

**“[T]he theatre alone was my route to success....¹ ” An exploration of Binodini Dasi’s
“mad, black scrawls² ” as the autobiography of an actress.**

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Binodini Dasi (1863-1941), who was born in the same year as Swami Vivekananda and two years after Rabindranath Tagore, was an extremely important figure in nineteenth century Bengal yet, somehow could never reach the same illustrious apex as her contemporaries, in the context of the recorded history of the Bengal Renaissance. Virginia Woolf’s assertion that women are “all but absent from history” is probably the reason behind women taking up the pen to preserve their ‘selves’ because documented historical narratives have always favoured men over women.

Georg Misch’s definition of autobiography in *History of Autobiography in Antiquity* as “the description (graphia) of an individual human life (bios) by the individual himself (autos),” makes the process of scripting an autobiography, a chronicle of self-achieved great prominence. Therefore, Misch’s notion of the autobiography as a document of the representative life of a public figure excluded those who had been accorded anonymity and forced to embrace silence. As evident, it has been traditionally argued that the autobiographical subject must be a representative figure whose life is held up for emulation and enables edification of posterity. Binodini then occupies a position of absolute negation by virtue of her being a prostitute actress and a colonial subject.

Georges Gusdorf talks of the autobiography as an act of “reconstructing the unity of life across time,” proposing it as an act of creation and not a faithfully factual written document reproducing the past. This idea brings forth a constitutive process in the composition of the autobiography- the politics of memory³ . The autobiographer, who is located in a particular space and time, during the composition of the autobiography enjoys complete liberty regarding “what is recollected and what is obscured” which is “central to the cultural production of knowledge about the past.” Then, as Piyali Gupta states in her unpublished doctoral dissertation on *Actress Autobiographies*, “It is not simply a recalling and retelling of various incidents in the past that constitute the act of writing an autobiography. It is the selection, arrangement, exclusion, emphasis and examination of the incidents that accords meaning to the autobiography,” and it is this very process that was named the “autobiographical act” by Elizabeth W. Bruss. The process of scripting an autobiography, then, becomes strictly performative. The conscious decision on the part of the author scripting their own life story about how they want to present themselves to all posterity ultimately becomes a self fashioning, a process of creation, and a performance that outlasts and outlives them. It is

impossible for women to view themselves as individuals, as an autonomous independent entity as they are always seen in relation to a group. They are traditionally viewed as relational creatures because their identities are always mapped by their roles as daughters, mothers and wives. For example, Sarada sundari Devi's identity as Keshub Chandra Sen's mother foregrounds the account of her life. In fact, she only wrote her autobiography on being insisted to do so by her son's disciples because they told her that people wanted to know about her as she was the Acharya Mata and were also interested in the childhood anecdotes of her son. Women were believed to only be able to "record" and "not transcend... the concerns of the private self." (Stanton 4) In fact, as Gupta observes, "[Women were] marginal figures divorced from mainstream society so they [could not] fully participate in contemporary life... Women's self-fashionings were inextricably interwoven with ideologies of gender, they defined themselves through relationships and thus their autobiographical writing [focused] more on personal details than on public matter."

In the context of nineteenth century Bengal, women suffered double marginalization by virtue of their gender and status as a colonial subject. They found themselves firmly located in the inner private space of domesticity, the ghar, as the caregiver, nurturer and the custodian of traditional values. She could not dream of social and financial independence, let alone acquire enough education to script an autobiography, and in turn carve out a separate, stable identity. Drawing such attention from the public realm would be deemed utterly despicable and thus destabilize her position as a respectable bhadra mahila or lady in society. This "anxiety of authorship" (Gubar and Gilbert) thus provoked her to adopt a self-deprecating stance in her self-fashioning by shaping the autobiographical self according to the standards of normative femininity. Their criticism of patriarchal injustice and complaints against being silenced and marginalized forever was disguised under the cover of rhetorical strategies such as self effacement and submission to avoid antagonizing the reading public. In Bengal, the first autobiography written by a woman was Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban*, a spiritual and domestic narrative⁴, and Binodini remains the singular actress autobiographer from nineteenth century Bengal to have composed her autobiography. Binodini's autobiography was first published serially in the magazine Natyamandir as *Abhinetrir Atmakatha* (The Autobiography of an Actress) (1910) and then later as *Amar Katha* (My Story) (1912) with an added preface. She wrote a second autobiography titled "*Amar Abhinetri Jiban*" (My Life as an Actress) which was serialised in *Roop O Ranga* in 11 instalments but was then dropped without explanation. After the foregrounding, Binodini's life is entirely divided into stages on the basis of the theatre houses she worked in, resulting in a very neatly structured narrative of Binodini's autobiographies and the naming - *Amar Katha*, *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* - focus on herself and her profession. Her narrative is structured completely around her professional identity, as chapters have been named according to the theatre houses that she worked with.

She openly claims that her life before it included her acting career, is nothing but a “Prelude to [her] Entry to the Stage”. So, despite being a personal story, Binodini’s autobiography is veritably the autobiography of an actress.

For a working professional, one of the key factors is the salary. Therefore, in her attempt to establish acting as a serious, professional job, Binodini mentions her salary multiple times. Her first income was at the Great National Theatre where she was paid a monthly salary of ten rupees, which was incremented to twenty-five rupees at the Bengal Theatre. In fact, when she was refused a paid leave, she left the theatre group because, as she writes, “I had always worked for money... It was back-breaking work in any case, and working without wages did not make sense.”

Her unapologetic and pragmatic way of dealing with wages as a professional actor stresses the pride that she took in her job. Upon joining the Bengal Theatre in 1876 with a raise of fifteen rupees, Binodini expresses her confident assertion of her stance as an actress: “Although I was still a little girl, I had become more skilful and powerful as an actress as compared to my performances in my early years. This was the first step on the path to better income and progression in my acting career.”

Gupta comments, “As the story of the first professional actress in colonial Bengal, this pride in the profession and the benefits that accompany it makes the narrative singularly inspiring.” Her pride in her professional accomplishments is made obvious from the ample reviews that she provides in the autobiography. From being declared the Signora of the Native Stage to the senior actresses being ‘jealous’ of her, Binodini leaves no stone unturned to showcase her celebrity status, professional prowess and achievements in very strategic ways.

Despite her autobiography never being published as a complete whole, or the criticism she faced from her mentor Girish Chandra Ghosh in the preface he wrote for her⁵, Binodini never once shies away from her identity as an actress or from owning it as “Amar Katha/Jiban.” Thus, she easily forgoes the reticence so characteristic of the nineteenth century Bengali woman, claiming her agency as she unhesitatingly talks about her life. At an age when women were not expected to be seen outside the boundaries of domesticity, the insistence of Michael Madhusudan Dutt to employ female actors in the Bengali public theatre led to women joining the public theatre at last in 1873, during the performance of Dutt’s *Shormishtha*. Although, he was concerned with the accurate representation of female characters more than anything else, some people deemed the introduction of the actress as a redemptive act, a civilizing mission that would liberate her from the status of a social outcast⁶, because these women were mostly employed from the prostitute quarters because the theatre was shunned by ‘respectable’ women. Nineteenth century public theatre in Bengal rose in imitation of European Theatre and proscenium staging. It can be said that the public theatre in Bengal was shaped by the bourgeois intelligentsia bred on colonial education making it a colonised state’s response to

colonial forms of entertainment. Theatre was used to build national consciousness, supposed to educate and reform masses, aimed at moral improvement as well as assert the superiority of Indian culture over the British. In fact, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa too, believed in the edification of the masses, or *lokshikkha* as he called it, through theatre.

Binodini Dasi, who, belonged from the prostitute quarters of North Calcutta, lived in a state of impoverishment in her childhood. Her family was limited to her grandmother, mother and little brother, and later when he was married, a young sister-in-law. However, her brother died in his childhood, leaving no male figure in the family. Binodini begins her autobiography by tracing not her ancestral, patriarchal genealogy but instead locates herself geographically, initially foregrounding the lack and absences in her life, negating the conventional patriarchal autobiographical narrative right from the beginning. Almost immediately, she establishes her success, juxtaposing it to her former conditions with: "However, there was no prosperity, only want... That house, No. 145 on Cornwallis Street, is now in my possession."

Binodini thoroughly establishes herself as a celebrated professional actress by including all details regarding salary, performance reviews, as well as explaining her roles and how much she worked hard to achieve perfection. She is fully cognizant about her unparalleled acting skills, and while she juxtaposes it with her "lowly" and "fallen" status, she stresses upon the fact that acting demands severe hard work and persisting perseverance. She says that "Acting was not mere fun in a playhouse, but something to be learnt and to be initiated into as a dharma," (91) establishing acting as a serious profession and herself as being completely devoted to her work at once. She reclaims respectability for acting as a profession by mentioning her diligence and accidents such as during her performance as Britannia in *Palashir Juddha*, wherein she was "descending from mid-air...when suddenly the wires snapped and [she] crashed to the stage," (154) Then her hair got entangled in a cable while she was being lifted by a crane while she was performing in *Nala Damayanti* as a result of which her hair had to be snipped off. Binodini's self-fashioning documents praises from contemporary newspapers like *The Statesman* and *The Englishman* where she is called 'Signora' and 'Flower of the Native Stage' which reiterates her competence as an actress. In fact, the event in which Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, mesmerized by her performance, blessed her, marks what is today called the sanctification of the theatre. It gave the theatre a new respectability that it earlier did not have. Shambhucharan Mukhopadhyay's review in *Reis and Rayyet* which confirmed Binodini to be "at the head of her profession in India" called her "a Lady of much refinement" and "one of inimitable Grace" quoted with flourish in her autobiography, accords to the text its dynamism. Binodini elaborates on how she would perform multiple roles in a single night, easily slipping into each character without compromising on either, but she also underlines the fact that it was a very difficult job- for example, portraying Chaitanya in *Chaitanyaleela*, who was a divine saint, as well as Bilasini

Karforma in Bibaha Bibhrat, which was the role of an urban, educated, high society woman, in the same night. When she played Manorama in Bankimchandra's Mrinalini, the author had praised her for her lifelike performance, which too Binodini quotes as:

"I had created Manorama's character only in a book. It had never occurred to me that I would see her manifested in flesh and blood. Today, on seeing Manorama, I feel that I am actually before my own Manorama! (81)"

She was adept at doing her own makeup and she speaks of this with pride. She introduced modern techniques of stage make-up through blending European and indigenous styles. Amritlal Mitra is reported to have said "Binod's taste in costume and make-up is superior in every respect to everybody else's." Even before the Star Theatre was built, people were in compliance that if Binodini were to leave the theatre, nobody would come to watch plays anymore and the theatre would suffer heavy losses.

Of the linguistic registers, she forgoes the colloquial chalit bhasha in favour of the more refined, formal and literary sadhu bhasha to script her autobiography. Binodini displays her knowledge of theatre and literary culture with ample references to Bankimchandra, the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, Sanskrit shlokas and David Garrick. In spite of her use of self deprecatory statements, Binodini expertly marshals her lamentations about her diminished, insignificant life and incoherent ramblings balancing it with her proficiency as an actress and an author. Accordingly, it is evident that her mentor's assertion that Binodini's autobiography is a collection of her "mad, black scrawls⁷" is anything but. As Gupta states, "It is the autobiography of a barangana-abhinetri, a prostitute-actress, who was marginalized from respectable society, yet her voice resounds with all the linguistic expertise befitting a bhadramahila."

Throughout the narrative, Binodini expresses her desire for a domestic space, a ghar, a sansar of her own- which she has always lacked- and aspires for the role of the bhadramahila not just on stage but in real life. Having taken birth in prostitute quarters, the rigid line between the concepts of the andarmahal or the ghar and the bahir was absent to her, because their personal space functioned also as their professional space.

In the nineteenth century society, when women were rooted in the private sphere of home, Binodini was performing in public, even traveling outside her native city to other parts of the country and beyond, which is something she feels proud of. Her education in theatre was a parallel to stree shiksha or women's education that catered towards making women better wives and mothers. Unlike other women receiving education in that era, Binodini's education was catered towards her enhancement of professional expertise. She listened to stories of Sarah Siddons, Ellen Terry and Isadora Duncan and went to watch British plays. She recounts, "I liked very much the stories narrated by Girish-babu about famous British actors and actresses and whatever else he read out to us from books. He explained to us the

various kinds of critical opinions expressed about Mrs. Siddons when she had rejoined the theatre after being married for ten years...I did not merely listen to these stories, but absorbed from them whatever I could of their bhava and then constantly meditated on it...In order to experience as many bhavas as possible, I kept my mind constantly occupied, living in the world of imagination." (80) She also learnt the amritakshar chhanda (blank verse) of Michael Madhusudan Dutt for performing a role in his play Meghnad Badh, such was her dedication to her craft. As someone who never had any formal education, she found it difficult to work on it. She writes on this: "I had to work specially hard to act in this play which had been written in blank verse. At first, it was barely possible for us to even read the play properly, keeping in mind the correct language and the appropriate feelings it expressed." (151)

For Binodini, the home and the world collapsed and collided into one another. She performed roles of middle class bhadramahila, Chaitanya, Britannia, Bankimchandra's women with equal elan. Regardless of her exceptional ability to portray characters on stage with such finesse that the audience forgot that she was acting and was not actually the character, let alone that she was a prostitute. Such was her talent that not only was she accepted as a bhadramahila on stage, but also as the spiritually divine characters of Chaitanya and Sati, among others, not just by the common public but by Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa himself, who otherwise known for his strict ideals, blessed her- a fallen woman. This encounter which later on became a noteworthy episode in Bengal's cultural history began to be portrayed as the patitapaban (redeemer) granting redemption to the patita (fallen woman). Binodini, however, does not glorify the incident. She interrogates the hypocrisy of being respected as the character she plays, but that very respect being denied to her in real life. The theatre which was used as a tool to raise national consciousness and for the moral upliftment of masses could succeed mostly because of the actors. Actresses like Binodini were, then, an important part of this nationalist project but ultimately, they were thoroughly overlooked and ostracised when it came to acknowledging their contribution.

Binodini says that although some ill-fated women "become prostitutes forced by circumstances, lacking shelter, lacking a space; but they too, first come into this world with the heart of a woman. The woman who is a loving mother, she too belongs to the self-same species! The woman who dies in the burning flames with her husband also belongs to that same species!" completely negating the mutual exclusivity of the concepts of the barangana, bhadramahila and the Sati. She claims to have a tender heart and is aware of the "responsibilities of a sansar" and blames fate for having spoilt her chance of having one:

"Perhaps people will laugh if they hear that we too are sensible to pain... they would understand that we too are women. When God sent us to this world, he did not send us deficient in the tenderness natural to a woman's heart... does this mean that we have no awareness of the responsibilities of sansar? The tenderness that had once filled our

heart has not been completely uprooted—bringing up children is enough proof of that.

Do we not desire a husband's love? But where are we to find it?" (85-86)

Although she begins in a position of absolute insignificance, as what Spivak would call the perfect subaltern, she ultimately achieves fame and financial success. Her self-fashioning is thus the telling of a success story. She is uninhibited in her approach to writing about her success. Binodini Dasi or Nati Binodini as she was later called- the former suffix- Dasi- was representative of a lowly status, while the latter "Nati" although literally means "female actor," was a comment on sexuality as Rimli Bhattacharya testifies⁸ - writes about her life unabashedly. She claims that the scripting of this autobiography is not intended for the edification of posterity, but is solely dedicated to the manifestation of her cathartic process. She does not care for sympathy or mercy from the reader but expertly manages to represent herself when "history and culture have denied her the existence of a self." Binodini attempts a very complex negotiation in the autobiography, where she portrays herself as a self-assured confident woman, but on the other hand, represents herself as a naïve, inexperienced, unfortunate girl-woman as well.

When she writes, "You call us fallen women, prostitutes, whores, but who is responsible for our fallen state? What if we want to transcend it?" Instead of succumbing to individual ignominy and shame, Binodini projects society's double standards onto society itself causing their collective ignominy. She does not really yearn for social acceptance but from her position of absolute marginalized nothingness, she cannot help but question the polarized constructs that have denied people like her any agency. Ultimately, Binodini only strives to be Binodini the actress, saying that she could never be detached from it, acting being the "treasure" and "mainstay" of her life, although her acting career only spanned twelve years. Today, Binodini lives on because her autobiography lives on. Her narrative woven entirely by her is the only living testament that has outlived her. One of Bengal's finest actresses, Nati Binodini remains unparalleled as the "Lady of much refinement of feeling...[and] inimitable grace," etched forever into the spirit of the Bengali stage⁹.

Keya Chakraborty, who played the role of Binodini in Nandikar's production *Noti Binodini* (1972), in interview with Surajit Ghosh, says that "To be a good actress in this society is one of the most difficult things to do in the world. (Ghosh 182) From a position of an extreme nonidentity then, Binodini not only accomplishes this "most difficult thing" but also registers her voice and scripts her own testimony resisting bourgeois, patriarchal normativity, claiming empowerment for herself even after being wronged repeatedly. Not only this, Binodini effectively creates a space for posterity after earlier explicitly stating that "people [would] feel [no] compassion for [her]." She writes, "The talented, the wise, and the learned write in order to educate people; I have written for my own consolation, perhaps for some unfortunate woman who, taken in by deception, has stumbled on to the path to hell". (107)

As Hindustan Times rightly wrote, “বাংলার সেই প্রখ্যাত অভিনেত্রীর জন্মের প্রায় ২৬০ বছর পরও তিনি কেমন যেন একই ভাবে প্রাসঙ্গিক থেকে গিয়েছেন।” (Bengal’s most celebrated actress at one time has remained consistently relevant in the same way as before, even almost 260 years after her birth.) This confirmation elevates Binodini’s tale of consolation and lamentation from the position of a Subaltern to that of one who has not just generated a discourse by reclaiming her voice and agency but also immortalized her narrative against all contemporary and contesting narratives in the process.

Notes

¹ Binodini in her autobiography mentions Girish Ghosh's prediction as, "Girish-babu had said that the theatre alone was my route to success, that his teaching could be realised only through me, that the stage brought one fame, respect and honour...if a theatre was set up because of me, then we would spend the rest of our lives as members of one family." (84-85) (emphasis mine)

² Binodini's patron or hridaydebota, to whom she dedicates her autobiography, calls her writing the "mad, black scrawls" like those of a child. In the preface to *Amar Katha*, Binodini recalls the incident as, "When the book had first been written, I turned to the person for whom this preface has been written and asked him, I shall write my life story and dedicate it to you, shall I? Smiling, he had replied, Well, since I bear all your cares, I will bear too the burden of these mad, black scrawls." (emphasis mine)

³ The politics of memory has become a fashionable and important object of scholarly investigations in the last thirty or so years, particularly in history, sociology, cultural studies and journalism. The sociology of memory may be construed as an attempt to come to terms with the need to study situations when there is "a will to remember... Without this intention to remember, lieux de mémoire would be indistinguishable from lieux d'histoire." Thus, sociology studies the social mechanisms involved in the emergence and organization of this intention to remember. (Michael Bernhard, *Twenty Years After Communism*)

⁴ In *Amar Jiban*, Rassundari Devi records her domestic life, consistently talking about God and his omnipotence and omniscience but at the same time describing her unending difficulties. She elaborately discusses the colossal household responsibilities she had to undertake alone, be it cooking for twenty five people twice every day, to taking care of her children. She discusses how after a whole day's cooking and serving others, no sooner than she sits down to eat herself, she is interrupted by a guest, her husband and then her children, in the end having to do without food. Ultimately, she says, Anyway, let us not talk of all that. It's not worth mentioning, I am ashamed even to bring it up' (*Words to Win* 164). When she speaks about how she was not allowed to even go see the body of her dead mother, because there was nobody to take care of the household in her absence, she dismisses it saying that it was what God had wished and so there was nothing to do about it. ⁵ In his preface for Binodini's autobiographies, Girish Ghosh critiques the personal and uninhibited aspect of the narratives. In *Srimati Binodini and the Bengali Stage*, he writes: "I have also explained to her how difficult it is, in my understanding, to write an autobiography and explained as well, the numerous strategies that many have been obliged to use when writing their autobiographies...Binodini has written a bitter critique of society in her book...it would have been better if she had not brought this up in her own life story in such a harsh manner." (emphasis mine)

⁶ Kshetra Nath Bhattacharjee in Education Gazette, 1872 wrote, “The more such theatres are started, acting will be improved and dramas composed in competition...Some of the prostitutes are trying to receive education. If a few of such educated women are secured, happy consequences will outweigh any mischief done.”

⁷ In the original Bangla text, the phrase is written as “paglami-r kali-r aanchorguli.”

⁸ Piyali Gupta writes, “Brajendra Kumar Dey’s production is named Nati Binodini, where the word ‘nati’ meaning actress recognises Binodini’s profession but is also a reminder of the popular perception of Binodini as a public woman. Rimli Bhattacharya reminds us that ‘Nati in nineteenth century writings in Bangla, increasingly becomes a comment on sexuality rather than a primary indicator of occupational identity.’”

⁹ Based upon Binodini’s bedonagatha, several adaptations have been materialised in popular culture. Brajendra Kumar Dey’s jatra by Natto Company, Nati Binodini (1971) became sensational and was awarded the Bishwarupa Prize for the best pala and Bina Dasgupta who played Binodini was given the West Bengal Best Actress Award in 1973. Nati Binodini, a play based on Binodini’s autobiography, Amar Katha was first presented by National School of Drama Repertory Company in 1995. In 2006, noted theatre director Amal Allana directed a play “Binodini” which premiered in Delhi. Tuhinabha Majumdar’s documentary Aamaar Katha: Story of Binodini won the National Award for the Best Biographical and Historical Reconstruction film and Best Cinematography (Non-fiction) trophies at the 62nd National Film Awards, 2015. In March 2024, Binodini Opera, another play on the Nati was staged with Sudipta Chakraborty as the lead. Apart from these adaptations, one might also mention, Utpal Dutt’s Tiner Talowar (1971), Dinen Gupta’s film Nati Binodini (1994), Natyaranga’s Binodini Katha (2010), Smaranik Bangalore’s Nati Binodini (2016) and Rituparno Ghosh’s award-winning film Abohomaan (2010).

The overarching narrative in most of the representations has been that of the fallen woman being redeemed by the redeemer Sri Ramakrishna. Gupta highlights that “Binodini was iconised as a cult figure, the moment of her iconisation frozen in several plays, biographies and documentaries repeated through the ages, reiterating with equal vigour, every single time, of the injustice meted out to her and of her redemption at the hands of Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa.” However, Binodini remains in the cultural memory of Bengal as an icon, given the innumerable adaptations of her life, based on her autobiographies.

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