



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.2., 2017 (April-June)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

**BINODINI DAS: AN ADVENTUROUS LIFE STORY OF AN OUTSTANDING INDIAN
ACTRESS**

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to explore real experience of a Bengali actress, Binodini Dasi, who created a new space for herself and also for other female actors during the conventional period of nineteenth century. She was also known as Noti Binodini particularly at the performance domain. Binodini, who was born to a prostitute, belongs to the first generation of actress family of the Bengal public theatre. She made her debut at the age of eleven in a one-line performance as Draupadi's hand maiden at Great National Theatre in Calcutta in 1874 under the guidelines, Girish Chandra Ghosh, who is the founder of the theatre. Within a short span of the time, she was recognised as a talented star. The paper depicts categorically about the characters she performed during twelve years of her acting career. Apart from that, it talks how the characters she performed are comparable to her personal life. The paper also talks about categorically how she was deceived by the chief coordinator of the theatre, with whom she lived. The main aim of this paper is to dig out the virtuous noble qualities of women actresses, though they are propagated as impure personalities in this male dominated society.

Key words: actress, performance, public stage, prostitution, liberty, progressive

Binodini Dasi was the first South Asian actress of the theatre to write her own autobiography. Her autobiography is very articulate and explores a section of the 19th century Bengali world at ease with European ideas, but conscious enough to carefully subjugate the female to the domain of the household. However she was neither that nor is today, recognised as a writer by either scholars or the Sahitya Akademi. In the prime of her career, she quit the stage to settle down to domesticity but her happiness was short lived. Her sudden retirement from the stage was insufficiently explained. She started her stage life as an uneducated waif and left as a cultured, refined, highly articulate and literate lady – almost *Bhadramahila*. This paper presents how women who talked of, and expressed in their lives the very embodiment of liberated family were, surreptitiously viewed from a distance, to be loved and be loved and never aspire to respectable notions of femininity.

In its early days, Bengali Theatre was man's world. No woman was allowed to participate in it. Men used to perform the female roles in those plays. However things changed, and the Kolkata theatre introduced female artists on stage, even before the English theatre had done it. One of the stalwarts among the first generation of actresses on the Kolkata stage was undoubtedly Binodini Dasi, popularly in the later years as Noti Binodini (also spelled as Nati Binodini).

Binodini Dasi (1863-1941), born in a poor, low-caste, woman-headed household in colonial Kolkata, was a precious child who was recruited to the stage at the age of 10 in order to support her family. In those days the ladies from upper-caste families were not allowed to act on stage. Theatre directors used to cast women from red light areas. This was a legacy to the Indian performing arts as a whole, where, since ages, the only theatre artists used to be the prostitutes. Binodini was one among such actor, who came from red light area of Kolkata as a prostitute. However her exceptional talent helped her stand out among all and be one of the major Bengali thespians of her time. She had started her career as an actress at the tender age of twelve and by the time she retired, she was 23 years old. Theatre lovers remembered her name for the ages to come.

In keeping with her occupation, she was apprenticed to Ganga Baiji for training in music. In "*Amarkatha*", Binodini recounts her initiation into her life. Her camaraderie with Ganga Baiji directed her towards the realm of theatre. She recalls: "When I was nine, a singer came to reside in our apartment. She was an orphan. Her name was Ganga Baiji. Later she became a famous singer in the Star Theatre... We became friends and used to call other "Golap". Later she was handpicked by the Bengali Theatre legend, Girish Chandra Ghosh(1844-1912),--one of the foremost dramatist of the time, with whom she was, to have a close, if turbulent relationship--she was also encouraged to write and publish poetry. He himself applauded Binodini's performance, - "A talent like Binodini is rare in the world"... It was he who said, "I declare that Binodini's successes in the theatre are much more due to her inherent talents rather than my teaching....." As an actress, she was first appeared on stage even before her teens in *Shatrusamhar* i.e. "Slaying the Enemy" on 2nd December 1874 at the Great National Theatre. Her acting career spanned barely 12 years, ending with *Bellik Bazaar* i.e. "Bazaar of the Impudent" on 1st January, 1887 at Star Theatre.

However she performed more than 90 roles in 80 plays, most of them are light operation pieces, mythological plays and literary historical romances matched her comic roles in farces and pantonimes. She was equally good in all challenging roles. Some of the important names can be mentioned as the National, Great National, Bengal, and Star. 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 *chaitanyalila* 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, and Kapalkundalam Motibibi and so on.

Intellectuals of her age such as Chattarjee's, Father Lafont, Edwin Arnold, and Colonel Alcott etc. unanimously praised her acting. Her highly charged performance as Chaitanya (1486-1533), the charismatic saint whose advocacy of devotionalism as the mode of salvation had broken down existing caste hierarchies. Binodini as Chaitanya was blessed by and equally charismatic sage, Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-18886), after performance of Chaitanya-Lila Part-I in 1884. This incidence left deep impression on the actress, later who became an ardent devotee of Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Apart from her excellent performance earned her titles, such as "Moon of the Star Theatre", "Flower of the Native Stage" and so on.

Binodini's career coincided with a major phase of Indian Theatre. It was the time when the Indian art form was transforming from its open air pattern and was adapting the proscenium form of theatre of the

European style. She blended the Indian indigenous type of make up with the European form to give a new shape to stage make-up for theatre, when there was no role model before her.

She was virtually sacrificed her personal resources to fund a play house to be named after her, but her comrades designed otherwise and christened it the "STAR THEATRE", completely negating her hopes. She left theatre perhaps out of the disillusionment, severing all active connections with it.

She in her later years, revealed her talents as a poet and writer. Her own narratives, written at different points of her long life after her abruptly left the theatre at the age of 23 in 1886. She was one of the first actresses in Asia to pen her autobiography, *Aamakatha* (my story) which was published in 1913. She dedicated her story to her "*Hridolata*" (the lord of my life), the man who protected her for 25 years and for whom she left the stage and shared him with his lawful wife. "*Abhinethri Atmakatha*" (an actress autobiography) and "*Amar Abhinetri Jiban*" (my life as an actress, 1924-25) were originally serialized in contemporary theatre magazines. In it she revealed the contemporary world of Bengali theatre and, at the same time, touches upon the Bengali society. Her work was appreciated for its historical value and for the lucid style of writing that she followed. Her autobiographical piece, *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* was left unfinished.

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.

Aware of the talent and status of her western compatriots –Ellen Terry and Sarah Bernhardt, she recorded her achievement and her aspirations, her crises of faith and her professional pride. Besides providing an invaluable account of the formative decades of professional proscenium theatre in Bengal, her writings stand outside the corpus of the fairly extensive range of women's personal narratives that have come to us from various parts of the subcontinent from the eighteenth century. Nothing much known of Binodini's whereabouts after this period. She probably returned to the area that she hated most—where the prostitutes lived and where she had spent a major part of her childhood. In this way her later days she lived a quiet lonely life in Kolkata. Nati Binodini passed away quietly in 1941, at the age of 79 years, leaving behind a legacy of outstanding stage performance where her acting and singing talent enthralled the audience for a decade.

In spite of all the oddities that were mushrooming her career as an actress with best talented skills, she had to bear all with utmost patience and finally proved herself what she is actually as an artist. She proved the often quoted words of Aristotle –"*ART IS FOR ART'S SAKE*" through her hidden artistic talents. Outward world, the societal impositions, the rituals, narrow minded mean views of the co-artists and the then theatre directors could not stop her from reaching to the pinnacle of the name and fame. She was, no doubt, in the initial stages of the art in the area of theatre, where no one dared coming out to prove themselves as artists, entered the stage of theatre and broke the long silence that was creeping into the Indian Theatre.

One ecumenical question that swipes every lover of the literature and the art is that had not she entered into the Indian theatre in those days of severe restrictions, which could have filled the void? Answer to this question is the art that never ends and it shall give births to the artists like Binodini Dasi to give life to the art. So was Binodini that sparked the Indian theatre which was grouped under curious state. It is no exaggeration to say that she will be there in the galaxy of "*Indian Art Theatre*" as a star to shine upon this artistic world forever and ever.

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