

Understanding History: A Reading of Binodini Dasi's Autobiography

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My study offers a critical exploration of the autobiographical writings of the Bengali actress Binodini Dasi (1863-1941) namely *Amar Katha* ('My Story', 1912) and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* ('My Life as an Actress', 1924-25). One of the earliest professional actresses of the nineteenth century public theatre in colonial Calcutta, Binodini Dasi was also a powerful writer with a voice of her own. The colourful story of her life, its ups and downs, her dreams and betrayal are recorded in her autobiographies *Amar Katha* and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban*. But during her time, neither her autobiographies nor her poems were given their due appreciation. Even they were left out from the anthologies of women ('*Bhadromahila*') writing of her time. As these texts have remained neglected it is time that they are rescued from the deliberate amnesia of scholars and in doing so, given their proper historical value. These texts would help us to rewrite new facets of socio-cultural history by focusing on the denials, repressions and the blank spaces of the grand narrative of the homogenous recorded history. I here attempt to read the life and actions of this female autobiographer 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.

Julia Swindells¹ delineates that autobiography has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and it can speak beyond individual. Binodini's autobiography captures her voice, her position in society. But more importantly it speaks of the condition of women in late 19th century Bengal and more specifically the prostitute-actresses' painful, unfortunate and debased place in society. Binodini wrote:

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).

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. 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 discourse of nationalism created the binary between inner/outer, *ghar / bahir*, spiritual/material, female/male, and the East/the West². Though Binodini was well versed, religious, caring and affectionate woman famous for her quality acting, she was kept out from the section of respectable women (*bhadramahila*). She got training in the language and sensibilities of the new middle-class culture (especially the codes of conduct of feminine domesticity) from the new humanism of Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Bankinchandra, and Dinbandhu Mitra, from the fervently nationalist representations of Girish Chandra Ghosh, and from the Hindu mythology and religious history during her life in the theatre. She maintained a spiritual life after acting in the play *Chaitanyaleela*. But nationalistic discourse considered her 'material' not 'spiritual' because she transgressed the bounds of '*ghar*'. In fact, in this context we can add to the binary vision of the 'home' and the 'world' of the Bengali respectable (*sambhranta*) *bhadralok* a secondary binary within the larger group of Bengali women that is situated at the very intersection of the first, segregating women as 'private' (*bhadramahila*) and 'public' (*barangana/prostitute*), the wife and the mistress. Society only pointed finger to Binodini's acceptance of the position of concubinage to various wealthy patrons, but did not justify her work for the solidarity and well-being of the theatre and art. Even society considers her act of public performance as a violation of the dictates

of 'feminine' respectability by subjecting her body into a commodity for pleasing the eyes of male voyeurs. In fact, Binodini Dasi has been written, scripted and produced so incessantly as *Nati Binodini* in various discourses. But to add *Nati* before her name went beyond acknowledging her identity as actress. *Nati*, in 19th century writings in Bangali, increasingly became a comment on sexuality rather than a primary indicator of occupational identity³.

Although Binodini was interpellated by the hegemonic patriarchal discourse as *barangona* and *kolonkini/patita*, she did not succumb entirely to these ideologies. Binodini, unlike the nascent and radical 'Feminists' of contemporary West, did not take extreme position to oppose the male discourses. Rather she followed the ways prescribed by patriarchy to get social respectability. There are three paths to the 'iconisation' of Binodini Dasi – "Manch-dharma-sansar". Binodini suffered betrayals at several levels - in her professional career as well as in her personal life. Primarily she had been driven by the ideology of theatre: the shame of being a woman of ill-repute would be removed by her dedication and accomplishments as an artist:

[...] Girish-babu had said that the theatre alone was the ladder of my self-improvement. That the success of the education he had imparted on could only be realised on stage by me. That theatre could bring a world of honour and respect. My fantasies were puffing up in the dream of the fulfilment of her desires. My theatre friends would not stop imploring [...] and I decided to go for theatre (Dasi, MS: 84-5).

Binodini saw her identity as an actress in terms of her place within the larger family of artists. Though she perceived herself as a part of the theatre and sacrificed a lot to save her larger family, the theatre, in return, could not save her from a debased life. In fact, the stage was an ambiguous space – both attractive and deceptive. In the illusory stage the actresses performed the roles of queens, princesses, mythic/historic heroines, mothers and every conceivable position of social grace. The stage whetted their appetite and raised their expectations only to dash them because the nationalistic discourse, on the other hand, had separated them from the status of respectability on the ground that in their public performance they transgressed the limits of 'spirituality'. 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). Hence, the progressive agenda of the theatre community were never so progressive as to turn these into social reality. 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.

Binodini was also attracted and deceived by the ambivalence of theatre ideology. Binodini had joined the public theatre at the early age of 10 or 11 as a child-actress. But her theatrical profession could not prevent her from taking on the profession she had inherited by birth. She had to sell her body to a rich non-Bengali patron, Gurmukh Roy, who had agreed upon that condition to finance the sickly theatre company:

[F]or it (Binodini's story) tells us once more that the story of national emancipation is necessarily a story of betrayal. Because it could confer freedom only by imposing at the same time a whole new set of controls, it could define a cultural identity for the nation only by excluding many from its fold; and it could grant the dignity of citizenship to some only because the others always needed to be represented and could not be allowed to speak for themselves (Chatterjee, 1999: 154).

Though Binodini debased herself repeatedly for her dedication to art, her contribution to theatre was unacknowledged in the discussion of Bengal theatre until 1960s and 70s. The newly formed theatre, for the establishment of which Binodini agreed to accept the status of a mistress, a kept woman, was to be named "B" Theatre which would remind posterity of the sacrifices of Binodini. But the theatre was registered as "the Star" theatre. Explanation was given that the nomenclature of the new theatre after the name of a prostitute might give a wrong message and it might lose the support of the *bhadrolok*. Thus she was driven to prostitution and also blamed for her fallen state. Moreover her compatriots, who had now become the rising executives of the theatre company, started ill-treating her and compelled her to leave the theatre forever. The self-spirited woman felt betrayed and insulted; and she, therefore, retired from the stage which had taken everything away from her but did offer nothing. Thus Binodini was disillusioned by the public theatre's so-called ennobling 'rescue act' of delivering the prostitute-actresses from an ignoble life. Hence Binodini's

life-story exemplifies the betrayal the prostitute actresses suffered at the hands of both the larger society as well as their apparent 'rescuers' and their associate in the theatre.

Binodini struggled hard to elevate herself to the status of respectable woman by erasing the social stigma labelled on her. As 'mancha' could not serve her purpose, she resigned from her profession. She then entered into the domain of 'sansar', a private space of domestic bliss created by patriarchal nationalistic discourse. Sansar epitomised the respective bourgeois family where women would carry the name of the father, or the husband, having no subject position and they would not perform in the public. Trained in the language and sensibilities of the new middle class culture, Binodini, we can well imagine, felt an intense desire to believe in the emancipatory claims made on behalf of the 'new women' of the colonial Bengal. After leaving the theatre Binodini had been living with her protector for long 33 years. Confining herself within the domestic inner house Binodini carried out the roles of a mother and a devoted wife. But she was never allowed to enjoy equal status with the *bhadramahila* (the legitimate wife of *bhadralok*). After the death of Gurmukh Ray, his 'real' family threw Binodini out from the house. Ultimately, Binodini had to return to the '*patitapalli*' (prostitute quarters), a status she inherited by birth. Hence 'manch' and 'sansar' could not elevate Binodini from her life of shame.

The only way left was 'bhakti marga' (spiritual path) through which she could have emancipated herself. Her life of spirituality (bhakti) started during her preparatory session of *Chaitanyaleela* (Part I and II):

During this time a change had happened in me. I thought that I would not I would not depend on anybody. It made me think that God has given me the strength to earn my own living, and if with physical labour I can support myself and my family, I would put myself out of misery and not have to sin any further by selling my body (Dasi MS: 97).

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 (ibid.: 93).

Binodini's spirituality gathered momentum when she received the blessing of the Bengali saint Sree Ramakrishna, her *patitpaban* (redeemer of the fallen) who uttered the sacred words: "May you receive *chaitanya*!" Ramkrishna Paramahansa indicated that the path of bhakti can be the only mode of self redemption from material life so full of cruelty, misery and inequality. Binodini left the theatre at the peak of her career in 1887, the year of Sree Ramkrishana's death. She, then, chose bhakti to be the only way of salvation from her '*kolonkini jiban*'. Certainly spirituality gave Binodini a new mode of salvation and emancipation that could be exclusively hers. Binodini's new turn to a life of spirituality, though debatable in society, enabled Binodini to claim social respectability that she would never have 'legitimately' acquired as a professional-prostitute actress. Binodini's struggle to elevate her in the social ladder indicates the fact that patriarchal interpellation could not dismiss Binodini as a powerless object of patriarchal domination. Rather Binodini's endeavour confirmed her subjective 'self'. Her attempt to refashion her self again and again in order to escape a life of shame marks her 'agency' which blasted the hypocrisy and the double standards of contemporary patriarchal system.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her study "Can Subaltern Speak?" implies that subaltern women's text cannot be read as having anything original to say because the colonized woman has no subject position. Everyone else speaks for her, so she is continuously rewritten as the object of patriarchy and imperialism. Although Binodini's position in the schema of colonial Bengal was that of a subaltern, Binodini's *Amar Katha* recounts her original subjective voice. Her position of thrice marginalization (Imperialism > patriarchy > respectable women > public women) enabled Binodini to assert back simply because she had nothing more to lose. Taslima Nasreen, a radical woman writer of modern Bengal, claims that one cannot protest against any institutionalization until and unless s/he is free from its ideology: "unless a woman becomes 'fallen' there is no way she can liberate herself from the cage of the social institutions"⁵. Being a 'fallen' woman Binodini used her marginal status to write back. She is bold enough to question 'unjust' patriarchy:

[...] [T]hey become prostitutes forced by circumstances, lacking of shelter, lacking of space: but they, too, first come into this world with the heart of a woman. [...] A prostitute's life is certainly tainted and despicable; but where does the pollution come from? Surely they were not despicable from the time that they were in the mother's womb? If birth and death be decreed by the Lord, then surely they were not responsible for their birth? We have to think of them who first made them despicable in life? It may be that there are some who of their own accord plunge themselves into darkness and clears the path of hell. But there are many who are taken in by the artfulness of men and trusting in them are doomed to carry an everlasting stigma and bear pain of unending hell. Who are all these men? Are there not some among them who are respected and adorned in society? Those who show hatred when in the company of others, but secretly away from the eyes of men, pretend they are the best of lovers and take you to the brink of complete surrender thus causing ruin of trustful and helpless women [...] (Dasi, MS: 104-5).

Binodini's *Amar Katha* and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban*, replete with such daring questions, make them works of resistance. Binodini's writing back is the voice of feminist, marginal and public women's asserting back against dominant patriarchy. The terms 'subjectivity', 'agency', 'experience' and 'identity' are hotly debated in feminist theory today. I agree with Chris Weedon's⁶ argument that in the shaping of the 19th century Indian woman's subjectivity, personal 'experience' is a crucial component of 'subjectivity' and a woman's 'self' is formed by her observation of and her practical engagement with the world. Binodini's case is no exception. The construction of Binodini's 'self' is shaped by the societal norms, discourses which she experienced in her day-to-day life.

Modernist and Postmodernist questioning challenge the authority of history by acknowledging that the "fact" presented in history is the author's subjective position. Following the dictum of Antonio Gramsci and the Foucaultian discourse we can claim that knowledge is not something innocent but profoundly connected with the operation of power. Hence the knowledge we get from history is immensely controlled and selected by dominant power group. History is only the tip of an ice-berg, delivering only a part of the entire 'fact'. History always represses some truths which may challenge the status quo of the society. Tej Ram Sharma in his study *Historiography*

(2005) echoes almost the same. For him, it is often felt that in India, society being patriarchal, everything is talked or written from male point of view and the women are more or less ignored. The conventional history of public theatre in colonial Bengal written from patriarchal mindset retells the similar story. 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 bold self assertion Binodini made in her autobiography can be viewed as feminist retort to patriarchal construction of femininity which marginalises her as a 'fallen woman'. Binodini's, therefore, challenges the convention of writing history and her *atmakatha* can be viewed as an attempt to refashion history from woman's point of view.

To sum up the whole discussion, Binodini's autobiographies *Amar Katha* and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* are considered valuable even today as they enrich history by providing an alternative account from a marginal woman's view point. Moreover, it is Binodini alone who fought against the social stigma of '*nati*' (a public female dancer), labelled on her and who forced the society to reconsider her position as an actress. Now when we call 'Nati Binodini' we consider her as a great thespis not as a prostitute dancer. Contemporary female public performers now enjoying social status and respectability should thank Binodini for her lone struggle for the canonisation of public actresses.

Notes :

1. Julia Swindells ed. *The Uses of Autobiography*. (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995), p. 7.
2. Partha Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments*, Ch.6. in *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*. (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 116-34.
3. See “Afterword” of *My Story and My Life as an Actress*. By Binodini Dasi. Ed. and Trans. Rimli Bhattacharya. (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), p. 188.
4. A pun on the literal meaning of the word *chaitanya*, i.e. ‘consciousness’. Ramakrishna probably meant ‘May you gain consciousness (and/of) the saint’.
5. Quoted. In Ali Riaz, *Voice and Silence: Contextualizing Taslima Nasrin*. (Dhaka: Ankur Prakashan, 1995), p.39.
6. Chris Weedon. “Subjects” in Mary Eagleton ed. *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p.112.

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