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## From Collective Struggle to Individual Heroism: A Comparative Study of *Angar* and *Mission Raniganj*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critical comparative analysis of Utpal Dutt's play *Angar* and Tinu Suresh Desai's film *Mission Raniganj* to examine how industrial disasters and labor are represented across distinct historical and ideological contexts. Drawing on Marxist criticism, Foucauldian notions of power-knowledge, and postcolonial theory, the study argues that the two texts construct fundamentally different narratives of crisis, agency, and resistance. *Angar*, emerging from mid-twentieth-century political theatre, frames the mining disaster as a consequence of systemic exploitation, foregrounding collective worker consciousness and resistance. In contrast, *Mission Raniganj*, situated within contemporary Bollywood conventions, reconfigures a similar disaster into a narrative of individual heroism, emphasizing technological ingenuity and moral courage while largely sidelining structural critique. The analysis further explores how institutional power operates in both texts, particularly in the production of "truth" and the marginalization of subaltern voices. By comparing theatrical form and cinematic narrative, the paper demonstrates that aesthetic choices are inseparable from ideological positions. Ultimately, this study reveals a broader cultural shift from collective political critique to individualized narratives of redemption, underscoring how representations of disaster shape public understanding of labor, responsibility, and social change in modern India.

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The representation of industrial disasters in cultural texts reveals profound truths about how societies understand labor, exploitation, and human agency. Utpal Dutt's Bengali play *Angar* (literally "Coal") and the Hindi film *Mission Raniganj* (directed by Tinu Suresh Desai, 2023) both draw upon coal mining disasters in eastern India, yet they construct radically different interpretations of the same essential reality. While Dutt's 1959 play emerges from the crucible of Marxist theatre and subaltern consciousness, *Mission Raniganj* operates within the conventions of mainstream Bollywood cinema, privileging individual heroism over collective action. This paper argues that a comparative analysis of these two works reveals a fundamental ideological shift in the representation of industrial crises—from a Marxist critique of systemic exploitation to a neoliberal celebration of individual agency. Through the theoretical lenses of Marxist criticism, postcolonial theory, and Foucaultian analysis of power, this study examines how each text constructs history, agency, and resistance differently, ultimately demonstrating that the form and politics of representation are inseparable from the historical contexts in which they emerge.

Both works ground themselves in actual events from India's coal mining history, a sector marked by colonial exploitation and postcolonial neglect. The Bengal coal belt, particularly the Raniganj and Jharia fields, has witnessed numerous disasters since the late nineteenth century, with inadequate safety measures, corporate negligence, and the brutal exploitation of labor forming the backdrop of this industrial landscape (Simmons 45-47). *Angar* draws upon the Chinakuri mining disaster of the late 1950s, an explosion that killed numerous workers and exposed the systematic failures of safety protocols under British and postcolonial management. Dutt, a committed Marxist and pioneer of political theatre in Bengal, wrote the play as part of his larger project with the "Little Theatre Group" and later "People's Little Theatre," organizations dedicated to using performance as a tool for class consciousness (Dutt, *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* 12).

*Mission Raniganj*, released more than six decades later, is based on the 1989 Raniganj coalfield rescue operation led by engineer Jaswant Singh Gill, who successfully saved 65 trapped miners using an improvised capsule. The film, starring Akshay Kumar, follows the conventions of the rescue thriller genre, transforming a historical event into a celebration of individual ingenuity and courage. The temporal distance between these works is significant: *Angar* emerged during a period of leftist cultural ferment in Bengal, while *Mission Raniganj* appears in an era of neoliberal capitalism and Bollywood's increasing alignment with nationalist, individualist narratives (Ganti 89-92).



This analysis employs multiple theoretical frameworks to illuminate the contrasts between the two texts. First, Marxist literary criticism, particularly the work of Georg Lukács on reification and Antonio Gramsci on hegemony, provides tools for analyzing how each text represents class relations and systemic exploitation. Lukács argues that capitalism transforms social relations into things, a process of reification that obscures the human origins of exploitation (Lukács 83-87). Dutt's play explicitly resists this reification by centering workers' consciousness.

Second, Michel Foucault's analysis of power-knowledge relations offers insight into how institutions—the law, corporate management, the state—construct truth in ways that serve dominant interests. Foucault contends that "power produces knowledge; that power and knowledge directly imply one another" (Foucault 27). The courtroom scenes in *Angar* exemplify this dynamic, as legal proceedings systematically delegitimize workers' testimonies while validating corporate narratives.

Third, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subaltern speech, articulated in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," provides a framework for understanding how marginalized voices are silenced or mediated within dominant discourse. Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot truly speak within hegemonic structures because the very conditions of articulation are controlled by dominant groups (Spivak 78). *Angar* grapples with this problem directly, while *Mission Raniganj* largely sidesteps it by making the engineer-rescuer the narrative's primary speaking subject.

The most fundamental difference between the two texts lies in how they explain and frame the mining disaster. In *Angar*, the explosion is presented not as an accident or a natural calamity but as the predictable outcome of structural negligence and capitalist greed. Dutt systematically builds this case through the voices of multiple characters who describe deteriorating safety conditions. One worker reports, "The company won't repair the fans... They won't buy any meter" (Dutt, *Natak Samagra* Vol. 1, 74). Another explains how workers have repeatedly warned management about gas accumulation, only to be ignored. The play thus constructs a causal chain linking corporate profit-seeking to worker death: safety measures cost money, management refuses expenditure, conditions become hazardous, and workers die.

Moreover, Dutt explicitly challenges the official explanation that reduces the disaster to natural causes. The play's managers describe the explosion as "a large outburst of gas... which caused the explosion" (*Natak Samagra* Vol. 1, 78), a formulation that erases human agency and managerial responsibility. By juxtaposing this official discourse with workers' testimony about neglected safety protocols, Dutt performs a classic Marxist operation: he reveals the ideological function of "naturalizing"



what is in fact socially produced. As Raymond Williams argues, "The dominant class's worldview becomes the natural order of things" (Williams 68). *Angar* denaturalizes the disaster, exposing its roots in class exploitation.

*Mission Raniganj* offers a sharply different explanatory framework. The film acknowledges that safety protocols have been violated and that conditions are dangerous, but it does not systematically explore the structural causes of these violations. Instead, the disaster serves as the backdrop against which individual heroism can shine. The narrative structure follows what film scholar Christopher Sharrett calls the "rescue formula," in which "catastrophe provides the occasion for the demonstration of exceptional individual virtue" (Sharrett 112). The question of why the miners were trapped in the first place—what systemic failures enabled the disaster—is subordinated to the question of how one man can save them.

This difference reflects what Marxist critic Fredric Jameson terms the "political unconscious" of cultural texts—the way narratives encode ideological assumptions that cannot be directly articulated (Jameson 20). *Angar's* political unconscious is shaped by class struggle and the conviction that systemic change is necessary; *Mission Raniganj's* political unconscious reflects neoliberal capitalism's faith in individual agency and technological solutionism.

The treatment of agency in the two texts represents perhaps their most significant divergence. Dutt explicitly rejected the conventional dramatic structure centered on a single protagonist, stating that "there is not any particular character who plays the protagonist but the whole working class... becomes the central character" (Dutt, *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* 34). This deliberate formal choice embodies a Marxist understanding of history: change comes not from great individuals but from collective action. The characters in *Angar*—Binu, Dinanath, Sanatan, Rupa—are not fully individuated heroes but representative figures whose experiences illuminate the condition of the working class as a whole. Their suffering and resistance are shared; no single worker's actions determine the outcome.

This collective protagonist functions through what Bertolt Brecht, a major influence on Dutt, called "epic theatre" techniques. Brecht argued that conventional dramatic forms, with their empathetic identification with a central hero, produced passive spectators who accept the existing social order. Epic theatre, by contrast, "aims to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism" (Brecht 23). *Angar* employs multiple Brechtian devices: direct address to the audience, songs that interrupt the narrative flow, and the absence of a clear protagonist. These techniques prevent emotional immersion and encourage analytical engagement with the play's political arguments.



*Mission Raniganj* could not be more different. The film is structured entirely around Jaswant Singh Gill, portrayed by Akshay Kumar as a figure of almost superhuman determination and ingenuity. The narrative follows the classic heroic arc: an ordinary man is confronted with an extraordinary challenge, he overcomes bureaucratic obstacles and physical dangers through courage and intelligence, and he emerges triumphant. The miners, while present throughout the film, function primarily as victims awaiting rescue. Their voices are heard, their suffering is depicted, but they do not drive the narrative. Agency flows from the hero to the rescued, not from the collective to the individual.

This heroic structure has profound ideological implications. As literary critic Joseph Campbell's influential analysis of the "monomyth" suggests, the hero's journey narrative reinforces the belief that exceptional individuals, not collective movements, produce historical change (Campbell 30-35). However, subsequent critics have noted that this structure, particularly in its Hollywood manifestations, serves neoliberal ideology by obscuring structural oppression and celebrating individual solutions to systemic problems (Biskind 156-58). *Mission Raniganj*, by centering the heroic engineer, implicitly suggests that what is needed to address industrial disasters is not transformed social relations but courageous individuals willing to work within existing systems.

The representation of institutions—courts, corporate management, the state—reveals another crucial difference between the two works. *Angar* presents a scathing critique of how institutions systematically serve ruling-class interests while appearing neutral and just. The play's courtroom scene is particularly devastating. The judge, ostensibly an impartial arbiter, reveals his class bias when he states, "I don't think they would come here to tell lies" (*Natak Samagra* Vol. 1, 90), referring to company managers while implicitly doubting worker testimony. The company's lawyer, Webster, deploys colonial stereotypes to delegitimize workers' claims, arguing that "the Indian worker has been known to hide and send his wife to claim compensation" (88). This racist framing, which Dutt places in the mouth of a British manager, exposes how colonial ideology persists in postcolonial legal institutions.

Foucault's analysis of power-knowledge is directly applicable here. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault demonstrates how legal institutions produce "truth" through procedures that systematically privilege certain voices while excluding others (Foucault 24-28). The courtroom in *Angar* operates through such procedures: company documents are accepted as evidence, while workers' oral testimonies are treated with suspicion. The law's formal equality masks a substantive inequality, as workers lack the resources and cultural capital to effectively challenge corporate narratives. The character of Sanatan, who has been legally declared non-existent, embodies this epistemic violence: "they have proved it in the



court that I do not exist... documents prove that you neither exist, nor existed ever" (*Natak Samagra* Vol. 1, 82). This moment exposes the terrifying power of institutions to produce reality through their procedures.

*Mission Raniganj* takes a more ambivalent stance toward institutional power. Some officials are portrayed as obstructive, prioritizing bureaucratic rules over human life. However, the film does not fundamentally challenge the legitimacy of the institutional order. The heroic engineer works within the system, navigating its obstacles rather than seeking to transform it. Moreover, the film's resolution—successful rescue, official recognition, public celebration—reaffirms the possibility of institutional redemption. The bad officials are exceptions, not embodiments of systemic dysfunction. As cultural critic Slavoj Žižek argues in his work on ideology, such narratives "reproduce the existing order by imagining that its flaws can be corrected by individual virtue" (Žižek 45).

The question of whether and how marginalized voices can speak within hegemonic discourse is central to *Angar* and virtually absent from *Mission Raniganj*. Spivak's argument about the subaltern's inability to speak is not, as sometimes misunderstood, a claim that oppressed people cannot talk. Rather, it is a sophisticated analysis of how "speaking" within dominant institutions requires the adoption of dominant frameworks that inevitably distort or silence subaltern experience. The subaltern can speak only by ceasing to be subaltern, by entering the very structures of power that produce subalternity (Spivak 79).

*Angar* dramatizes this paradox with painful clarity. The workers speak constantly; the play is filled with their voices. Yet their speaking does not produce justice. In the courtroom, their testimonies are dismissed. In the corporate office, their petitions are ignored. In the colonial archive, their existence is denied. Dutt does not offer a simple solution to this problem, but the play's very form—its collective protagonist, its Brechtian interruptions, its refusal of conventional resolution—constitutes an attempt to create a space in which subaltern voice might be heard differently. The play's audience, positioned as critical witnesses rather than passive consumers, is invited to recognize the mechanisms that silence workers and to imagine alternatives.

*Mission Raniganj*, by contrast, does not engage with this problematic. The miners speak and are heard, but their speech is always framed by the narrative of the heroic rescuer. Their suffering is represented, but it does not become the basis for a critique of the structural conditions that produced that suffering. The film's miners are victims, not subaltern subjects struggling to articulate their experience against epistemic erasure. This difference reflects what postcolonial theorist Partha Chatterjee calls the



distinction between "political society" and "civil society"—the former being the domain of subaltern negotiation with power, the latter being the domain of propertied citizens whose voices are recognized by institutions (Chatterjee 34-36). *Angar* represents the struggles of political society; *Mission Raniganj* operates entirely within civil society's representational frameworks.

Marx's theory of alienation provides another framework for comparing these texts. Under capitalism, Marx argued, workers are alienated from the products of their labor, from the labor process itself, from their species-being, and from other workers (Marx 70-74). *Angar* opens with a powerful illustration of the first form of alienation. A man, caught taking coal to survive the cold, pleads, "Few pieces of coal... very cold—" only to be threatened by warders who respond, "Let us show you how cold it is!" (*Natak Samagra* Vol. 1, 69). The coal that workers extract, at the cost of their health and safety, is denied to them even for basic survival. The commodity that embodies their labor power is owned by others, and those who need it most are punished for taking it.

This scene encapsulates what Lukács called "reification"—the process by which social relations among people are transformed into relations among things (Lukács 86). The coal, a commodity, is more real in capitalist society than the human need for warmth. The worker's relationship to the coal is mediated by property law and corporate ownership, which appear as inevitable natural facts rather than social conventions created and maintained by force.

*Mission Raniganj* does not ignore labor's hardships, but it frames them differently. The miners' suffering is depicted in visceral detail, and their courage is acknowledged. However, the film does not explore the alienated character of their labor. There is no scene comparable to *Angar's* opening, no moment that exposes the contradiction between producing wealth and being denied access to it. Instead, the film focuses on the rescue operation's ingenuity: the improvised capsule, the engineering problem-solving, the heroic risk-taking. As critic Anustup Basu argues about contemporary Bollywood's representation of labor, "The worker disappears into the hero's gaze, his suffering and his skill both appropriated by the narrative of rescue" (Basu 167).

The comparison between *Angar* and *Mission Raniganj* reveals two fundamentally different ways of representing industrial disaster, labor, and human agency. Dutt's play, emerging from the Marxist theatre movements of mid-twentieth-century Bengal, constructs a collective protagonist, systematically exposes the structural causes of disaster, and refuses the consolations of heroic narrative. The film, produced in neoliberal India's dominant commercial cinema, centers individual heroism, subordinates structural critique to rescue thriller conventions, and offers closure through romanticized victory.



These differences are not merely aesthetic; they have profound political implications. *Angar* invites its audience to recognize that disasters are not accidents but predictable outcomes of exploitative social relations, and that meaningful change requires collective action, not heroic individuals. *Mission Raniganj*, while genuinely celebrating human courage and ingenuity, implicitly suggests that existing institutions can be reformed by exceptional individuals and that systemic critique is unnecessary. The shift from collective to individual, from critique to affirmation, reflects broader transformations in Indian culture and politics over the six decades separating these works. Both texts, however, serve important functions. *Angar* remains a crucial document of subaltern struggle and a powerful example of committed political art. *Mission Raniganj* brings attention to the dangers of mining labor and celebrates real human achievement. But the differences between them matter. In an era of increasing inequality, ecological crisis, and attacks on worker safety, the question of how disasters are represented—as systemic failures or isolated crises, as collective tragedies or occasions for heroism—has urgent political stakes. Reading these two works together illuminates those stakes and reminds us that every representation is also an intervention, every narrative a position taken in ongoing struggles over meaning, power, and justice.

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