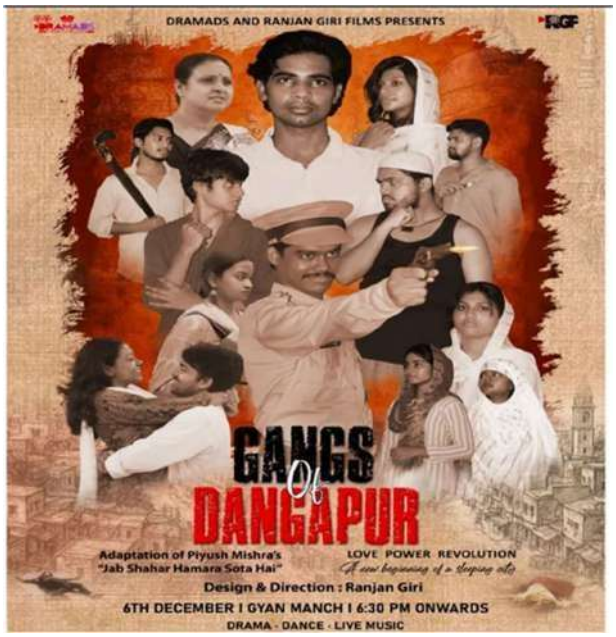
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Reviewing Gangs of Dangapur: Theatre, Power, and the Fractured Ethics of the City

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Directed by : Ranjan Giri

Staged at Gyan Manch Kolkata , India on 6th December 2025



Promotional Poster of the Play

Fig 1: Reproduced with the Permission of Ranjan Giri

Readers might be surprised to read a review of a theater in an academic journal. As a fan of theater, I believe the theatrical play Gangs of Dangapur goes beyond a mere representation of a stage play and becomes a critique of society. [1] As Stella Adler, American actor & teacher, said, “The theatre was created to tell people the truth about life and the social situation" (Kissel). The theatrical production, designed and directed by Ranjan Giri, emerges as a vital cultural intervention towards fragmentation, femicide, and societal degradation, which are normalized even in the modern era. Integrated Perspectives: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research is a journal that prioritizes interdisciplinary research focusing on several issues related to social stratification, social constructs, gender expression, and authoritative power. This play reflects social scholarship that is practiced on stage during the performance. Theatricalizing stories of ordinary lives, it showcases how they are thrashed by institutionalized brutality and moral dilemma, which is synonymous with the journal’s dedication towards

multifaceted exploration of modern momentums. [2] This approach of play and the journal complement what German playwright & director Bertolt Brecht wrote in his "Epic Theatre": “The aim... was to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism" (Brecht, 1964).

[3] As British director Peter Brook wrote, “Nothing in theatre has any meaning before or after. Meaning is now." (Brook, 1968). Here he focuses on the immediate nature of the theater. Similarly, German director Thomas Ostermeier, who popularised “Regietheater” believed that modern classic playwrights should also engage with current issues. [4] He states that, “ Every generation writes its own Shakespeare” (Ostermeie, 2016). Continuing the above tradition, Ranjan Giri’s theatre adapted Piyush Mehta’s *Jab Sahar Hamara Sota Hai*. Going beyond the source manuscript’s depiction of metropolitan lawlessness and moral distress, the Hindi theatre heightens socio-aesthetic impact. Thus, Dangapur ceases to be an imaginary place and rather symbolizes numerous Indian towns where safety, transgression, honesty, and security are compromised. [5] Performer and playwright Eve Ensler, who was also the creator of the controversial play *Vagina Monologues*, said in an interview, “Theatre is a place where we can tell the truth about what is happening to women's bodies... it is an act of radical transformation. The stage must not reflect only suffering but rather a catalyst for a global movement to end violence" (Ensler, 2006). Similarly, Giri’s adaptation refuses to remain a passive observer and heightens the focus on patriarchal brutality, misogynistic victimization, and ideological rigidity, recontextualizing Mehta’s original text. The director’s attempt to intensify and reframe the original text is praiseworthy and also in similar lines with German theatre director Thomas Ostermeier. [6] Ostermeier said in an interview, “The director must intensify the conflict so it mirrors the modern viewer's own 'uneasy collusion' with inequality” (Ostermeier, 2025). However, Giri’s scholarly insights show the burden of violence is not just limited to carnage. He rightly shows how individuals internalize brutality, sometimes consciously or unconsciously, resulting in moral callousness. In this sense, the play functions as a sociological case study, a political allegory, and a human drama simultaneously.

The dramaturgical framework of the play reveals the fine boundary that separates institutional law and criminality. [7] Renowned British playwright and screenwriter Harold Pinter, during his 2005 Nobel lecture, describes institutional power as “quite clinical manipulation of power... while masquerading as a force for universal good.” Similarly, Gangs of Dangapur features a character who goes by the name Tyagi, the police officer. Played by actor Zahid Hussian, the persona symbolizes both systemic duplicity and sinister fineness. His scenes in the red-light district with his authoritative dominance over sex workers not only showcase ethical compromise but also a system that has decayed from beneath. [8] The above can be reinforced by Bertolt Brecht in The Threepenny Opera, where he writes, "The law was made for one thing alone, for the exploitation of those who don't understand it... And anyone who wants a crumb of this exploitation for himself must obey the law strictly." (Brecht, 1949 The play is successful in its reflection of macro-analytical scrutiny of the system, ethical metaphysics, and criminology. [9] Once Mexican poet and activist César A. Cruz infamously said, "Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable." (Cruz, 1977) Keeping up with the spirit of the above quote, this theatre forces the audience to go through the dilemma of whether law itself transforms into a tool for exploiting those that it vows to protect.

The audience would sympathize with the multidimensional persona of Abhaas despite his violent past. Rahul Sharma’s passionate acting brings out the character’s vulnerability and yearning for reformation to the violent milieu of Dangapur. Though he tries to fall in love, his

past and the violent society entangle him time and time again. [10] Russian theatre reactionist Konstantin Stanislavski, in his radical view on communication, reveals, “Interaction is possible through moments of silence. Actors must learn to speak with their eyes.” (Stanislavski,2008) Silence sometimes heightens the impact of acting beyond spoken narratives, which Sharma cleverly improvises in his scenes. As the storyline of the theatre rolls on, self-doubt appears in Abhaas’s mind regarding the possibility of reformation in such a volatile place like Dangapur. This intrapersonal confusion in Abhaas brings out psychic tension & crisis of conscience, contextualizing the theatre as a form of psychological narrative. Providing no solution to the chaos rampant in Dangapur the theater presents the system as a nemesis annihilating every potentiality in an individual. Another interesting character is Aslam. This particular character, if seen in the light of “Polyvagal Theory," would make more sense. [11] This theory propagates how “intergenerational trauma is incarnated in male personas.” (Schreyer, 2023) The passing away of Aslam’s dad as per the script triggers the character’s rage and urge for vendetta. However, the psychological masking of his damaged mental health later becomes his achilleas heel. Raj Sarkar justifies the role of Aslam’s character and brings out the indignation, angst towards society, and affection that he feels for his ladylove, Tabassum.

[12] Legendary American actress Meryl Streep said in an interview with Forbes magazine, "Women characters must become universal agents with whom anyone can identify, rather than being accessories to a male journey.” (Streep, 2024) Moving away from being traditional and sentimental character sketches, Gangs of Dangapur indulges presenting in female personas who are agents of resistance and reformation. Instead of vocalizing their trauma and pain, they let their body language and method acting do the talking. [13] British actress and director Romola Garai, regarding her role as Nora in Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, remarks, “A deep female character can revitalize a production.” (Garai, 2026) Similarly for Gangs of Dangapur, the character Tarana, played by Kuheli Ghosh, is the emotional core of the production. Ghosh’s gritty portrayal of Tarana’s character embarrassing humanity over any other religious belief would woo both the audience and critics alike. As per the storyline, Tarana is in love with Abhaas. Her unconditional love and commitment to her lover confront deep-seated conventions of the society hostile to respecting individuality & sovereignty. English actress Kate Fleetwood, while acting as the Witch in Into the Woods, used "vocal soaring" during her performance. She said, “Modulations bring out the internal chaos of a character, making it more deeply rooted than an archetypal concept.” (Fleetwood, 2026) Ghosh follows exactly the same process through her successful metamorphosis into the character of Tarana, portraying the shift from raw emotional fragility to an indomitable force while maintaining commanding presence and empathetic resonance.



Fig2: Kuheli Ghose as Tarana. Reproduced with the Permission of Ranjan Giri

Avoiding sentimentalism, Ghosh's modulations in her diction, bearing, and ocular focus on stage make the character Tarana a tangible reality. As the storyline evolves, the audience witnesses the demise of Abhaas, the love of Tarana. Using this bereavement as a catalyst, Ghosh encapsulates the transition from a melancholic state of mind to transgression. The spectators oscillate between various emotions like anguish, fortitude, and ethical valour through the activist presence of Tarana on stage. An antithetical matrilineal arc is presented in the theatre through the characterization of Tabassum, brought to life by the provocative acting of Ria Karmakar. American singer-songwriter Ani DiFranco remarks, " Peace is a product of balance. I see patriarchy as a fundamental imbalance with its deeply rooted domination that wakens even the most righteous of human beings." (DiFranco) Tabassum is one such example. Her conversion from an individual with a positive mindset towards resentment & depression after the accidental murder of Aslam at the hands of Abhaas shows how patrilineal brutality engulfs people looking for tranquillity in life.

[16] American coach Ivana Chubbuck highlighted the need for the portrayal of women characters in life and art forms. She remarks, "Modern-day women do not fit in the damsel-in-distress concept. Focusing on women who reflect resilience and existential angst can deconstruct the clichés with which audiences view them." (Chubbuck) [17] Meryl Streep once said, "Showcasing women going beyond their physical appearance brings out authenticity and vulnerability, adding realistic stature to their persona on stage." (Streep) Gangs of Dangapur's depiction of women, including those from the red-light district, are all in a similar light. The audience would come across characters based in the red-light district, such as Gulabo, played by Indrani Roy; Rekha, acted by Poulomi Khara; Phulwa, portrayed by Bristi Banerjee; and Jule Bag, as Chameli. In spite of the manipulation by the system, all these characters maintain their sisterhood. The reflection of collective angst, witty exchanges, and integrity amidst the threat of banning their brothel by the system symbolizes the voice of outcast communities. Often the mainstream society treats the red-light communities with certain prejudice. The theatre challenges such social mandates by presenting the above characters as good Samaritans offering solace & care to Tarana in her hours of distress. Dangapur rightly points out morality or ethics is not limited to the upper class of the society; rather, it exists simultaneously within

the marginalized strata of the social fabric. Through all these layered characterizations, the theater echoes with subalternity and feminist discourse.

American science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler considers paradox as the "oil-and-water" combination [18]. “Contradictions preserve uniqueness of character and prevent them from becoming flat tropes." (Butler) The audience witnesses a similar characterization in Vilas, starring Simroz Khan. The character personifies a fractured morality of the contemporary era, which demands selling out to achieve a position of power. Vilas often struggles to maintain his allegiance to political authority and good rapport with Abhaas. He wanted to take his love, Rekha, outside the red-light district and settle with her. However, his benevolence gets lost in the predatory system.

[19] American actress and film producer Viola Davis once said, “A director’s greatest gift is clarity.” (Davis) Ranjan Giri’s directional perspective is so clear that it provides a specific map to the character’s objective. This aspect of his direction safeguards artistic manifestations from being diluted or vague forms of expression. His direction brings out a safe space for each actor/actress, extracting the inherent authenticity of every character. Giri directional restraint reflects Meryl Streep’s ideology. [20] She said, “Directional restraint allows actors to live truthfully on stage. It provides theatrical production a subtle nobility.” Designing the scenography with existential gloom and psychological shadows where needed without exaggeration Giri skillfully fuses metaphor with realistic undertones. Giri needs no introduction as a thespian directing twenty large-scale productions. His film Ashva was featured at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival. With more than thirteen years of experience in cinema and theater, Giri has acted in more than forty plays so far. His vision is to create inspirational dramatic forms on both stage and screen that touch audiences critically. Thus, Gangs of Dangapur becomes a contemporary adaptation in Giri’s direction while retaining the flavor of Mehta’s novel.

The theatre reflects transdisciplinary integration, engaging in a holistic inquiry in the normative framework of political issues along with a critique of social ontologies. It also touches several areas of psychology and critical gender theory, going beyond academic discourse. Instead of compromising with the happily ever after “comfort narrative," rather, Gangs of Dangapur unmasks several social double standards.

I hope readers will enjoy reading the review of such a dramatic form that reimagines theatrical art to challenge social constructs while mirroring cultural realism.

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