

Memory and the written testimony: the actresses of the public theatre in Calcutta in the 19th & 20th century

Memória e testemunho escrito: as atrizes do teatro público em Calcutá nos séculos XIX e XX

Sarvani Gooptu¹

Netaji Institute for Asian Studies, NIAS, in Kolkata, India.

¹ Professor in Asian Literary and Cultural Studies at the Netaji Institute for Asian Studies, NIAS, in Kolkata, India.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1564-1225>

E-mail: sarvanigooptu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: Modern theatrical performances in Bengali language in Calcutta, the capital of British colonial rule, thrived from the mid-nineteenth century though they did not include women performers till 1874. The story of the early actresses is difficult to trace due to a lack of evidence in contemporary sources. So though a researcher is vaguely aware of their significance and contribution to Indian theatre, they have remained shadowy figures – nameless except for those few who have left a written testimony of their lives and activities. It is my intention through the study of this primary material and the scattered references to these legendary actresses in vernacular journals and memoirs, to recreate the stories of some of these divas and draw a connection between testimony and lasting memory.

Keywords: Actresses; Bengali Theatre; Social pariahs; Performance and creative output; Memory and written testimony.

RESUMO: As representações teatrais modernas na língua bengali em Calcutá, a capital do governo colonial britânico, prosperaram a partir de meados do século XIX, embora não incluíssem mulheres até 1874. É difícil traçar a história das primeiras atrizes devido à falta de evidências em fontes contemporâneas. Dessa forma, embora o pesquisador tenha uma vaga consciência de sua contribuição e importância para o teatro indiano, elas permaneceram obscuras – anônimas, com exceção daquelas que deixaram um testemunho escrito de suas vidas e atividades. Por meio do estudo desse material primário e das referências esparsas a essas lendárias atrizes em diários e memórias na língua vernácula, pretendo recriar as histórias de algumas dessas divas e estabelecer uma conexão entre testemunho e memória duradoura.

Palavras-chave: Atrizes; Teatro bengali; Párias sociais; Representação e produção criativa; Memória e testemunho escrito.

Modern theatrical performance in India is generally linked to the establishment of colonial rule under the British. In Calcutta performances of plays in Bengali had a long, though broken lineage. After two aborted attempts in 1795 and 1835, the history of continuous performances in Bengali plays from 1850s reached an apogee in 1872 when public theatre started in Calcutta and when women entered Bengali public stage two years later. Though much has been written on the history and growth of the drama in Calcutta there is hardly any research on the actress. One is vaguely aware of their importance, the significance of their presence in the development of the history of Bengali drama but they have remained shadowy figures – nameless except for those few who have left a written testimony of their lives and activities. Writing a history of performance in India is always hampered by paucity of the written material and one has to string together the little pearls that remain hidden in the contemporary writings in the journals and the memoirs of the actors of the time to create a proper understanding of the actress on the Bengali stage and construct a lasting memory with the help of the literary evidence.

Imagining how performances of ancient dramas were held intrigued the first translators of Sanskrit plays from the 18th century under the auspices of the Asiatic society. Indologists like William Jones (1789), H. H. Wilson (1827), Sylvain Levy (1890) E. P. Horowitz (1912), M. Schuler (1906), and A. B. Keith (1924) undertook to write scholarly work on Indian theatres followed in the 20th century by Indians who analytically discussed the performances in the past and the present. In none of their writing however can we find much reference to performances by women. Two doctoral theses from London University by P.C. Guha Thakurta and Hemendranath Dasgupta¹ on Indian

¹ Written around 1915 but both published in 1930s. P. C. Guhathakurta, *The Bengali Drama: Its origin and Development*, London: K. Paul, Trench and Trubner Co. Pvt Ltd, 1930; Hemendranath Dasgupta, *The Indian Theatre*, 4 vols, Calcutta: Metropolitan Printing and Publishing House, 1934-44.

theatre based in Bengal described the content and form of the dramas performed on the Bengal stage focussing on the sources of Indian drama and the development of its unique styles. Dasgupta was the first to include a discussion on the actresses who performed in the English theatre in Calcutta from 1788. As he shows, there too doubts were raised regarding its worth since the playhouses would become, ‘nurseries of vice and public seraglios’ as Mrs Fay pointed out in *Hartley House*.² Though drama performances were popular among the rich and middle class Bengali families with invited audiences on special occasions, they were exclusively male dominated through the second half of the 19th century. The contemporary newspapers and magazines both in English and Bengali discussed the plays performed on stage in the Bengali language and often rued the lack of actresses but it was not till the 1870s that women were brought in.

When the exclusivity of the Bengali theatre ended with the start of public theatres, societal control over the profession also declined and to boost sale of tickets women were brought in to act. There was no question of the availability of actresses from established families so they had to be procured from the families of prostitutes. It is not that this was unprecedented because from ancient times it was they who were the most accomplished in the performance art. But socially there had been a decline in their status by the 19th century. Urdu theatre from the 1850s always had women acting in female roles, but it was a revolutionary step for Bengali theatre where in the same period men always acted in female roles.

A veritable cacophony of questions arose immediately which was reflected in the contemporary writing of the time. Would these uneducated women from economically backward families be able to achieve success as actresses in that actor-dominated world of theatre? And more importantly,

² Hemendranath Dasgupta, *The Indian Theatre*, Vol I, Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1988, p. 90-91.

would these women who were perforce obtained from the families of prostitutes in the suburbs of Calcutta be able to on one hand transcend their backgrounds and perform in the roles they were assigned in the plays and secondly how would their introduction impact on the social acceptability of Indian theatre. For a long time despite all the reform movements in the country focussing on improvement of conditions of women, these actresses who achieved great fame, adulation and artistic success could never establish themselves socially at par with other middle class women. In fact they were accused of bringing ruin and shame to the acting profession and the world of theatre. There is no doubt that some of the legendary actresses like Binodini, Tarasundari, Sukumari, Tinkadi in the early period, Probha, Charushila, Konkabati slightly later in the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century established acting as a profitable profession but the question still remains whether they achieved pure artistic satisfaction or emancipation from society's efforts to drag them down. I have discussed these issues of empowerment elsewhere in more details³ and here I will restrict myself to an analysis of few written testimonies that are available to us. The ideas that emerge from this analysis of the writings of some of the actresses may also echo similar experiences of women performers in other countries and other cultures as well.

Compared to the large number of performers who were women in the theatre of Calcutta, the leading colonial city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth and the leading cultural hub in the latter half of the century, very few of them actually left testimonies of their experiences in the form of memoirs, essays, creative works like poetry or songs and very rarely were their biographies written or published. Therefore the few that have remained have become path-breaking writing since they provide a rare insight into

³ Sarvani Gooptu, *The Actress in the Public Theatres of Calcutta*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2015.

the minds of the *nati* as the actress was called in Bengali, who were admired from far but never welcomed into an integral part of the society. For this paper, I have tried to look at both literary works as well as autobiographical essays by some of the leading actresses in the 20th century Bengali theatre to understand their aspirations and angst. Two autobiographical essays by Binodini Dasi⁴ (*Amar Katha* or *My Story* and *Amar Abhinetri Jibon* or *My Life as an Actress*) Tinkadi Dasi (*Abhinetrir Katha* or *Story of an Actress*)⁵, biographies on Tarasundari⁶, Sukumari Dutta⁷ and Probha Devi⁸, and the literary works of Binodini Dasi (two books on verses *Basanti* and *Kanak O Nalini*) Probha Debi (songs) and Sukumari Dutta (a drama *Apoorva Sati*). I have also used other sources like drama reviews, essays on plays and the actresses in the contemporary literary periodicals, as well as memoirs of actors and playwrights as secondary sources.

It is astonishing that the entry of actresses in theatre was considered as being detrimental to the morality of the whole society, since there had been women performers in music for a long time. As the greatest theatrical personality of the first era of Bengali theatre, Girish Chandra Ghosh, actor, director, dramatist and manager, pointed out, 'most of the keertan singers and dancers were prostitutes but there was no real hatred for them. It was only towards theatre that their fingers were raised'.⁹ The society had

⁴ Binodini Dasi, *Amar Katha O Onanya Rachana (My Story and other writings)*, ed. Saumitra Chattopadhyay and Nirmalya Acharya, Calcutta, Subarnarekha, 1987, p. 135-144.

⁵ Tinkadi Dasi, *Amar Abhinetri Jibon or My Life as an Actress* reprinted in *Shatabdir Natyachinta*, (A century of Ed. Debashish Majumdar and Sekhar Samaddar, Kolkata, A Mukherjee and Company Pvt Ltd, 2000, p. 86-94.

⁶ Upendranath Bidyabhushan, Tarasundari, reprinted in *Shatabdir Natyachinta*, op cit., p. 59-73.

⁷ Kiron Chandra Datta, Suprasiddha Abhinetri Sukumari Datta, reprinted in *Shatabdir Natyachinta*, op cit., p. 130-133.

⁸ Devnarayan Gupta, Protibhamoyee Abhinetri Probha Debi, *Banglar Nat Nati (Actors and Actresses of Bengal)* Vol II, Calcutta: Sahityalok, 1990, p. 138-148; Amit Maitra, *Rangalaye Banganati*, (the Bengali stage actresses) Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2004, p. 563-578.

⁹ Girish Chandra Ghosh, *Girish Rachanabali (Collected Works)*, ed. Rathindra Nath Roy and Devipada Bhattacharya, Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1001, p. 735-736.

accepted the presence of women singers possibly because they were not in intimate physical contact with the male actors in public gaze just as the society accepts however unwillingly the presence of the prostitute and entertainer but never feels threatened by them. During major festivals and important occasions in the houses of respectable and rich of Calcutta, famous singers/dancers like Mejbai, Gyanada, Basanta, Sarala Sundari and others, performed at 'Mehfils' or 'Keertans'.¹⁰ It is also interesting that none of the enlightened men of Bengal who were deeply involved in the nineteenth century reforms for uplift of women considered the theatre as a professional alternative to the women who were stigmatized as 'fallen' by the society. Not even the Tagore family at Jorasanko which served as a beacon for women's liberty, could bring in women of any type, respectable or otherwise, to perform in plays at their private theatre till much later when Rabindranath Tagore introduced their family women to perform in his plays and dance dramas at Jorasanko Natyashala and Santiniketan to the consternation of the society.

The vernacular newspapers and journals were loud in the criticism of the new step and in the editorials the theatres were cautioned that the society was not yet ready and the managers should not "stoop down to the level of the jatravalas" (*Hindu Patriot*). One editorial said that it was a tragedy that gentlemen were being seen with prostitutes (*Bharat Samskar*). There was even a protest against the presence of some Brahmavidyas in the audience because it was unseemly that they should see the acting of prostitutes (*Sadharani*). Even the improvement in the aesthetics and standard of performance it could not compensate for the loss of moral uprightness of the society. Monomohon Basu said in *Madhyastha*, that it was a sad time when instead of concentrating on the social reforms for women

the society was enjoying the performance of prostitutes on stage. It was specially tragic that the capital city should set such a bad example.¹¹

Overcoming disadvantages of their backgrounds

Even when a woman was brought into theatre to perform, there was still a lot to be achieved before she achieved the high level that audience aspired. She remained a good student, a brilliant performer yet was never able to exceed the 'lead' actor in the choice of roles, monetary matters or in fame. She was also subordinated by her 'loyalty' to her mentor or patron and this loyalty in her career and personal life often hindered her ambition. The position of the actress always remained subordinate in this early period of the professional stage (1872-1920). Initially there was very little expectation of good performance from the actresses since it was known that they were from backward and uneducated sections. But when night after night in the different plays the actresses performed brilliantly the praise of the critics became unstinted. How could these prostitutes become transformed into characters of 'noble women' or 'Heavenly Goddesses'. Though they were uneducated they were able to interpret the complexities of human nature and even portray anglicized Bengali characters with English based dialogues. With aplomb they acted in historical tragedies portraying strong and complicated characters.

Working hard to improve dialect based speech defects and perfecting dialogue delivery, the young actresses Binodini, Tinkadi Dasi or Tarasundari became famous in their rendition of difficult roles. Not only did they excel in acting but they had to be accomplished in singing and dancing as well since songs were an integral part of Bengali drama. In fact playwrights

¹⁰Sumanta Banerjee, *Asruta Kanthaswar* (Unheard Voices), Subarnarekha, Calcutta, 2002, p. 29.

¹¹Brojendra Nath Bandopadhyay, *Bangla Natyashalar Itihas* (History of Bengali theatre), 1795-1876, Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 1979, p. 156-163.

included songs not really required in the script to gain popularity at the box office. Binodini was a legend during and after her time but even she was criticized for not being ‘really good in singing’ yet she was never exempted from portraying characters in which singing was essential and had to compensate with superior acting. Dancing according to Girish Ghosh was not a part of the theatre in the initial years probably because the newly educated westernized Bengali looked down upon the popular dance style *khemta* which the farces propagated and Ghosh took the important step of transforming it into attractive dance sequences with formal dance training for the actresses.¹² Even the basic acting had to be taught to the actresses since they all came to the theatre at a very tender age and could barely relate to the characters they had to portray. They were taught by the legendary actors of the time like Girish Ghosh, Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi or Amritalal Bose or Amritalal Mitra. The idea began to circulate among the actors/producers, playwrights, critics and leading men of the time that if these young inexperienced girls could put up such fine performances what could they not achieve with education. A large number of journals of the time contain articles expressing this sentiment. In *Nachghar*, the editor Nalinimohon Roychowdhury, said that it is true that the actresses do not really need to have school education but an overall education definitely improves the quality of the mind and hence performance. That would bring in respectability to theatre which the coming of the actress had badly hampered.¹³ Binodini in her autobiography too discussed the teaching style of Girish Ghosh. ‘He had a wonderful teaching method: first he would explain the *bhave* (feel) of the role in question, then he asked me to memorize the lines. After this, he would, at his convenience come to our

house... talk about numerous English actresses and works of famous English poets...’¹⁴ Girish Ghosh himself wrote in ‘*Abhinoy O Abhineta*’, that ‘acting was not simply a training of how to say the dialogue but a total education – to comprehend how the character is supposed to behave,’ and he made his point by using illustrations of biographies of famous English actors and actresses.¹⁵ His grouse was that after all the trouble was taken by the director and manager to train the young girls, they were quite willing to sacrifice it all when some ‘kaptan’ (a rich man or patron) swept her off her feet with promises of a comfortable security.¹⁶

The greatest fear that confronted the actress was that her expectation of monetary stability might at any moment be hampered by a better performer or by the loss of patronage and support by her mentor. So in search of that security she often turned to whoever offered her financial stability since most of the time in her haste and eagerness to join the theatre she burnt her boats regarding her option of returning to her previous environment. A prostitute would always look for a long-lasting patron as soon as they started out in the trade and that training remained with most of them even in this new environment. In a sense they were far worse off because now they had to adjust with new social rules, new principles, new styles of behaviour as well as confront the accusations of moral polluting of every person or place they came into contact with. They had to forego their family connection and support yet never outran the stigma of their past. They were brilliant in their performance because they never let their limited education and poverty stricken homes act as a barrier in their vibrant desire to learn.

¹⁴ Binodini Dasi, *Amar Jiban*, Translation by Rimli Bhattacharya, *My story and my life as an actress*, Delhi: Kali for women, 1998, p.78.

¹⁵ Girish Chandra Ghosh, *Girish Racanabali*, Vol III, op cit., p. 829-844.

¹⁶ Girish Chandra Ghosh, Bartoman Rangabhoomi, *Rangalaya*, v. 1, n. 23, 1901, reprinted in *Shatabdir Natyachinta*, (A Collection of essays on Bengali theatre) ed. Debashish Majumdar and Sekhar Samaddar, Kolkata: A. Mukherjee and company Pvt. Ltd., 2000, p. 3.

¹² Girish Chandra Ghosh, *Girish Racanabali*, Vol V, op cit., p. 335-40.

¹³ Nalini Mohon Roychowdhury, Editorial, *Nachghar*, v. 3, n. 4, 1914.

They learnt to take pride in themselves and their work, but at the same time became dependent on their tutor-patrons.

Recreating lives through testimony

Girish said in his *Banga-Rangalaye Srimati Binodini* that he had asked Binodini to write her memoirs so that it might be an inspiration to improve herself through remembering the process as well as be an inspiration to other women like her to join the theatre in the hope of redeeming herself by escaping the life she might live otherwise.¹⁷ Of course Binodini didn't write it when she was at the top of her profession but nineteen years after her retirement in 1887, having suffered from the tragic deaths of her young daughter and lover. Ghosh wrote the preface to her book as he had promised and wrote that he didn't approve of way Binodini bemoaned her fate and presented her memoirs as her life's tragedy. He had probably wanted her book to be an inspirational example for others to follow. He was probably embarrassed at the many instances that Binodini showed of betrayal by her theatrical connections and even him. He tried to sidetrack by pointing out that her sadness was because of her background which kept haunting her till the end and prevented her daughter from being educated like children from other respectable families. He had decided to endorse her book because he thought that if other women could read how Binodini had received blessings of the greatest living saint of the time, Sri Ramkrishna, despite coming from such a fallen family, they might be inspired to join the theatre. 'Those who like Binodini were unfortunate enough to belong to a family which had no other alternative livelihood, those who are being wooed by sweet nothings

by men of loose morals, even they will be inspired... Those who are actresses will realize that if they concentrate on a superlative performance in the roles allotted to them they will be feted by the society – it was this thought that compelled me to write the preface to Binodini's book.¹⁸ But what he did not anticipate was her silent protest even at the time of its publication. When Binodini's book was first published in 1912, Ghosh's preface was not included. What courage it must have taken for a retired actress and protégé to decide not to include that work of a reigning Master of Bengali Theatre. It was finally added in the second edition after Ghosh's death in 1913. Ghosh remained ignorant of the fact that Binodini was able to stay an inspiration for generations of actresses to come because her account of her life made her effort believable, the weaknesses and bemoaning of fate that he condemned made her beloved with all those women who faced innumerable instances of humiliation and discrimination. What came across to posterity was not helplessness but acceptance of her limitations and a sense of self-respect and pride in her achievements. She faced repeated betrayal from those whom she loved and admired but she dealt with her pain with wry sense of humour. As she wrote in *Amar Abhinetri Jiban (My life as an actress)*, she received 'at least two or three offers of Fifty thousand rupees' (in return for the favours of a mistress or a wife) but she 'spurned them like dust' so enchanted was she by the magic of theatre.¹⁹ Girish has criticized in his preface the writing style of Binodini when he writes that 'she has not discussed the events in her life properly but is only looking for sympathy.' Contrarily he was probably embarrassed when she strongly criticized the social conventions and her many betrayals. He also pointed out how she had 'spoken only about herself' instead of giving details of how

¹⁷ Girish Chandra Ghosh, *Banga Rangalaye Srimati Binodini*, Appendix V, Binodini Dasi, *Amar Katha O Ananya Rachana*, op cit., p. 135-144.

¹⁸ Girish Chandra Ghosh, *Girish Racanabali*, Vol V, op cit., p. 364-5.

¹⁹ Binodini Dasi, *Amar Abhinetri Jiban*, (My years as an Actress) originally serialized in *Rup O Ranga* (1924-25) reprinted in *Shatabdir Natyachinta*, op cit., p. 38.

she trained for each role, ‘how each effort paid dividends, how important discipline was, how voice was trained, how attention was paid to every action’.²⁰ On the contrary, the Memoirs were, as Girish must have realized even then, a skilful protest against all the injustices committed by Girish and others towards Binodini.

It is true that the great theatre mentors trained both actors and actresses yet in the case of the actress there seems to be a difference. A kind of mystical aura surrounded the teacher-pupil relationship in the Guru-shishya style which became a bonding for life. This extended beyond the stage to guidance in day to day life. This could be because the actors came from secure middle class backgrounds though once they entered the ‘tainted’ portals of the theatre they were more or less forced to sever connections with their families. The actresses on the other hand were stepping into the unknown once they left the shelter of their erstwhile profession. They not only had to act in unfamiliar roles on stage in front of a critical audience but also had to carry on living public lives offstage especially once they became famous. So in this unfamiliar terrain the bona fide protection that a cult figure offered must have been irresistible.

The result of this dependence was a blurring of the lines demarcating personal lives and careers. It would have been understandable if it had been only their teacher and theatre mentor who was taking decisions for these women since they had almost given them new lives but often we notice that even successful actresses often let those men who provided them security and were not associated with the theatre take important decisions for them even depriving them of their acting career which brought them fame and monetary escape from the drudgery of their past lives. In the urgency to flee the ‘shame’ of their past life they often floundered in their career choices

depending on the whims and limitations of their patrons. Their career graph often fluctuated with the personal fortunes of these men. If the supporters of use of actresses in Bengali theatre believed that acting profession would be the saviour of all these degraded women by granting them respectability they had miscalculated. They did not take into account the emotional factors. These women always placed love and loyalty for individuals above their careers. Some considered domesticity a better alternative for a career on stage while for others even in career choices priority was always given the patrons’ wishes.

Binodini’s attachment to her mentor Girish Ghosh was legendary. She called herself his right hand and said that he rushed to fulfil all her trivial whims. She attributed her success in theatre to Girish Ghosh. But his influence did not end there. In most of her personal decisions he played a role sometimes upholding her wishes and at other times impressing upon her that his decision would benefit her. Quite early in her career the young man who looked after her wanted her to leave the theatre. Then realizing that Binodini was too committed to acting to heed his request he asked her not to accept a salary for her performance. This too went against her independent spirit. Finally on the advice of Girish Ghosh she pretended to be an honorary artist and her salary was given to her mother. Another occasion when Binodini had to go against her conscience was when on the advice of her Guru she had to accept the offer of Gurmukh Rai as her patron though she still felt attached to her previous patron. At this juncture when Gurmukh offered her Rs 50,000 in lieu of the theatre she resisted the temptation. That would have meant leaving the profession she adored. But to save her mentor Girish and other actors who had been left without a theatre to perform in, she had to compromise and leave her lover to whom she had been very attached, and accept Gurmukh’s offer to be his mistress in lieu of the new theatre that he would build. While making this sacrifice she consoled herself

²⁰ Girish Chandra Ghosh, *Banga Rangalaye Srimati Binodini*, op cit, p. 137.

that having a theatre named after her would compensate for her grief. But her hopes were dashed when during the registration the theatre was named Star and not B theatre, at Girish's instigation. Later when shares of Star were being bought up Gurmukh Rai offered to give Binodini some shares but Girish Ghosh advised her against it saying that a woman would not be able to handle the responsibility.²¹ Despite all these instances, Binodini never accused her mentor of 'betrayal' but rather asked him to write the preface to *My Story*, which incidentally she dedicated to her lover for whom she had forsaken her art and settled down in domestic bliss at the height of her career.

Another actress Tinkadi Dasi is an interesting example of a woman who came into theatre for the love of acting and did not allow anything to stand in the way. Her autobiography, *Abhinetrir Kotha*, or *The Revelations of an Actress*, reveals a mature style of writing where instead of the usual contemporary word *natishe* uses the formal *abhinetrilo* describe actress, thereby sanitizing the profession by removing the associations with that of a dance performer which *natimay* imply. She starts her autobiographical essay mentioning the salary that she started her acting career at Beena Theatre at the age of sixteen when she realised her mother, from a misguided desire for security for herself and Tinkadi, was trying to prise her away from theatre by dangling the bait of financial security under the exclusive shelter of two moneyed gentlemen. But Tinkadi was bitten by the acting bug and refused to listen to her mother's cajoling or threats and sent the gentlemen away declaring that she would never leave acting.²² She too, like Binodini Dasi, acknowledged the contribution of her mentor Girish Ghosh to her artistic development. In his case training and working with him was a matter of pride, and financial losses never mattered to her

nor the fact that she had to audition for him even though in other theatres she was the leading lady.²³ She mastered the difficult role of Lady Macbeth though she was quite poorly educated. Her whole essay on the story of her acting life was about the training by the maestro and how she successfully mastered it. Yet such a professional actress too became totally unreasonable on one occasion. She was supposed to appear on stage as a widow in the play '*Karametibai*' at Minerva, and heard that her lover, her *Babu* (Master) was in the auditorium. She forgot that she was an actress and refused to appear before him in widow's dress in case it cast a shadow on his life. The director Girish realising that no orders would overcome this superstition quietly requested the gentleman to leave and the scene was resumed without further ado. Tinkadi later apologized to Girish for her momentary lapse of professionalism.²⁴ Gradually she became Girish's loyal protegee, moving from theatre to theatre with him. There were rumours of them living together. At this time a rich man wanted to make her his mistress but stipulated that she would have to leave acting. With Girish's support she spurned his offer but the aggrieved man tried to take revenge on them which was luckily foiled by a common friend. The leading pair was smuggled out of Minerva and the rich man's plot foiled. There were many such stories prevalent of their close relationship and Girish was openly appreciative of her talent. Later when she fell ill and her diabetic condition forced her to stay away from theatre Girish advised her to stay in touch with acting by performing occasionally with Thespian theatre.²⁵ The interesting part is that despite rumours Tinkadi always remained loyal to her unnamed *babu* and according to her will two of her houses were donated to Mayo hospital and one to the son of her *babu*.

²¹ Binodini Dasi, *Amar Katha O Ananya Racana*, op. cit., p. 37, 40, 46.

²² Tinkadi Dasi, *Amar Abhinetri Jibon*, reprinted in *Shatabdir Natyachinta*, op. cit., p. 88.

²³ Ibid., p. 89-92.

²⁴ Devnarayan Gupta, *Banglar Natnati*, Vol I, op. cit., p. 61-73.

²⁵ Ibid.

The tragedy of Golaap Sundori, better known as Sukumari Dutta's life which was transformed into a success story by her tenacity and courage is one of the most inspiring stories of the Bengali theatre. She was one of the first four actresses to join the stage in 1874. It was her talent as a singer that first attracted the notice of manager Sarat Chandra Ghosh who brought her to Bengal Theatre. Under the training of her mentors Ardhendusekhar and Upendranath Das her talent bloomed. In Das' play '*Sarat Sarojini*', Golaap's performance as Sukumari was so brilliant that she became identified with that character and came to be known henceforth as Sukumari. Inspired by the Brahma ideals of reclaiming the 'fallen' prostitutes, Das wanted to rehabilitate actresses through marriage and settlement. He married his star pupil Sukumari to a young protégé actor of the group, Goshto Behari Dutta. Knowing that society would not forgive him for his folly in marrying a fallen actress Golaap quit association with the theatre. She started living in a shanty with her husband, and a daughter was born to them soon. But the hope of acceptance by her husband's middle class family was dashed when Dutta was ostracised by his family for marrying her. Her sacrifice of successful career seemed even more futile when her husband yielded to the societal pressure and abandoned her. Her mentor Upendranath Das' departure to London for medical treatment led Goshto Behari Das to escape too. In severe financial distress Golaap turned to her last resort, the theatre. But she did not simply rejoin as an actress. She first made an attempt to start a women's theatrical group. Then she wrote a play, '*Apurba Sati*', in the introduction of which she wrote that it was to be performed by women for a women only audience. This was a courageous gesture at a time when women of middle class families were strongly discouraged from attending theatrical performances. There are inconsistencies regarding where and when the play was performed,²⁶

²⁶ Amit Maitra, *Rangalaye Banganati*, op. cit., p. 49.

but if details ever come out in future, Sukumari's contribution to the history of performance will never be doubted again.

A decade or two later, Probha became one of the most highly acclaimed actresses who also wrote songs, published in the theatre journal *Nachghar* and was later compiled into a book. At a time when under the leadership of Sisir Kumar Bhaduri, a university graduate who left his successful career as lecturer and joined the world of theatre, public theatre was at last achieving a degree of respectability, Probha joined the Bengal Theatrical Company established by the Madans at the age of eighteen. She was an amazing singer, her voice quality was unique besides being a talented dancer. Her innate talent was sharpened and developed by the expert training of Sisir Bhaduri who brought a revolutionary change in acting style and production. Probha was his close associate in times fair and foul and is remembered to this day for her skillful exposition as his foil in all the plays he acted and directed.

Like other actresses before her, Probha too keenly felt the need to express her feelings and thoughts in writing. But unfortunately she didn't leave any account of her extraordinary life but almost every issue of the theatre journal *Nachghar*, in the thirties of the 20th century, contains a song by Probha. She distinguishes between her *gaanand ghazal* (both of which are songs) outlining the difference in lineage and style of music. In *Gaan* (probably meaning geet), there is a strain of spiritualism and the main theme is that of a lover suffering from pangs of *biraha* (parting) or surrendering at the feet of her lord. In the *ghazals* there is a more earthy touch with mention of words like *saki*, *piyalasharab*, *lalpani* (all relating to alcohol). I will only quote a few lines of a *ghazal* because of the extraordinary daring and vivid description in it of the physical appearance of a lover at the end of a night spent with the beloved. It is bold even by today's standard and must have raised some hackles when published in *Nachghar* in 1931. Besides the drooping eyelids, smudged *sindoor* (vermillion) there is a reference to the

dishevelled bodice of the lover. She then continues: “– Play of the (lovers’) nails paints the sky-like breasts with a crescent shaped necklace, Deep kisses of the beloved fill the face with clusters of red love-bites...”²⁷, though the tone in general is very aesthetic and lyrical with marked influence of early modern *panchali* style poetry. Whether it was the rare bold song or the very fact of her writing which annoyed her readers but some of the disgruntled murmur must have reached her ears. Probha wrote a prose essay in the same journal, *Rahasyerchabikathi* (Keys to the mystery) in which she makes a statement justifying her writing. Apparently many people had asked her how she learnt how to write poetry. She disclaims writing any and points out that these are songs which are simply expressions of her feelings and thoughts. This statement is by itself a very well written literary piece, tongue in cheek, using irony to bring shame to the sceptics:

... The patter of rain, the babbling of the brook, the trill of the birds, create music which comes spontaneously without training... because nature needs to express herself. It does not require any training – it comes naturally. In the same way humans express themselves in many ways... music is one such fine expression. ... A poet has said those who don’t love music are capable of murder. I think that a person who doesn’t sing is himself dead – even when he moves there is no life in him... Where do I get words? As I have said before music comes to my heart and words follow.

The dignity with which she continues her tirade against those who insinuate that she is incapable of real art and only reproduces what someone else has written is worth noting. She makes it clear that she has no doubt that she is a celebrity, the adored goddess of people’s hearts not to be trifled with and definitely not to be doubted.

²⁷ *Rupashi ar keno go lukao tomar montiokaron...*

Jagi raat dagor duti aankhir pataa tundra binate!

Lolatersindoormolin, buke dole shithilaboron!

Nokhorertulirleelaybuk-akasheshobhechanderhaar!

Pritamerpunjachumaychunirteelebhoroa je aanon! Nachghar, n. 6, v. 13, 1929.

I know that those who ask me this are not fools and do not need this explanation. The real intention behind their questioning is to ask me if there is someone whose work I print in my name. I can barely keep pace with my own heart – how can I know what is in someone else’s? What would be my benefit in printing my name to someone else’s work? Yes there is a desire in everyone for fame. But after all despite the burden of notoriety I believe that I have made a name for myself and that fame will hardly be increased by a few songs....It is also possible that the criticisms are not levelled against me as an individual but against the whole community of actresses. We are fallen (*patita*), we learn the art of dalliance from our childhood but are we exceptions? Every profession learns to deceive... Serving the Goddess of Arts we have done our duty in enriching culture. If I pluck a few flowers and serve it to my inner Goddess – that offering is both my motive and my achievement.²⁸

Probha does not deny the influences on her creativity and clearly mentions her sources of inspiration. Just before she left for America with Sisir Bhaduri’s troupe Probha gave the manuscript of her songs to be published with Gurudas Chattopadhyay and Sons as a book called *Gitayan*. In the introduction of the book Probha wrote that she had performed in many roles in her life but had never imagined that she would ever enact the role of a poet. The songs were expressions of many moods and thoughts that she could not express to any person. It was not to fulfil any great purpose but only express these fleeting moments of inner drama that she wrote the songs.²⁹ The book has 36 songs which she set to tune herself. Probha was an artist of the highest order and seems to have valued her privacy because she does not seem to have involved herself in scandals and controversies that dogged the lives of the actresses of the time. There are many legal cases going on at the time involving other actresses but Probha was not involved in any of them. She was content to be loyal to her mentor Sisir Kumar Bhaduri but was probably not romantically involved with him. This could have been

²⁸ Probha Devi, *Rahasyer Chabi, Nachghar*, n. 5, v. 43, 1928.

²⁹ Quoted in Devnarayan Gupta, *Banglar Natnati*, Vol II, op. cit., p. 146.

because she was one of the luckier ones who found domestic bliss through marriage with Tara Nath Bhaduri, her mentor's younger brother, by whom she had two daughters.³⁰ Many memoirs connected with theatre remember the dedication of Probha during performances. Deb Narayan Gupta does not mention her marriage but lauds her remarkable stoicism during her performances: once a wooden chip pierced her leg, yet she continued to perform, and even worse when she performed on a tour her daughter Bula died in her arms on the way.³¹ This incident is even more poignant since it is narrated by her elder daughter Protibha Neogi who was with Probha on that journey and shared in her mother's grief at the loss of the talented Bula.³²

Story untold is an artistic life forgotten

Posterity remembers only a handful of actresses. Most stories are lost because they have left no testimony nor are they even mentioned in contemporary accounts by others. Whether it is their artistic style or their mental state, everything about the actresses of yesteryear has remained untold till this day. Today people talk about and write about only Binodini Dasi because she alone left an account of her life. But Binodini worked for a shorter time compared to some others – twelve years compared to Tarasundari's forty nine years, Probha's thirty nine years or Tinkadi's thirty. The actresses I have written about here at least have some documentation, but others like Charushila, who worked for twenty seven years, is notorious only for the court case she embroiled her mentor Sisir Bhaduri in for non-payment of dues. Most actresses are also only remembered

when they are linked romantically with their mentors like Tarasundari with Amarendranath or Aparesh Mukhopadhyay or Konkaboti with Sisir Bhaduri.

The lives of the actresses who fought such odds to make a position for themselves in the world of theatre while at the same time looking for financial security and the solace of a family and love very rarely put their thoughts in writing, and very little was discussed by the critics of the period. There are front page articles in the theatre journals describing lives and performances of actresses of the western stage but hardly any discussion is made on the Bengali actress, except to rue their background and the ruinous moral impact they allegedly had on the stage and society. One can scarcely blame the actress for not wanting to draw attention to themselves by writing publicly since whenever someone did show courage like Probha, or Sukumari, doubts were always raised regarding their authenticity. Sukumari's claim to being the first female playwright is continuously doubted and *Apurva Sati* is claimed to be the work of the social reformer Upendranath Das, who organised her marriage, according to the research of a serious scholar of Bengali Literature, Sukumar Sen.³³ Others claim that it was her manager Ashutosh Das who was the real author, though Sen thinks no such person actually existed and was an invention of Das.³⁴ However none of the critics give any plausible explanation as to why these supposedly real dramatists would give up their claim to their creative work. Even Probha's enigmatic statement, 'What right I have to that fame I do not know for sure. It possibly belongs to another. My claim to that fame is only as much as a daughter has for her father's wealth,'³⁵ could be out of pique and hurt at the allegations that she was not capable of literary creativity or a more spiritual relinquishing of claims to an ephemeral dream. Ultimately I think

³⁰ Amit Maitra, *Rangalaye Banganati*, op cit., p. 569.

³¹ Devnarayan Gupta, *Banglar Natnati*, op cit, p. 143.

³² Quoted in Amit Maitra, *Rangalaye Banganati*, op cit., p. 573.

³³ Amit Maitra, *Rangalaye Banganati*, op cit., p. 52.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Probha Devi, Rahasyer Chabi, *Nachghar*, n. 5, v. 43, 1928.

the use of adjectives of ‘dasi’ (slave) or ‘nogonno’ (lowly) in the testimony of the actresses while describing themselves in relation to their mentors and guardians may have been proof of their loyalty, but it was the very reason why their achievements were made light of by others and doubts were raised about their creativity, artistic and literary.

References

Amit Maitra, *Rangalaye Banganati*, (the Bengali stage actresses). Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2004.

Binodini Dasi, *Amar Katha O Onanya Rachana (My Story and other writings)*, ed. Saumitra Chattopadhyay and Nirmalya Acharya, Calcutta, Subarnarekha, 1987.

Binodini Dasi, *Amar Jiban*, Translation by Rimli Bhattacharya, *My story and my life as an actress*, Delhi: Kali for women, 1998.

Binodini Dasi, *Amar Abhinetri Jiban*, (My years as an Actress) originally serialized in *Rup O Ranga (1924-25)* reprinted in *Shatabdir Natyachinta*.

Brojendra Nath Bandopadhyay, *Bangla NatyashalarItihas*, (History of Bengali theatre), 1795-1876, Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 1979.

Devnarayan Gupta, Protibhamoyee Abhinetri Probha Debi, *Banglar Nat Nati (Actors and Actresses of Bengal)* Vol II, Calcutta: Sahityalok, 1990.

Girish Chandra Ghosh, *Girish Rachanabali (Collected Works)*, ed. Rathindra Nath Roy and Devipada Bhattacharya, Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1001.

Girish Chandra Ghosh, Bartoman Rangabhoomi, *Rangalaya*, n. 1, v. 23, 1901, reprinted in *Shatabdir Natyachinta*, (A Collection of essays on Bengali theatre) ed. Debashish Majumdar and Sekhar Samaddar, Kolkata: A. Mukherjee and company Pvt. Ltd., 2000.

Hemendranath Dasgupta, *The Indian Theatre*, 4 vols, Calcutta: Metropolitan Printing and Publishing House, 1934-44.

Nalini Mohon Roychowdhury, Editorial, *Nachghar*, n. 3, v. 4, 1914.

P. C. Guhathakurta, *The Bengali Drama: Its origin and Development*, London: K. Paul, Trench and Trubner Co. Pvt Ltd, 1930.

Probha Devi, RahasyerChabi, *Nachghar*, n. 5, v. 43, 1928.

Sarvani Gooptu, *The Actress in the Public Theatres of Calcutta*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2015.

Sumanta Banerjee, *Asruta Kanthaswar (Unheard Voices)*, Subarnarekha, Calcutta, 2002.

Tinkadi Dasi, *Amar AbhinetriJibon or My Life as an Actress* reprinted in *Shatabdir Natyachinta*, (A century of Ed. Debashish Majumdar and Sekhar Samaddar, Kolkata, A Mukherjee and Company Pvt ltd, 2000.

Recebido em 16/02/2018.

Aceito em 02/05/2018.