assure you of direct responses, but everything will be logged and presented to the departments concerned. Here's looking towards a world-class river for a world-class –

SATHISH Hello? Are you there... *(Silence)* ... I'm crazy, aren't I? The Poltergeist of Premier Pro is not an actual thing... and still, I heard you, didn't I? It is you, haunting my editing suite, my hard disks, the tracks... that voice... it is you, isn't it Karthu?

I don't understand how, but why? Why are you in there, when you're not out here anymore? Karthu, my Karthu, please... what am I supposed to do? Oh God.

Watery static patient, and then-

SATHISH No, no ghosts here. Just a mad editor. With a deadline I can't put off anymore. Pongal release of a public consultation. When did politics become a joke? ... I've got to fix all this, don't I?

Watery static.

VOICE Sathish–

SATHISH Karthu?

KARTHU/VOICE Sathish—

SATHISH Karthu... is that you? Please tell me—

KARTHU/VOICE Sathish, the room is freezing! You—

SATHISH I remember this- wait. Stop it-

KARTHU/VOICE You silly idiot, you left the AC running for hours!
You are paying this month's electricity bill...

SATHISH I know what you're doing! Get lost! DELETE,
DELETE, DELETE—

KARTHU You silly idiot, you left the AC running for hours!
You are paying this month's electricity bill... We
didn't get the funding for the film. I thought we
had such a good chance. I've done half the work
already, but... no one wants a film about the
River... because why would anyone want
something true? They said the funding has gone to
some public project about the river, to spout lies
about all the good they're doing... Anyway, I
guess the dream is dead for now. I already called
the newspaper about work. If they'll have me
back... I know you said you have to meet Daniel
about this new project he has for you, but when
you come home could you bring snacks and a lot of
sympathy? I know the film can still get made...
someday, but can we sit down and pretend it's
going to be made tomorrow and all those stories,
those people, and the waters themselves, that
they'll all get a hearing? That we won't lose them
all like this? ...

SATHISH You're not Karthu...?

VOICE ... can we sit down and pretend it's going to be
made tomorrow and all those stories, those people,
and the waters themselves, that they'll all get a
hearing?...

SATHISH I've lost Karthu and no recordings will bring her back.

VOICE But we remember. Water always remembers.

SATHISH You can't bring her back. You can't...

Muffled sobs, then a phone rings.

SATHISH Hey Daniel... no I'm fine... the audio, yeah uh... no no I don't need more time. I've fixed it all... I can upload it for the launch tomorrow directly. Yup, it just needed a full day of work... Yeah, you sound great. I'll talk to you soon, man.

We can hear him after the call ends, breathing, and this is mixed in with that low watery static.

SATHISH ... Karthu?

VOICE No. We're sorry. *(Silence, only breathing and static)* Would you like to hear it again?...

SATHISH ...Yes, please.

KARTHU/VOICE ...but can we sit down and pretend it's going to be made tomorrow and all those stories, those people, and the waters themselves, that they'll all get a hearing? That we won't lose them all like this? ... Anyway, I'll be where I always am... Come back to me soon.

Only the water stays. It is more clearly the rush of the river, the slow trickle of a stream, the glug of marshes, the gentle shush of a lake, the sound of waves at the river's mouth... all joining to create strange music that carries us, for the last time, into silence.

End.

Theertham

Characters

Ammala Gopalan	50, long-widowed housewife; lonely; loves her daughter to pieces
Jaya Gopalan	23, maths tuition teacher; stuck; dating Paro
Giri	65, retired lawyer; devout; single-minded
Paro	23, successful software engineer; Confident; cares for aging father
Lalitha	32, engineer; clever; does what it takes
Kamban	45, water diviner; lost and confused; trying to atone
Davam	36, water diviner; ambitious; never one to lose an opportunity

Location

All the action takes place in the back garden of the Gopalan house located in the declining suburb of Korai Nagar on the edge of The City. Once a lower-middle-class neighbourhood, Korai Nagar underwent several failed attempts at gentrification. This should be reflected in the house and garden, in Ammala and Paro's dressing and speed of speech. Everyone who isn't from Korai Nagar, including Paro, must look, and feel, just a bit more polished, especially in Act I.

Foretale

Lights reveal a woman kneeling next to some earthen pots of water. She picks one up and starts to drink. As she drinks, a noise starts: drowned voices. They get louder the more she drinks. But she does not stop drinking, not to breathe, not when the water sloshes down her body, not even when she chokes.

VOICES

A curse on you, your home, your loves.

You will look, you will not see

You will listen, you will not hear

You will know, and then you will forget

We curse you

We curse you

We curse you

Thrice said it is done.

We cannot undo it

Water had two sides, and both must be paid.

Now go,

Pay the price.

When the woman is done, she tosses the pot aside and looks out into the audience. She holds her hand out as if to touch someone. She falls over dead.

ACT I

Scene I

The dead woman remains where she collapsed. The stage is set up around her.

First, an old, defunct well is assembled over/around her body. Then around the well a garden that tells us it belongs to an ambitious owner of modest means. There is low wobbly plastic furniture, some stools and a table, a rusty gate and a garden wall. We also see the dusty edge of a house: prominently a grilled kitchen window and a back door into the house.

The house is stage right, and the garden gate is stage left. Beyond the gate is a back lane leading out to Korai Nagar. The front of the house is rarely used by those in the know.

Once the stage is set, it is early December, morning. The sun has not quite managed to pull itself up into the sky, but the street is already awake, A young woman, JAYA enters. She hastily braids her hair and greets passing neighbours as she does.

We hear frogs. One hops in through the gate and gives Jaya a scare.

AMMALA, her mother, appears at the back gate, fresh from a visit to the temple and holding another frog.

AMMALA

Don't worry, they won't eat you.

JAYA

Amma!

AMMALA

I won't eat you either.

JAYA

I didn't expect you back yet. Shoo! Get away uglies, before I step on you.

AMMALA

Don't listen to her, Kumbhakarnan¹¹⁰. You're a handsome fellow.

JAYA

Ha! He's the right size to be Kumbhakarnan.

¹¹⁰ A powerful demon from the legend of the Ramayana, famous for his size and appetite, and a curse that has him asleep for six months of the year, and awake for the other six to eat and wreak havoc.

AMMALA

And he loves his sleep. Wait and see. The moment the sun is properly up, he'll be snoring in the hibiscus pot. Off you go Manimekalai.

JAYA

You and your frogs.

AMMALA

If it rains now, it'll be thanks to our frogs.

JAYA

You took them to the temple?

AMMALA

Even the head priest was impressed at how both of them listened to me. When the young priest went to tie the thali¹¹¹ for Manimekalai, she started hopping around like mad, but then I told her to calm down, and she went as still as a rock until they finished marrying them.

JAYA

Manimekalai was a nun Amma. Her whole story was that she didn't want to marry.

AMMALA

Our Manimekalai is a romantic. She's pined for him for years—

JAYA

I saw her flirting with the smaller one.

AMMALA

Illeyaraja. But don't even say his name now. All that is done.

JAYA

They've both gotten fatter this last week.

AMMALA

I've been feeding them a little extra— don't look like that. They're not breeding, and I thought maybe they weren't big enough.

JAYA

Maybe they're conservative. No babies out of wedlock.

111 Sacred thread used to sanctify most Hindu marriages. Tied around the bride's neck, not unlike a yoke.

AMMALA

Mch, it's this sad excuse for a garden. I prayed asking the Devi¹¹² to send us some money to fix it up and build them a little pond.

JAYA

You should have prayed for some rain. They breed in the monsoon.

AMMALA

Jaya, just a few thousand? The Kandappas' gardener said he would show me how to build a proper pond, but I'd have to buy the concrete.

JAYA

Make him buy it. He has a crush on you.

AMMALA

You think everyone has a crush on me.

JAYA

Because you're so cute.

AMMALA

Don't distract me. A few thousand?

JAYA

Okay. We'll return the new water heater.

AMMALA

Return the— I can't take cold baths. In December that too!

JAYA

Water heater or frog pond. You decide.

AMMALA

What if I take a thousand- uh two thousand, from the big account? (*When she sees Jaya's face*) Just asking— Ayyo, no, no. No lessons. Please...

JAYA

What are the two kinds of accounts?

AMMALA

Jaya I—

112 The Goddess

JAYA

What are the two kinds of accounts?

AMMALA

Current account and savings account.

JAYA

Which account can you take money from?

AMMALA

Current account, but—

JAYA

Which account must you never touch unless it is an emergency?

AMMALA

They're saying it might not rain this year. Isn't that an emergency? A frog emergency?

JAYA

Which account must you never touch?

AMMALA

I must never touch the savings account.

JAYA

Because?

AMMALA

No one will give me health insurance because I'm diabetic.

JAYA

So?

AMMALA

If I have a health emergency I need the money, but I'm very healthy!

JAYA

Apart from the diabetes. Amma, you're getting old—

AMMALA

I'm not old!

JAYA

Leave that money alone. It's not enough to pay for half a surgery yet. ... I'll give you money for a pond next month. I have the Kandappa twins as students—

AMMALA

Those brats?

JAYA

I charged the Kandappas a brat tax.

AMMALA

So hard working. Just like your father. But Jaya, don't be too much like him. He worked hard and never could enjoy his money. *(Suddenly there's the distant sound of thunder)* Did you hear that?

JAYA

Finally!

AMMALA

It's all because of the frogs. Well done Manimekalai and Kumbhakarnan!

JAYA

Sure. *(Peering up at the sky as more thunder crashes)* No grey clouds though.

AMMALA

The thunder means the rain is coming. Wait and see. You think I should ask the government for payment? My frogs made it rain.

JAYA

If you can get a naia¹¹³ paisa from the government for anything I'll never teach you about banks again. They still owe the neighbourhood association for the damage those metro rail people did to our electricity lines. And they didn't even end up building the station here.

AMMALA

The Kandappas said they'll finish the new line by next summer and finish our station also.

JAYA

The Kandappas are hoping that we'll be in the City proper and that the land they bought near the old highway will finally be worth something.

113 A single, even one paisa. (100 paisas make up a rupee)

AMMALA

Maybe it will. Maybe they'll finish the line –

JAYA

They'll never finish the metro and no one in the City would care if they did. They'll make Hong Kong or *(She gets a text)* ... Florida part of the City before us.

AMMALA

Where are you going?

JAYA

Just for a walk. I have back-to-back tuitions today. Oh god that Giri is coming. To gossip. Please stop telling him you're looking for young men for me.

AMMALA

I never said that!

As Jaya leaves GIRI enters. He tries to greet her, but she waves, hastily steps around him, and exits.

GIRI

Mrs. Gopalan, good morning. Where is Jaya off to this early? I saw that Paro was visiting her father. I hope they don't still sneak off in the morning to smoke in those trees behind the temple.

AMMALA

They're grown-up women now Giri iyyah, they don't do all that anymore. I haven't ground the maav¹¹⁴ yet–

GIRI

No rush. I can have a coffee while you do it. I've been up since four Mrs. Gopalan, I need a strong coffee.

Ammala left with no option disappears into the kitchen and reappears at the grilled window.

AMMALA

Why so early?

GIRI

I got a strange call from the Kandappas, at 5:00 am, saying there was an emergency at their old highway property, and that could I go there urgently.

114 Batter for dosas, thin rice and lentil pancakes. It's got to be ground well and it's not uncommon for retired men and bachelors to buy it off housewives. These days you do get it premade in grocery stores, but such novel delights are yet to arrive in Korai Nagar.

AMMALA

What happened?

GIRI

When I got there, it was like a market. Or the stock market maybe. Dozens of people, everyone yelling.

AMMALA

What people?

GIRI

Diviners. Engineers.

AMMALA

Diviners?

GIRI

Two days ago, the Kandappas put out an ad inviting borewell companies and water diviners to come search for aquifers.

AMMALA

An aquifer in Korai Nagar?

GIRI

Why not?

AMMALA

All the wells have dried up.

GIRI

Manmade wells. Like this one. What is it? Fifty feet deep? They can go in hundreds of metres now. It was an inspired idea. We haven't used groundwater around here in decades. There could be something down deep. And if there was a good-sized aquifer there, the value of their land would go up. But so would Korai Nagar's overall value. People will want to move here because of the water.

AMMALA

But there's no bus or train. And autos will only leave you on the highway—

GIRI

All that will follow if people want to move here.

AMMALA

But what was the emergency?

GIRI

The Kandappas had put the advertisement out, uncertain even if a single diviner would show up. But today, twelve turned up.

AMMALA

Twelve?!

GIRI

From twelve different borewell companies. And you know how they're all enemies? When they saw each other, they got angry, and started fighting. Mr Kandappa said he was worried they'd start beating each other up, so he intervened. He said he would give the contract to whomever first found water on his property. Like a competition. But he would also invite some neighbours to watch. The companies could try selling their services to anyone interested. I was a little irritated at the subterfuge, but it might do Korai Nagar some good to have a few diviners checking for groundwater. After all, what if water from the City Supply fails?

AMMALA

The thunder—

GIRI

Thunder is well and good. But where is the rain?

AMMALA

The City Supply said there was no need to panic.

GIRI

Maybe not, but the Kandappas are thinking ahead. And they're helping us all think ahead.

AMMALA

All?

GIRI

They invited the whole neighbourhood. It was like an early morning party. I only left because we don't have land for a well. And I was getting hungry.

AMMALA

Why didn't they call us?

GIRI

Oh... maybe they did? You might have missed the call. If you put it on silent at night—

AMMALA

No. My phone is always on loud. And there's no miscall.

GIRI

Maybe they called Jaya.

AMMALA

She would have said.

GIRI

Maybe they just forgot. You're better off for it Mrs. Gopalan. They do charge, these diviners. A pretty packet it costs.

AMMALA

We have land, we have a well. Didn't you once tell me people here thought it was a sacred well?

GIRI

In those days, and those are bygone days— where are you going?

AMMALA

To see what's happening. I haven't seen a diviner working in years. We might be too poor to afford a diviner, but the Kandappas can't object to me watching?

GIRI

No, I suppose not.

AMMALA

Ever since Govind died, people act like I'm invisible... because we have no money. We'll see...

GIRI

But what about my maav? Mrs. Gopalan?

She leaves without responding. Giri drinks his coffee, muttering about egos and how he's hungry. He peers into the well as he exits.

GIRI

Should have filled you in a long time ago...

He exits. The stage fades to black.

Scene II

An hour later. The same garden and no one is around. It is sunny, with no sign of rain or thunder. Enter Jaya, and another woman, PARO.

JAYA

You have to go back?

PARO

Meetings with lawyers and doctors and all that.

JAYA

I could come along.

PARO

And your tuition students?

JAYA

They're all going to fail anyway.

PARO

You say that to their parents?

JAYA

Oh yes. Honesty is the best policy.

PARO

Liar. Here don't forget this.

JAYA

Normally people first buy presents for their girlfriends. Only then for their girlfriends' mothers. Paro— this looks expensive.

PARO

I got a bonus a work.

JAYA

For what?

PARO

Just existing.

JAYA

Paro, I love you, but you don't get bonuses for existing.

PARO

My boss reads horoscopes and mine says that wherever I go, money follows, so he wants to keep me working for him.

JAYA

In high school, you practically lived here, and I think my family went bankrupt just feeding you.

PARO

They should have adopted me. Or better yet, let me marry into the family.

JAYA

What's in it for me?

PARO

My loveliness?

JAYA

Pass. But... my mother wants a frog pond.

PARO

You'll marry me for a frog pond?

JAYA

Why not? Shall we run away to Canada? Finland?

PARO

Ah. I'll settle for you running away to the City with me. (*Jaya is quiet*) Did you look at the course I sent you?

JAYA

Exams start next month, and my students are panicking about trigonometry.

PARO

I knew you wouldn't. (*Taking her phone out*) Look now.

JAYA

Paro—

PARO

It's a diploma course that's 'highly respected in the job market'. My friend did it and she got three job offers.

JAYA

I won't make the cut.

PARO

You'll easily make it. You can apply today. Start in Jan. You can do it all online, or... attend classes in their centre in the City.

JAYA

And live where?

PARO

So!

JAYA

Careful.

PARO

Sorry uh, my housemate is moving out in three weeks. We could live together!

JAYA

Paro, Paro, I know you're very excited, but don't fall into the flowerpots. The frogs sleep there.

PARO

It's everything we talked about! Come on Jaya, just do it.

JAYA

It's expensive.

PARO

You said you were saving up.

JAYA

And then the bills had to be paid, the washing machine fixed, and the water heater replaced—

PARO

Who needs a water heater? It's 21°C.

JAYA

Not all of us lived in Amsterdam for three years—

PARO

Utrecht—

JAYA

We find 21°C very cold.

PARO

Do you not want to be together?

JAYA

Of course, I do!

PARO

You keep saying you miss me, you want to be with me, but whenever I try to help you move to the City, where there are... less prying eyes, you... delay it.

JAYA

So that doesn't mean I don't want to be with you. We got back together because I made a move.

PARO

At my mother's funeral.

JAYA

Her spirit was egging me on.

PARO

Egging you, more likely. Stop. I don't understand. What's wrong? Do you not want to live in the City?

JAYA

The City of shining lights, where everything and everyone is awesome? Of course, I want to move to the wonderful City.

PARO

Is this about your mother?

JAYA

It's about money Paro. That's all. I don't have enough. But I have more students now; I'll save and enrol for the next one.

PARO

That's in six months.

JAYA

We did a year of long distance when you went to Amsterdam.

PARO

Utrecht. And then we broke up.

JAYA

We won't break up. You know things are difficult. That I can't just leave her to fend for herself?

PARO

Of course.

JAYA

I'll enrol in, is it May?

PARO

Really?

JAYA

Yes. Promise. Now I haven't seen you in weeks. Don't I get any presents?

PARO

... I don't know if you deserve one.

JAYA

I have a present for you.

PARO

What is it?

JAYA

You'll have to follow me to find out...

Paro relents and follows her into the house. A few moments later, a man, KAMBAN runs onstage, looking hunted. He jumps the gate and hides in the Gopalan garden. A woman, LALITHA, follows.

LALITHA

Kamban? *(Silence)* I saw you jump that wall. Don't make me follow you. *(Silence)* It wasn't that bad Kamban. And no one noticed.

KAMBAN

Everyone noticed. One of those diviners worked for Jaggan.

LALITHA

I know.

KAMBAN

I told you we shouldn't have come. Why did you make us come?

LALITHA

When we worked for Jaggan, did we ever accept such small jobs? I thought it would be a small job, safe from prying eyes and you... you could practice. *(Beat)* I was trying to help.

KAMBAN

You helped put our business in the ground.

LALITHA

I'm not the one who can't find water. *(Beat)* Sorry... Kamban, Kamban, come back up. I didn't mean— you can still find water. We'll go back and tell them you were sick.

KAMBAN

They know we're lying. One of the locals called me a fraud.

LALITHA

You're not a fraud. You're... in a slump.

KAMBAN

It's been a month, Lalitha. A month of fuzzy nonsense. What if it's gone? What if the curse—

LALITHA

Not this again.

KAMBAN

I'm being punished.

LALITHA

For what? Doing your jobs? Stop this kind of thinking. It's making your problem worse. *(Kamban lets out a groan)* All this self-flagellation. It's not good for you. You need to relax. Let's go get lunch, have a rest and then I can get us another plot before the day is up, I'm sure of it.

KAMBAN

Before word spreads you mean?

LALITHA

Don't be silly.

KAMBAN

I'm not doing it.

LALITHA

Not doing what?

KAMBAN

I'm quitting.

LALITHA

You're hungry and annoyed, and I am too. It was a waste coming here— Korai Nagar. Backwards dump with dumpy people. Come on, let's go.

KAMBAN

No.

LALITHA

Are you going to live in that sad little garden for the rest of your life?

KAMBAN

Maybe.

LALITHA

Don't make me follow you in.

KAMBAN

You're too short to jump the wall.

Lalitha marches to the gate, pushes it open and grabs him.

LALITHA

You are being a baby.

KAMBAN

Let me go! I'm not doing it Lalitha! My powers are gone.

LALITHA

Your brain's what's gone! We need business and we need it fast Kamban. Well and Water Solutions is low on funds and if we don't get some business soon—

KAMBAN

I don't care.

LALITHA

I see. So, you don't mind that I'll be out of work too? That I'll have to go crawling to my brother to ask for money to pay off the car and our legal fees? I see. After everything I did for you, after I stood up for you with Jaggan and then walked out when you did—

KAMBAN

I didn't ask you to. And technically after I did— a week after—

LALITHA

Because I was trying to get us money for Veeravelli! Fine, you live there forever, and I'll find a new diviner.

Before she can exit the garden, Ammala enters.

AMMALA

Hello? Can I help you?

LALITHA

This is your house? Sorry, Kamban we're at the wrong house— *(She hauls Kamban up and they try to shuffle out quietly.)*

AMMALA

Wait, you're the diviner from before. The one who couldn't— I mean the one everyone said—

LALITHA

That everyone said what? What?

AMMALA

Nothing. Sorry. I—

KAMBAN

Let's just go, please.

LALITHA

No, hold on. Do you know who this is? This is Kamban. He's helped build more wells and set up more farms than every other diviner there. Put together. He's never failed to find water, and never been wrong. Yes, Kamban didn't find anything for the Kandappans, but that happens to everyone occasionally, usually when the aquifer is so small it's not worth digging for. Kamban and I were the most honest people there. Whomever they pick will make the Kandappans dig two hundred feet for a month's supply of water. They're the real frauds. People like that diviner from Theertham Inc. Did you see him? Showy amateur. Kamban, when he finds something, works discretely. The reason he rushed away was because he sensed water somewhere else, isn't that right Kamban?

KAMBAN

What are you doing?

LALITHA

Making sure we can still find work after this. Just be vague, say you sensed something— What did you sense Kamban?

KAMBAN

Nothing certain... Just the pull of something, from this direction.

AMMALA

You don't think our well might—

LALITHA

Might just be. Hmmm, it's dry?

AMMALA

It's been dry for years. When we finally got City Supply water... maybe fifteen years ago? We stopped using it, and it must have run dry some time then.

LALITHA

Looks old—

AMMALA

Oh yes. It's older than the house. My husband's mother said it used to be a sacred well, but that must have been a long time ago...

LALITHA

Ah these sacred wells, you know they were just wells dug over good aquifers. We could... investigate for you?

KAMBAN

Lalitha! I'm... tired.

LALITHA

So sit down. Now Ms...

AMMALA

Mrs. Gopalan. Widowed.

LALITHA

Sorry for your loss. We would be looking at some divining and if there is water, a clean-up — it's not in good condition. Maybe deepening it. It would all be... 34. (looks at the house) For you 30.

AMMALA

Thousand?

LALITHA

This isn't easy work Mrs. Gopalan.

AMMALA

I know that it's just that I can't—

LALITHA

Ah, people never want to invest in their futures. It might be thirty thousand, but just think, you might never have to pay a water bill again. How much will you save in the long run?

AMMALA

That's only if there's water.

LALITHA

So just hire us for the consultation. That's just 10.

AMMALA

10?!

LALITHA

For you, 7.5. There is a drought coming. They've been saying the rain will be here since November, and here we are in February, and where is it? You know, Kamban's gut feelings have uncovered aquifers the size of a small ocean. That could be the case here.

KAMBAN

Lalitha—

But before he can get her away, Giri enters, having overheard the last part.

GIRI

Mrs Gopalan! This is very propitious news. Here I was coming to collect my maav, and what do I hear? Water, in this old well? Amazing.

AMMALA

Giri iyyah, I don't think—

GIRI

I have always said we should do something about the well, as a community. It was a sacred well once, people came from miles for the water.

LALITHA

We're from Well and Water Supply. Our card. Kamban, the diviner, Lalitha, engineer.

GIRI

Very good, very good. Giri Kumaran. A close friend of Mrs Gopalan's late husband.

LALITHA

And you must be the community leader?

GIRI

Oh? Not officially but—

LALITHA

Hard to believe. We learn to spot the leaders, in our line of work and I would have thought for certain—

GIRI

In a sense. People do come to me for help occasionally. Like when I helped with Govind's funeral eh?

LALITHA

And you know the local lore.

GIRI

Oh yes. So, you had no luck on the Kandappa property?

LALITHA

We found nothing interesting. Some others found a little, but not more than a few hundred litres.

GIRI

And you think there might be more?

LALITHA

We can't be sure until Kamban works his magic, but we're both getting a sense, yes.

GIRI

Very exciting. You've been given no refreshments? Mrs. Gopalan—

AMMALA

Giri iyyah, I don't want to—

GIRI

Nothing in the house? Some coffee at least?

KAMBAN

We don't want coffee. My partner is forgetting we have business elsewhere—

LALITHA

They postponed.

GIRI

Excellent. Mrs. Gopalan, coffee?

AMMALA

... Yes. Alright. I would like some help bringing it out Giri iyyah.

GIRI

Ah, of course. Come along. Don't go anywhere.

LALITHA

We won't- ow!

KAMBAN

Lalitha, we can't take her money.

LALITHA

Why not?

KAMBAN

I can't divine!

LALITHA

You had too many eyes on you. Made you nervous. Just calm down, drink coffee and try.

KAMBAN

And when I can't find anything?

LALITHA

If you can't, we say we found nothing and move on. I'll say we'll only take 6, and we come off looking good.

KAMBAN

You hated when other diviners did things like this. You said we need to have principles.

LALITHA

And we do. We need to stand by our principles through thick and thin... Unless the thin is that the thug we used to work for is set on ruining our business, not that he needs much help since we haven't found water in a month because Mr Mighty Diviner can't divine! When that's the thin, you put your principles away for the future and do and say whatever you need to.

KAMBAN

Cheat a woman? A widow?

LALITHA

We're not cheating her. There might be water.

KAMBAN

My powers aren't—

Ammala comes out with coffee, and Giri follows.

GIRI

Here you are. Please, sit. Now Mrs. Gopalan has been telling me that she's not interested in fixing her well. It's a bit too expensive for her.

KAMBAN

That's fine, please Mrs. Gopalan, no need to worry. We can leave.

GIRI

Nonsense. She can't afford it, but I have decided I will loan her the money.

AMMALA

Giri iyyah, there's no need—

GIRI

No, no I insist. It's for the good of Korai Nagar. You can pay me back in your own time.

LALITHA

Wonderful news.

GIRI

Now we won't be paying full price.

LALITHA

But—

GIRI

I know how all this works. We'll pay half. If you find water, we'll pay the other half.

LALITHA

We can't control—

GIRI

You don't want a poor widow to spend her hard-earned money on nothing, do you?

LALITHA

...No. Of course not. For Mrs. Gopalan. A special rate.

GIRI

Good.

LALITHA

Would you prefer to pay by cash or card? Kamban, put your coffee down. We should get to work.

GIRI

Phone pay?

LALITHA

Let me get a signal¹¹⁵.

As they wander to one edge of the garden searching for a signal, Ammala and Kamban look miserable and morose.

KAMBAN

Mrs Gopalan, I can see you aren't happy about this, and—

AMMALA

Giri iyyah is being very... kind. But I don't think my daughter will like this loan... That can't be helped now, but please Kamban sir, don't find water. I know! I know it's an evil thing to say when there's been no rain, but I worry that if there is water, even a little, Giri iyyah and everyone else will want us to fix the well, and we can't afford that.

KAMBAN

Surely you can say, no?

GIRI

All done.

LALITHA

I'll email you a receipt. Kamban?

115 Bars on a mobile.

KAMBAN

I'm ready.

LALITHA

Just make it convincing.

Kamban turns away and starts. He walks around a little, surveying the garden, the earth, the plants...

GIRI

This is how they suss out the best place to find the water. Study the soil, the— *(Kamban pauses and crouches down.)* He's found something. Now we'll start seeing the magic. Sometimes you can feel it, the power radiating off them. *(Kamban stands up and moves on.)* Ah, false alarm.

LALITHA

It's best if we're quiet.

GIRI

Of course.

Kamban suddenly stops, turns to them, and shrugs.

LALITHA

What?

KAMBAN

There's nothing here.

GIRI

How can you tell so quickly?

KAMBAN

The feeling is gone.

GIRI

Gone where?!

LALITHA

One minute. *(Pulling Kamban aside)* What are you doing?

KAMBAN

What you said. Tried. And nothing.

LALITHA

That was not you trying.

KAMBAN

What do you want me to do? I can't divine.

LALITHA

Shh! I want you to make it look real! Wave your hands, mumble, spin around... I know that's not your style, but it's what he expects. And you could say you found something, but it's hundreds of metres deep and—

KAMBAN

No.

LALITHA

We won't dig for them. We could say we don't have the technology— we could use the full payment Kamban.

KAMBAN

I'll do the song and dance. But I'm not lying about there being water.

LALITHA

He's just a bit tired. (*Joining the others*) We were working all day yesterday. Needed a pep-talk.

GIRI

I would have thought 3 thousand was all the pep-talk he needed. He can divine?

LALITHA

Of course! Kamban is an expert, a genius. Just watch.

Kamban starts again, this time, it's a little more energetic, a bit showier.

GIRI

Those other diviner's had instruments— why doesn't he—

LALITHA

Every diviner works differently.

GIRI

If you find nothing, I might want the money back.

LALITHA

That was not the deal.

Enter Jaya, followed by Paro, from the house.

JAYA

Amma, what's going on?

AMMALA

Oh, Jaya, you're back— and Paro kanna, so nice to see you.

JAYA

Who are they?

AMMALA

Now, don't get angry but, they're from a borewell company, just seeing about the well—

JAYA

I'm gone for five minutes—

GIRI

There's no need to worry Jaya, I'm loaning your mother the money, no interest, but it looks like she might get nothing out of it. Paro, you know people in the City? Can you find out if these two are frauds?

PARO

I think I'll—

AMMALA

Don't go yet Paro, I want to hear all about—

JAYA

You, whatever his name is, tell him to stop. We can't afford this. Giri, get your money back from them—

Kamban suddenly goes still.

GIRI

Maybe that is best.

LALITHA

You can't just stop he's already—

JAYA

What? What is he already doing that deserves payment? ... I can wave my hands and pretend too.

Kamban lurches forward as if in pain.

AMMALA

Kamban sir?

Kamban starts shaking. There is a sound that starts, but no one except Kamban can hear it yet.

GIRI

Ha! Conveniently, now he's divining.

JAYA

Is he faking it?

LALITHA

Kamban?

GIRI

This is all nonsense. Next, he'll wave his hands and roll his eyes back...

Kamban lets out a cry.

AMMALA

What's wrong?

PARO

He's having a fit. Someone, grab his—

LALITHA

Don't touch him. I think something is happening. Something is actually—

AMMALA

He's in pain. Move! Kamban, come here. Sit down and—

Kamban grabs Ammala by the shoulders.

KAMBAN

Do you hear it?

There's an unearthly sound that they can all hear now.

GIRI

What is that?

LALITHA

Kambam, go on, where is it? Move Mrs Gopalan, he needs to find the source— where is it?
(The sound gets louder) Oh my god, it's a big one. Kamban—

KAMBAN

I hear it, I hear it again.

He sinks to the floor, and it is Ammala who catches him. She is left holding him as the scene goes to black.

Scene III

The garden, a little later. The well is uncovered. Kamban is in a plastic chair that had been brought from inside, a wet cloth across his forehead and unconscious. Ammala is in the kitchen. Giri and Lalitha stand on opposite ends of the stage, talking urgently into their phones. Occasionally one of them goes and peers into the well and seems to report on it over the phone. They end their respective calls as Ammala comes out with a bottle of juice for Kamban. They pounce on her simultaneously.

LALITHA

Good news Mrs Gopalan. We can have someone here to deepen this well by tomorrow.

GIRI

Mrs. Reddy's mother has confirmed what I suspected Mrs Gopalan, this well was a sacred well for centuries—

LALITHA

We do see a lot of older wells over large aquifers.

GIRI

You think a few million litres?

LALITHA

Maybe more? Kamban has never been able to... I've never heard the water like that. It must mean there's something special about it.

GIRI

Maybe... maybe it is blessed water. The well was sacred.

LALITHA

We've never found a blessed aquifer before, but there are stories. There's a lot of money to be made from them.

GIRI

The water, no, not water, its theertham¹¹⁶ surely, if the well is sacred?

LALITHA

Theertham is an excellent name for a bottled water brand, you know?

Enter Jaya, with a little brown pharmacy packet.

¹¹⁶ Water blessed by the gods, usually through a ritual done by a priest. Not unlike holy water in the Christian tradition.

JAYA

Will you please let my mother breathe?

AMMALA

What took so long?

JAYA

I took a detour on my way back.

AMMALA

Jaya! He's sick.

JAYA

Or he's faking it.

LALITHA

Kamban is not a fake. If you knew how talented he was—

AMMALA

I can't disagree. We all heard it—

JAYA

We heard some... weird sounds, we don't know what it meant. I've never heard of a diviner amplifying the sound of groundwater before.

LALITHA

Which is how you know he's the real deal. What do the usual diviners do? They have their stick, and the stick pulls them around... but Kamban's never needed all that. He's always just known, and he's always been right.

JAYA

Except earlier, on the Kandappa plot. I stopped by on my way back. Those other diviners had some stories about you. There was one, from a company called Theertham Inc., (*Lalitha lets out a hiss*). Yes, he seemed to feel the same way about you. Davam he said his name was. He told me that Kamban and Lalitha were fired from his company by their boss and that everyone knew it was because they cheated some of their clients.

LALITHA

You can't believe anything that snake says. He's a competitor and a hack. He's always been jealous of Kamban.

JAYA

So you did get fired?

KAMBAN

I was fired. (*Awake and sitting up*) Lalitha quit to support me.

AMMALA

But why were you fired? You didn't cheat someone?

GIRI

Look at their faces, they certainly did something wrong. Well done, Jaya. Smart of you to ferret out the truth. We can find more reliable people to—

JAYA

We are not doing anything. How much did you pay them? I'll pay you back now.

KAMBAN

I was fired because I was no longer able to divine.

GIRI

Then just now, when you— was it a trick?

LALITHA

Kamban is exaggerating. He was going through a difficult time; every diviner has weeks like that, and he was fired for it. So, I quit, in support of him. Because I knew he just needed some support, and he would be back in action. I was right. You saw— heard what he can do Ms. Gopalan. That was no scam. And it's no scam when I tell you we can get your well working by the end of the week if not sooner.

JAYA

We don't need our well fixed.

LALITHA

Don't be foolish. Everyone knows this will be a hard summer. A well would be very useful. And if the aquifer is large enough you could sell some of the water. Make a good amount of money too.

GIRI

I thought it was illegal to sell water from private property.

LALITHA

I'm not talking about a water farm, just a few hundred litres here and there... Though with how things are going, I wouldn't be surprised if the City made it legal to collect and sell sweat. You don't realise it, but this is like... like finding gold on your land. There are all kinds of options.

JAYA

Alright, thank you. I think we've heard enough. Amma, give him that juice. You're alright to walk after the medicine? Please, all of you, yes you too Giri. Leave. I have students coming in a half hour.

AMMALA

Jaya, if he's not well—

KAMBAN

I'm fine. We should leave.

LALITHA

Kamban!

GIRI

Now, Jaya, you're being very short-sighted. This is an opportunity and a blessing. It doesn't have to be them. But a sacred well comes back to life—

JAYA

But it hasn't come back to life, has it? They're saying they think there's water somewhere on this land. And if we dig deep enough and pay a small fortune, there might be water in the well. Maybe. We don't have a small fortune, and we don't need or want a loan we won't be able to pay back. Now please, all of you, go.

LALITHA

Take our card. This is both our numbers and if you let us come back later and explain—

GIRI

We could find a way around the loan—

Jaya manages to lead them both offstage still talking. Kamban hangs back.

KAMBAN

Ahh Ammala, Mrs. Gopalan. Thank you.

AMMALA

For?

KAMBAN

When I fainted earlier. You caught me.

AMMALA

I didn't really. Fell with you might be truer.

KAMBAN

Still. I don't have a lump on my head thanks to you.

AMMALA

Do you usually faint?

KAMBAN

No. It's never been like that.

AMMALA

Still. To be able to do something like that!

KAMBAN

I thought so. Once. Lately, it's only caused trouble.

AMMALA

Trouble... Wouldn't be trouble if Lalitha was right. Could we make money from it?

KAMBAN

You could, but... it would be best if you left the well alone.

AMMALA

Why?

Jaya enters.

JAYA

Your partner is waiting for you. Come on.

She makes sure Kamban exits this time, rolling her eyes behind his back at her mother. She follows him out too. Ammala stays and looks back at the well, but there is no sound. She leaves it uncovered. The stage goes to black.

Scene IV

The garden, nighttime. The same day. The frogs are singing. Jaya and Paro are there, sharing a cigarette between them. Paro is holding Lalitha's card as she listens. Then—

PARO

That's mad!

JAYA

It was.

PARO

What did it sound like? Like the ocean?

JAYA

No... Water in the earth doesn't sound like that does it?

PARO

I don't know. What was it then?

JAYA

I don't know... But like voices. Drowned, far-off voices.

PARO

Creepy.

JAYA

It was. But those people, the diviner and engineer, they seemed thrilled.

PARO

Duh. Money. *(Holds up the card)* You know it's become a mini-economy in the City? People with borewells on their property sell water when they can. Make a fair bit. It's illegal, but when has that ever stopped anyone?

JAYA

Yeah well, they'll be regretting it now I'm sure. All this talk of City Supply stopping.

PARO

It's just talk... Last year also they said that, and we had tapped water all through the summer.

JAYA

We didn't. Remember?

PARO

For a day.

JAYA

Other places didn't for longer.

PARO

My point is everyone is acting like the drought's already here, but a failed monsoon doesn't have to mean drought.

JAYA

Not failed. No monsoon Paro.

PARO

It'll rain in the summer, like last year. Wait and see. In the meantime, water companies will make millions and people who have water on their land. I think this is all thanks to me, by the way.

JAYA

To you?

PARO

You asked me to marry you today. I told you, where I go, money follows.

JAYA

Oh, so I have to tie a thali quickly?

PARO

I might get a better offer. My boss has a son, you know? *(She goes quiet as Jaya kisses her)*
Brave?

JAYA

It's 11 pm, no one is awake.

PARO

You know if you lived in the City with me, you could kiss me whenever you wanted.

JAYA

Paro.... Come on. I said I'd come in May.

PARO

Why wait? Deepen your well, sell them some water and come now. No, listen, if there's a good amount of water, you could stop taking tuition, pay for the course and not have to worry about your mother for a while. What? Why won't you even consider this?

JAYA

Paro, it's such a stupid idea. What if there's no water? What if it rains? What if the water is bad quality? What if someone complains and we get arrested because it's illegal?

PARO

No one is going to complain here. People know your situation, and they'll support you.

JAYA

You haven't lived here in years, so you've forgotten what they're like.

PARO

You can't take that risk for us?

JAYA

That's not fair—

Ammala enters in a night dress and housecoat.

AMMALA

You girls! Smoking right where everyone can see you. What? What's happened?

JAYA

Nothing.

PARO

No, not nothing. Aunty, don't you want to dig the well, and see if you can make a little money on the side?

AMMALA

We decided not to.

PARO

But aren't you always saying you want a little more money? Paint the house, give the frogs a pond, replace the washing machine?

JAYA

Paro, stop it.

AMMALA

Jaya says we're managing fine—

PARO

But you're not.

JAYA

Paro shut up.

PARO

Jaya wants to study and get a job in the City.

AMMALA

Jaya?

JAYA

I don't.

PARO

She does. She feels bad because she thinks she's abandoning you—

JAYA

No, Paro wants me to do it because Paro thinks everyone should be like her and the only good life is being in the City.

PARO

Why are you attacking me? I think you're too smart to be sitting in Korai Nagar taking tuition for the rest of your life.

JAYA

Maybe I don't want to study coding.

PARO

Then why did you say you'd do the course?!

JAYA

Because you wouldn't stop going on about it!

PARO

Because you want to get out of here!

JAYA

Maybe I don't!

PARO

Yes, you do! *(Beat)* Yes, you do. I have no idea why you pretend like I'm the one trying to drag you there but stop it. It isn't true. I love you. I love you so much I probably would stay with you if you wanted to live here for the rest of your life, teaching tuition. But you don't. You're scared, or something, and you're using your mother as an excuse, so don't even—

AMMALA

You love her?

Beat

PARO

Yes, I do.

AMMALA

And Jaya, you...

JAYA

Amma, calm down.

AMMALA

I'm calm? I'm very calm. I'm asking: you love Paro?

JAYA

We're not— this doesn't mean what you think it does.

PARO

What does that mean?!

JAYA

Paro, this is not about us.

PARO

Yes, it is! I keep saying it, and oh my god you never say it back. You just... kiss me and I thought—

AMMALA

You kiss her?

JAYA

Amma, not—

PARO

I'm sorry Jaya. I didn't mean to do this, but do you love me?

JAYA

I don't— this isn't the time to— Paro, please, leave. I'll come and talk to you later. Please.

PARO

Don't bother.

Paro exits, running.

AMMALA

Do you know what will happen if people find out?

JAYA

I know— no one needs to find out.

AMMALA

How long— I don't even know where to start. But Jaya, it's not safe. The things people say, what they'll do— those poor girls from the church, you remember—

JAYA

Of course, I remember!

Silence

AMMALA

Do you love her?

JAYA

I— we've only just become a couple again! And—

AMMALA

Again? ...That's why you lost touch before? You stopped being girlfriends. Did you break up?

JAYA

Oh god. Do you hate me?

AMMALA

Hate you? Jaya, I'm scared for you! What if... someone tells other people? What if they call the police? We don't have money; we don't have influence. Those girls, their parents were at least able to bribe them out of trouble, but—

JAYA

Amma, I've been lesbian for fifteen years. No one's ever found out.

AMMALA

You have to go to The City.

JAYA

What?

AMMALA

You can't stay here. There, you can be safe. Safer. Oh god, I wish Govind were here.

JAYA

I don't see Appa helping.

AMMALA

I would have made him help. Jaya, Jaya, I don't hate you. How could I hate you? And for this? For loving someone. But Jaya you can't stay. Do the course, and go live with Paro.

JAYA

You can't manage—

AMMALA

So it's time I learned to do things by myself no?

JAYA

What are you doing?

AMMALA

Go talk to Paro. Tell her you'll do the course.

JAYA

I don't want to do the course!

AMMALA

Get a job, whatever it is, I'll manage the money.

JAYA

But—

Ammala takes the phone and calls someone. We hear it ring, just twice.

AMMALA

Hello? Kamban? Oh, Lalitha. Yes, it's Ammala Gopalan... Yes, that's right... I want to talk to you about the well.

Stage to black.

Interlude

In the spotlight we see Kamban kneeling, eyes closed as he works. We hear the water, and it teases him. He cannot get an exact sense of it, and as he grows more frustrated it only grows more elusive. He gives up, wipes his brow, and picks up a pot of water. He drinks most of it and then suddenly chokes. He begins to convulse. He falls over dead.

Act II

Scene I

The Gopalan garden, late January. Late morning. The edge of the house is now freshly painted, the garden furniture looks new and the well has been fixed with pumps, pipes, water meters and a metal covering that can be locked shut. The garden is fuller, there is a frog pond, but no frogs and the plants are a bit droopy. All around the well are a collection of buckets, of various colours and makes.

Paro emerges from the kitchen door, pulling a suitcase along. Jaya follows close behind.

JAYA

Are you going to be able to manage the bucket and the suitcase?

PARO

I'll be fine.

JAYA

Thanks for taking that with you. I'll come pick it up on the weekend.

PARO

You better come to visit before the weekend. It's bad enough you're not living with me—

JAYA

It's induction week. I want to meet people, make friends—

PARO

You can come and stay one night. I'll drop you back in the morning, in time for your first class.

JAYA

It's the other direction from your work.

PARO

At least let me drive you into the City.

JAYA

I have too much luggage for that little car of yours.

PARO

Why are you taking so much? Do you know the hostel room will be tiny?

JAYA

Tell my mother that. She's gone mad buying things. New clothes, new books, new shoes, a new laptop, and for some reason a mini-vacuum cleaner? That I've hidden in my cupboard.

PARO

It's all that sweet water money.

JAYA

I don't think she's saved a rupee of it—

PARO

Because she wants to support your decision to leave and go to college again. She can save money once you're gone.

JAYA

I'm worried.

PARO

Lalitha and Kamban are taking good care of her. You said that yourself.

JAYA

There's been more tankers coming, to take water away.

PARO

And they're paying her for it. Stop worrying. I don't see Kamban letting that happen. He's... very protective.

JAYA

It's strange.

PARO

You mind?

JAYA

No, it's just odd to see your mother acting like a schoolgirl. And he's—

PARO

What? Good looking? Nice? Kind?

JAYA

Yes, I suppose he is all those things.

PARO

But?

JAYA

I don't know. I'm not expecting any big news any time soon. Every time he comes over, he pretends it's to check the well. Or help with the garden.

PARO

He's done a good job. Frogs like the new pond?

JAYA

If they are they've been very quiet about it. Haven't seen one this last week. Not that I blame them. The heat's brutal. For January.

PARO

The City is worse. Be prepared. Okay, I'll pick you up at 6.

JAYA

Paro, my luggage won't fit.

PARO

We'll find a way to fit it all in. I understand wanting to take things slowly, but taking a late, bumpy, smelly bus doesn't have anything to do with our relationship. Okay?

JAYA

Okay. I love you.

PARO

Love you too.

As Paro picks up her bucket, Ammala enters, with several shopping bags.

JAYA

Amma, what is that?

AMMALA

Things for the house—

JAYA

Good.

AMMALA

— and for you.

JAYA

I have enough. Please. Stop.

AMMALA

Hostel food is terrible. Mrs. Kandappa says you should be able to cook something basic in your room. I know you can't take an electric stove, but this is a small electric pan. You plug it in, and—

JAYA

I don't have space to take all this.

AMMALA

You're not packing right. She doesn't roll her clothes, Paro.

PARO

She's a fool.

AMMALA

No water again today?

JAYA

Not so far. And it's 11:45, so I don't think we'll get any.

AMMALA

Is that enough Paro? Take another bucket?

PARO

We had an hour of water yesterday, so I managed to fill the tanks up at home. This is an emergency bucket because Appa forgot to do laundry last week.

AMMALA

How's he doing Kanna?

PARO

He's fine Aunty. Bored. He was so bored he went and played chess with Giri.

JAYA

And? What are Giri's latest complaints?

PARO

Nothing.

JAYA

Go on. Amma knows what he says. She's sucking Korai Nagar dry and having an affair and—

PARO

Jaya! He didn't say anything like that Auntie. He's given up complaining since everyone else is grateful for the well. Does he come to take water?

AMMALA

No. He's come to try talking about how the well is sacred.

JAYA

So sacred that he thinks the water should only be sold to certain people. Believers.

PARO

He had a diviner over last week you know?

JAYA

Really?

PARO

Appa saw him. Tried to pretend he was there for something else, but Appa saw him walking around the tiny strip of land they had behind the apartment.

AMMALA

It's not just him. Kamban said he's been approached by a few of the neighbours, but he refused.

JAYA

Wouldn't want to split their vein of gold.

AMMALA

He thinks one well here that is selling water is enough.

JAYA

So long as it's selling to him? There were a lot of tankers yesterday.

AMMALA

There was an emergency. A hospital needed water. They took ten from here. You should be grateful Jaya, you'll be living in the City soon.

JAYA

I doubt whether an old hostel like mine can afford 'Theertham'. I doubt whether we could afford our water if we needed it.

AMMALA

They only charge what they have to. And Lalitha said some of the tankers go to the City Supply.

PARO

Did you see that article yesterday? Some film stars bribed a City official to send three tankers for their daughter's wedding. Who knows where the water gets to Auntie? I'll see you at six Jaya.

Paro exits.

AMMALA

Kamban and Lalitha won't let that kind of thing happen.

JAYA

Amma, Kamban and Lalitha are not all-knowing and all-powerful. There's a drought, people are desperate. Give me that. Please stop now. You must have spent every paisa they paid you for last month – 5,000?!

AMMALA

It's the best quality.

JAYA

I don't need a 5,000-rupee electric pan!

AMMALA

Kanna, we're finally financially alright. Your Appa and I never could spoil you when you were growing up. Let me do it now.

JAYA

You're paying for the course, for the hostel— have you spent any money on yourself?

AMMALA

The house? The garden. I bought a sari last week and I didn't even blink at the price. (*She holds up three fingers*)

JAYA

Thirty?

AMMALA

Thirty? Jaya, three!

JAYA

This pan is more expensive than that sari.

AMMALA

Next time, I'll buy a sari for thirty.

JAYA

Please just save some money. No more presents.

AMMALA

Not one more. After the scooter.

JAYA

Amma!

AMMALA

I only put a downpayment. There's a waiting list for eight months, but by then I'd have saved for it. It'll be so nice. You can go visit Paro regularly.

JAYA

I can take the bus. Or the metro.

AMMALA

It'll be tiring, and you'll get there annoyed, and she'll be tired after work, and then you'll have a fight about whether you want rice or chapati for dinner and stop being lesbians.

JAYA

Amma, shh! And people don't stop being lesbians because of rice and chapatis.

AMMALA

People do all kinds of things because of rice and chapatis. I won't pay for the petrol. You can pay for that.

JAYA

Amma—

AMMALA

No lecture.

JAYA

What if the well runs out of water? What if it rains? You have to save now and—

AMMALA

I am saving. *(Suddenly there's a croak)* Did you hear that?

JAYA

What?

AMMALA

Shh. Listen. *(There's another)* That sounded like Kumbhakarnan! He's back. I haven't seen one of them in the last week.

JAYA

It's hot. Maybe they went on holiday. Now that our family is rich...

AMMALA

Mch, help me find him. I want to make sure this heat isn't hurting them.

JAYA

I have to pack... alright. Where did you hear it?

They try to find the source of the croak, lifting and replacing buckets, and following the frog across the stage, but never locating it. Kamban enters when they think they have finally cornered it, near the well only to discover nothing behind the last bucket.

KAMBAN

Did you finally find one?

AMMALA

No. But we heard one.

JAYA

Back so soon Kamban?

AMMALA

I invited him—

KAMBAN

There's been a request for emergency tankers.

JAYA

Again?

LALITHA *(As she enters on the phone.)*

Yes sir, 20 tankers... yes...

AMMALA

Oh, Lalitha is here too. For work.

JAYA

20 tankers?

KAMBAN

We'll pay of course.

LALITHA

I have the addresses... no we won't be late...

JAYA

Didn't you just take ten yesterday?

KAMBAN

I'm not happy about it, but Lalitha says these areas are badly off. Desperate.

LALITHA

Yes, it's very clean water... like Himalayan water sir... like Cauvery water... thank you.

JAYA

Don't sound that desperate. What areas?

LALITHA (*Off the phone*)

East of The City centre. Very poor. And their MLA wants to make sure they get decent water. Aunty, we'll be paying of course, and we can adjust it.

JAYA

Adjust what?

AMMALA

Adjust against what we agreed to. We're happy to be able to help those people.

LALITHA

As are we.

JAYA

Uh-huh. So long as they pay.

LALITHA

Still here, Jaya? Not left to start that expensive new diploma course?

AMMALA

She leaves today. Starts tomorrow. How are you Lalitha? We haven't seen you in a few weeks.

LALITHA

Yes, well Kamban likes to handle this property. And business has been booming. I've had to handle all the new requests, and the paperwork with the City- we're incorporating you know? We have a new card. (*Giving them one*) Generosity is our motto.

JAYA (*Reading*)

'Well and Water Solutions. We listen. We care. We deliver.'

LALITHA

It's clever. Because we *care* that you need water. And then Kamban *listens* for the water. And then we *deliver*—

JAYA

The water. I get it. But that slogan is already taken.

LALITHA

I came up with it, all by myself.

JAYA

Well so did... (*On her phone*) Acumen Recruiting.

LALITHA

That's stupid. What are they listening to?

JAYA

And a delivery service. And a catering company, and—

LALITHA

You're making this up.

JAYA

Red Delivery Xpress, Canton Catering, Norwich Nanny Agency—

LALITHA

They copied each other. I invented it. And it's going to be our guiding principle, isn't it Kamban?

AMMALA

It's lovely.

LALITHA

And before your daughter accuses us of anything else. (*Getting out a sheet of paper*) Here's today's order, for your record. Sign there. And there. Kamban, the tankers are nearly here, let's clear away these buckets, we need this done fast.

AMMALA

Ah, the neighbours need water today.

LALITHA

They can take it after we're done.

JAYA

They'd have been waiting all morning to see if there would be piped water. They'll need it urgently.

LALITHA

Ammala and I agreed that the tankers are the priority.

KAMBAN

Why don't we start filling the buckets, so your neighbours can just take theirs and go? The tankers won't have to wait long—

LALITHA

We have a deadline Kamban.

JAYA

Because the desperate, poor people won't accept water if it's late?

LALITHA

In addition to being generous, we pride ourselves on punctuality—

KAMBAN

The tankers aren't here yet. And if you help, we'll be done faster. Come on.

LALITHA

Kamban, you know that this is an important delivery.

KAMBAN

And we'll make it.

LALITHA

Fine. If you're putting your foot down, so be it.

KAMBAN

I'm not— where are you going?

LALITHA

There are a hundred other things we need to be doing. If we're going to wait till the neighbours get water, I might as well do some of them.

KAMBAN

Like?

LALITHA

Calling up the other water farms and checking in? Following up on the delivery of the second German drill to the beach house property? Following up with potential new clients? If both of us sit around flirting with Ammala all day, who'll run the business?

Lalitha exits in a huff. Kamban and Ammala look embarrassed.

AMMALA

Jaya! Here take some buckets and put them outside.

JAYA

I have to pack.

AMMALA

You have all afternoon!

JAYA

I don't want to be here for the awkward flirting scene that's about to play out.

She exits.

AMMALA

Jaya says anything that comes to her head.

KAMBAN

So does Lalitha. We don't flirt. We talk like adults. About common interests.

AMMALA

Yes. Like the news. And your childhood. And my childhood...

KAMBAN

Because we both grew up down south.

AMMALA

That's right.

KAMBAN

And I come here to check on the well.

AMMALA

It needs so much attention. It's not like you come here to check the well as a pretence to spend time with me. And... bring me presents.

KAMBAN

No.

AMMALA

You do sometimes forget to check the well till the very end.

KAMBAN

When the conversation is interesting—

AMMALA

And you do usually bring me something.

KAMBAN

Just something I saw that I thought you would find useful. That's not... flirting.

AMMALA

No. I suppose not.

KAMBAN

They're just stirring up trouble.

AMMALA

But what would be so troublesome about some flirting? We're not that old.

KAMBAN

In our prime.

AMMALA

Unless you think I am too old—

KAMBAN

No! You are not too old. I was just telling Lalitha you don't look anywhere near old enough to have such a grown-up daughter.

AMMALA

I don't know about that. My hair is going grey.

KAMBAN

I like your hair.

AMMALA

What about it?

KAMBAN

It's very shiny.

AMMALA

It's going grey.

KAMBAN

I like grey.

AMMALA

Mch, now you're just– who likes grey?

KAMBAN

It's the colour of the sky before it rains. How could I not like it?

AMMALA

I used to dye it of course... but you grow tired of that kind of thing. There's so much else I'd rather do.

KAMBAN

I like how enthusiastic you are. Even when things are hard.

AMMALA

Being a fool you mean? Jaya can tell you all about that.

KAMBAN

Jaya would tell me you're the kindest, most generous person she knows.

AMMALA

She's a good daughter, that's why.

KAMBAN

I like how you talk about the things you love. Your daughter, this house, the frogs, your husband–

AMMALA

I wouldn't have thought you liked hearing about Govind.

KAMBAN

It makes me feel that if you ever loved me, I would have done something to deserve it. That I might be able to be a good person.

AMMALA

You are a good person. You bring water to people, whatever Jaya says, that is a good thing.

JAYA *(At the window)*

Amma, have— uh *(She turns her back on them in a hurry)* Amma, ahem, you ordered something? It's huge and they want you to sign for it.

AMMALA

The new washing machine! I'm just coming.

Jaya shuffles away. And Ammala gets up to follow. She pauses at the kitchen door.

AMMALA

Flirting isn't that bad, is it?

KAMBAN

No. It's not so bad.

She exits and Kamban continues filling up the buckets, with a half-smile. Scene to black.

Scene II

A half-hour later. The buckets are all gone. We hear the tankers lining up. Kamban is at the kitchen window adding to the cacophony of voices suggesting how to get the new washing machine into the kitchen. Lalitha enters through the back gate, looking worried.

KAMBAN

Try angling it like this. No like—

LALITHA

Kamban? Come here for a minute.

KAMBAN

You send him off Ammala. I'll get it in for you. What is it, Lalitha?

LALITHA

I got off a call with the farmer out west.

KAMBAN

And?

LALITHA

He's not selling to us from next week.

KAMBAN

His well ran dry?

LALITHA

He has to save what he can for the summer.

KAMBAN

Alright. We'll get the other farmers to give us a little more—

LALITHA

He said none of the farmers in that area would sell to us anymore.

KAMBAN

All six? At the same time.

LALITHA

It's everyone talking about a drought. They're scared.

KAMBAN

But they haven't said there'll be a drought.

LALITHA

People have brains. It'll be February next week and already the City Water Supply is failing.

KAMBAN

What do you want to do?

LALITHA

Find new water farms. There was an inquiry from somewhere west of here, maybe I can set that up for this afternoon and—

KAMBAN

You want to leave now? What about these tankers?

LALITHA

We don't have to be here. We got Ammala to agree, and the tanker drivers know what to do... What is it? You can see her later. This is our business!

KAMBAN

That's not it! I...Last week, at that small job for the couple with the beach house. When I said there was no water...

LALITHA

No.

KAMBAN

It wasn't that I didn't find water.

LALITHA

No Kamban.

KAMBAN

I couldn't find water.

LALITHA

Not again. We fixed you.

KAMBAN

I like that. You didn't do anything. Except throw me in the deep end.

LALITHA

It worked then, it'll work now. It was just one place.

KAMBAN

Maybe.

LALITHA

Why are you only telling me this now?!

KAMBAN

We decided we wouldn't need another farm for a few weeks. I thought I could rest and then test myself.

LALITHA

What are you waiting for, test it right now

KAMBAN

If Ammala comes—

LALITHA

I'll lie. Just do it fast.

Kamban goes quiet and it's not like the first time. It's strange and patchy and more like what we saw in the interlude scene. He falls to his knees sweating.

LALITHA (Cont.)

Kamban? What is it?

KAMBAN

Did you hear anything?

LALITHA

No. Why does this keep— Get yourself in order.

KAMBAN

I'm trying.

LALITHA

No. You've been distracted for months. Because of her.

KAMBAN

I found the farms.

LALITHA

I found the farms. You found the water but I did the paperwork, I sweet-talked the water board, and I'm the one who's set things up so that we never have to worry about money or the business ever again, but if you fail, then what are we supposed to do?

KAMBAN

What are you talking about?

LALITHA

I was going to tell you when the deal was a sure thing. But we might get a contract with City Supply.

KAMBAN

Us? But Theertham Inc., has the contract.

LALITHA

There have been rumours their supply is not good enough quality. They're digging too deep. So I met with the Minister in charge and he's giving us a chance.

KAMBAN

A chance?

LALITHA

... This. This is the chance. Yesterday the tankers went to him. And he's asked for more so we're in a good place. Once this set gets to him, we're in.

KAMBAN

You said it was an emergency.

LALITHA

It is. For him. It's for his constituency in the City.

KAMBAN

You said it was for a hospital.

LALITHA

The hospital must be in his constituency. Kamban, it doesn't matter. We need a sponsor, a supporter, and he's willing to withdraw his support from Theertham Inc., and give it to us. You should be celebrating.

KAMBAN

Lalitha, we know how this works.

LALITHA

What does it matter so long as he pays us?

KAMBAN

Is he paying us?

LALITHA

Not this time, but that's how you do business. Complimentary things. He'll pay us back with the contract.

KAMBAN

How are we paying Ammala?

LALITHA

I'm just adjusting against what she owes us.

KAMBAN

She owes us money?

AMMALA (*Appearing at the window*)

Kamban, could you help with the washing machine?

LALITHA

Great! Go help with the washing machine Kamban. I'll see about that farm west, and get things started for the tankers. (*In an under voice*) Don't say anything. We have a good thing going.

Lalitha pushes him towards the house and starts the pump. It roars to life once again. All three of them are about to exit in different directions when without warning the pump shudders to a halt. They freeze and look back at the pump. From somewhere we hear a frog croak. Scene to black.

Scene III

Midafternoon. The lid to the well is open and a rope leads down into it. The pump is unattached. Lalitha enters at the same time as Ammala. But before Ammala can speak, Lalitha's phone rings. She holds up a hand, telling Ammala to stay quiet as she considers the call. She lets it ring out.

AMMALA

Who was that?

LALITHA

No one. Did you find anything?

AMMALA

There's no mechanics nearby, but there is a store you can buy a pump from.

LALITHA

But we don't know if it's the pump. Do we? Where's Kamban?

AMMALA

I thought he was with you.

LALITHA

Of course, he's disappeared now, when I need him. *(She texts him)* He has the car key. *(Her phone rings again and this time she cuts it)* Where is he?!

AMMALA

Lalitha, you didn't tell Kamban about the money I borrowed?

LALITHA

I didn't realize it was some big secret.

AMMALA

... No. But don't mention it when Jaya is here. She's very... she doesn't like it.

LALITHA

Even though it's paying for her new life? Fine, fine. I'll keep quiet. I have enough to worry about.

AMMALA

We'll find out what's wrong.

LALITHA

It's not just here. We lost some water farms.

AMMALA

What happened?

LALITHA

Nothing. The farmers we had a deal with are getting stingy. And then there's Kamban himself.

AMMALA

What about him?

LALITHA

He's... not being himself. Not like he was before.

AMMALA

What was he like before?

LALITHA

He was focused. Determined. You all think I work hard, you should have seen him. We'd be closing two deals a day. Then after Veeravelli—

AMMALA

What's that?

LALITHA

A job we had. Had some trouble with it and Kamban's never been the same since.

Enter Giri followed by Davam. Giri is looking very pleased with himself.

GIRI

What's this? Problem with the well Mrs. Gopalan?

LALITHA

What are you doing here?

DAVAM

Nice to see you again Lalitha.

GIRI

Davam, an engineer, could have a look if you wanted? Would you mind Mr. Davam?

LALITHA

No, thank you. He works for our old company.

DAVAM

Partner now.

LALITHA

You?

DAVAM

I was the natural choice.

LALITHA

After Kamban and I left.

DAVAM

Were fired you mean?

GIRI

Yes, Davam has been telling me all about your inauspicious exit from the company. Not the kind of people I would want to entrust with my well.

AMMALA

You don't have a well.

GIRI

Not yet. But Davam has just looked at the land behind the apartment. And he's very hopeful.

LALITHA

Behind which apa— behind those apartments?

DAVAM

So this is the famous, sacred well?

LALITHA

I know what you're doing.

DAVAM

Trying to take a look at the well for you. What's happened? Run out of water?

LALITHA

The pumps broken and you can stay right there. You think you can dig over there and steal water from our aquifer?

DAVAM

Lalitha, you know better than anyone the aquifer belongs to no one. From everything I've heard, it probably runs below all of Korai Nagar. Surely Giri iyyah and everyone at the apartment also deserve a chance to get clean, good quality water?

GIRI

Water we won't sell to the highest bidder.

DAVAM

No need to be worried, Lalitha. We're just a little competition. Afterall, isn't your business thriving? Or has that business with farmers across the state refusing to sell water to the City hit you badly?

LALITHA

As if it hasn't hit you badly. I know you failed to meet your quota to City Water last week.

DAVAM

Oh, a temporary setback. I was hoping I could talk to you Mrs. Gopalan? Do you want to sell us a few dozen tankers a week? We'd pay more than they do.

GIRI

Excuse me? You said—

DAVAM

We'll build your well Giri iyyah. This is a one-time deal. But you'd make a lot of money.

AMMALA

No than—

LALITHA

We have a deal. So, no.

DAVAM

I hope she doesn't have you borrowing against the well. Old trick she used to play on farmers to keep them in her pocket. Oh move Lalitha, I just want a look. *(He finally makes it past Lalitha to the well and then gives a yell and a head appears out of the well. It is Kamban.)* What are you doing?!

KAMBAN

(Pulling himself out) I checked the valves and the pipes. There's nothing wrong.

LALITHA

Did you go all the way down?

KAMBAN

Not enough rope. But the valves are about ten meters down, and they look fine.

LALITHA

Then it is the pump?

KAMBAN

Maybe.

LALITHA

Maybe isn't good enough. We have tankers waiting for an emergency supply. To a hospital.

KAMBAN

It should work.

LALITHA

Should? *(She punches the pump on. It comes on and we hear water pumping for a moment, but then it stutters to a stop and the pump overheats again)* Then why isn't it?!

GIRI

Perhaps it's punishment. For selling sacred waters—

AMMALA

Giri iyyah, please—

DAVAM

Is there water in the well?

Beat

LALITHA

Of course, there is.

DAVAM

It's been two months. And Giri iyyah tells me you've been taking out a lot of water. You know that even deep wells can go empty in less.

KAMBAN

We're not sucking the place dry like you.

DAVAM

Like you used to, you mean?

AMMALA

Kamban, it can't be dry?

DAVAM

Easy enough to know. Kamban, do us the honour.

KAMBAN

What?

DAVAM

Use those magnificent powers. After hearing about it from Giri iyyah I'm eager to see it live.

LALITHA

He's not going to waste his energy to give you a thrill. *(She picks up a large rock and throws it in. We hear it splash)* See? There's wa— *(There's a loud flurry of croaks, what sounds like a hundred frogs.)*

AMMALA

What are they doing down there?

DAVAM

Clogging up your pipes. *(He grabs the large pipe going into the well and shakes it loose. First a few rocks fall out, then a little frog leaps out.)* Not a surprise.

AMMALA

(Picking it up carefully) Who are you? Are you... new? No, I recognize— you have Kumbhakarnan's colour... but Manimekalai's spots!

Two more frogs hop out of the pipe, and then another. Ammala is ecstatic.

DAVAM

It'll be an infestation. You'll have to clear them out before you can pull any water up. What you want is a good exterminator. *(Looking through his phone)* I know one not far, could be here in an hour if I called him.

AMMALA

We're not killing them!

LALITHA

Ammala—

KAMBAN

Leave it.

DAVAM

Not like you to be squeamish Kamban. That too about frogs.

KAMBAN

No one wants you here. Please, go.

DAVAM

They're usually very professional. Kamban especially? Didn't you divine in a snake infested scrub once? Chased out cobras to build a well?

LALITHA

We need the tankers today.

DAVAM

And that other time, oh what was the name of that place? Veeravelli, wasn't it? Have they told you about that Mrs. Gopalan?

KAMBAN

Get out.

DAVAM

Little farming village, about a dozen kilometers south of the City. It didn't look like much, but Kamban, Kamban realized they were sitting on gold. Water you understand. An aquifer the size of an ocean he said. But it was hard to find exactly where to dig. We must have tried every corner of the village, until finally on a bit of overgrown land no one wanted anything to do with, we managed it. Deep well, wasn't it Lalitha? They had to call me to come to help, it was that hard to dig. Some of the villagers didn't like it— said that water from that deep was no good to anyone. But Kamban, wasn't to be stopped, was he Lalitha? He was quite the sweet talker, but you know that.

LALITHA

Davam, that's enough.

DAVAM

I think Mrs. Gopalan should know exactly who she's in business with. He hasn't told you this story, has he? No, so this girl, a young woman, Harini is the one who objects, and he convinces her that the water will be tested and treated before it's given to anyone to drink and uh he... strikes up a bit of a romance, doesn't he Lalitha? Good looking man can't be helped. Things are going well, everyone in the village is excited— the head has agreed to split the money they get evenly— and the tanks roll in, must have been hundreds. And we couldn't have emptied those wells with a hundred more, that's how big this aquifer was. But we're filling them in and this girl, woman Harini wants to know when we'll test and why we're filling up so many tankers when we can't be sure the water is good quality, and Kamban just ignores her. So, she points this out to her villagers, who also ignore her, and when she tries to tell the local collector, they lock her up don't they? Kamban helps. Lalitha did you help? No. You

were overseeing the tankers. And then what happened? I went back to the City at that point. Other cases. What happened next Kamban?

AMMALA

Kamban—

KAMBAN

I didn't—

DAVAM

Kamban didn't kill her or anything like that! Sorry I should have said. He walked away from the police case without a stain on him.

AMMALA

What happened?

KAMBAN

She was worried that the water wasn't good. There had been instances of people falling sick and dying when their wells went too deep. She wanted me to stop it. She was scared it would kill people. I told her not to worry but she couldn't stop and... I didn't lock her up. I didn't help.

DAVAM

Get to the drama. She escapes, gets to the tankers, cuts the wires to the pump and stages a dharna in front of the well. She has these three earthen pots with her. Filled with well water. Was she already drinking by the time you got there?

KAMBAN

People tried to stop her, but she threatened to jump into the borewell if we came close. By the time we reached, she was already... sick. Delirious, vomiting, but she started to drink the third. When she finished, she cursed us. Me. Then she collapsed.

AMMALA

And she died?

KAMBAN

I... yes.

DAVAM

Don't hold out now. Tell her the rest. No? They took her to the hospital, and the doctors wanted to know what she'd been poisoned with, and they wouldn't tell them. Or you wouldn't Kamban, right? Lalitha was back in the village, filling the well in and paying off villagers so no one ended up in jail. (*Kamban is silent*) There you have it, Mrs. Gopalan, the people you've been doing business with. Why not work with—

Jaya runs in from the house.

JAYA (*Barely decipherable*)

Amma— Paro called— it's her father. Amma, he's not waking up. She can't lift him, she's not strong enough. She says he's not—

AMMALA

Jaya, I can't understand. Slow down.

JAYA

No time. Kamban, you're strong. Come with me. I need you— you have to help Paro's father.

AMMALA

Not Kamban. I'll help. If he's fallen, he'll need to go to the hospital. Giri call an ambulance?

JAYA

It'll take too long—

GIRI

(*On his way out the back gate*) I'll go see if the Kandappans will lend us their SUV.

KAMBAN

Ammala, Ammala, please—

AMMALA

Not now. Please leave.

LALITHA

We have a deal—

JAYA

What's going on?

AMMALA

Nothing. Lalitha, not now.

LALITHA

I need the water now.

JAYA

Don't yell at her.

LALITHA

Your mother—

KAMBAN

Of course, we'll discuss it tomorrow. Please, go help Paro.

They exit, and Lalitha turns on Kamban.

LALITHA

Are you out of your mind? What do you want me to do here? We have to get the water there Kamban and— *(Her phone rings again, and she cuts it again)* He's been calling nonstop because he needs the tankers tonight and—

KAMBAN

Tell him there's been a delay.

LALITHA

A delay? Kamban, you know there can't be delays, not on a job like this. And she owes us money— she can't—

KAMBAN

Just leave it Lalitha. Leave it. We'll— we'll lose the contract, alright? I don't care. I don't... Just send the tankers home.

LALITHA

Where are you going?

Kamban says nothing and exits.

Silence for a moment.

Davam steps forward. Lalitha preempts him.

LALITHA (Cont.)

No.

DAVAM

I might be the only friend you have right now.

LALITHA

Friend?

DAVAM

Ally.

LALITHA

He'll be back. He always is. Kamban hasn't changed, whatever he thinks. We'll find a way to talk her into getting rid of the frogs, and the tankers will go out, maybe a bit delayed, and your contract will be ours.

DAVAM

Maybe. Or maybe you fail, and neither of us gets the contract. *(When Lalitha says nothing)* It was silly thinking Kaban could get you what you wanted Lalitha.

LALITHA

Best diviner in the business.

DAVAM

But still having some trouble, no? Isn't that why you jumped in just now? Oh, I know all about why he left, what happened at Veeravelli, and why Jaggan fired you. Does Kamban know? That you were fired? No... he thinks you quit, doesn't he? Followed him out of a sense of loyalty. *(Pause)* I believe all that went down the wrong way you know?

LALITHA

Oh sure. And you're sad you got made partner instead?

DAVAM

No. But I won't lie Lalitha, I'd much rather be a partner in a company you worked for. *(Pause)* Come back to us.

LALITHA

What?

DAVAM

Come back to Theertham Inc., New start. Exciting times ahead Lalitha. This ground water game? It's done. No future in it. Not really. Bad monsoons for a few years and you're in the kind of situation we're in— begging farmers and now housewives to sell to us. 'Saltwater Desalination Plants', that's the future. We've diversified. Already started building one up north on the coast, got a bit of land for cheap from the Port project that never took off. We need good engineers for the job. Maybe even a Head Engineer...

LALITHA

... But what about Jaggan? He said that I would never—

DAVAM

Jaggan is a businessman. He won't hold a grudge if it stands in the ways of business.

LALITHA

What's the catch? What do you get?

DAVAM

I told you. I get you!

LALITHA

Try that on someone else.

DAVAM

You would have to dissolve... 'Well and Water Limited' wasn't it?

LALITHA

Dissolve?

DAVAM

Sell it to someone. We could make you a good offer for whatever wells and machinery you have. You can split it with Kampan and let him go on his journey of self-discovery.

LALITHA

... This seems too easy.

DAVAM

Because it is easy. It's win-win-win. Now we will need your help with your MLA friend. Our plans are all in motion, but we do need a bit of government support. But these ministers and officials are small-minded, short-sighted. Miss a few weeks of their bribe water tankers and you're out the door. You're making a deal with one, so you know... But if we could just get them to see that SWDPs are the future—no more coddling farmers, surprise inspections, environmental activists. No more begging for water from the boondocks. The sea is right by the City after all.

LALITHA

Do you want me to talk you up to the Minister? Get you back in his good graces.

DAVAM

No. I just need to meet him. And the easiest way to do that is to be there when his tankers are delivered.

LALITHA

The tankers are for a hospital—

DAVAM

Oh Lalitha, we all know where 'emergency tankers' end up. Now what do you say? You're coming back?

LALITHA

(Lalitha's phone starts to ring again.) Sir?... Yes sir... Sorry about missing your calls earlier... No problems sir... No delays. The tankers will be there tonight.

Scene to black.

Scene IV

The backyard. Not long after.

We hear a tanker backing up, a tinkly tune plays. It momentarily drowns out the song of the frogs that has just started. A large pipe starts to gush gallons of water into the tank at a furious speed. There is an urgent croaking as the frogs surge out of the well. Some through the pipe, others right over the wall.

A man in a gas mask comes on and starts to spray. With time, the stage is carpeted with dead frogs.

Stage to black.

Scene V

The garden, evening. The pump is reattached, the pipe leads out of the gate as before. We hear several trucks leaving as the scene opens. Three ominous looking garbage bags sit against the back gate. Kamban sits on a stool, waiting. We hear movement in the house.

Ammala appears at the kitchen window. She spots him and then reluctantly enters the garden.

KAMBAN

Is Paro's father—

AMMALA

Still with the doctors. We won't know for some time. I thought you would have left.

KAMBAN

I couldn't until—

AMMALA

(Eyeing the well) You put it all back. Why?

KAMBAN

That wasn't me. It must have been Lalitha—

AMMALA

And the tankers are still here. I told you both—

KAMBAN

I told her. Ammala, we won't bother you tonight. I wanted to talk about... what you heard. About us. I'm not who I was then.

AMMALA

Six months ago, you mean? I looked in the news. There wasn't much, but there was an article about a woman killing herself in a small village called Veeravelli over a water dispute. Lalitha's work I suppose.

KAMBAN

No, that was Davam's work. He's not so innocent in this either. If you sell to him—

Lalitha enters.

AMMALA

I'm not selling to anyone.

LALITHA

Yes you are.

KAMBAN

Are you still here?

LALITHA

You might run off the moment there's a problem, but I've been working. And Mrs. Gopalan, are you forgetting what you owe us?

AMMALA

I'll pay it all back. I can return all the new things and—

LALITHA

Tell Jaya not to go to the City? Anyway I'm not sure that would be enough. You're forgetting the interest.

AMMALA

You said there was no interest!

LALITHA

That was before. You borrowed a considerable sum this month, and I'll be charging interest. Small, but it'll add up. Kamban, move. The thankers have to leave. Davam is already on his way to the Minister.

KAMBAN

What are you talking about?

LALITHA

We'll be sending tankers here twice a week, fifteen each time and—

AMMALA

You can't do that.

LALITHA

I assume you'll want to pay back what you owe as quickly as possible. Maybe three, four months? If you don't want to be paid, we could do it in two. But I assume you want to keep being paid?

KAMBAN

Lalitha, what's going on?

LALITHA

You can't divine, so I had to find other ways to take care of things.

KAMBAN

Davam? Really?

LALITHA

He's willing to— the company is willing to take us back if—

KAMBAN

We're not going back.

LALITHA

In return I'm selling him Well and Water Supply, and all our open contracts, so this isn't really me Mrs. Gopalan. It's Theertham Inc., and if you don't work with me, they'll send someone else, who will be much less nice.

AMMALA

What does that mean? What are you saying?

KAMBAN

Nothing, we're not doing it.

LALITHA

It's not up to you. I've already agreed. Kamban, it's a way back into work. Davam and the company are moving out of this space because they've got new ways of sourcing water. But they've lost government support. Which we still have. So, we partner up and they let us in for a big piece of the pie.

KAMBAN

Why would they want me? If they're not looking for ground water anymore?

LALITHA

I told you I'd have your back. I'll find something for you.

KAMBAN

I refuse. I refuse to sell the company. We're partners.

LALITHA

Just think about it Kamban. I've already set up a meeting between the Minister and Davam. He's on his way there now, and the tankers are going to follow. This isn't like before. Mrs. Gopalan isn't about to kill herself, is she? It's a fair deal. We gave her life a glow-up, we got all the water we needed, we can keep doing that. You know if we pump more out Mrs. Gopalan, we'd be out of your hair faster. We could do this many tankers three times a week.

AMMALA

What about the frogs?

LALITHA

Yes, look, we flushed them out and we had to make sure they didn't go back. But I'm sure a few survived.

AMMALA (*Going the black bin bags*)

You... killed them?

LALITHA

Not all. Really Mrs. Gopalan, they're not that hygienic. And there was a small army of them down there. We had to flush the well with about a hundred liters of water to get them all out, but it was worth it. (*She turns the pump on, and it works*) See?

KAMBAN

Ammala, Ammala, I am so sorry.

AMMALA

Then stop her. Take her and leave! They're dead. Three bags full.

KAMBAN

Ammala give me the bags. Ammala—

LALITHA

Mrs. Gopalan, more frogs will show up. It'll be work keeping them out of the well.

KAMBAN

Will you just go? You got what you wanted. Fill the tanks and leave.

LALITHA

What did I want? I'm saving the company. And you! I'm giving you a perfect alternative. You can't divine and don't want to – this new tech? No divining. No sweet-talking farmers, no worrying about anything— it's the sea Kamban. They're going to turn sea water into fresh water! Isn't that amazing? Honestly that's a real miracle. The real theertham— what are you doing?

KAMBAN (*Switches off the pump*)

My gifts, that sense of water, of knowing where it flowed beneath my feet, how deep, how much— it made me feel in control like I knew something about the earth, something useful, something blessed. And these last few months, I've been deaf, senseless, and even when I do hear these waters, they're not something I know anymore. Like something flipped and I'm looking at the other side to water—

LALITHA

Kamban, turn it back on. Come on, this is not a joke.

KAMBAN

No. I found the water. I have rights.

LALITHA

No. You found the water for our company. The company has rights. And now the company has been bought so Theertham Inc has rights. Whatever you think of them, some of those tankers are going to people in the City who need it. It's a blessing for them.

AMMALA

This water isn't a blessing.

LALITHA

What?

KAMBAN

Ammala, be careful. Sit down, you've had a shock—

AMMALA

It isn't theertham!

LALITHA

Fine, it isn't theertham! Who cares what we call it? Blessed, cursed— water is water. Kamban, come on let me— Kamban move— Fine, think of the people, however few waiting for this water. What will they drink?

Kamban hesitates and Lalitha tries to push him out of the way and turn the pump back on. They fall to the floor, struggling. As they struggle, first Ammala tries to make them stop, and then she grabs all the bin bag and walks past them to the well.

LALITHA

Wait, get off— Mrs. Gopalan stop. What are you—

KAMBAN

Ammala, you'll poison it. You can't use the water either and—

Ammala drops them into the well. The three of them look at her.

LALITHA

What have you done?

AMMALA

The well is cursed. The water is cursed. You cannot have it. You cannot have us.

The scene goes black.

Epilogue

The watery sound starts up and with it there is a great crack. The lights show us the well split in two and the woman from the Foretale climbing out.

VOICES

I bless you.

I bless you.

I bless you.

Thrice said,

But it is easily undone.

Remember it well.

Water has many sides.

Silence apart from the water that drips off the woman. The stage goes black.

End.

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