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A Pipe Dream in Delhi:
A One Act Play in English

Author's Note

The play *A Pipe Dream in Delhi* was inspired by Robert Browning's well-known poem "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" and what facilitators from pandies' theatre, who were working with children of the urban-village, Nithari, narrated to me when a shocking incident came to light.

In December 2006 eight human skeletons were accidentally unearthed from clogged drains behind a rich industrialist's palatial home in NOIDA, the plush satellite-city of Delhi. They were the remains of some of the poor children who had gone missing from Nithari, the adjoining urban-village. The parents and relatives—mainly migrant workers and daily wage-earners—had made several complaints to the police about 38 missing people, mainly girl children, from their locality and been callously turned away on one pretext or another by India's law enforcers. A bizarre and gory tale of kidnapping, rape, murder, cannibalism, and probable organ-sale monopolized media-attention for several months that followed. The play invokes and interrogates representations of the real-life incident.

Poetry recited in the play is from Browning's "The Pied Piper of Hamelin." The language spoken by the slum-children is a variant on the kind of Indian English native Hindi speakers, who have been newly introduced to English, would speak.

The first performance of a shorter version of the play was put up by pandies' theatre in 2008 in Delhi and subsequently in Bangalore. It was directed by Sanjay Kumar.

In the script the stage is conceived in two parts. In the pandies', performance lights were used to alternate the middle-class and urban-village/slum spaces.

Pied Piper in the play is a fantasy figure. In the pandies' performance he dressed as described in Browning's poem. I sometimes visualize him wearing elaborate Kathakali make-up and using eye-movements peculiar to the dance-drama form.

List of Characters

Female

1. Rajni (child from the urban-village/slum)
2. Gita (child from the urban-village/slum)
3. Rajni's mother
4. Teacher—Shveta (young woman)
5. Woman 1 (Meenakshi, Shveta's mother)
6. Woman 2 (Nonita)

Male

7. Anthony (child from the urban-village/slum)
8. Suresh (child from the urban-village/slum)
9. UB—urchin (street-child). His seldom-used name is Raju.
10. Man 1 (Ratish, Shveta's father)
11. Man 2 (Nonita's husband)
12. Pied Piper

Female/male

3 Journalists/2 Advocates/1 Hangman/ 2 Policepersons/ 1 Judge—
played by 5 characters

Night school in an urban-village/slum (Part 1 of the stage). Rajni, Gita, and Anthony are playing with small rounded stones.

(Suresh comes in running)

Suresh: Has Miss come? Is casting done?

Rajni: *Na re!* You want to act?

Suresh: Yes. That is why I here. I not want to learn English and improve life like all you.

Rajni: We looking for a joker like Johnny Lever (clowns a little). You perfect for that!

Suresh: You girl. You know who you talking to?

Rajni: *Haan-haan!* Vivek Oberoi!

Gita (giggles): Vivek Oberoi!

Anthony: Yes, he look like Vivek Oberoi in "Shootout at Lokhandwala."

Suresh: You think I look like Vivek Oberoi?

Rajni: *Haan!* Vivek Oberoi girlfriend ran away and got married to somebody else. You look like that only.

(Gita giggles some more. Rajni and she triumphantly clap their hands with each other. Urchin (UB) comes in running.)

UB: Oho! I late? Casting done?

Gita: *Na re!* We just waiting for the hero. Good you come! The heroine just ran away with boyfriend...And now the cast waiting and waiting for hero...

(UB looks at the girls and snorts)

UB: Ha! These heroines? Look what faces! (Looks at Suresh) Johnny Lever also here?

Anthony: Yes, we have joker and I make people cry. (Stands up and crosses the stage limping. Stumbles dramatically and Rajni helps him) Like this!

Gita: *Hai re!* Poor thing!

(Teacher enters and takes her place. Children sit down.)

Teacher: Good evening, children. So have you thought of what we are going to do?

Suresh: Yes, Miss. Drama. The whole cast—it is ready.

Gita: I'll do the heroine free-free. Look, my hair.

Teacher: Your hair is very beautiful but don't you think Rajni's is lovely too?

Rajni: I be heroine.

UB: Miss! We do action drama. I be hero. See, Miss. (Jumps around miming karate and judo). I dance also—with two heroines. Very good.

Teacher: Suresh, what can you do?

Suresh (after a pause): Comedy! I make people laugh and laugh. Johnny Lever. (Does a short sequence of clowning to Bollywood music from backstage)

Teacher: This is very impressive. We should try to incorporate all your talents in the play. The play I have in mind is called: *The Pied Piper*.

UB: P-p-p ...what?

Teacher: *The Pied Piper*

Suresh : What name is this?

Teacher: It is a play about children who disappear.

UB: Children?

Teacher: Yes, innocent and lovely children like you.

Gita: Miss, who come to watch play about children?

Teacher: Lots of people love children. Children like you.

UB (yawns): But who the hero, Miss? People like hero.

Teacher: Hero, hmm! I don't know. But there is a villain all right.

Suresh: Good-good. Villain good. What villain do?

Teacher: He takes away all the beautiful lovely children.

Suresh: Kidnapping?

Teacher: Yes.

(Suresh puts a cloth on Rajni's face and makes as if to kidnap her)

UB: Then hero necessary. Who beat this villain, save children? I be hero. (Pushes Suresh on the floor and mock pummels him)

Teacher: In this play the children don't come back.

Gita: Never?

(UB lets go of Suresh in surprise): Eh?

Teacher: Never

(The children look at each other and make faces to indicate that it is a stupid script)

Anthony: Then you need sad song—I can sing it. Make audience cry like old films. (Sings old sentimental Bollywood number)

Gita: This is sad ending, Miss. People not like sad ending. My memsahib say enough trouble in life as it is.

Rajni: Yes, Miss.

Gita: But villain will have girl dancing in his palace. I do item number. See, Miss. Rajni sing.

(Rajni sings a popular Bollywood number, Gita dances thrusting out bosom and wriggling her butt. UB claps)

Teacher: This is very nice, Gita but too much like Hindi films, no? We will have different kinds of dances. Okay?

Gita: What dances?

(Teacher gets up and tries to do a dainty children's number with Rajni. Children snigger)

UB: Miss, I go?

Teacher: But we haven't discussed the play yet.

Gita: I also have to go, Miss.

Rajni and Suresh: Me too, Miss.

Teacher: Okay! We'll meet next week.

(The children are eager to leave and are crowding around the exit)

Anthony: Miss! Like this they not come back....

Teacher (raising her voice): Next week we'll watch a film together.

(The children pause)

UB: Film, Miss? Which film?

Teacher: Hindi film. Latest release.

UB: Shootout at Lokhandwala!

Teacher: Maybe.

Gita (coming back): Everybody say I speak like Aishwarya Rai.

Suresh (pushing UB downstage): This is Aishwarya's man: Abhishek Bachchan.

UB: Right-right! (Blushes and bows)

Teacher: We will see what you can do next week.

(Children leave. Teacher sits down)

Teacher: Anthony! You also like films?

Anthony: Yes, Miss. But I can't be hero no—because of my leg!

Teacher: Of course you can be hero! It depends on the script.

Anthony: Nobody like play with lame hero.

Teacher: We can never predict what will work on stage.

Anthony: Miss, I go now.

Teacher: Bye, Anthony.

(Anthony exits)

Teacher: *Uff!* Bollywood-Bollywood-Bollywood. It's taken over their lives. Poor children. They can't think beyond Bollywood! Aishwarya Rai and Abhishek Bachchan! Their dreams begin and end there.

It wasn't like this for me when I was their age. I could imagine thing—things never seen, never even heard of. These poor children with their poor lives....

But they will respond to "The Pied Piper"...I think they will....there's not a child who doesn't....They are children after all!

"The Pied Piper of Hamelin"! Our English partners will be impressed when they watch the performance. They'll realize the scope of this project... and hopefully stop being so niggardly with the grant. Slum children—completely uneducated—who didn't even have ABCD—after six months of English-coaching by us, play Robert Browning's poem "The Pied Piper of Hamelin"! (Indicating it as newspaper headline)

No matter what people say about the use of teaching English to slum children, I know that "The Pied Piper" is truly magical. He will restore the imagination of these children—teach them to dream other dreams...

(Recites)

The Pied Piper of Hamelin

Hamelin Town's in Brunswick,
By famous Hanover city;
The river Weser, deep and wide,
Washes its wall on the southern side;
A pleasanter spot you never spied;
But, when begins my ditty,
Almost five hundred years ago,
To see the townsfolk suffer so
From vermin, was a pity.
Rats!
They fought the dogs and killed the cats,
And bit the babies in the cradles,
And ate the cheeses out of the vats,
And licked the soup from the cooks' own ladles,
Split open the kegs of salted sprats,
Made nests inside men's Sunday hats,
And even spoiled the women's chats,
By drowning their speaking
With shrieking and squeaking
In fifty different sharps and flats

(As she recites she moves to the corner of the stage. By the second stanza a man—M1—in a car draws up on the other side. UB rushes up to clean the car. Man smiles and puts the window down. UB engages the man in conversation, distracts him by asking for water that is lying at the back of the car. Steals the mobile and runs away. Teacher finishes her recitation downstage)

Part 2 of the stage

(Middle-class sitting room suggested by a trolley of expensive cocktails. A well-dressed couple (W2 and M2) and the hostess (W1) are engaged in conversation. M1 enters)

W1: Hi Manish! What happened?

M2: What's up, yaar? I have been trying to call you all day...

M1: A beggar stole my mobile this morning. (To W1) Sorry! I was out in the field with the team from Japan—couldn't call you.

W1: I was worried.

M1: Sorry, sweetheart!

M2: How did it happen?

M1: On my way to work. You know, the Nizamuddin crossing! He came up to clean my car there...

M2: The usual story! You must have put down the window.

W1 (indulgently): I knew it was bound to happen someday. (To others) He's always doing it. He keeps a packet of sweets to distribute among them.

M1: You won't believe it, yaar! He was such a cute child. Wanted to hear the music playing on my CD. He said he wants to be Abhishek Bachchan. I felt so sorry for him... After all, just a kid and forced to do all this work...

W2: These aren't normal kids, Manish.

M1: They would be I suppose if they had a regular upbringing. God knows who the parents are, whether they have parents at all—

W2: Yes, the parents could be prostitutes, pimps, thieves, murderers!

W1: I don't know about the parents but the kids are very sweet. You know, Shveta is doing her English teaching project in the slum. She says that the kids are very bright and intelligent...

W2: Bright and intelligent! That slum is a horror.... You should see my maid. Her family lives there. She's just ten years old and my God so forward!

W1: Ten isn't all that young.

W2: Meenakshi, you won't believe! She wriggles her bottom at him—it's obscene! And, you know, she comes in with the tray and if he's around her *dupatta* slips off oh so accidentally! Of course the bosom doesn't exist yet; so, it is fairly pointless (grins). But it's like having the parody of a whore in the home. What's the use of teaching English to such kids?

M2: Nonita! You really exaggerate...

W2: Don't tell me you haven't noticed...I think she also steals my cosmetics.

M2 (irritated): Throw her out then. She shouldn't be working in the house anyway if she isn't fifteen, Nonita! You'll get us all into trouble.

W2: Who'll serve your spoilt family then? Your father doesn't get up from his bed all day; your mother can't do without a servant for ten minutes. I need that girl. Anyway, if there is any trouble her mother will swear she's fifteen. If this girl doesn't work what will her six siblings eat? This country passes impractical laws every day.

W1: (sighing): Poor things, these kids work to support their families. And they grow up too soon as a result! It is a vicious cycle...

M1: I would say pick these children up from the streets, from their workplaces and put them into schools.

M2: I agree. Drastic measures are called for to clean up the city. On the one hand, we talk of making Delhi an international city; on the other hand, we have all this—like pock marks all over. Now in Beijing ...

M1: This isn't China.

M2: Yes, it definitely isn't. We too need a government that has the balls to bring about sweeping changes. Remove the slums, put all these budding criminals to work in factories—have a police force that's tough!

W1: I don't agree. Change has to be gradual. I think we're slowly moving towards a more egalitarian system. The transitional phase is difficult ... for everybody ... for us and for them ...

W2: Yes, yes! Meenakshi's right. We have to understand their needs. Children in their kind of families have to work—they have to support their families. What's the point of insisting on treating them like children when there is no childhood left ...

M2: But they shouldn't become criminals to support their families. That affects everybody! Manish has got robbed today by a child ... the

same child might murder somebody tomorrow ... Nonita, this maid of yours! If she's stealing today when she is ten or whatever—what will she do when she is fifteen or twenty?

W2: I'd rather not say what she will become by then ...

M1 (hurriedly): Yes-yes! Law and order are becoming a problem because of the slums—

M2: Exactly, that's what I'm saying. This government of ours has to prevent robbery on the roads ...

W1 (reluctantly): Yes, I suppose ...

W2: What about solicitations from child-whores? How will all that be prevented?

M1: Nonita, to have a ten-year-old maid in the home is not an ideal situation...

(M1, M2, recite. W1 and W2 are reluctant. The men pull them in)

At last the people in a body
To the Town Hall came flocking:
"Tis clear," cried they, "our Mayor's a noddy;
And as for our Corporation—shocking
To think we buy gowns lined with ermine
For dolts that can't or won't determine
What's best to rid us of our vermin!
You hope, because you're old and obese,
To find in the furry civic robe ease?
Rouse up, sirs! Give your brains a racking

To find the remedy we're lacking,
Or, sure as fate, we'll send you packing!

Part 1 of the Stage. Urban-village. Outdoor. UB and Suresh enjoying ice-candy together. Lounging.

UB (displaying the mobile): See-see, earning for today!

Suresh: *Saala!* You'll get the same 200.

UB: 200? Ha! 20,000!

Suresh: Oho! What about sin-card?

UB: What be that—sin-card?

Suresh: You idiot or something! Has the phone tring-tring?

UB: Yes.

Suresh: And you answering?

UB: I'm mad or what! Of course not!

Suresh: Police still track with tring-tring. Give it here. (Takes the card out)

UB: It won't sing songs now?

Suresh: No, it be quiet and you safe.

UB: What the point?

Suresh: Point? You sell it, get 200 and we get ... (Looks around surreptitiously. Mimes cigarettes and drinks)

UB: Put it back.

Suresh: Why?

UB (catches him by the collar): *Saala!* Just do what I say.

Suresh: You go to eat jail's rotten food?

UB: Put it back.

Suresh (putting the sim-card back and handing the instrument over to him): You not give it to Dada. You sell it. Then you know what happen!

UB: Not afraid.

Suresh: Not afraid ... (Makes a sign of slitting his throat)

UB: Na! I not selling.

Suresh: *Hain*, then what you do with it?

UB: Listen to music ... like this ... We need music for the drama (switches it on). Hero will dance. I keeping.

Suresh: You keeping this phone for drama?

UB: *Haan!*

Suresh: You mad!

(UB is quiet)

Suresh: You having car in drama?

UB: *Haan!*

Suresh: And bungalow...

UB: Bungalow ...

Suresh: And wife ...

UB: Wife!

Suresh: Aishwarya Rai?

UB: And I bloody Abhishek Bachchan!

(UB pats Suresh on the shoulder. They go to a corner. Suresh looks around to see if there's anybody watching. Satisfied that they are unobserved, they settle down and smoke together. The phone is playing music. Suresh brings out a bottle and hands it to UB. They drink. After a while UB falls off to sleep. Suresh takes the mobile.)

Suresh: Sorry yaar! For your own good, yaar ... (Takes out the sim-card and throws it away)

Hissing recitation backstage:

Rats!

They fought the dogs and killed the cats,
And bit the babies in the cradles,
And ate the cheeses out of the vats,
And licked the soup from the cooks' own ladles,
Split open the kegs of salted sprats,
Made nests inside men's Sunday hats,
And even spoiled the women's chats,
By drowning their speaking
With shrieking and squeaking
In fifty different sharps and flats

Part 1. One-room home in urban-village indicated by pots and pans or string-bed etc. Gita and her mother.

(Gita is getting ready in front of a small mirror but she preens as though it is full-length)

Mother: Hurry up! You are getting late again.

(Gita makes a face and continues her grooming)

Mother: She will scold. She will call me to the bungalow and scold me too. *Bak-bak-bak!*

(Gita ignores her)

Mother: You think you are Aishwarya Rai or what? You don't have to look like a film-star to wash utensils.

Gita: Not going.

Mother: *Hai Ram!* Why?

Gita: I don't like.

Mother: Why?

Gita: She always shouting and abusing ...

Mother: What abuses?

Gita: Bitch, whore ...

Mother: You lying bitch.

Gita: I not.

Mother: Memsahib cannot know all these dirty words. Your friends must be teaching you—that Sheila and that Rajni.

Gita: What you know? Memsahib much worse. She frustrated.

Mother: Frustrated?

Gita: Husband not go to her, *na*.

Mother: *Hai Ram!* Frustrated! Who taught you all this. You only ten years! This is what teacher is teaching in night school?

Gita: Sahib look at girls from window. Memsahib think he looking me.

Mother: *Hey Bhagwaan!* You bitch. Blackening our face! Where are you going?

Gita: Going for drama. I acting on stage.

Mother: Come here! I will give one tight slap and take out all acting-*shacting*.

Gita: Going

(Mother watches helplessly as Gita strides off.)

(Gita sashays around the stage to the night-school)

Hissing recitation backstage:

Rats!

They fought the dogs and killed the cats,
And bit the babies in the cradles,
And ate the cheeses out of the vats,
And licked the soup from the cooks' own ladles,
Split open the kegs of salted sprats,
Made nests inside men's Sunday hats...

(Gita meets Rajni downstage)

Rajni: *Aah re* Aishwarya Rai! What hair colour?

Gita: Henna.

Rajni: Bitch liar! This not henna.

Gita: Hair dye mix.

Rajni: Hair dye? That bitch gave?

Gita: I took while she (mimes sobbing) inside..

Rajni: Why was she sob-sob?

Gita: Sahib is having scene no, that's why.

Rajni: With whom?

Gita: Office *ki* typist.

Rajni: How you know?

Gita: He talk mobile. He thinking I not understanding English. Also memsahib fighting-fighting with sahib in English—you spoil my life; now you find twenty-one year old ... floozie!

Rajni: He doing it to this floozie-madam? Not to memsahib?

Gita: Shameless you are! Yes-yes! She broke his glasses—threw them.

(They giggle)

Rajni: Memsahib-bitch in heat! You be careful. *Hai Ram!* Sahib like this! He get after you, Aishwarya Rai!

Gita: Old man he is! What he do?

Rajni: Old man yes. But rich man no? Two already fighting for him.

Gita: I manage.

Rajni: Really! Look like you thinking about it?

Gita: *Na re*. Someone else—big fish.

Rajni: Who who? Tell me, no!

Gita: A man in big-big bungalow—all alone!

Rajni: *Wah-re!*

Gita: Pay double—half work.

Rajni: Why pay double?

(Gita shrugs her shoulders and looks knowing)

Rajni (affectionately): Shameless bitch! You get into trouble.

Gita: I manage. 10 men also I manage. These goods—only for watching.

Rajni: Not for sale!

Gita: Aishwarya Rai, no! Only for looking!

(They clap hands with each other)

Gita: Let's go for drama practice. Miss come and talk and talk.

Rajni (mimicking teacher): Anything can happen in a play ...

Gita: You innocent, lovely children!

(They laugh and walk on together arm in arm)

Hissing recitation from backstage:

Rats!

... even spoiled the women's chats,

By drowning their speaking

With shrieking and squeaking

In fifty different sharps and flats

Part 1. Urban-village. Night School. Suresh and Anthony are already waiting there.

(Gita and Rajni reach night school)

Rajni: How you Johnny Lever!

(UB comes in running)

UB: Where it is?

Suresh: God promise, I don't have it!

UB: You took.

Suresh: God promise, I didn't!

UB: I kill you.

(Rajni and Gita giggle and watch the two, Anthony is a little alarmed)

Suresh running: *Bachao*—help help!

Anthony: Don't fight please!

Rajni: Look-look, Abhishek killing Johnny Lever.

(Gita goes and pulls at UB)

Gita: You killing him or what?

UB: He betray me.

Suresh: *Na na!* (Folds his hands and requests Gita) Please please—you tell. I only helping.

Gita to UB: At least, listen.

Anthony: She right. Listen!

(UB looks at Gita and likes what he sees)

UB: Why you take my phone?

Suresh: To protect ... Look I keep money for you.

UB: I not want.

(Suresh tries to give him Rs 200, UB sulks and looks the other way. Teacher enters)

Teacher: What's going on?

Rajni: Rehearsal.

Teacher (laughs): What's all this money doing here? In a play we don't use real money.

Suresh (stuffing the money in UB's pocket): Not real, Miss.

UB (taking out the two hundred rupee notes, histrionically): This 20,000 rupees, Miss. Not real.

Teacher (amused): So much money! What will you do with it? We don't need that much money for our little play.

UB (nods): Small budget!

Gita: Miss, what about film?

Teacher (shows the tickets): I'll take you to the movie hall.

(The children clap and cheer)

Teacher: But only if you listen carefully to the story of the play we're going to perform.

Rajni: The Pid Piper

Teacher: "The Pied Piper"—you know why he was called that? Because he wore multi-coloured clothes.

UB: Like a joker?

Teacher: Hmm! Not quite like a joker. He was very strange.

(Recites with actions)

And in did come the strangest figure!
His queer long coat from heel to head
Was half of yellow and half of red,
And he himself was tall and thin,
With sharp blue eyes, each like a pin,
And light loose hair, yet swarthy skin
No tuft on cheek nor beard on chin,
But lips where smile went out and in.

Anthony: Swarthy?

Teacher: Dark. Dark-skinned!

UB: Like me!

Suresh: But how did he kidnap children? They not scared of dark man?

Anthony: And he wearing funny clothes!

Teacher: No, he played on his pipe and they followed.

Gita: Why?

Teacher : He promised to give them whatever they wanted.

Anthony: Stupid children! Why they believe him? Kidnappers don't give, they take. They take lots of money; they torture—like in films.

UB: Like this! (Grabs Rajni and pretends to torture her)

Teacher: In fact, we don't know for sure whether the Pied Piper was bad to the children.

Gita : Good kidnapper not possible.

Rajni: You said the children not come back. He kills them, no?

Teacher: No, he doesn't kill them. He just takes them away.

UB: And gives them nice-nice things?

Teacher: But doesn't let them come home.

Suresh: So what! Then it be fine.

Gita: I be the pretty girl who marries rich man ... away from home.

UB: I be the poor boy who gets very very rich ... away from home.

(They look at each other and smile shyly as they realize what they've said)

Teacher: We will begin rehearsal tomorrow. Today before we go for the film I want all of you to tell me about your dreams. What you desire—what you want. But you have to want something original. Something nobody has ever thought of. Now ... you can't say Abhishek Bachchan and Aishwarya Rai and you can't say "lots of money."

(The children look bored and talk among themselves)

Teacher: We won't go for the film till you do this.

(The children close their eyes hastily)

UB (after a while): Nothing except money.

Suresh: Too difficult ...

Teacher: Can't you think of one thing that nobody else has?

(Children close their eyes again)

Teacher (recites):

For he led us, he said, to a joyous land,
Joining the town and just at hand,
Where waters gushed and fruit-trees grew,
And flowers put forth a fairer hue,
And everything was strange and new;
The sparrows were brighter than peacocks here,
And their dogs outran our fallow deer,
And honey-bees had lost their stings,
And horses were born with eagles' wings;

UB (slowly): I want to be on cloud. Soft-soft cloud. I sail on cloud, I sleep.

Teacher: Very good.

Gita: Pink ice cream with red fruit ... a house made of pink ice cream and red red small small ...

Teacher: Strawberries. Wonderful!

Rajni: A big swing—bigger than a school—and everything on it—swinging—school, home, cars.

Teacher: My God! A gigantic swing!

Suresh: T.V. in the sky. Just go out of the house and look up. All the programmes together.

UB: All programmes together? Too much noise!

Suresh: Everybody hear only what they want. Mother serial channel, father sports channel, children cartoon channel ...

Teacher: Let your mind go beyond everything you know. Everything you imagine is going to come true. The Pied Piper will play his pipe and take you to a land where everything is possible. In a play everything's possible.

Anthony: I running fast-fastest. I number one. Lot of clapping. Get a medal and a garland ...

UB: MISS! We're getting late for the film ...

Teacher: Oh! This was such a wonderful dream! Okay, let's go. You did very well today. All of you! Let's go.

(They begin to walk. Children skipping merrily. Exit)

Part 2 of Stage
Middle-class bedroom, M1 and W1

M1: Where's Shveta?

W1: Gone to night school.

M1: She's working too hard.

W1: She says she has at last found what she wants to do in life. It is the only kind of job that gives me satisfaction, she says (laughs). Young people can exaggerate so much!

M1: What's she doing with those slum-kids now?

W1: Killing herself rehearsing a play. I tried to explain to her that it is all right to teach them a bit of English. But an English play is definitely beyond their capabilities.

M1: I know what she must have said. Acting liberates ...

W1: She says they lead such poor limited lives. Theatre will open up their world—give them a glimpse into limitless possibilities.

M1: Why not do the play in Hindi then?

W1: She is also thinking of the Eduaid visit. They're coming from England next month. They might sanction a three-year project for the NGO if she convinces them that English teaching in the slums is making progress...

M1: Is that so? I am glad she's found focus at last. At times Shveta can sound completely airy-fairy.

W1: I don't know about focus. To me she is sounding quite impractical even now. She says she is teaching the kids to dream.

M1 (smiling): She should take them for a Hindi film. They are mainly dreams—nightmares!

W1: Oh no! Our Shveta would argue that they make children passive. She wants them to be real children with this play—actively imagine fairies, goblins!

M1 (frowning): Such dreams are available only to the privileged.

W1: She'll accuse you of elitism.

M1: Of course! Childhood is a luxury in this country.

W1: Shveta says it is the right of every child.

M1 (fondly): Our daughter is an idealistic fool. But I'm glad about Eduaid. A three-year project will be good—especially in pounds! I must talk to her about her proposal. She should understand that presentation is everything in such contexts.

W1: No, seriously! I'm worried about this play business in the slums...Rehearsals take so long...And she'll be there all alone in the late evening. All kinds of criminal elements...

M1: I think the play is a great idea. I know these foreigners. The *goras* will be charmed by the slum kids. You must insist that Shveta take the driver when she stays there late. I'll arrange that.

Part 1 of stage. Urban-village. Night school. Play rehearsal on stage properties lying around. Teacher surrounded by excited children.

Suresh: Miss, really this story better than films!

UB: Huh!

Anthony: Yes, Miss. Parents must be crying-crying after children go. So sad!

UB: Huh!

Rajni: But children—they be happy?

Gita: Yes, they get what they want.

UB: What they get? Horses with wings?

Rajni: Yes and big-big houses and ice-creams and soft-soft beds.

UB: How?

Anthony: Pied Piper gave.

UB: But Pied Piper ... he be poor, no, Miss?

Gita: No, he pretending. He very rich and ... he love children.

Teacher: I will teach you to see with your eyes closed, to hear the sound of silence, to move with the rhythm of poetry ...

(Recites)

His queer long coat from heel to head
Was half of yellow and half of red,
And he himself was tall and thin,
With sharp blue eyes, each like a pin,
And light loose hair, yet swarthy skin

Anthony: Dark—dark skin!

Suresh: Funny clothes!

Teacher: Yes, that's right! Try and imagine the Pied Piper

(Recites)

No tuft on cheek nor beard on chin,
But lips where smile went out and in;
There was no guessing his kith and kin:
And nobody could enough admire
The tall man and his quaint attire.

(Teacher and children freeze. The Pied Piper appears.)

Pied Piper (To the audience):

Please you honours,
I'm able,
By means of a secret charm, to draw
All creatures living beneath the sun,
That creep or swim or fly or run,
After me so as you never saw!
And I chiefly use my charm
On creatures that do people harm,
The mole and toad and newt and viper;
And people call me the Pied Piper.

(Bows deeply)

Poor piper as I am,
In Tartary I freed the Cham,
Last June, from his huge swarms of gnats,
I eased in Asia the Nizam
Of a monstrous brood of vampyre-bats:

And as for what your brain bewilders,
In Hamelin I did the rats.

(During the recitation the Pied Piper has begun to dance. The children mesmerized sleepwalk to him after his recitation. They surround him)

Backstage recitation:

Into the street the Piper stept,
Smiling first a little smile,
As if he knew what magic slept
In his quiet pipe the while;
Then, like a musical adept,
To blow the pipe his lips he wrinkled,
And green and blue his sharp eyes twinkled,
Like a candle-flame where salt is sprinkled;

(Pied Piper dances and leads. The children of the night-school also dance and follow him. They go around the stage dancing. The Teacher still cannot see the Pied Piper. She is frozen in a corner)

And ere three shrill notes the pipe uttered,
You heard as if an army muttered;
And the muttering grew to a grumbling;
And the grumbling grew to a mighty rumbling;
And out of the houses they came tumbling.
Small feet were pattering, wooden shoes clattering,
Little hands clapping and little tongues chattering,
And, like fowls in a farm-yard when barley is scattering,
Out came the children running.

From street to street he piped advancing,
And step for step they followed dancing,
When, lo, as they reached the mountain-side,
A wondrous portal opened wide,
As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed;
And the Piper advanced and the children followed,
And when all were in to the very last,
The door in the mountain-side shut fast.

(Pied Piper and children exit. All except Anthony who had fallen behind due to his limp. He goes to the exit and knocks several times. He limps back to the teacher; teacher is still frozen)

Part 2 of the stage. Living Room with the cocktails-trolley. M1, W1, M2, W2

W1: What happened in Nithari is unbelievable. So many children disappeared—forty of them—and nobody did anything.

W2 (focused on food and drink): They were being killed one by one, Meenakshi. By that pervert. How would anybody come to know anything?

W1: The real scandal is the police.

M1: Yes. Forty children disappeared and the police kept sitting on their fat asses.

M2: They were bought off. The man was rich.

M1: The real story will never come to light. A scapegoat has already been found. The servant did it—single-handed! Ha!

W2: Oho! What real story is there to discover! The pervert-servant raped and killed a bunch of poor kids... That's all!

M1: Forty children, Nonita—We're not talking about a couple of disappearances. It might have been a large-scale racket to get body organs. You know a healthy kidney can sell for almost half a million.

W1: We'll never know. It could have been prevented. A lot of lives could have been saved if the police had acted in time.

W2: Does the police ever act in time in this country?

W1: They were young innocent children who got killed, Nonita.

W2: Wasn't there a prostitute too?

M2: The police can turn any girl into a prostitute. It seems they told the parents of a seven to eight-year-old girl that their daughter must have run off with her boyfriend.

W2: It's much too easy to sit here and criticize the police. In this country people breed like vermin. How are the police supposed to keep track of all the thousand millions? And I'm sure the parents did not go to the police in time.

W1: You know Shveta teaches there. She's completely traumatized. She was telling me that the parents kept making complaints to the police that the children were disappearing from near the water tank adjacent to that big house—D5. They went again and again and the police would tell them to get lost.

M2: Instead of complaining to the police they should have concentrated on preventing the children from going near that place.

W2: As if children listen! Especially their children. My maid that whore, just ten years old, and ...

M1: This was a question of life and death. Why couldn't they warn the kids? It isn't such a big place.

W1: Oh they did try to warn the kids! It seems a couple of parents had got together and even organized a loud speaker to caution the entire neighbourhood.

W2: Greed and ambition! Children won't listen to warnings. They must have good clothes, cosmetics, mobile phones—even if parents can't afford them. It seems that the pervert servant would tempt them with chow mien.

M1: Our kids are the same, aren't they?

M2: Come on, breeding shows! These were deprived children. Our children won't risk their lives for chow mien and sweets and some money...

W1: Perhaps not for chow but for fancier stuff, for a couple of millions.

W2: I get a headache with all this talk. Can we forget about Nithari please! The CBI is working on the case. The guilty will be punished. That's the end of it.

M1: Till it happens again ... in another slum-village.

W2: Look! In this country there is a murder, rape, or robbery every second. There are starvation deaths galore; too many children are born, too many die. There is no bloody end to misery. You and I have to live our lives ... There has to be a limit ... Can I have another vodka? And make it stiff please!

Part 1. Night-school. Teacher and Anthony are frozen.

(Teacher comes to life, gestures to Anthony as if encouraging him to rehearse)

Anthony:

It's dull in our town since my playmates left!

I can't forget that I'm bereft

Of all the pleasant sights they see,

Which the Piper also promised me.

For he led us, he said, to a joyous land,

Joining the town and just at hand,

Where waters gushed and fruit-trees grew,

And flowers put forth a fairer hue,

And everything was strange and new;

The sparrows were brighter than peacocks here,

And their dogs outran our fallow deer,

And honey-bees had lost their stings,
And horses were born with eagles' wings;
And just as I became assured
My lame foot would be speedily cured,
The music stopped and I stood still,
And found myself outside the hill,
Left alone against my will,
To go now limping as before,
And never hear of that country more!

Teacher (claps): That was very good Anthony! Perfect enunciation, perfect diction! Wow! Here's a chocolate for you. How did you manage to learn up the entire speech in one day?

Anthony (taking the chocolate): Thanks. Which speech?

Teacher: The speech of the lame child who gets left behind in Hamelin after the Pied Piper has taken away all the others. I'll tell all of them all how good you were today.

Anthony: Who will you tell?

Teachers: All the other children. All your friends.

Anthony (shakes his head as if bemused): Do you think they'll come back?

Teacher: Of course. I'll call them and we'll have another run-through Gita, Suresh, Raju, Rajni—Final run-through ... (Calls again and again)

(Anthony keeps looking at her): My friends have gone.

Teacher: No, they haven't. They'll inform me before they leave. Run along and go and call them, Anthony.

Anthony: Why do you call me that—Anthony?

Teacher: Anthony, this is your name! There's just a week left for the final performance. Stop playing the fool. We must have another run-through. Go and call them ...

Anthony: Who have you been calling all this time? Whom do I call?

Teacher: Gita, Suresh, Raju, Rajni

Anthony (as if trying to learn unfamiliar names): Gita, Suresh, Raju, Rajni ...

Teacher: Anthony! Have you forgotten their names? Now, go and call your friends,

(The child shrugs but goes, limping)

Teacher calls out: Cut it out Anthony! Why are you limping like this?

Anthony: Because I'm lame. The Pied Piper didn't cure my limp.

Teacher (a little overwrought): Hardly! You're hardly lame! We had to practice so much to get you to limp effectively. But will you cut it out now! You're giving me the creeps.

(The child gives her a strange look, shrugs again, and limps away)

Teacher: Talk about the power of imagination!

(Her cell phone rings.)

Teacher: I'll start from here in half an hour. Promise! No, no, I promise I won't be late tonight. Just one more run-through. (Obviously waiting. Looks at her watch again and again) Where are they? Gita, Suresh, Raju, Rajni. Now, this Anthony has also disappeared! Where are you guys? Come out quickly.

Part 2. Middle-class living room with the trolley. M1, M2, W1, W2

W2: Thank God, for the CBI!

M2: All the rumour mongering will stop now. I knew it had to be the servant.

M1: I find it difficult to believe that the servant killed forty children in the house and the master knew nothing.

W2: What's Shveta's take on all this?

M1: Where is Shveta? Have you called her?

W1: She says she'll start from there after doing a last rehearsal.

M1(looking at his watch): I'll be glad when this foolishness gets over.

W1: I'm glad you think it is foolishness.

W2: I don't know why you allow her to go to that place. It must be full of criminal elements.

W1: Don't be silly, Nonita! She's working with children.

W2: As if children there are not criminals. Wasn't his cell phone stolen by a child?

W1: Yes, it was ... But all children of that class are not criminals. Shveta says that they're really bright and they have a real desire to learn.

W2: Whatever you say! Class and criminal behaviour go together... To allow a young woman to go to a slum like that—unescorted—is a little foolhardy.

M2: Nonita, you always over-react! But Ratish, you know this city ... A young woman out all alone ...

M1: The driver is there with her.

W2: He must be sleeping in the car. You can't depend on the driver ... You must tell her to come home before it gets dark.

M1 (to W1): Call her again.

W1: She isn't answering. (To W2) Rehearsals take time. The children are free only at night; they work during the day.

M1 (looking accusingly at W1): These things have to be supervised strictly. I too don't see why she has to spend every evening there. This is just a community play not something being put up for an international award!

W1: What's the matter with you, Ratish? You are the one who encouraged her in the first place.

M1: I know what it means to her. Besides, she told me she's trying to get funding to improve their lot. That's something I wanted to encourage but it seems she's getting carried away ...

M2: Oho, sentiment is all very well! But to go to a criminalized place! What's the need? The government, the police ... what are they there for?

W2: We must ensure our children's safety first and foremost. Especially that of girls. No matter how old they are. This city is much too wicked.

Part 1 of the stage. Night-school

Teacher (calling): Gita-Suresh-Raju-Rajni-Anthony! Where are you?
(To herself)
Where have they disappeared?

(Her mobile rings)

Yes Mama. I know I said an hour. But you know these kids. They're being really naughty. They've run away. Yes, yes. But I have to wait for them you know. There's just a week to the final performance. Oh Mama, really! It is just eight o'clock... What criminal elements are you talking about? Really Mama! There's no need to get paranoid.

(The Pied Piper in handcuffs and flanked by two policemen appears)

Teacher: Okay, Mama! I'll call you in a bit. Who's this? Why have you arrested him?

(The Pied Piper rolls his eyes at her.)

Teacher: Why have you arrested him?

The Policemen in unison: Suspicious behavior! Strange clothes!

Teacher: I can't find five children. Can you help? Their names are Gita, Suresh, Raju, Rajni, and Anthony.

Policeman1: I knew it! He's done it again.

Policeman 2 (beating the Pied Piper): Bastard! Where have you hidden the bodies?

Teacher: Stop beating him. What's he done? Which bodies?

(Three journalists appear. They study and photograph the Pied Piper from all angles—lifting his clothes etc. Piper brings out his pipe, and begins to play. Everybody on stage is pulled towards him as though hypnotized. A policeman breaks out and snatches his pipe away)

Teacher (as though recognizing him): It's the Pied Piper. He's come ... He's come out of the poem! (Trembling) But why have you arrested the Pied Piper? You can't arrest him. They've arrested the Pied Piper.

(Journalists rush to her)

Journalist 1: You think he hasn't committed the murders?

Teacher: I ... I don't know. Which murders? He's not real.

Journalist 2: What do you mean he's not real?

Teacher: He exists in a poem. A poem by Robert Browning—an English poet.

Journalist 1: You mean he was out of the country when the murders were committed?

Teacher: He ... he doesn't exist.

Journalist 2: You said he kidnapped the children.

(The policemen nod sagely)

Teacher: They're missing. Five children are missing. They were playing here. We were rehearsing.

Journalist 1: That's exactly the point. He must've lured them away.

Journalist 2: Raped them

Journalist 3: Eaten their flesh

Journalist 1: He's got necrophilia

Journalist 2: Pedophilia

Journalist 3: Schizophrenia

Journalist 1: Once we hang him children will be safe.

Journalist 2 (thrusting the mike at the teacher while others take pictures): Would you say that capital punishment should be done away with?

Teacher: He...he... doesn't take children away in reality!

Journalist 1: Now, how do you know this?

Teacher: He exists in a poem ... a play ... Why don't you look for the children?

(Journalist 1 indicates to Journalist 2 that the teacher is not right in the head)

Teacher (screams): I was teaching them. They wanted ice cream and a soft bed and a family T.V. Why don't you listen?

(Journalists shrug. A policeman dons a wig and becomes a judge. Two Journalists don gowns and become advocates. One journalist becomes the hangman. Their focus is completely on the Pied Piper. Mime of a court hearing)

Teacher: They are wasting their time with somebody who doesn't exist. (Screaming) Leave him alone.

(Nobody pays any attention to her. The judgment is pronounced)

Teacher screaming: Five children have disappeared, they might be in danger.

(The Pied Piper nods in agreement. The gallows are wheeled in by the policeman and the hangman)

Teacher (starts to weep): Why don't you people look for the children? Why doesn't anybody look for the children? They only wanted an ice cream and a family T.V. and a soft bed ... Did you see them?

(The Pied Piper nods and rolls his eyes)

Where?

(Pied Piper dances around the stage to indicate the whole world. While he is dancing the judge becomes the policeman again and the two advocates become journalists. The police drag the Pied Piper back to the gallows)

Teacher: Oh, why did I encourage them to dream! Why did I invoke the Pied Piper!

(Journalists rush to her)

Journalist 1: Did *you* send them to him?

Teacher: Yes, I did.

Journalist 2: Why?

Teacher: We were doing a play. We were rehearsing for the visit from Eduaid, UK.

Journalist 2: Do you think this is a conspiracy? Do you think the CIA might have a hand in it?

Teacher: I don't know. Eduaid was going to fund the project for their education.

Journalist 3: Do you agree that NGOs are doing more harm than good?

Teacher (sobbing): I don't know.

Journalist 2: Do you think NGO funds should become transparent under Right to Information?

(Teacher sobs more.)

Journalist 1(thrusting the mike at her): How do you feel now that the children are dead because of you?

Teacher screams: They are not DEAD.

(The Pied Piper climbs on a stool at the gallows, bows to everybody)

Teacher to Pied Piper: Tell them they're not dead. They've gone away because all of us betrayed them.

(The journalists rush to the Pied Piper. He rolls his eyes at the Teacher and dances on the stool before putting the noose around his neck)

Teacher (pleading): They're not dead. Look for them. Let him be. He doesn't kill children. He's not real. Look out for the children please.

(The journalists have been writing busily, taking pictures, and making calls on their mobiles. The Pied Piper pretends to die)

Teacher: You can't kill the Pied Piper. Nobody can kill the Pied Piper.

(Journalists look at her and confer among themselves. At last Journalist 1 goes to the Teacher and thrusts the mike at her): Do you believe in reincarnation?

Teacher (pushing her away): Go away! Can't you hear me? Five children have disappeared from here. You need to look for them.

(The journalist shrugs and moves away. Pied Piper is being taken away on a stretcher by the police. He jumps up and begins to dance again. Both the journalists rush to him and prance around excitedly. The police arrest him again and drag him back to the gallows. Journalist 1 is taking down notes and talking on his/her mobile. The noose is being prepared again.)

Journalist 2 (breaks away and comes with the mike at the teacher): Do you agree with the human rights lobby that the Pied Piper should be pardoned?

Teacher (screams) Go away! Somebody look for the children, please. Please, please look for the children. They must be here—somewhere close by. Right here ... near your homes. Please save the children ... Look for the children, please ...