

Creatures of the Sub-world: Nineteenth Century Actresses of the Bengali Stage

MINOTI CHATTERJEE

Reader, Department of Political Science
Gargi College, Siri Fort Road, New Delhi-110049

Feminism within theatre has its own very specific space today. Women's issues are raised stridently and powerfully as also their position as actresses vis a vis their profession. But in 19th century Bengal this was not so. Women actresses were exploited both on and off stage, and in a manner nothing short of consumerism, were practically bought, sold, and kept. Most actresses came from the red-light area of Calcutta because the Public Stage was to be kept strictly out of 'respectable' homes and was the haunt for all rejected elements of society, the truant young men and the so called fallen women. Yet the lure of the boards was so magnetic that the 'bhadrak' had a strange relationship of desire and rejection of the Public theatre.

The Public theatre in Bengal was really the only focus of urban metropolitan life which could place the matter of occupational identity squarely within the women's question. All issues of modernity, gender roles, caste, education and class were thrashed bare, despite the continuous debates centred around the actresses' 'immoral' presence.

As it is, acting as a profession, was an unusual socio-economic category. The actresses' identity within this occupational cluster was further complicated by social constricts of their sex. Life in 'Bhadrak' Bengal was interpreted by a male dominated culture that defined normative rules for female sexuality, activity and intellect. Social respectability was merited as long as women met the views prescribed for their age and class, but actresses virtually by definition lived and worked beyond the boundaries of propriety. 'Bhadrak' were deeply suspicious of women whose livelihood depended on skills of deception and dissembling, and the circumstances of actresses were such in real, as well as stage life.

No matter how consummate the artists (the list is endless) who were pre-eminent, favourites and modest—the woman actress could never supersede the fact that she lived a public life and consented to be hired for amusement by all who could command the price. For an

actress and more so if she was also a prostitute—all evidence of respectability was over-ruled. She was 'no better than she should be'. Hiring women to play female leads evoked negative responses from all and sundry, including the Press which thought it obnoxious. But when it did finally happen with four actresses Golapsundari, Elokeshi, Jagatarini and Shyamasundari joining the *Bengal Theatre* in 1873—*The National Theatre* and *Great National* followed suit, with others like Rajkumari, Haridasi, Jadumoni, Kadambini, and eventually Binodini Dasi.

This proved to be pivotal in charting the directions of Bengal Theatre and the space assigned to the actress by the Bengali bourgeoisie. The women who were brought into theatre halls were employed for their labour. And thereby they were inserted almost overnight into a cultural enterprise in whose projection they never actually had a part—although as actresses, they were to be instrumental in making theatre possible. At the same time, because most of them were recruited from the prostitute quarters, the stage actress was already read as a 'fallen woman' and outside the 19th century projects being constructed for women.

The position of the professional actress itself was a creation of the new educated middle class culture, supplying a need produced by the requirements of the new public theatre modeled on European lines. To train these actresses became a remarkable educative project in itself, producing women schooled in the language and sensibilities of a modernist literati, who learned to think of themselves as professional career artists, and yet were stigmatised by society for immoral living. The actresses' lives were indicative of the contradictions of a new world of middle class cultural production.

Bipin Chandra Pal, a militant nationalist, in his autobiography talks about how when women actresses were first introduced, they were outside the social pale. The Brahma Samaj in the name of public morals registered the strongest protest against the new development in the Bengali stage. But the actresses' attempts to reconcile sexuality and the female cycle to a physically demanding, itinerant occupation which underwent constant public scrutiny, led to assumptions about their morality assumptions that were constantly re-inforced by theatrical conventions which reflected popular pornographic images.

Keshub Sen's journal *Sulabh Samachar* of 15th April 1873 blamed the Christian, Michael Madhusudan Dutt for introducing 'bad' women on stage. Vidyasagar who had fought all his life for the rights of women walked out of the meeting of Bengal Theatre when Michael suggested it. So intense was the social hysteria that even progressives and reformers abandoned their crusade and joined the band wagon.

The Hindu Patriot of 18th August 1873 "... we wish the dramatic corps had done without actresses". *Bharat Samachar* 22nd August 1873 regretted "that sons of respectable families should act with women of the town". *Englishman* 18th August 1873, wrote "that though the actors and actresses performed successfully, it wished that drama could have done without actresses. It observed that in England females were brought in on the stage in 1660 - Eighty four years after the opening of the public stage in 1576. In Calcutta on the other hand they were seen within a year".

The actresses' earnings were lower than their male counterparts. The positions of director, authors, playwrights, producers or other artistic pursuits and positions were illusive for them. On 14th September 1912 *Star* had a condolence meeting for Girish Ghosh (before this there had been a large meeting at Town Hall where the actresses were not allowed) chaired by Amarendranath Datta who recollected "The actresses told me that since they were not allowed in public places, they requested me that with my sense of justice, these unfortunates should be allowed to weep and pay their last homage to their Guru and God Girish Babu". The actresses who attended and read their own tributes were Ranisundari, Basanta Kumari, Sushilabala, Norisundari who read a powerful speech in which she lambasted the 'Bhadrasamaj' "... after my birth the respectable society had said since you are not born into a stamped respectable family, you may as well keep sinning and we will go on cursing you ..."

Binodini Dasi (1863-1941) was perhaps the most celebrated actress of the Calcutta stage. She was an exceptional woman, who was trained to perform in a novel medium, by a metropolitan intelligensia seeking cultural identity under colonial rule. Her writings, specially *Amar Katha* (my story) and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* (my life as an actress) are a record of an unusually fine mind responding at multiple levels to the experimental world of theatre. It offers unusual perspectives from which to evaluate the place of public theatre in the cultural history of a nation. From this point alone, it informs our present endeavour of re-examining aspects of cultural identity against the backdrop of a nation in question.

The writings of these actresses in the form of autobiographies, diaries and poems, have opened the portals for examining a 'sub-world' of these women actresses within the framework of a Nation in the making. Could they be categorised within the narrative writings in Literature by other women of 19th century Bengal, specially along with the voices from within the 'Andarmahal' or the womens inner quarters? What is definite is that they are speaking publicly of the

'inner-world' of the Public Theatre. As such it would be literature and history of theatre. However, in studies such as this, it requires careful sifting of a lot of subjective evidence or reminiscences to reconstruct something. The writings provide valuable insight into the interpenetrative discourses of Hindutva, patriotism, nationalism and 'nari-hriday' (a woman's heart) and 'streejati' (woman kind) as they were enunciated by the actresses with respect to their own social position. Since most of the sources are highly individualistic accounts subjective in nature, there is bound to be an inevitable limitation of the writer's own experiences, tinted by his or her individual belief. Besides we have no firm chronology when we seem to retrieve the inchoate changes in the realm of feelings through the medium of didactic or fictional literature. But then it is hardly reasonable to expect this, because time remains elusive in the realm of the mind which appertains to personal emotions. Here the 'personal' often becomes the 'political' if one is convinced that there is no detail however small and intimate of social and individual life, which does not have a wider political meaning. Many new questions were raised about the individual and society, its oppression, the nature of political change, and therefore it is from this source that we might see a new definition of political subject matter for theatre.

Two representative theatre magazines *Natya Mandir* (1910-1912) and *Roop-O-Rang* (1924-25) published the autobiographical writing of Binodini Dasi. These magazines were a watershed in an attempt to bridge the gap between the 'bhadramahila' and the 'other' women and to exploit the existing interest in theatre and media personalities. *Saurabh* the short-lived theatre magazine edited by Amarendranath and co-edited by Girish, published Binodini's and Tara Sundari's (1879-1948) poems and prose. *Basana*, Binodini's first book of verse dedicated to her mother and *Kanak O Nalini* in memory of her dead daughter, were both published privately. *Amar Katha* in prose, in *Natya Mandir* (1910) and *Aamar Abinetri Jiban* in *Roop-O-Rang* (1924-25).

There was utmost honesty in the way in which these women treated theatre: "Although deceit is our constant companion and deception in the life of a fallen woman is considered to be the mainstay of her business . . . perhaps people will laugh if they hear that we too are sensible to pain, that our deceptions cost us much agony". In a very profound declaration Binodini says ". . . has anyone ever sought to know whether it was we who first deceived or whether we learnt deception only after we were ourselves deceived?" In the analysis of Rimli Bhattacharya who has done valuable research on women actresses

of this period "the Nati in the 19th century writing in Bengali increasingly becomes a comment on sexuality rather than a primary indicator of occupational identity. When constructed as a public woman she becomes emblematic of the degraded morals of the metropolis". Inherent within the theatre world lay not merely an acknowledgement of sexual difference between men and women but a 'sub-world' attributed to the sexuality of the prostitute actress.

The number of Bhakti plays in this period from 1884-1886 like Prahaladcharitra/Pravas Yagna/Chaitanyalila/Meera Bai/Buddhadeb Charitra/Karmeti bai/Dhruba Charita/Nemai Sanyas all had prostitute actresses playing the holy characters. The large number of plays around a woman's *sattitva* (chastity) was the theme of many productions in Public Theatre, all played to the hilt by *fallen* women. *Sati Ki Kalankini* by Nagendranath Bandopadhyay in 1874, *Apurba Sati* (1875) by Golap Sundari and *Adarsha Sati* 1876 by Atul Krishan Mitra, to name a few.

It is said that Sri Ram Krishna Paramhans (1836-1886) visited the Public Theatre on a number of occasions. And on one such occasion when Nati Binodini had performed as Nemai for *Chaitanya Leela* he had blessed her by saying "Let there be Chaitanya (enlightenment)". This is often quoted as being the legitimising point of the public stage, and the moments of inter-action between the Saint and the Sinner have become a 'frieze' in theatre history. But could this erase a century of the public theatre's lack of credibility or questionable location in Bengali cultural life or even in the lives of the fallen women? Was it enough to give public theatre a legitimate and justifiable place in Bengal's bourgeois cultural life? The whole project of redemption of the actress suppresses all references to the politics of *labour*.

For Binodini work was worship, and it denied the hard work, economic and physical hardship it involved. In fact she was denied any agency at all. She is still made to carry the entire burden of redemption for the women actresses of the performance industry. The rest of her life can be read as simply an entry into grace, all her troubles would be looked after by the Patit-paban (forgiver of sins) and thereafter life would be a domestic haven after her stormy days in theatre. But this was not so when she left theatre in just twelve years' time, with no one to even ask her to return. Her autobiography indicates a most disturbed mind, a body used, and a woman betrayed by theatre.

Tinocowridasi (1870-1917) was born in a red light district, with only her mother to care for her. Extremely talented, she could sing and dance and always wanted to be an actress, she moved from theatre to

theatre for higher pay scales *Star*, *Bina* and finally *Emerald* where she is said to have been patronised and kept by its owner and financier Gopal Das Seal. While at *Star* she replaced another actress Pramoda Sundari for the role of Lady Macbeth on her own merit, and is said to have excelled in the role. Her words about Girish Ghosh were: "Under his tutelage and kindness I who was illiterate, naive, having no sense of direction became an actress known to everyone".

As discussed earlier, the life of an actress was very uncertain. In our country the class, place and society from which they came did not permit them an independent will. Most often it was the *mother* or a *patron* who made the decisions. The temptations of the flesh trade or finding a patron were tremendous and very difficult to get out off, ultimately destroying the physical capacity of the woman. It was alarming to see how many actresses were already mistresses of some patron or the other, willingly or out of compulsion. Sometimes the patrons forced the actress to leave the stage and a premature end came to the acting career.

If a prostitute gave birth to a daughter, she just waited for her to grow and take up the trade or be a mistress and have a 'bagan-bari' (kept in a farm house). Tincowri too had the same problems with her mother. She relates a very interesting incident of how when she was just sixteen or seventeen, two men came to her house, wearing babu clothes, coloured rings on their fingers, and wearing an overpowering fragrance. They offered to pay her mother two hundred rupees plus what Tincowri was getting in the theatre plus an advance sum. All this just to keep her, and in lieu of the fact that she would have to give up the theatre. Tincowri narrates '... can a woman like my mother ever leave the temptations for so much money ...' These men threw lewd glances at her, and Tincowri relates how she felt like getting hold of them by the scruff of their neck and throwing them out. On her refusal to leave the theatre, her mother tried to persuade her but to no avail. As a result she beat Tincowri so hard, that the actress had fever for days. Sometimes she went without food for days but still did not give up the idea of joining the theatre.

There is also the incident of her not wanting to do the role of a widow in the play *Karametibai* and wear white clothes on stage. It created a furore in the theatre as no one could understand why. Girish was livid with rage, but she would not listen. Until someone took the trouble to find out that amongst the audience was the Babu who kept her, and how could she (who was wed to him, though not legally) not wear vermillion in her hair, and go on stage like a widow. The Babu was kind enough to oblige and leave, and only then did the show begin.

Sushilabala, Provadebi, Kusum Kumari, Tarasundari, Niroda Sundari, Manimala were all actresses of great repute during their times, but their old age was spent in misery. The once glamorous Kusum Kumari of Star Theatre was found to be begging at *Rangmahal Theatre* in 1945. Debnarain Gupta the author of the lives and times of many an actress, saw her with Saratchandra Chattopadhyay (manager) who addressed her as 'ma' and gave her some money and allowed her into the green room to collect more. Debnarain could not recognise her, so the manager said "Why she was the Marjina (of Ali Baba fame) of the Bengali stage!" Later the author imagines the actress in her dying moments saying "Chi Chi Etna Janjal" (Ugh, so much dirt). This was so prophetic. Little did she know it, when she had sung this song for Kshirodprasad Vidyavinod's *Alibaba* at the *Classic* in the year 1897.

Shantibala another actress blinded in her old age was found begging on the streets led by a boy. She was given Rupees five a month from *Rangmahal Theatre*. The wills left behind by some of these actresses show an amazing sense of charity rather than a desire to get even with the uncharitable world. Property and money was often willed to the poor, charitable institutions, hospitals, ashrams and the like. Perhaps another way of 'cleansing' themselves from their 'tainted' sinful lives.

B.C. Pal reviewed Tara Sundari's (1878-1948) acting in the *Hindu Review* of February 1913 saying that "... not merely in refinement and delicacy of their deportment on the stage, but equally also in the quality of their art some of our actresses could well hold their own in competition with the best representative of the English stage. Those who have seen the part of *Reziya* as it is played by Tarasundaree will bear out the truth of this statement. *Rezia* is one of the most complex characters met with, in any literature. Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth* comes very close to it. But even *Lady Macbeth* is a shade simpler than *Reziya*. And Tara's rendering of *Rezia* has been declared by competent critics who have seen the best European actresses to be as good an achievement as the best rendering of *Lady Macbeth* by the most capable English actresses . . ."

Tara Sundari, also a poetess, published one of her poems along with Binodini's poem in *Saurav* 1302 B.S. (*Sraban*) issue. Girish in the editorial says, he does not know whether he is accepted in the *Bhadrasamaj* or not, and he really does not care, but "... actors and actresses are like my sons and daughters. Their talents should not go unpublished. This is the purpose of my publishing these two poems".

Aparesh Mukherjee an actor was involved with her, he was already wed to a girl from a respectable Ganguly family, but the attraction to Tara was so fatal, that he wed her too, and had a son through her,

named Nirmal.

The last days of Tarasundari were spent in an ashram at Bhubaneshwar, since she had already got initiated like Binodini into the Ramakrishna sect. To some Babus who once made propositions to her she had said "we are hated by society. In our lives being 'bad' has a big role to play. We come to the theatre and give up the 'bad'. You are bhadrakok. You come here and give up some of your 'good'. We together collect the 'good' you leave behind, and you take back the 'bad' of our nature".

Golap Sundari (Sukumari Dutta's) life is another important case in illustration. She was one of the few who got married to a respectable young man called Gosthobihari Dutta. B.C.Pal in his book *Memories of My Life and Times* writes of how she got married under Act II of 1872, to a respectable co-actor, when a leading Brahmo Samaj person Babu Nagendranath Chatterjee officiated as Minister in their marriage. B.C.Pal thinks ". . . it did to some extent indicate a healthy line of evolution, and the very possibility of such unions somewhat removed the moral bias against our stage".

But it was not that smooth an affair, as Sukumari Dutta's husband abandoned her with a small daughter under sheer social pressure and fled to England where he later died. They were lampooned widely in a popular song:

A woman of pleasure I am, Sukumari,
Man and Woman, we act it out together,
Come watch us, ye people of the world.

The Brahmo Samaj in itself did much to campaign for widow re-marriage, against child marriage and kulinism and even attempted to rework gender roles within the Samaj itself. But surprisingly it did little to take up in any radical way the problem of destitute or abandoned women, or women, who turned to prostitution. Actresses therefore saw in theatre a way out of or a possible choice between, degrading prostitution and a means of reasonable, if somewhat uncertain income.

Sukumari Dutta never surrendered, she wrote a play *Apurba Sati* (1875) about a prostitute's daughter which was autobiographical and it was staged at the Great National on 23rd August 1875. She formed a women's company called The Hindoo Female Theatre (1883) and in the same year staged *Shumbha Sanhar* with an all women cast at the National Theatre. An advertisement in the *Statesman* closed the credits with a significant line: "Mrs Sukumari Dutt, Star of Native Stage.

Manager". But such cases were rare and there was inevitable reliance on 'father figures' from the theatre world for artistic and material advancement. Even Binodini's own contribution in making possible a theatre house owned by the theatre people themselves and not by businessmen, *Star Theatre*, has to be evaluated as against a stupendous effort the virtually rootless position of these actresses of the Public Theatres.

Sukumari Dutta's end was predictable. She was constantly attacked and humiliated by her peers and her last days not surprisingly were spent singing in the inner houses of the rich.

The play *Apurba Sati* has cross references to Sukumari's own life. An oppressive mother Haramoni sells her daughter due to sheer poverty. Interestingly it has many references in English which make the authorship suspect. It drags in the name of one Ashutosh Das (some say it was the pseudonym for Upendranath Das) who is said to have been her lover but this is not a proven fact.

The content analysis of *Sarat Sarojini* (1874) and *Surendra Binodini* (1875) both by Upendranath Das, indicated that literary critics of a later period appear to be dismissive about these works as the incidents depicted in the plays do not seem to satisfy their notion of 'nationalism' the mainstream ideology of our monolithic 'National' movement. But these plays are a telling comment on the 'chastity' issue in gender construction of the time.

Sarojini's 'Devi' like image (not with a sword though but with a pistol in hand!) should not make one think that the play is revolutionary in terms of gender issues, in spite of Upendranath Das' stress on women's education in both the plays, specially *Surendra Binodini* which is perhaps a better play in terms of construction and politically more radical in the sense that he depicts a prisoners' revolt in a colonial jail.

The plays appear quite conventional in their extolling the physical chastity (satitwa) of women. Bhubanmohini, the stepmother of Sharat who at a point says that satitwa is like a pot of glass, once broken nothing can make it one again, has to commit suicide at the end of the play as she has lost her own chastity. In spite of the obvious possibilities of losing that chastity Sarojini has to keep it in tact, to offer a chaste body to the hero, who was dead against any kind of love (pronoy) but finally has to give it some allowance for the sake of procreation! A similar story had to be devised by the playwright to keep Sukumari, the hero's sister keep her body chaste to offer it to a sub hero Benoy. In the play, the wretched wife of the villainish zamindar Matibabu, the womaniser,

beats her blue and black for being impertinent enough to make adverse comments on the husband's 'bad-deeds'; she (Bindu) has to die a ghastly instantaneous death after vomiting blood, simply at the sight of her husband dying. And for such a noble 'co-death' (Sahamaran). With the rather effeminate sub-hero Benoy she is highly praised as a *Sati* by the enlightened exponents of women's education.

The playwright Das (a close friend of Sibnath Sastri a Brahmo) with his peculiar combination of Brahmo-like nationalism and Madhusudan-like wantonness was courageous enough to arrange for Golapsundari's marriage as referred to earlier in the paper. Incidentally Golap came to be completely identified with the role of Sukumari that she played and henceforth was called Sukumari. And it is to be noted here that the apparent discrepancy between Das' representation of women in his plays and his efforts in real life in rescuing Golapsundari without bothering about her loss of 'chastity is a sign of the complexity of our 'modernity', perhaps also the state of things in the theatre culture of the period in question.

It is not important if *Apurba Sati* is mature enough to stand the test of time, it is an extremely significant text in its representation of the gender issue in terms of women educated or not, perceiving their own position; the very effectively delineated prostitute mother, Haramoni, giving us a clue to why the prostitutes had to choose this profession and the harrowing account of their life; the stratification within themselves; ambivalent attitudes of the mothers towards their daughters' emancipation; with scenes of the daughter Nalini, with her craving for education and a decent social life accusing her mother for ruining her love affair and selling her to a lecher; the inevitable tragedy (ending with suicides of both mother and daughter) implying in a way the limitation of a male-led emancipation movement in a male dominated society, the movement being one of the most significant aspects of our modernity. Nalini is declared the incomparable *Sati* (*apurba*) at the end of the play by her hapless, could-have-been saviour, Chandraketu (who incidentally also commits suicide to heighten the drama). The general extolling of 'Satitwa' is to be seen with contemporary favourable reviews about the plays. It reflected quite an important feature of the contemporary middle-class perception of the gender situation.

The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon the women the honour of a new social responsibility, that of spirituality and pureness of heart, while the man's domain was national gain, which could mean anything. Lives of women had to be contained so as

not to threaten basic social and family hierarchies. The actresses' invisibility vis a vis society was still something the male would prefer.

In plays based on social themes, patriarchy was reiterated. For example in Dinabandhu's *Biya Pagla Buro* and Michael's *Buro Shaliker Ghare Ron* both about old men, lusting for young women. A number of 'scandal' plays cropped up with young women in full command of old husbands almost a 'she devil' characters. Attempts to control the wife's sexuality by not letting her go to her parents' home, that is long absences from her marital home, were depicted in many social plays. 'Chastity' plays, 'Prostitutes' plays, Reform plays all had women at the centre stage.

The Bengal Theatre which first took in women actresses from the prostitute quarters also employed an intensive advertising campaign to make theatre a family entertainment. It did so by secluding special spaces for respectable woman viewers and by focusing on domestic dramas. The 'scandal' plays were among the first such ventures. For the first time then, the two poles could be contained within the same space and a large drama unfolded beyond the stage, as the respectable female gaze was turned on to its 'erotic' other. Also for the first time, prostitutes played wife and the prostitute, as well as the dangerous middle term—'fallen wife'.

For the wives in the audience, the situation would create complicated circuits of desire. There would be the horror of meeting the 'other' in the flesh, there would also be the sting of seeing it. A number of contemporary plays dealt with issues of the abandoned wife, with the errant husband who pursues an actress/mistress. The wife viewer would be simultaneously exposed to a dramatisation of her condition, and to its transcendence by a glamorous rival. The spectacle of her goodness is thus rendered infinitely more problematic by the simultaneous spectacle of a glorious alternative—both transgressively dissolved within the same unchaste woman's body. Visually therefore chastity was both problematised and continuously polluted even while it was formally celebrated.

The entire debate on actresses centres around the issues brought about by discussion in this paper (1) Did the actress women finally see sexual difference only as a celebration of male superiority and view themselves as victims of an unfair social order (2) Could they find ways of overcoming their disadvantages, in however limited a manner (3) Would it be appropriate to talk of an emerging feminine consciousness. By this is meant not feminine 'activism' but varying perceptions of how women perceive and experience the world.

What has perplexed historians is the sudden disappearance of such issues from the agenda of public debate towards the close of the nineteenth century. The overwhelming issues were now directly political ones—concerning politics of nationalism. The 'women's question' was situated and relegated to the inner domain of sovereignty, far removed from the arena of political context and the colonial state. As for the 'fallen' woman, the less said of her the better.