

Beyond the Grand Narrative: Subaltern Resistance in Utpal Dutt's *Angar*

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Abstract

This paper examines Utpal Dutt's *Angar* as a powerful intervention against dominant historiography by foregrounding marginalized voices within a Marxist and postcolonial framework. It argues that Dutt challenges what Jean-François Lyotard terms "grand narratives" by reconstructing the Chinakuri mining disaster through "little narratives" of the working class. Drawing on theories of Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Walter Benjamin, the study analyses how capitalist exploitation, institutional power, and epistemic violence contribute to the erasure of subaltern histories. The play exposes how law, corporate authority, and official discourse collaborate to silence workers' voices and deny their existence. Through Brechtian theatrical techniques, Dutt transforms the stage into a site of resistance where suppressed histories are recovered and reimagined. Ultimately, *Angar* demonstrates that history, when articulated from below, becomes a critical tool for challenging power and asserting the agency of the oppressed.

Keywords: Marxism, Subaltern Studies, Grand Narrative, Political Theatre, Class Struggle, Historiography

Utpal Dutt, the eminent playwright, director, actor, and committed Marxist thinker, occupies a crucial place in Indian political theatre for his persistent effort to challenge dominant structures of power through cultural production. His plays consistently foreground the experiences of the marginalized—those excluded from official histories—and attempt to reconstruct history from their perspective. As Dutt himself asserted in an interview with Samik Bandopadhyay published in *Sabdo*, Utpal Dutt Special Issue that if one does not look at History with Marxist outlook, one cannot interpret Present from Marxist angle either. This statement is not merely ideological but methodological, revealing how Dutt conceives theatre as a historical practice. His play *Angar* becomes a site where history is not simply represented but actively contested and rewritten.

The dominance of what Jean-François Lyotard calls the “grand narrative” is central to understanding the politics of representation in *Angar*. Grand narratives legitimize power by presenting history as coherent, progressive, and unified, thereby erasing contradictions and suppressing alternative voices. In colonial and postcolonial India, such narratives often celebrate industrial progress and national development while concealing the exploitation that sustains them. Dutt’s dramatic strategy dismantles this illusion by foregrounding what Lyotard would call “little narratives,” the fragmented yet powerful stories of marginalized communities. The Chinakuri mining disaster, officially explained as recorded in the ENVIS Centre on Environmental Problems of Mining database:

There was a large outburst of gas from the splinter seam immediately beneath the Disergarh seam. This splinter seam was known for its inherent gassy nature having confined gas under pressure. The intervening strata had become so thin that it was no longer able to repress the upward progress of the gas and consequently the floor was lifted, liberating a large volume of gas which caused the explosion.

The disaster is thus reduced to a technical inevitability, stripped of its human and ethical implications. However, as the documented account itself reveals, the seam was already known for its “inherent gassy nature,” and the failure of the intervening strata to contain pressure points suggests a deeper history of negligence rather than mere accident.

Dutt’s intervention lies precisely in exposing this gap between official explanation and lived reality. By reworking the incident theatrically, he refuses to accept the abstraction of disaster into scientific discourse and instead re-centers the narrative on the workers whose lives were lost or endangered. This shift becomes even more significant when read alongside Dutt’s own ideological position, where he believed that history must be understood through a Marxist lens to interpret the present. The “truth” of the disaster, therefore, is not contained in geological reports but in the experiences of the miners, whose voices remain absent in official records.

The opening moments of *Angar* immediately disrupt the grand narrative by presenting the everyday suffering of the workers rather than the spectacle of industrial progress. The scene where a man is caught stealing “Few pieces of coal... very cold—” and is threatened by the warders—“Let us show you how cold it is!” (*Natak Samagra*, vol. 1, p. 69) foregrounds the brutal irony of a system where those who produce wealth are denied access to it. This moment encapsulates Marx’s concept of alienation, where workers are estranged from the products of their labour and reduced to mere instruments of production: production without ownership, labour without dignity, and survival without rights.. In a country abundant in coal, the workers die of cold, revealing the hollowness of developmental rhetoric. Such moments function as what Lyotard terms “little narratives,” exposing the fractures within the grand narrative of progress.

Moreover, Dutt shows how these dominant narratives are actively constructed and maintained through institutions of power. The company’s refusal to repair safety

mechanisms—“The company won’t repair the fans... They won’t buy any meter” (*Natak Samagra*, vol. 1)—points to a deliberate prioritization of profit over human life. Yet such structural negligence is systematically erased in official accounts, which prefer to attribute disasters to natural causes. The grand narrative thus operates not only by omission but by distortion, transforming systemic violence into accidental misfortune.

Dutt further complicates this dynamic by revealing how history itself becomes a contested terrain. In the courtroom scene, the company officials deny the very occurrence of death, reducing a fatal explosion to a “minor” incident, while the legal system readily endorses their claims. This aligns with the broader mechanism through which grand narratives sustain themselves—by silencing dissent and delegitimizing subaltern testimony. The workers’ experiences, no matter how real or immediate, fail to enter the domain of recognized truth. As a result, their suffering remains unrecorded, their deaths unacknowledged, and their history effectively erased.

By reconstructing the Chinakuri disaster through the voices of the miners, Dutt transforms *Angar* into a site of resistance against such epistemic violence. The play restores the human dimension of history, emphasizing that what is erased in official discourse continues to persist in lived memory. In doing so, Dutt not only challenges the authority of grand narratives but also asserts the necessity of alternative histories that emerge from the margins. These “little narratives,” far from being insignificant, become crucial in exposing the contradictions of power and reclaiming the agency of those who have long been silenced.

The operation of power within *Angar* extends beyond economic relations into institutional structures, particularly the law, which emerges as a crucial site where domination is legitimized and reproduced. The courtroom scene exposes how legal discourse functions not as a neutral arbiter of justice but as an instrument of class power aligned with capitalist interests. The judge’s assertion, “I don’t think they would come here to tell lies. Especially what Mr. Webster has said regarding the Indian workers is very important” (*Natak Samagra*, vol. 1, p. 90), reveals an unquestioned faith in authority and a predisposition to accept the testimony of those in positions of power. This is further reinforced by Webster’s deeply prejudiced remark: “the Indian worker has been known to hide and send his wife to claim compensation” (*Natak Samagra*, vol. 1, p. 88). Such statements not only delegitimize the workers’ claims but also reproduce colonial stereotypes that portray them as dishonest and unreliable, thereby justifying their exclusion from the domain of credible knowledge.

This dynamic can be effectively understood through the lens of Michel Foucault, who argues that power and knowledge are mutually constitutive. According to Foucault, institutions such as the court do not simply uncover truth; they actively produce it through discursive practices that privilege certain voices while silencing others. In *Angar*, the courtroom becomes a site where “truth” is manufactured in accordance with existing power relations. The dismissal of the Niamatpur Inspector’s testimony on the grounds that the location was “twenty five miles” away from the accident site (*Natak Samagra*,

vol. 1, p. 90) further illustrates how legal reasoning is manipulated to exclude inconvenient evidence. The apparent procedural logic masks a deeper ideological function: the protection of corporate authority. Thus, the law does not operate independently but in collusion with capitalist structures, ensuring that the narrative of the ruling class is upheld as the only legitimate version of reality. The collusion between legal authority and corporate power is underscored by subtle yet telling details within the scene. The casual invitation—“Lunch at Director’s Bungalow” (*Natak Samagra*, vol. 1, p. 90)—exchanged between Webster and the judge immediately after the proceedings symbolically reveals the intimate nexus between judiciary and capital. Justice here is not blind but deeply entangled in networks of privilege and power. The courtroom, therefore, becomes a performative space where legality disguises exploitation, and where the appearance of justice conceals systemic injustice.

The question of voice and representation in *Angar* resonates profoundly with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s seminal interrogation, “Can the subaltern speak?” The play suggests a complex and unsettling answer: the subaltern does speak, but is not heard within dominant structures of power. The workers’ voices are repeatedly dismissed, distorted, or erased, rendering their speech ineffective within institutional frameworks. This is most starkly illustrated in the case of Sanatan, who recounts his experience of being erased from existence: “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, p. 82). This moment transcends the boundaries of legal injustice and enters the realm of ontological violence—the denial of one’s very being. Sanatan’s narrative exemplifies the extreme consequences of what Spivak identifies as epistemic violence, where the subaltern subject is not only silenced but rendered unintelligible within dominant discourse. His repeated assertion—“It’s me! Baidyanath!”—is met not with recognition but with bureaucratic denial, exposing the fragility of identity when it is contingent upon institutional validation (*Natak Samagra*, vol. 1, p. 82). The transformation of Baidyanath into “Sanatan” is not merely a change of name but a forced erasure of history, memory, and selfhood. Through this, Dutt reveals how capitalist and bureaucratic systems possess the power to rewrite existence itself, reducing individuals to entries—or absences—in official records.

Spivak’s argument that the subaltern cannot be heard within hegemonic structures finds a powerful dramatic articulation here. The workers in *Angar* articulate their suffering, protest, and grievances, yet these expressions fail to achieve recognition within the dominant framework of law and authority. Their voices are systematically filtered, dismissed, or reinterpreted in ways that align with the interests of the ruling class. However, Dutt’s theatre intervenes in this process by creating an alternative discursive space—the stage—where subaltern voices can be heard, if not within the world of the play, then by the audience witnessing it. This intervention transforms theatre into a site of counter-discourse, where the silenced are given presence and the erased are restored to visibility. By staging these narratives, Dutt not only exposes the mechanisms of suppression but also challenges the audience to recognize the limits of institutional truth. The courtroom may deny Sanatan’s existence, but the stage affirms it. In this sense,

Angar operates as a powerful critique of the structures that regulate speech and recognition, while simultaneously offering a space where the subaltern, though unheard within power structures, can still speak—and be heard—through the medium of theatre.

The erasure of identity is thus inseparable from the erasure of history, a concern that closely aligns with the critique advanced by Benjamin in his reflections on historicism. Benjamin argues that history, as traditionally written, is always the history of the victors, and therefore must be read “against the grain” to recover the experiences of the oppressed. In *Angar*, Utpal Dutt enacts precisely this methodological shift by reconstructing the mining disaster from the perspective of the workers, refusing to accept official narratives as complete or authoritative. The company’s attempt to deny the very existence of trapped workers culminates in the chilling declaration, “Rescue? No, it’s not rescue operation... There’s no one alive” (*Natak Samagra*, vol. 1, p. 128). This statement, delivered despite reports that voices could still be heard from within the mine, becomes emblematic of what Benjamin would identify as the suppression of historical truth by dominant power structures.

The act of flooding the mine, ostensibly undertaken to control the fire, operates on both literal and symbolic levels. On the surface, it is a technical decision aimed at preserving the colliery, but at a deeper level, it represents a deliberate erasure of working-class existence. The voices of those trapped inside are silenced, their bodies submerged, and their stories rendered inaccessible. This moment encapsulates what may be termed an “epistemic drowning,” where not only lives but also histories are extinguished. The flood thus becomes a metaphor for the broader processes through which capitalist and colonial systems seek to obliterate the traces of subaltern struggle. In Benjaminian terms, the “state of emergency” in which the workers exist is not an exception but the norm, and the official narrative functions to conceal this reality by transforming systemic violence into an isolated incident.

Dutt’s theatrical reconstruction resists this erasure by preserving the memory of the workers within the space of performance. The play does not allow the audience to forget that beneath the official claim of “no one alive” lies a suppressed history of suffering and resistance. By bringing these silenced voices to the stage, Dutt transforms theatre into a site where history can be reimagined and reclaimed. The miners, though denied recognition within the legal and institutional framework of the play, achieve a form of historical presence through their representation, thereby challenging the authority of dominant narratives. This project of historical recovery is further reinforced by Dutt’s theatrical method, which bears a strong affinity with the principles of Brecht’s epic theatre. Brecht’s concept of the “alienation effect” seeks to disrupt emotional immersion and prevent the audience from passively identifying with the characters. Instead, it encourages critical reflection on the social conditions depicted on stage. *Angar* similarly resists conventional realism by foregrounding structural contradictions and refusing narrative closure. The audience is not invited to empathize passively with individual suffering but to analyze the systemic forces that produce it.

One of the most significant Brechtian elements in *Angar* is the absence of a singular protagonist. As Dutt himself envisioned, “there is not any particular character who plays the protagonist but the whole working class... becomes the central character” . This collective mode of representation shifts the focus from individual tragedy to social reality, emphasizing that the suffering depicted in the play is not exceptional but structural. The multiplicity of characters—Binu, Dinanath, Rupa, Shambhunath, Sanatan, and others—creates a mosaic of experiences that together constitute the condition of the proletariat.

This approach also aligns with the ideological framework of people’s theatre, encapsulated in the slogan “People’s theatre stars the people” . By placing the working class at the center of the narrative, Dutt challenges the conventions of bourgeois theatre, which often marginalize or romanticize subaltern figures. Instead, *Angar* presents the workers as agents of history, whose lives and struggles demand recognition. The stage thus becomes a space of political education, where audiences are encouraged to critically engage with the realities of exploitation and to recognize their broader social implications.

Furthermore, the play’s refusal to provide closure reinforces its Brechtian orientation. There is no resolution that restores order or justice; instead, the narrative ends with the persistence of injustice and the continuation of struggle. This open-endedness prevents the audience from experiencing catharsis and instead leaves them with a sense of discomfort and urgency. Such a strategy compels the audience to move beyond the theatre and reflect on the conditions represented, thereby extending the political impact of the performance.

In this way, Dutt’s use of theatrical form complements his thematic concerns, creating a powerful synthesis of content and technique. The recovery of suppressed histories, the critique of institutional power, and the emphasis on collective experience are not only articulated through the narrative but also embedded in the structure of the play itself. *Angar* thus emerges as both a critique of dominant historiography and an experiment in political theatre, demonstrating how the stage can function as a space where the erased can be remembered, the silenced can be heard, and history itself can be rewritten from below.

Ultimately, Utpal Dutt’s *Angar* exemplifies the transformative potential of theatre as a medium of resistance and historical reimagination. By bringing together Marxist analysis, postcolonial critique, and subaltern perspectives, Dutt not only dismantles the authority of dominant narratives but also exposes the mechanisms through which such narratives are produced and sustained. The recovery of suppressed histories, the critique of institutional power, and the emphasis on collective experience are not confined to the thematic content of the play but are embedded within its very structure and performance. In this sense, *Angar* becomes more than a representation of working-class suffering; it functions as a counter-historical intervention that challenges the epistemic violence of official discourse.

The stage, in Dutt's hands, emerges as a dynamic space where the erased are restored to visibility and the silenced are granted a voice. While institutional frameworks within the play deny recognition to the oppressed, the theatrical form itself ensures that their experiences are neither forgotten nor dismissed. This dual movement—of exposing erasure and simultaneously resisting it—enables *Angar* to reclaim history from below, aligning with broader theoretical calls to read history against the grain. At the same time, the play's Brechtian refusal of closure and its insistence on critical engagement extend its political function beyond the immediate narrative, urging audiences to confront the persistence of such injustices in their own reality.

In doing so, Dutt transforms theatre into a site where history is not only represented but actively contested, where silence is broken, and where marginalized voices assert their place within the broader narrative of society. *Angar* thus does not merely recover a suppressed past; it redefines the relationship between history and representation, demonstrating that when history is articulated through the experiences of the oppressed, it becomes a powerful instrument of resistance and a means of imagining more just and inclusive futures.

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