

**Devi, Nati or Dasi- Re-Reading the voice of the Marginalized in
Binodini's 'Amar Katha' in the backdrop of 19th century Colonial Bengali
Theatre**

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“These are only the 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 soul 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. I have no kith and kin, no society, no friend—no one in this world whom I may call my own”

- Rimli Bhattacharya

Rise of Nationalism and 19th Century Colonial Bengali Theatre

The rise of the Proscenium gave a new direction to theatre viewing in the second half of the 19th century. A brand-new way of sitting in front and watching the actors on stage with three sides closed, not only changed the quality of the theatre goers but also brought a metamorphosis in the content of the plays produced. The history of colonial Bengali theatre was dominated by *jatras*, *kheurs* and *kathagaans*. Theatre in the true sense was exclusively within the domains of the aristocrats who dwelled upon private theatres as a mode of entertainment. It was not inclusive of the middle class and least of all the lower classes. *Jatra* and such open forum of entertainment was the prevalent form of cultural expression of the masses. The advent of English education created a newly emergent middle class *Bhadralok*, who started questioning the native vulgarities of the *kheur* and *kabigaan* that were filled with sexual innuendoes. The Sambad Prabhakar of 16 November 1865 wrote: *“The present Jatra performances are detestable to the true music lovers. Considering stage performances very expensive a few educated young boys have started presenting Geetabhinay in the same system [as Jatra]. This is very commendable indeed. The proscenium style of theatre was the craze of the babus and the bourgeoisie, who richly borrowed from Sanskrit texts to write plays for the Great National Theatre.”* The cultured, well-mannered and

aesthetically rich *bhadralok* was brimming with new forms of expression to reach the common masses. They were fervently in search of a medium that would help them to revive the age-old glory along the lines of European liberalism.

Thus, arose a culture that was infused with traditional Hindu religiosities merged with a look back into the puranas. Doyens like Girish Chandra Ghosh, whose Great National Theatre dominated the cultural milieu of Kolkata back then, produced plays like *Chaitanyaleela*, *Sitar Banobash*, creating a counter colonial narrative to confront Victorian liberal dogmas. The new theatre also absorbed the merchant community, thus turning theatre into a site of private capital parallel to being a field of cultural production. The newly educated Bengali middle class men, the *babus*, formed the major chunks of the audience, apart from their White Town friends in Calcutta.

The women were disconnected from the entire theatre fraternity. The rising aspiration and nationalistic fervour though inundated with doses of liberalism borrowed from the West, yet it strangely kept its women out of bounds. The binary of *Bhadramohila* (a woman of respectable upbringing) and *barbonita* (a public woman) was a differentiating factor that excluded women from respectable households to perform in theatre. Often, women sat in the garb of veils and purdahs, away from the menfolk to watch *jatras*. Depicting the condition of the women, The Amrita Bazar Patrika (20 February 1873) wrote: “*The family-women of this country will never enter into acting; perhaps the female characters have to be collected from the group of social outcasts and it is yet to be decided whether that will benefit or cause harm to the country.*” The newly emergent *babu* class excluded women from performing on stage. Men, in the garb of women, performed female roles. Most of the time, these men were considered effeminate and it was pitted against the so-called masculinity of the protagonists of the theatre. According to Bishnupriya Dutt in her seminal book, this masculinity of the emergent Hindu *bhadralok* was the basis of an ultra-Nationalistic fervour, which was represented in the political arena and therefore into theatre as well.

The Nationalistic aspirations of the English educated middle class, as stated earlier sought to revive everything that was indigenous. The slogan of the day was ‘back to the Vedas’. In order to counter everything British, they tried to find shelter in

the Puranas, religious texts and the ideals of high and ascetic living. Women, were considered to be the epitome of virtuosity and loyalty. Good women were supposed to stay indoors and perform her duties towards her husband. While the *bhadralok* community was constructing an image of themselves as the progressive and the modern under the light of Western education, the burden of representing the traditional fell on the '*bhadramohila*' of the *andarmahal* (interior). The binary of the *bhadramohila* and the *barangana* is evident in the writings of Nirod C. Chaudhury's "*Bangali Jibone Ramoni*". The concept of the public woman was very much evident from his writings. She was considered a commodity by most of the *babu*'s whose seduction was to savoured by many but admitted by none. *The Maddhyastha*, a leading chronicle of those times, voiced a prolonged sarcastic accusation that all hell might break loose by the association of those "wicked" women. The women of the town were subjected to undeserving, merciless, acerbic criticism without even taking their behaviour during rehearsals into account. Amritalal Basu's description of the prostitutes' work ethic surely throws the Bengali aristocratic and editorial agenda which gave birth to the proscenium stage, into question.

The year 1884 created a furore in the history of the 19th century colonial Bengali theatre, as it was the first time that a woman, a public woman performed on stage, and that too of a virtuous woman in a religious play *Chaitanyaleela*. Binodini's entry into the Bengali theatre created many milestones- one, she replaced the cross-dressing men acting as women and performed as a real woman, secondly, she received accolades from many leading personalities, including Sri Ramkrishna Paramhansa and carved out some sort of social identity for herself (though this was fraught with many personal pitfalls), thirdly, she flagged off the entry of women into theatre as a respectable profession. Though Binodini had predecessors like *Elokeshi*, *Golapsundari*, *Ganga Baiji*, *Khetromoni*, *Rajkumari* and others performing on stage before her, it was her powerful performance that made her the queen of theatre for many years, superseding all other actresses of her time.

The Saintlore of the Victorian tradition was heavily present in the British theatre, during those times, where the English ladies liberally performed on stage. They were a site of spectacle and consumption, with doses of sexual adventure and

eroticism. The disillusioned *bhadraloks* of Bengal wanted to give a counter narrative to this carefree and often vulgar exhibitionism of the Western woman and was thus abhorrent to the portrayal of virtuous characters by prostitutes who in reality were home breakers. Binodini was not outside this. She too faced much trials and tribulations for being the daughter of a prostitute, which perhaps is the reason why she left theatre at the peak of her career. According to Dutt and Sarkar —“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 homemakers on stage. The nationalists turned towards the ‘conjugal project’, where these fallen women, from their role in domestic social drama, shifted towards role of conjugality and that of mythological characters. The mythical and historical narratives got domesticated to re-enhance the domestic conjugality project and the ideal patriarchal imagination (Dutt and Sarkar 2010:52)”. In her own words, as translated from Amar Katha, “An intolerable burden of her pain has been concealed by smiles, as despair reinforces hopelessness relentlessly, day and night. How many are unfulfilled desires, the wounds burning with pain that are alright in their heart: has anyone ever known any of this? They become prostitutes forced by circumstances, lacking shelter, lacking a space...those unfortunate women, deceived by men had to turn their lives into a perpetual cremation ground, ashamsan (cremation ground), only they know how painful is a prostitute’s life.”

According to Rimli Bhattacharjee, it is not sure as to from when she started being called as *Nati Binodini*, as she never signed herself in that name. However, one of the reasons can be that local popular culture of those times referred as *nati* to that woman who was a sexual commodity/ fallen from the ideologies of being a family woman, and not necessarily *natis* we understand to be a dancer. An interesting point is that though her autobiography was written in the year 1913, not many prolific women writers during her time, ever mention her writing, leave alone her name. Her autobiography found utterance much later, depicting the hypocrisy of her times. Her writings explore the vacuum left by the homogenous histories collectively written during the 19th century. I here attempt to read the life and actions of this female auto biographer as texts pitted against the complex spectrum of religion, society and culture of colonial Bengal, the marginal voice of this

suppressed, and hence ‘Subaltern’, (as Gayatri Spivak used it), woman cannot be dismissed as powerless. She does raise a voice of her own. But she can neither be labelled as nascent or as radical ‘Feminist’ in accordance with the Western critical discourses. My study explores the social, emotional and sexual exploitation of women amidst a patriarchal, colonial regime in which they have tried to create their own identity and Selfhood.

The Nationalist agenda of the middle-class Bengali was thus full of hypocrisy as it actually practiced the theory of exclusion, reducing the identity of Binodini to suffice the needs of the theatre, but did not emancipate her from her sad state of affairs in her personal life. All through her life, Binodini desperately tried to establish her identity as a woman of respect. She performed all those rituals that was expected from a virtuous woman in the erstwhile Bengali society. But it was the double-faced nature of the middle class so called enlightened *babus* who spoke of Nationalism and Liberalism infused with English education on one hand, yet never let a fallen woman change herself for the good. It did not matter that she was the queen of theatre and was often applauded for her brilliant performances, as the male gaze was limited to the theatre walls, outside which she was still considered a public property, a *Noti*, whose main profession was that of a seductress. In the words of Rimli Bhattacharya who translated some portions of *Amar Katha*, the autobiography written by Binodini: *“I began to think that he who had given me protection would be true to me. He was not and he deceived me like any other deceitful male. He had sworn repeatedly by dharma that I was the sole object of his love and that his love for me was forever. But what actually happened was quite different. He had pretended to go to his ancestral village on the pretext of work. But the real reason for the visit was not work, but getting married. Where then was his love for me? Such deceitfulness.”*

Before Binodini, the theatre did turn the prostitute *Golapsundari* into a respectable *bhadramahila*, Mrs Sukumari Dutta, but it was a temporary remission. Society ostracized Sukumari and her husband Ghostha Bihari Dutta, and they became social outcast. Very soon Sukumari, abandoned by her husband, was obliged to return to her earlier profession. So, it was evident that the stage or the *mancha* could not

liberate the soul of Binodini who was forced to return to prostitution after the death of her mentor Gurmukh Roy.

Binodini in Amar Katha: Voice of the Subaltern Marginalized Woman

The narrative of Amar Katha, the long-forgotten autobiography of Binodini, one of the finest produces of the 19th century Bengali colonial theatre is surprisingly a saga of hopelessness and despair. Being one of the modern women to bring in changes in the mode of dialogue delivery and makeup of stage artistes, her monologue about the public and private life she led, is muted in gender specific socializations, embedded deeply in betrayals and hypocrisy. However, unlike most of the women of her times, she did not channelize her anger by way of her acting, rather contained her melancholy in deep silences. As Gayatri Spivak iterated ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ it is interesting to note that despite having several avenues, Binodini fell back on her ill-fated life with a kind of surreal surrender. Whether it be her earlier mentors who fell back on their promises of lifetime companionship, or her being used as a ploy to submit to the whims of another rich mentor, she sacrificed her life and career to resuscitate the dying National theatre, never questioning verbally the torment meted out to her in this process.

As will be pointed out in the later paragraphs of the research paper, Binodini faced marginalization from different quarters of life, and by men and women alike- men, who voyeuristically savoured her femininity both on and off stage as a public woman, as well as from women who despised her as she was a ‘*nosto meye*’ or a spoilt woman. She says, as translated from her autobiography Amar Katha by Rimli Bhattacharya on her subdued position in society, “*In me you have created an ill-fated woman Whom the three worlds call a sinner Desires cry out and die within; but to speak of my pain is to invite contempt*”

Binodini was exploited by her unnamed mentor who never gave her the respect of a wife, in spite of making many promises. He went off to marry another woman by lying to her about his trip to his native village. Subsequently there was a violent dispute between her rich protector and Gurmukh Rai, Binodini for her passion for theatre left her rich protector so that she could persuade Gurmukh Rai to spend unlimited sums of money for the construction of the auditorium. Most of

Binodini's colleagues had assured her that the name of this new theatre would be B Theatre after her name. Binodini trusted her colleagues. However, she came to know that it was named Star Theatre only after the registration was over. Binodini wrote: "*I wondered afterwards was all their love and affection merely a matter of words in order to get some work out of me? But what could I do? I was then completely tied to them. And I had never suspected that they would deceive me and behave in such a dishonest manner. The grief that I had not felt in my refusal of such a huge sum of money, I now intensely felt about their behaviour. Although I have never said a word to anyone, this is something I will never forget.*"

Binodini talked about another rich protector towards the end of her acting career, who became her *hridoy debata*, (the lord of her heart) for whom she had given up stage, fame and the prospects of wealth. Such complete self-denial would be a pre-condition for receiving protection from protectors from other predatory men, and some love. For Binodini his death put an end to the need for both.

Nati Binodini: The Star in Colonial Bengali Theatre

Binodini was rechristened as *Nati Binodini* for her stupendous performance on stage. It is a matter of great tragedy that her years in Bengali stage acting was minimal (1874-1886). She had the great Girish Chandra Ghosh, known as the doyen of colonial Bengali Theatre as her mentor. Under his able tutelage, Binodini transformed herself from a self-proclaimed public woman to a talented theatre actress who took the stage by storm. Such was her acting brilliance, that she was called "*Flower of the Native Stage.*" Binodini's entire career may be seen in four phases — she was initiated into the realms of the Great National Theatre, later, she became an intrinsic part of the Bengal Theatre; she joined the National Theatre and finally, bedecked the stage of the Star Theatre. According to Madhumita Roy and Debmalya Das in their research, her journey began with the role of an "extra" in the play *Shatrusanghar*. Soon, she achieved the central role in Haralal Roy's play *Hemlata*.

Throughout her career of twelve years, she portrayed almost ninety characters in about eighty plays. With her acumen she could enliven epical characters like *Sita* (in *Sitaharan*, *Rabanbadh*), *Pramila* (in *Meghnadbadh*), *Draupadi* (in *Pandaver*

Agyatabas), *Kaikeyi* (in *Ramer Bonobas*), *Uttara* (in *Abhimanyubadh*), *Gopa* (in *BuddhadebCharit*), as well as, the earthly ones like *Kanchan* (in *Sadhabar Ekadashi*), *Kamini* (in *NabinTapaswini*), *Radhika* (in *Sati Ki Kalankini*). She even depicted her skill of portraying seven different characters in the dramatic version of *Meghnadbadh*. In Bankimchandra's *Durgeshnandini*, she played both the characters of Ayesha and Tilottama. Often, she had to portray contradictory characters within a single night. Thus, people witnessed her swift, skillful transition from the spiritual portrayal Chaitanya in *Chaitanya Leela* to *Bilasini Karforma*, the comical representation of the "New Woman" in *Bibaha Bibhrat*, or, from *Kunda of Bishabriksha* to *Kanchan of Sadhabar Ekadashi*. Binodini was appreciated by many eminent people including Bankim Chandra, Ramakrishna, Father Lafont, Edwin Arnold and other personalities. Her encounter with Sri Ramakrishna instigated her spiritual transformation.

Bengali colonial theatre of the 19th century, however was ridden with conspiracies and hypocrisy. Binodini, on her part reveals it all in her autobiography *Amar Katha*, where she goes on to describe the betrayals of her compatriots in theatre. In the name of saving a dying theatre, she was mentally forced to stay with a new mentor Gurmukh Roy, who spent enormous amounts to the dying Great National Theatre, only because Binodini was in his shelter. Binodini, while delineating the story that lies at the backdrop of the construction of the Star Theatre, reveals the hypocrisy of her compatriots. Her love towards the stage, the theatre, as well as the other fellow companions, forced her to be a subject of Gurmukh Rai's whim. Abandoning her former paramour's shelter, she unwillingly accepted Gurmukh's proposal of building a playhouse in lieu of Binodini.

Her guilt consciousness gets reflected in her assertion: "*The concubines, like us, have to endure many ups and downs; still, they have their limits. But my destiny has always been very harsh ...Our destination has remained erroneous, whenever we desire to follow the right path, the wrong comes in the way.*" The "woman" in her utters in utmost bereavement: "*To abandon one shelter and attain another has been our perpetual law yet, in this condition I was very disturbed. People may laugh at a concubine's guilt consciousness or pain. But, if, they consider it gravely, they may surely decipher the woman in us.*" Thus, despite all her

oscillations, she finally chose to discard the “woman” in her so as to value the “actress” residing within the deeper core. Moreover, her mentor Girish Chandra insisted: “*It is theatre that has been the ladder of my progress... Theatre establishes one’s fame in the world perpetually.*” Probably, his comment sowed the seeds of ambition in her. Binodini’s colleagues, too, voluntarily proposed to name the newly constructed theatre house in the name of Binodini: the B-Theatre. However, it would be wrong if we interpret her craving for fame as the sole reason behind her subjugation under Gurmukh Rai.

Although, the artist Binodini secured appraisals on stage, the real situation was worse. Under the scrutinizing eyes of her fellow companions she retains the degraded status of a concubine, always vulnerable to material allurements. Her identity as a low-born concubine effaced the transcendence that she achieved as an actress. She says “*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 soul who will listen even to this. There is none in this world before whom I can lay bare my pain, for the world sees me as a sinner – a fallen woman. I have no kith or kin, no society, no friend – no one in this world to whom I may call my own. For I am a social outcast – a despicable prostitute.*” (Dasi, MS: 49). Thus, the theatre that found its existence with her aid was not given her name. The name “Star” resounded with a perpetual insistence on her deprivation. Before her retirement she said “*The chief one of these many reasons was that I was extremely hurt by the deceptions that were practiced on me... I had not been able to forget the blows of deception. Therefore, I retired when the time was ripe.*”

A more or less similar event is etched in Amit Maitra’s documentation of another actress, Gangamani’s theatrical career. This gifted singer could not efface the title of “Baiji” from her identity. Although she presented herself in the roles of *Subhadra (in Abhimanyubadh)*, *Guhakpatni (in Ramer Bonobas)*, *Mandodari (in Sitaharan)*, *Lakshmi Devi (in Sri-Batsa Chinta)*, *Goutami (in Buddhadeb Charit)* and mesmerized the audience with her sublime voice, the advertisement of Girishchandra Ghosh’s play *Kalapahar* (1896) inscribed her as “*Ganga Baiji*” in the catalogue of its dramatis personae. Finally, she embraced the predicament of an “extra” and immersed into the realms of uncertainty. Binodini’s decision of leaving

the stage was her self-assertion, a muted protest against her companions' hypocrisy. But, such a decision cannot be regarded as solely her own; apart from naming the theatre as "Star" her colleagues were conspiring to marginalize her. Moreover, when Gurmukh Rai proposed to bestow the theatre's proprietorship on her, Girishchandra Ghosh toiled hard to dissuade Binodini and her mother from undertaking the proprietorship. Her mentor's indifference regarding her wellbeing was thus clear.

Anticipating such a non-chalant response, Binodini leaves her Aamar Katha with a mild plea: "*People, who would laugh at my humble effort, should discard the idea of reading it... Those, who possess the faculty of sympathizing, will understand the pain embedded in this heart.*" Within her plea, the narrator in her engages herself in categorizing the reading public. Seeking to eradicate the possibility of ill-treatment of her autobiography at the hands of the insensitive readers, she strategically attempts to specify the target recipients of her text. She goes on to specify the reason behind the degradation of the socially attested "professional" women. Her voice of protest points the arrow of indictment towards patriarchy. The males, who designate them as degraded, are equally involved in the vicious circle of degradation. If women like her are compelled to sell their bodies, it is the so called *Bhadraloks* who emerge as the chief consumer. Binodini asserts, "*There are many men, who, led by their instincts, fail to exercise self-restraint and destroy the life of powerless maidens forever.*" However, Binodini's repeated self-condemnations ironically hint at the hypocrisies of society. The actress, who was committed to cater to the interests of the society, assumes the vital role of a dissenter as she scripts her life. With her ultimate self-humiliation: "*Like my corrupted soul, I have tainted the white pages by my inscription. What could I do? A degraded soul has nothing more than degradation*", Binodini emerges out as a voice of protest seeking to transcend social ostracism through spiritual transcendence.

Binodini's form of acting (1863-1941)- according to Sudipto Chowdhury, was a mixture of the Natyashastra as well as Stanislavskian method mostly enacted by the Victorian women of the White town- her plays included *Dakshya Yagna* followed by *Chaitanya Leela*. Seen deeply, an alternative history of colonial Kolkata was

given by her in her autobiography *Amar Katha* published in the year 1913 which has references to the trials and tribulations that she faced in the hands of the theatre community—*“These are only the 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 soul 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. I have no kith and kin, no society, no friend—no one in this world whom I may call my own”*

Binodini also acted as *Mrinalini* by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, where she played the role of a devout Hindu woman who jumps into the funeral pyre of her husband. She acted in six characters in one production, such as *Parimala, Baruni, Rati, Maya, Mahamaya, Sita in Meghanadbudh* i.e. *“Killing of Meghanadh”*, in 1881. There was another instance as three in another namely *Ayesha, Thilottama, Asmani in Durgesh Nandini* i.e. *“Chieftain’s Daughter”*, in 1876. Both of these were dramatized by her mentor Girish Ghosh. The wide range of her interpretations in diverse roles proved her ability. Most of her roles were almost contrasting. Some of the are *Kunda* in Ghosh’s dramatization of Bakim Chandra Chattarjee’s“ tragedy *“Bisha-Briksha”* i.e. Poison Tree, and *Kanchan in Dinabandhu* *Mitras satirical Sadhabar Ekadashi* i.e. *“wife’s widowhood Fast”*, the Godly Chaitanya in *Chaitanyaleela* i.e. *“Chaitanya’s Miracles”* and the sophisticated *Bilasini in Bibaha Bibhrat* i.e. *“Marriage Muddle”*,. She also acted as the transformed *Chintamani* in *Bilwamangal* and the lighter *Rangini in Bellik Bazaar*. All of these were directed by Girish Ghosh. Some other well-known characters played by her include *Sita, Draupadi, Kaikeyi, Kapalkundalam, Motibibi* and so on. Apart from her excellent performance earned her titles, such as *“Moon of the Star Theatre”*, *“Flower of the Native Stage”* and so on. The later years of Nati Binodini was veiled in obscurity. She charts the betrayals, within the theatre world, the death of her beloved daughter Shakuntala, and the companionship and loss of the upper-class patron, *Ranga Babu*, whose death left her isolated.

Binodini Dasi- A Public Woman and Seductress among *Bhadraloks*

Perhaps one of the most tragic part of Binodini’s life was her failed personal relationships. She was subjected to male scrutiny in all spheres of her life. Right

from the beginning of her career in theatre, she was treated like a social outcast by the theatre fraternity. Since virtuous women were not allowed to perform on stage, she was always treated like a public woman who had entered the male domain. Hence for the most time of Binodini's life, she was a commodity meant to pleasure the sexual overtures of men. She was indeed, applauded for many of her roles in theatre, but outside the parameters of acting, she was always a fallen woman, a *barbonita*, whose sexuality was to be devoured by all and sundry.

There are many contemporary *jatrapalas*, or stage plays based on the life and contribution of Binodini (played by veteran Bina Dasgupta), which showcases her tremendous sacrifice for the cause of theatre in the 19th century. She made the supreme sacrifice that any woman can make to pull out The Great National Theatre from the great paucity of funds that they were facing. In order to save the staff of theatre from starving to death Binodini sacrificed her life to the cause of theatre. A fallen woman, she was guided by her mentor Girish Chandra Ghosh to entertain the rich Gurmukh Roy, who in reward of her subservience to him would financially support The Great National Theatre from falling. Most of Binodini's colleagues had assured her that the name of this new theatre would be B Theatre after her name. Binodini trusted her colleagues. However, she came to know that it was named Star Theatre only after the registration was over, she reserved for herself *janamdukhini* (congenitally sad), *hathobhagini* (unfortunate woman), *abhagini* (sinner). She wrote, 'In this world rare is the occasion when women such as ourselves may indulge in *maanabhimaan*, (emotional turmoil) in feeling hurt or upset.

In her autobiography *Amar Katha*, she called herself 'despicable prostitute' thereby submitting to the patriarchal marginalization inflicted upon her. The preface of her autobiography was written by Girish Chandra Ghosh, who was not sympathetic to the pains and agonies that she faced and none of it is visible in the preface. This is another instance of hypocrisy performed by the men of those times who greedily consumed the voluptuousness of the prostitute in the public platform yet denied her basic rights in the personal space. Binodini's second bout of suffering came in the hands of another man whose identity she has not disclosed and referred herself to be his '*ashrita*'- yet she was exploited by the same man and there are many lines

which point out to the distress that Binodini felt in her autobiography. Binodini talked about another rich protector towards the end of her acting career, who became her *hridaydebata*, (the lord of her heart) for whom she had given up stage, fame and the prospects of wealth. Such complete self-denial would be a precondition for receiving protection from protectors from other predatory men, and some love. For Binodini his death put an end to the need for both.

In her autobiography 'Amar Katha' Binodini refers to her last mentor, with whom she lived for more than three decades as her '*hridaydebata*' or Lord of her heart. His death could not fill in the void in her life. She had been a seductress, a prostitute all her life, but she had tried to reform herself and attain salvation. Quoting from her autobiography, she says "*sei doyamoy debotar charone, eibedonajorito 'Amar Katha' samarpon korlam*" (I am offering my autobiography in the Holy feet of my beloved). In later paragraphs, she also goes on to write, that death has not been able to steal him away from her- "*amarsurjyomukhi oi swargeachey...amarkachenai, kintu se amarswargeachey*" (the sunflower of my heart is in the Heaven, he is not with me, but in my heaven). Such was her deep love for her mentor, that even during the moments of his death, she was always by his side. The eternal seductress was a reformed character, away from the limelight of the glitz of the theatre halls, away from the accolades, the stage, her other admirers, ready to serve her mentor with the utmost reverence that she possessed. Her mentor too, often referred as *Ranga Babu*, loved her beyond anything. During his last, he put his head in the lap of Binodini and passed away. In referenced to this, Binodini writes, that the last words of reassurance of *Ranga Babu* was- "*amitomarnikot je sattyobaddhyohoiyaachi, tahasakoleijaney, jaharaamayjaney, taharatomayjaaney...*"(everyone knows of my loyalty towards you; those who know me, know you). Binodini referred to him in these words- *sei nyayporayon, sottyobaadi, sohridaydebota, chandrer nyaye ektimatro kalonko rakhiya amaye chiro jatonamoye samudre feliya chole gelen*" (my honest, fair, and sympathetic God has left me alone, just like the black spot on the moon)

Calling herself *barangona* (courtesan / prostitute) and *kolonkini / potita* (the fallen women), a woman deprived of all happiness and deserted by friends and society, Binodini was speaking about a new binary created within women. She writes,

referring to her conversation with her mentor, that he often said that we all come to this Universe with a purpose and that whatever work we do, that is to be respected. Binodini questions her own existence saying that each time she was forced to prostitution, she lost a part of her existence. Was this salvation? In her words “*Kintu amar ki hoilo? Amar je jala achey, se jalai ache, je shunnyota, sei shunnyotai. Shunechi lamdebotar daan furoyna, tar ki ei pramaan?*” This new binary was constructed outside the nationalistic discourse which stereotyped a feminine role model to be followed by other women by restraining themselves within ‘antapur’.

The construction of Binodini’s self is shaped by the society’s norms and discourses-Foucault’s theory of Discourses stresses on the fact that history of a society is shaped by the power relations of that society, in this case so was the case with Binodini. In the introduction to a recent reprint of Binodini Dasi’s autobiography, veteran Bengali actor Soumitra Chatterjee points out that the chroniclers of 19th century Bengali theatre movement are curiously silent on the topic of Binodini. Despite her contribution to the success, prosperity and development of all the theatre companies she worked with, Binodini was denied the high rank she deserved in the theatrical history of colonial Bengal. Even her writings have long suffered neglect. It is most unfortunate that her autobiography *Amar Katha* did not find any place in the history of Bengali literature as an autobiographical writing. Even the volumes of poetry she wrote stood out from the body of women’s writing of Bengal because she was not a *bhadramahila* and had a little formal education. Now it is the time for the sensible readers to rescue Binodini’s writing from oblivion and to assess their historical value. The historical elements within Binodini’s writings offer a complete history of public theatre by bridging the gaps and silences deliberately left by patriarchal account of conventional history of the public theatre of colonial Bengal.

The later years of Nati Binodini was veiled in obscurity. She charts the betrayals, within the theatre world, the death of her beloved daughter Shakuntala, and the companionship and loss of the upper-class patron, *Ranga Babu*, whose death left her isolated.

Binodini Devi and her submission to the Supreme Power

Most of the information on Binodini is got from her autobiography and forty poems. Besides, *Amar Katha* and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* (My Life as an Actress), Binodini also had a collection of forty poems called *Basana* (Desire) and a collection of narrative poems *Kanak O Nalini* and a number of letters on theatre in the *Bharatbashi* paper. Two very interesting lines of thought can be constructed from her writings- one, her metamorphosis from a fallen woman to a person pursuing *Bhaktimarga*, especially after her performance in *Chaitanyaleela*, and secondly, her renunciation from a life of a flamboyant actress to one who is in renunciation, seeking shelter in Lord Krishna.

The blessing of Sri Ramkrishna Paramhansa also added to her turning towards religion and dharma. It could be sheer coincidence, but the year Ramkrishna Paramhansa died, Binodini left theatre acting forever. The year was 1884 in colonial Calcutta, the theatre goers were astounded by the performance of a young actor and so were the critics. The play was *Chaitanya Lila* and the performer was Binodini. The actress played the role of young Chaitanya and it happened to be her most phenomenal performance, as well as of any actress in the history of nineteenth-century popular Bengal theatre. The last statement might seem assertive, but the reasons behind it aren't scanty. The entire staging of the *Chaitanya Lila*, in retrospect, can be observed as a phenomenon—a fallen woman, playing the role of Chaitanya, the latter being the Vaishnava cult figure. It is a matter of happy chance (and thus establishes itself as a fact, later) that when Binodini left the stage she was of the same age—twenty-three or twenty-four—as Chaitanya when he renounced *sansar* (Bhattacharya 1995–96). Girishchandra's *Chaitanya Lila* is based on Brindavan Das's *Chaitanya Bhagavat*, which depicts the early life of Chaitanya (Nimai) ending with his renunciation of home. Binodini's performance as Bengal's most charismatic saint was to determine subsequent readings of her life.

The 1884 production at the Star Theatre was a great success and set the trend for the 'biographical devotional' on the public stage. However, this surrender to the shelter of Lord Krishna also made her question her very existence. Time again, she referred to the hypocrisies latent in the Bengali *Bhadralok* society, that made sarcastic comments on a prostitute playing the role of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. She

questions Ramakrishna, whom she also referred to as *Patitpaabon* or the redeemer of sins- it was Ramkrishna who had told her that she was an extremely brilliant and talented woman to be playing the role of such noble and pious characters, as it is very difficult to play them without intrinsically feeling these characters with one's soul. Binodini had a pure soul, and this is the reason why she could attain perfection in her roles. However, Binodini retorts in anguish that though she herself led a pious life in order to enact in *Chaitanyaleela*, every time she pronounced the name of Lord Krishna, it was from the core of her soul, yet the society could not see or feel the purity of her being. They still regarded her as a public woman outside the stage, a wretched prostitute!

She says:

“Mohashoy boliyachen, darshoker manoranjan koriyachi. Darshok ki amar antor dekhite paiten? Krishna naam koribar subidha paiya antore bahire kato aakul pane dakiyachilam! Darshok ki taha dekhiyachen ?”

However, what is little known is that such was Binodini's passion to the character of young *Chaitanya*, or *Sita in Sitar Banobash*, she started leading a pious life herself, away from the red-light area, and transformed herself into a religious seeker- a seeker of Lord Krishna. According to her “I could not sleep on the night before *Chaitanyaleela* premiered; there was a desperate anxiety in my heart. I got up in the morning to take a holy dip in the river Ganga; after that I wrote down [the goddess] Durga's name 108 times and begged her, “May the lord [*Chaitanya*] help me through this great crisis. May I receive his benevolence? But all through the day I was restless with fear. I discovered later that my prayers for refuge at his fearless feet had not been in vain. That I had been the fortunate recipient of his kindness was expressed by numerous audience members. I realised in my mind, too, that God had shown me His mercy.” She writes in her *Atma Katha*, how she had devoted her life to serve Krishna, but he never became her saviour! She says “*ei je hriday jora jatonar bojha niye tanr bisshwobyapi darjay poreyachi, kano doya paina! Ar dakibona, ar kandibona boleo je 'ha Krishna ha Krishna' koriya hridayer nibhrito konthe ke tahake dakitechhi, kothay se Hari!*” In spite of her devotion to the Almighty, reality made Binodini suffer a lot. She felt the agonies and the sorrows of most of the characters that she depicted as if she was one of

them. Thereby, when she enacted Chaitanya in *Chaitanyaleela*, she felt the inner loneliness of *Chaitanya*.

When she portrayed *Manorama in Mrinalini* by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, she enacted an ideal Hindu woman who decided to immolate herself in the funeral pyre of her husband. Binodini's search for respite in an alternative domain of spirituality curbed her earlier ambitions, thereby, installing in her a consciousness. Thus, the commemoration of her glorious life on the stage often suffers interventions, where the narrator pauses for a moment to contemplate upon her spiritual loss or gain. Her self-condemnation, her muted notes of protest may reflect that tone of stoicism and detachment, which echoes Ramakrishna's grace bestowed upon her: "*Ma, may you achieve consciousness.*" Self-humiliation, self-criticism, thus, frequently appear in Binodini's rhetoric: "*I am the daughter of humility: on one hand, my ambition bars my self-sacrifice, on the other, the glorious faces of allurements implore my soul towards them.*" Was such a self-condemnation really a consequence of her spiritual elevation? Or, was it an echo of her internalization of society's reproach incessantly directed at women like her?

She was betrayed time and again by her protectors to whom she had gone as a "Ashrita" (one who is given shelter). Time and again, we find her calling herself *janamdukhini* (congenitally sad), *hathobhagini* (unfortunate woman), *abhagini* (sinner). She wrote, "In this world rare is the occasion when women such as ourselves may indulge in *maan abhimaan*, (emotional turmoil) in feeling hurt or upset. ...". She believed herself to be *khudro* (insignificant) and regarded her life story as trivial, inconsequential and unworthy.

These terms of self-denigration were not feminine indulgence in self-pity. These derived from male constructions of womanhood systematically inculcated in women in traditional society. These included a feminine norm of not hurting anybody by words or by deeds. Binodini would rather remain silent than hurt anybody. When she wrote, she would be unapologetic. Moreover, the *bhadralok-chhotolok* (the non-elite common mass) segregation added further power to the process of self-denigration. There was internalization about her acquired class position in combination to her achieved occupational status. Both these impinged upon her style and content of writing. To quote Sudipto Chatterjee — "*the stage,*

the society, and the Nation could accommodate and ideologically emancipate only the actresses' images, their corporeal presences, their 'bodies-on-stage', but never honour their spirits, their aspirations or desires nor undo the political gendering of their 'bodies' on the social margin"(Chatterjee 2007: 182).

While acting on stage for *Chaitanyaleela*, Binodini was blessed by none other than Sri Ramkrishna Paramhansa. This proved to be a milestone in her life, as she redirected her life on the paths of renunciation after this. Ramkrishna said the famous words "*Chaitanya Hok*" or may you receive Salvation after which Binodini regarded Ramkrishna as her '*Patitpabon*' or redeemer of the fallen. She left theatre at the peak of her career and went in the road to Bhakti-one can draw a critical conclusion that it was in this path of chosen salvation and emancipation, the road to Bhakti did Binodini try to legitimise her existence in the books of the *Bhadraloks* who applauded her great acting ability on stage, but never gave her the social stratus at par with them.

Binodini's life can be best regarded as a quest to seek legitimacy of her existence, to rise above the hypocrisy of the 19th century *bhadralok* society by following the cult of Bhakti. It can be regarded as a façade, a camouflage to hide her despair of non-acceptance by society-she re-fashioned herself again and again to rise the social ladder-she had no voice but only echoed the voice of the patriarchal society-according to Spivak her role was rewritten every time by the patriarchal system.

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