

Negotiating the Stage and the World: The Life Writings of Binodini Dasi.

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Abstract: At a time when it was not ‘respectable’ for women to act on a public stage, Binodini Dasi’s performances created quite a stir. Not only was she of the first actors on the Bengali stage, she was also one of the finest. Her autobiographies, *Amar Katha (My Story)* and *Amar Abhinetri Jibon (My Life as an Actress)* were published in 1910 and 1924/25 respectively. The necessity for her to chronicle her life, arose out of her need for acceptance, wherein she constantly judged herself against a prevalent societal value system. Dasi was born into a house of prostitutes and her identity had always haunted her, even in the public sphere, in spite of her success. Her autobiographies have an overarching tone of self-pity. Her desire to fit in, into a society that had set norms of “propriety”, in fact, pushes her to look for redemption, which comes through, with the intervention of an almost saint like figure, Ramakrishna Paramhansa, who redeems her of all her sins. She ceases to be a ‘*patita*’, or the fallen one. However, one cannot ignore the fact that, Binodini writes her autobiographies because she is famous. The foreknowledge of the fact that her autobiographies will be accepted went hand in hand with her popularity, and she negotiates the power of this popularity alongside, the society’s strict value system, to write an account of her life, located amidst the politics of class, gender, identity, the public and the private, purity/propriety and the ‘home’ and the ‘world’. This paper will attempt to read/analyse these negotiations, within the larger context of writing an autobiography.

Keywords: Autobiography, Stage, Theatre in Bengal, Women on stage

After the relocation of courtesans across the Northern and Eastern parts of the country, post the siege of Lucknow, it became increasingly difficult for them to look for employment opportunities. While the prolific performers catered to the elite, by entertaining them and residing in their *bagan baris* (garden houses), some others associated themselves with the Cantonments. A select few were also, now being employed as theatre artists in Bengal, as it was

still disrespectful for the “chaste” women of the household to perform in the public arena. The most significant ones were Binodini Dasi, alongside Golap/Sukumari Devi and Teenkori. Not only was Binodini one of the first actors on the Bengali stage, she was also one of the finest. Her autobiographies, *Amar Katha (My Story)* and *Amar Abhinetri Jibon (My Life as an Actress)* were published in 1910 and 1924/25 respectively. The necessity for her to chronicle her life, arose out of her need for acceptance, wherein she constantly judged herself against a prevalent societal value system. Her autobiographies have an overarching tone of self-pity. Her desire to fit in, into a society that had set norms of “propriety”, in fact, pushes her to look for redemption. However, one cannot ignore the fact that, Binodini writes her autobiographies because she is famous. The foreknowledge of the fact that her autobiographies will be accepted went hand in hand with her popularity, and she negotiates the power of this popularity alongside, the society’s strict value system, to write an account of her life, located amidst the politics of class, gender, identity, the public and the private, purity/propriety and the ‘home’ and the ‘world’. This paper will attempt to read/analyse these negotiations, within the larger context of writing an autobiography and peruse, the woman’s question in terms of the Nationalist discourse, of which these “public” women never formed a part.

The origins of the public theatre in Calcutta can be traced back to the eighteenth century as an impact of the theatrical activities of the British in Calcutta. Mrs. Emma Bristow, the wife of a wealthy British merchant, opened a theatre in her own house and appeared in her own production in 1789. By the nineteenth century there was a sizeable number of theatre houses in Calcutta. In 1795, Garasim Lebdeff, a Russian entrepreneur, tried to produce a play in Bengali, with women playing the female roles, for an Indian audience. Though this was a brave start, his enterprise was cut short, when the Dharmatala Theatre, where he had staged the play, was burnt down. Further accounts of theatre activities by Indians can be found only in the 1850s, that too under the patronage of the landed gentry, the Tagores and the Paikpara Rajas.

The Bengal Theatre was established 1873 by Saratchandra Ghosh and Biharilal Chatterjee. The inclusion of women actresses on stage was discussed by the advisory committee of Bengal Theatre, which included the likes of Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. While Dutt supported the idea of allowing courtesans and prostitutes to act on stage, Vidyasagar, who had spearheaded a movement against child marriage and sati, resigned from his post at this prospect. Four women, Golapsundari, Jagatarini, Elokeshi and Shyama, were brought from the red-light areas to act in Dutt’s play *Sharmishtha*. There were mixed reactions from the public and press. Women often took part in *jatras* and theatre was considered superior to *jatra*. With the inclusion of women who were “social outcasts and immoral”, the press accused the theatre of stooping down to the level of the *jatrawallahs*. The play though turned out to be a huge success. The British newspaper, *The Englishman*, too, like the *Hindu Patriot* and the *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, disapproved of the inclusion of these women in the theatre circuit.

People like Girish Ghosh criticised this stand and attitude of disapproval about the inclusion of women into the theatre arena. Ghosh drew parallels with the European theatres where women performed ballet on stage. He criticised the babus, who kept mistresses and were regularly entertained by them, but pointed a finger at these very courtesans when they performed on stage. Sudipto Chatterjee in his book *The Colonial Staged* mentions: “Casting women in female roles served another important function, it nullified the homophobic anxiety of having boys pass for women, thereby heterosexualising the stage and escaping the unspeakable horrors of homoerotic desires” (182). The issue of courtesans performing on stage was even more complex than this. Most of the actors on stage were “bhadraloks” or respectable men, and the very fact that the courtesans now acted on stage made it very clear that these respectable people would have to share physical space with them, which was quite unacceptable. The theatre, which till then was seen as a means of spreading social message and moral instruction was now getting “tarnished” with the inclusion of social outcasts who shared space with noble men. For the prostitutes, this served as a means to attain social acceptability. They moved out of close quarters to public domain. This domain did make them “available” women but in some cases like that of Golap, who was married to a well-born, educated actor, and called herself Sukumari Dutta after that, gave them a social standing, recognition and family.

Binodini Dasi’s *Amar Katha (My Story)* was published in 1910 and *My Life as an Actress* in 1924/25. Her first act on stage was in 1874, where she played the role of the handmaid of Draupadi. In the very next play she was offered the main role of the heroine. Her life and acting career were both exemplary. She was born into a family of prostitutes and took to theatre to sustain her family. She began her training under Ganga Baiji, a renowned courtesan, who lived as a tenant in their house. Her earliest stint was with the Bengal Theatre, after which she moved to the National Theatre and then to the Star Theatre. She played the lead role in almost all the plays staged during that time. Much of the advice that she received during her career was from her mentor Girish Chandra Ghosh. He made her watch a lot of European Theatre to train her, apart from making her understand the fact that one has to live the character to master portraying it. Most of Ghosh’s plays were successful because she acted in them.

Binodini Dasi was born into a house of prostitutes. Her identity always haunted her, even in the public sphere, though she was immensely successful. She performed at a time when respectable women did not act on stage. But she could never reconcile herself to her identity. It is fairly interesting to note here that she through history she was referred to as Nati Binodini, wherein her profession is deeply embedded into her name, and thereby part of her identity, (Nati in Bangla would mean courtesan/prostitute in the early twentieth century). The connotations of the word however, changes through the late twentieth century, to stand for someone who is thespian/theatre actor.

Dasi's autobiography puts across succinctly her deep admiration and commitment for the stage. There is no denying that her writing throws light onto the workings of early theatre in Bengal. She was also, part of the first set of women who were being trained in a novel medium, facing a crowd who till now had never seen women on stage. "Her writings are a record of an unusually fine mind responding at multiple levels to the experiential world of theatre." (ix) Her autobiographies are replete with incidents from both her interactions with fellow workers and her relationships. It deals with the death of loved ones, including a daughter, and her mentor Girish Ghosh. The text is essentially personal, and confessional, which also addresses pain and loss. But it is definitely her stage persona that comes through more vividly in the texts. She is absolutely passionate about theatre. She talks about being trapped in the *maya* of theatre. In an instance, her colleagues asked her to have a relationship with a wealthy non-Bengali merchant so that they could get enough money to build a new theatre. She even agreed to this, and asked her benefactor to build her a theatre, which he did. This new theatre was supposed to be named after Binodini. That of course did not happen. The theatre was instead called The Star. Much of it had to do with her identity as a prostitute, as people thought that naming a theatre after a prostitute would bring in ill repute. Since then, she became extremely cautious about her personal life, so much so that she does not even mention the name of her husband in her autobiographies. Her autobiographies have an overarching tone of self-pity, whereby she constantly judges herself against a prevalent value system. "These are only shadows of an unfortunate woman's heartache. There is nothing in this world for me but everlasting despair and the fears of a heart filled with sorrow. And yet, there is not a should who will listen even to this. There is no one in this world before whom I can lay bare my pain, for the world sees me as a sinner- a fallen woman." (Bhattacharya My Story 50) She fails miserably and then this self-pity becomes her only redemptive tool. By justifying her actions, she falls into the trap whereby she accepts the societal norms as correct and 'proper'. Binodini is a *patita*, a fallen woman and needs redemption. "Utterly despicable and degraded is our status in society...A prostitute's life is certainly tainted and despicable." (Bhattacharya 104-105) This redemption comes in the form of Ramakrishna Paramhansa, who visits her during the performance of Chaitanya Lila, and blesses her, thereby sanitizing her and the theatre.

And it was during the performance of Chaitanya Lila that is to say, not only this performance, but the incident around it which became the source of greatest pride in all my life, that I, a sinner, was granted grace by the Paramhansadev Sri Ramakrishna mahashoy.... The most divine of beings granted me refuge at his feet...he would place his hands on my head and cleansing with his touch my sinful body, he blessed me, Ma, may you have Chaitanya! Poignant indeed was the sight of his gentle and compassionate image before an inferior creature such as myself (Bhattacharya 95)

He redeems her of all her sins, and she ceases to be a '*patita*', or the fallen one. This in a certain fashion co-opts her into the societal system. She has the blessings from a mahapurush and after this incident she starts distancing herself from the stage and finally retires after the death of Ramakrishna in 1886. It is interesting to note here that there have been several plays staged on just this incident from the life of Binodini, thereby insisting on the need for redemption.

Binodini writes her autobiography because she is famous. This is a way for her to find recognition, outside of stage, as a human being, albeit, one with follies. She also, writes it because she has financial independence, she had a professional career. She therefore is a working woman writing her story. The foreknowledge of the fact that her autobiography will be accepted went hand in hand with her popularity. Hence, she had internalised the power of her popularity, but at the same time used the tone of self-pity to negotiate her identity and position in a society which was strict. She faced a lot of betrayals, both at the personal and professional level. Her autobiography is of significance also, because in it, she tells her story, as opposed to others narrating her story. It also, becomes representative of the subaltern writing, and in this case, she definitely is three times as marginalised, by the colonisers, patriarchy, and a moral code. Her mentor, Girish Ghosh, for whom she had the highest regard was dismissive of her writing her autobiography. However, in a note titled "Srimati Binodini and the Bengali Stage", he mentions in a positive note:

Reading this autobiography will destroy the pride of the zealous devotee, the righteous will embrace humility and the sinner will be given new hope. Those who are unfortunate as Binodini and having no option take up a disgusting path for livelihood, those who have been seduced by the honeyed words of the licentious, they too, will be hopeful that if like Binodini they too can commit themselves to the theatre with body and soul, they can expend their despicable birth into the service of society. (Bhattacharya "Benediction"28)

The understanding was so, that, it was *karma* or action and not birth that made a human being. These theatre actresses went through rigorous training, and through *tyaag* (sacrifice) and *sadhana* (dedication) attained *siddhi* (achievement). Perhaps, this is what Ghosh meant when he wrote the foreword, to the autobiography. Binodini Dasi praises her mentor Girish Ghosh by giving him the full credit for training her, as she was "semi- or uneducated" (Chatterjee 190). However, he is often accused of not writing or creating powerful roles for actresses. Chatterjee observed that this happened because Ghosh at some level felt that "[t]he uneducated actresses of the period were simply not capable of rendering subtle impersonations" (189). Most of his women characters were historical heroines or mythic goddesses. The ones whom he placed in today's day and age were martyred daughters/mothers, vamps or temptresses. His women characters lacked shades of grey and were generally flat. Much of this had to do with the fact that the actresses were prostitutes and the audience consisted of babus and bhadraloks. And the identification of the actresses to the roles that they played on stage would be potentially dangerous. The audience would not accept the actresses playing characters that they identified

with. The prostitute was the home breaker and hence no identification with the character portrayed was possible as far as the domestic women were concerned. But at the same time the fact that domestic women were jealous of these actresses cannot be denied. The actresses represented the most public form of life, they were also people who lured their husbands away, and hence served as an enigma for every wife. Sudipto Chatterjee in his book *The Colonial Staged* mentions, "...the prostitute could even represent Mother Nation (as in the case of the nationalist pantomimes commonplace in the public theatres) but not the mother or mother to be, at home. It was unspeakably dangerous to allow the 'home breaker' prostitute actress, whose social role was to entertain the babus and lure them out of their homes, to portray the 'home maker' on stage" (Chatterjee 198).

As Sudipto Chatterjee observes, the idea of the nation as mother was part of the nationalist discourse--both in the literary and the political rhetoric. It drew heavily from Hindu mythology. The prostitute actress on stage brought the scope of actually, physically locating a space where the discourse could be deliberated upon. There could now be a physical representation of "Mother Nation". The prostitutes who were marginalised outcasts were now put in an exalted position. Someone who absolutely had no agency could represent the entire nation. As Chatterjee puts it,

These actresses were the ones who paraded on the exalted female figures for the audience to gaze at. After all, to see Mother India was to believe in her. As a logical corollary, then it was the very same staged Motherhood that was denying them the motherhood they were biologically capable of; that had in the manner of speaking rendered difficult, nay impossible. So much so that the best playwrights, all of them male, would not dare write roles for them in which they replicate their real life counterparts. These women could be gazed upon but not identified with. (206)

It can be safely concluded that these marginalised women playing the roles of Mother Nation, goddesses and saints was accepted, only because of a historical and mythological "romance" that surrounded these roles, whereby one could watch them, but never identify with them. So though prostitutes and courtesans were employed on stage to provide them with social acceptance, the roles that were given or written for them, denigrated them and put them back in the vicious circle of unacceptability, rendering them as "available women", none of whom could have a "normal and pure life" after and during theatre. They did win accolades but their status in society in terms of acceptability did not improve much. As Chatterjee goes on to say:

The perfunctory service implicit in the false exaltation of the female figure in nationalist discourse, especially in Bengali Theatre, is harshly contested by the life stories of the numerous actresses who appeared on the Bengali stage, especially Binodini Dasi, the distinguished actress. Ostensibly raised from the depths of fate's severity to social recognition, from prostitute to performer, a number of these actresses were rewarded with

the same ignominy, exploitation and neglect that their former profession offered them. This points out, once again, the failure of the nationalist agenda to reconcile itself with the reality of the social condition of the “nation”. (265-266)

Partha Chatterjee talks about a binary between the ‘home’ and the ‘world’, and further creates a binary for women in terms of the “private” and the “public” --the wife and the mistress. They could co-exist at the extreme end of a babu’s life but there was no interface between the two. Prostitutes, if allowed to enter the mainstream socio-cultural activity from the margins of the bourgeois society, could damage the social cohesion. This had already happened as the courtesans and prostitutes were performing on stage alongside babus. But they could not be allowed to enter the inner sanctum of a household and neither could they be allowed to perform the roles which the babus could identify with. The prostitute playing the role of a wife on stage mimetically gave rise to another possibility, that of the wife becoming the prostitute. The public and the private had to be kept separately. In his essay titled “Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonised Women: The Contest in India”, Partha Chatterjee elucidates on the relevance of the woman’s question within the nationalist framework:

The nationalist response was to construct a reformed tradition and defend it on the grounds of modernity. In the process, it created the image of a new woman who was superior to the Western women, traditional Indian women and low class women. This new patriarchy invested women with the dubious honour of representing a distinctively modern national culture... An analogous set of distinctions would mark out the "low class" or "common" woman from the "normal". They would be brazen, irreligious, sexually promiscuous, etc. The nationalist male thinks of his own wife/sister/daughter as "normal" precisely because she is not a "sex object" while those could be seen as "sex objects" are not "normal". (622-630)

The nationalist movement essentially catered to a certain section of society, which did not include the old traditional strata or the low-class people. It essentially was a middle-class phenomenon: “Nationalism located its own subjectivity in the spiritual domain of culture, where it considered itself superior to the West and hence undominated and sovereign” (Chatterjee 631). Since, we were far superior in terms of spirituality, and colonisation so far had not been able to destroy the superior, inner sanctity, the agenda of the nationalists was to imbibe what the West was superior in, that is ‘modern sciences and arts of the material world’ and overthrow the power. The figure of the nautch girl, or the prostitute essentially would not fit into this paradigm and hence, was conveniently left out: “The nationalist discourse we have heard so far is a discourse about women; women do not speak here. It is a discourse which assigns to women a place, a sign, an objectified value; women here are not subjects with a will and consciousness” (Chatterjee 632).

The figure of the courtesan/prostitute was a subaltern one where her existence was acknowledged but her problems were never foregrounded. She was given no agency. They almost suffered a triple marginalisation, in terms of colonialism, patriarchy and the propriety of the then society. The courtesans/prostitutes tried to look out for alternate professions (by becoming the first actresses of the public stage), thereby looking forward to social acceptability, which all of them desired. But as theatre actresses as well, they were stigmatised:

The sympathetic liberal--minded bhadralok (like 19th century Bengali theatre directors and actors, and few Brahmo social reformers) did, indeed, acknowledge the talents of the actresses who came from the red-light areas. But while trying to appreciate their art, or attempting their 'rehabilitation' (either by giving them away in marriage, or by taking them under their protection as mistresses), they tended to fix their female identity as that of submissive domestic creatures, to be trained under benevolent and civilized male patronage. They failed to recognize the strivings for an independent status that some among these women might have been fighting for. (Banerjee, S. 187)

The prostitute was seen as the "other" who was not supposed to be emulated. She was flippant and ignorant as opposed to the image of the "new" woman that was being created. She represented the world outside, which the new emerging women was not expected to represent. The prostitute was abhorred and attempts were made to regulate her functioning in the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries, but the profession survived, because of "the sheer tenacity of self-preservation" (Banerjee, S. 182). It is within these parameters of purity, and ideas of a new emerging woman that Binodini Dasi assesses herself and is unable to reconcile with. She calls herself, "fallen (*patita*), unfortunate (*abhagini*), despised and despicable, a sinner (*papi*) and a lowly woman, and repeatedly refers to herself as a prostitute" (37) While both these could easily have been autobiographies or life stories of one of the first professional women actors on stage in Bengal and indeed of a "new" idea of womanhood, which at the centre of it, had economic independence, these instead, become the tales of a woman, steeped in self-pity, trying to redeem herself and find acceptability and a respectable reputation in society.

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