

The 'moon' of Star Company

Binodini, the prostitute-actress, staked a lot for Bengali theatre, but Bengali theatre barely remembers her today, 50 years after her death. Madhushree Datta is both angry and sad at this neglect

FIFTY years! A long time! A long time for a society to rethink, to re-align, to re-write its history; a long time for an era, which has witnessed an intense movement for equality of women, to recognise Binodini; a long time for the modern patrons of culture, who boast about their sensitivity towards tradition, to identify the contribution of the legendary actress Binodini; a long time for the government of West Bengal, who claim to have set right age-old injustices, to give a kind thought to the claim of one of the finest artistes of the state.

Binodini died in 1941, 50 years ago. One of the pioneer actresses of the country, a legend in her own time, she died an insignificant death.

Born in an urban prostitute family, Binodini entered the magic world of theatre in 1863, at the age of 11. The tradition of women acting on stage in Bengal is not older than 1855. Available material shows that in Marathi theatre, for instance, women began acting in mixed casts as late as 1929. Binodini was the beginning of an era by virtue of her mere entry into theatre. But she was a legend by virtue of her singing and acting talent.

Along with playing female leads in 60 odd plays in the short span of 12 years of her acting career, Binodini played legendary male characters like Pralhad and Shri Chaitanya. In spite of our callousness in recording history, she is traceable today because of her three books, two volumes of autobiography and one of poems.

Binodini, as long as she worked in theatre, never gave up her family trade totally. The theatre of her time, quite like today's, was not a lucrative profession. She was brought to theatre by her mother at a tender age as she was not old enough to get into the family tradition of prostitution. Later she remained in theatre — much to her mother's disgust — because of her passion for it and after fulfilling the needs of the family by other means.

Binodini's patrons ranged from famous nationalist writers to migrant Marwari traders, from a



Binodini: "Nobody comes out of the mother's womb, evil"

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religious leader, Thakur Ramkrishna, to a Pathan landlord of Lahore, from the reformist elite to young college boys. The expression of this varied experience is to be found in her two autobiographical books — *Amar Katha* and *Abhinetrir Jeeban* ('My Story' and 'Life of an Actress').

Considering that she came from a red light area, the thought of writing an autobiography was in itself a sophisticated one. Obviously, the non-formal education she received in the theatre company and exposure to the greatest texts of world literature had trained her sensibility to a great extent.

The arts page of a famous Bengali periodical said in 1886:

"Binodini is not only the moon of Star Company but absolutely at the head of her profession in India. She must be a woman of considerable culture to be able to show such unaffected sympathy for so many and such varied characters and to have such a capacity for reproducing them. Her Chaitanya showed a wonderful mastery of the forces dominating one of the greatest of religious men who was taken to be the lord himself and to this day worshipped as such by millions. For a young woman to enter into such a being and give it perfect expression, is a miracle."

But the Bengali-Hindu society

treated Binodini with all its inner contradictions. They accepted the prostitute in the role of the religious philosopher Sri Chaitanya but severely punished her in other contexts for her background. Binodini wrote in her autobiography in 1912:

"Prostitutes are heinous, evil? But how do they become so? Nobody comes out of the mother's womb, evil. One has to think who first made this life heinous. . . Who are those men? Are not some of them sitting among the respected, adored citizens. . . I loved theatre a lot. I would have done anything to remain in the company. But I could not forget the hurt their betrayal caused me. Finally I retired."

Binodini retired in 1886 at the age of 24, at the peak of her career. It was a time of self-realisation for her. Through her talents she had become influential enough to get patronage for the theatre. Binodini was instrumental in the formation of the Star Theatre — the first actors' co-operative company in India.

It was a time when serious theatre *wallahs* were being harassed by the business-minded proprietors. Naturally, they were immensely tempted by a migrant trader's proposal to build a theatre to be run by the performers-directors. Gurmukh Singh, the middle-aged patron, wanted only one thing in return for this favour — Binodini would have to be his mistress. Her colleagues agreed readily and did not find any reason for Binodini not to accept such a kind and rich person as her patron.

Binodini was, at that time, in love with a young zamindar. She reacted vehemently against this proposal. But she could not resist the request from her guru, the renowned playwright-director Girish Ghosh. He coaxed Binodini into this arrangement in the name of *gurudakshina*. She exclaimed in desperation, "Would you have asked this of me if I'd been married to that zamindar?" The guru retorted, "But the fact is that you are not married to him. You cannot be."

In any case, Gurmukh was much richer than the zamindar. So the pressure from the family also rose to the occasion. Binodini switched her loyalty only to be termed, once again, a conventional prostitute.

But she had one consolation. They would have their own theatre. The theatre would be named 'B Theatre', after her name. Binodini, out of enthusiasm, even worked manually in building the theatre. On one occasion, when the patron expressed a desire to pull out of the theatre project, and instead give the whole amount, that is Rs 50,000, to Binodini personally, she reacted violently. In 1879, very few mortals but Binodini could have turned down a gift of Rs 50,000. All for theatre.

The patron kept his word. The building was ready in time. On the date of the registration, Binodini's colleagues, the leading elite of society, realised it would be a shame to work in a company named after a prostitute. It was better late than never. They got the company registered under the name of "Star Theatre."

The glamorous era of Star Theatre started in 1882. Eventually Binodini was pushed out of the co-operative too as business was considered an unlikely job for women. In this company Binodini spent the last three years of her career; played characters like Pralhad, Sri Chaitanya and Gopa (in *Buddhadev*); received the blessings of Ramakrishna, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Edwin Arnold (writer of *Light of Asia*); and subjected to extreme humiliation and betrayal.

Binodini retired in 1886. The only wish left to her was to give her daughter a decent identity, a formal education. She still had faith in her elite friends. But the babus of Calcutta, who once admired her as the 'honour of the country', again showed their ugly contradictions. No help came forth for the education of the prostitute's child. The child remained illiterate and finally ended Binodini's last battle by leaving this world at the age of 13.

Binodini's autobiography ends with her retirement. The official history of theatre has done its share by mentioning her name as the actress of many widely acclaimed productions. A theatre is still running in Calcutta in full glory — named Star Theatre. Nobody knows about the woman who ceased to be an actress at the age of 23 and lived till the age of 78.

Many theatre halls, many roads, many centres have been renamed in the last few years after famous artistes of yesteryear. For some strange reason, Binodini's credentials have always fallen short of achieving such immortality.

It seems that the woman Binodini died with the actress Binodini, when the curtain dropped on her, and on all her glory and pain, contribution and betrayal.