



'Roopmugdha—Binodini', *Roop o Rang*, 1st year, no. 18, 16 Falgun 1331

MY STORY  
and  
MY LIFE AS AN ACTRESS

Binodini Dasi

*Edited and translated by*  
RIMLI BHATTACHARYA

kali for women



1998

*My Story and My Life as an Actress*  
was first published by  
**Kali for Women**  
**B 1/8, Hauz Khas**  
**New Delhi 110 016**

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Typeset by Tulika Print Communication Services,  
35 A/1 (II floor), Shahpur Jat, New Delhi 110 049;  
and printed at Raj Press,  
R-3 Inderpuri, New Delhi

## Acknowledgements

This book is greatly indebted to the editors of the Bangla text of Binodini's selected works, Soumitra Chattopadhyay and Nirmalya Acharya, who first reprinted the texts in the journal *Ekshani* (1962-64) and have subsequently revised it in book form through 1987, this last edition in collaboration with the theatre historian, Shankar Bhattacharya. I am specially grateful to the late Nirmalya Acharya for his continued support and the gift of rare copies of theatre magazines. For his generosity with time and information my thanks to Samik Bandhopadhyay. And for encouragement and help at various stages on my general project on actresses and the Bengali theatre, my thanks to Sumanta Banerjee, Tara Bhattacharjee, Deb Kumar Basu, Sisir Das, Ajit Kumar Ghosh, Debnarayan Gupta, Amitava Ray, the late Subir Ray Chaudhuri, Pabitra Sarkar and Nabaneeta Deb Sen.

Bina Dasgupta and Ketaki Datta graciously shared their experiences in playing 'Nati Binodini' and conveyed to me some of the material exigencies of performance. Prativa Khanna's hospitality and her sharing with me of invaluable childhood memories of Binodini has enriched more than my research work.

The translation and research work was begun towards the end of my tenure as a Pool Officer with CSIR at Jawaharlal Nehru University and was supported later by an ICSSR fellowship, with an affiliation to Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. I am most grateful to Meenakshi Mukherjee and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya for agreeing to be project supervisors in these respective phases. Much of the research was conducted at Natya Shodh Sansthan, Calcutta, where I was always given prompt assistance with books, journals and photographs (and provided with much needed cups of tea). My thanks also to the library staff of the NMML and the Sahitya Akademi, Delhi, and the Baghbazar Reading Room, the Bangiya Sahitya Parshad and the National Library, Calcutta.

A British Council visitorship allowed me to avail of some of the materials in the India Office Library, London; and a Rockefeller Fellowship permitted me to work at the University of Chicago. I deeply regret that I will not be able to show to Professor A.K. Ramanujan the completed version of the translation he had read with such care and interest in the spring quarter of 1993.

I have been helped most willingly at the manuscript stage (through many years) by Nandini Bedi, Prasanta Bhattacharya, Lily

*Acknowledgements*

Ghosh, Swapan Ghosh, Priya Gopal, Siddhartha Gupta, Ranjana Mohan, Reena Mohan, Rekha Sen, Uttara Shahani, and Subir and Hema Shukla. I thank most specially Sujit Mukherjee for his detailed comments on the translation, and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan for critical editorial counsel. Among other debts of gratitude: to Bonani Bain who has taken care of my everyday life for the past few years and to S.K. Bakshi for his kindness in letting me use his computer one difficult summer. To friends and my parents who have borne the brunt of my Binodini years, I cannot express enough.

The book was initiated by Kali; my thanks to Urvashi Butalia for her support. Having recorded only a part of my many debts, I should add that all errors, misconceptions and otherwise critical lapses are entirely my own.

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## Shakuntala

*You must keep my word  
Nor darken my life, or,  
give me back  
the tryst of an other time.*

*In shadows of the bakul-tree  
a lonely forest where  
you held my hand, my love,  
and said, Come beloved,  
let me bind you  
in ties of love*

*Let us forget the cruel world  
two hearts close as one;  
let us play the two  
together,  
dreams of happiness.*

*The creeping vines  
balmy wind and flowers  
rose and malati, the encircling green,  
and all birds  
who make the air their home,  
our witnesses be.*

*Laughter of stars  
and moonbeams enclosed  
in a lover's kiss.  
In return take my body,  
My self,  
Life itself.*

*Here lies  
the bank where we lay  
the same flowers wild,  
But where  
the shining eyes,  
lips smiling,  
Why are bright eyes  
cast down this day?*

From the collection of verse, *Basana*, by Binodini Dasi

## Preface

Binodini Dasi's exceptional career as a professional actress encompassed twelve heady years (1874-86) of the public stage in Calcutta. More than a century later, she occupies an indisputable place in the cultural history of the city and in Bengali theatre for reasons that we may well have cause to dispute.

Since their publication, Binodini Dasi's story of her life, *Amar Katha (My Story, 1912)*, and her (incomplete) account of her career as *Amar Abhinetri Jiban (My Life as an Actress, 1924/25)*, have been used sometimes as material for social history and, more frequently, as footnotes to theatre history. The documentary value of Binodini Dasi's autobiography, *My Story*, was highlighted almost at its inception when her theatre-guru, Girishchandra Ghosh (1844-1912), titled his prefatory essay to the book: 'Srimati Binodini Dasi and the Bengali Theatre' In this essay (see Afterword), Girishchandra explains at length his own reluctance to record the history of the Bengali stage in the form of an autobiography; he did not think, however, that it would be possible to do so in any other form, considering the extent of his own involvement with the founding and shaping of the public theatre. Girishchandra then criticizes Binodini's book for its many defects, but finally, it is implied that the book will fill in the lacunae he himself was unable to fill. Subsequently, Binodini Dasi's autobiography and her own life became popular material for books as well as for dramatic productions of various kinds.

Despite the many productions that the autobiographical writings have engendered, the writings themselves have rarely been read as Binodini's own stories or as social texts. By this I seek to emphasise, that while Binodini Dasi was an exceptional woman, she was also one of the many girls/women who were being trained to perform in a novel medium, by a metropolitan intelligentsia seeking cultural identity under colonial rule. Her writings are a record of an unusually fine mind responding at multiple levels to the experiential world of the theatre. They offer unusual perspectives from which to evaluate the place of public theatre in the cultural history of a nation. From this point alone, they may inform our present endeavours to re-examine aspects of cultural identity against the backdrop of a nation in question. I have not sought here to frame Binodini's stories either by providing an *explication du texte* or by locating them exclusively within the theoretical terrain of women's autobiographies as a



branch of feminist studies. The writings seek, and will surely find, sustained engagements from more than one perspective.

In re-presenting Binodini Dasi in another language, for another audience, and in another time, one may take as a cue, her 'return to the stage' in writing, beginning perhaps with the question: What did the theatre mean to Binodini?

From both narratives emerges the story of a blood relationship—between her and the stage and her fellow workers. Reliving her theatre days in her writing, decades after she has quit the stage, Binodini is unable to sever these ties of blood. An actress's passion for the stage and her absolute commitment to her profession may claim, in turn, a reading that is situated in the history of her theatre world, and of that theatre in 'the world'. Therefore, these appendages to her own slim texts: an introduction, a rather lengthy afterword, extensive notes on the theatre of her time, and a string of appendices and an index.

This book has been designed with at least two kinds of readership in mind. The language of translation is English: as such, it will at least make Binodini's writings available to those who have no access to Bangla and/or no special knowledge of Bengali cultural history. On a more ambitious note, it may even stimulate translations and comparative studies of other such documents of women and/in performance in the country. When I had begun translating the autobiography, I also read a Hindi translation of the Marathi film actress, Hansa Wadkar's autobiography, *Sangtae Aika* (1966), and wished that she had been translated into Bangla, and Binodini into Marathi or Kannada . . . the possibilities are many.

Secondly, there has been a conscious decision in this book to foreground Binodini Dasi's identity as a stage actress. With an editor's unfair advantage, I have consistently embedded the actress's writing in her performance context, envisaging that the composite texts will also be of use in theatre studies.

Thus, the shorter poems and a longer narrative poem by Binodini have not been included in this volume, which offers only translations of the autobiographical narratives *My Story* and *My Life as an Actress*. For as untrammelled a reading as possible, the texts are left fairly undisturbed. Comprehensive sections about the material conditions of performance as well as some details about the productions mentioned by Binodini in her writings are to be found in the 'Notes on the Bengali Public Theatre'. These, together with the notes to individual sections (placed at the end of each section) are also intended to function as reference for readers working on regional theatre elsewhere in the country.

The Introduction delineates the continuum between actress and writer by providing an overview of two quite disparate histories. In the Preamble to 'A Bengallie Theatre' is outlined the entry and construction of the 'actress' on the public stage in Calcutta of the 1870s. The second part, 'Scripting a Life', is a venture into the quicksands of self-representation, shored by the many genealogies that the actress-writer shared and did not share with her contemporaries.

The Afterword offers a cartography of the passage from Binodini Dasi, the actress and writer, to 'Nati Binodini' as a public referent in Bengali cultural history. This history of representations includes, a little ironically perhaps, translations of two essays by Girishchandra on his pupil. One prefaced her excerpted autobiography serialised in the theatre magazine, and the other (mentioned earlier) was specifically written for Binodini's book.

In order to maintain the actual interrelation between specific performance contexts and broader currents in cultural and social history, I have taken recourse to a somewhat intricate system of cross-referencing. The method generally followed here has been to rely on a chronology based on first appearances: for example, the first time a play is mentioned, besides the information in the context itself, additional information is provided in the notes when necessary. The reader is subsequently referred to this note when the same play is first referred to in Binodini's texts.

The original Bangla titles first appear in transliteration, followed by an English equivalent in parenthesis, unless of course it is a proper noun. Subsequently, only the Bangla title is used. Since plays were often adapted from other literary genres (eg. novels or *kavyas*) or older performative traditions (eg. *javras*), the original author as well as the playwright are mentioned in some cases. The information on the plays includes a brief plot summary and production details. The date of publication is indicated in parenthesis immediately after the Bangla title and its English version. The date of production is provided separately in the notes. (The matter of dates in theatre history is, in general, very contentious. For example, although we know that Binodini Dasi passed away on 12 February 1941, many books and commemorative inscriptions have 1942. Despite every attempt at double checking, it is possible that some errors remain.) As a rule, dates are according to the Gregorian calendar, although in many cases the Bengali era, Bangiya Shatabdi or BS has been retained for those who may wish to refer directly to Bangla publications. BS 1307 would approximate to 1900, or about 593 years less than the Gregorian calendar.

The Index includes titles (in Bangla and English) of plays and literary works, names of important theatre personalities and others who figure in the texts. A theatre's Who's Who is provided as an appendix, to be consulted for quick reference. Other appendices/boxed material include chronological lists of Binodini Dasi's roles, her publications, and productions of 'Nati Binodini'. The photographs reproduced in this volume are mostly taken from the theatre magazines of the first decades of this century.

The notes and biographical details accompanying the translations in this text rely primarily on the definitive Bangla edition compiled and edited by Soumitra Chattopadhyay and Nirmalya Acharya, revised most recently in 1987 with Shankar Bhattacharya as co-editor. There are also references to the original articles published in the theatre journals in which Binodini wrote. Other sources are listed in the notes and in the Bibliography.

My experiments in translation will perhaps become apparent in the course of reading Binodini Dasi's works. However, they are duly chronicled for the interested reader (Appendix I). I had begun translating *Amar Katha* with no thought of a book in mind. I was intrigued by the language. And I wanted to reckon with the swirls and eddies and the often frightening undertow that pulled me in my own reading of Binodini's work. I desired to understand them as part of the history of theatre and its practitioners. And above all, as the life story of a pioneer, a modern working woman and an artist trying to understand and come to terms with her place in her world. To translate was to begin to understand.

The reader may justifiably demand from these translations some of the immediacy and the quite remarkable range of responses that the actress's autobiographical writings provoke in her own language.

*Calcutta, 1997*

## Introduction

## Binodini Dasi and the Public Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Bengal

### *Preamble to 'A Bengallie Theatre'*

In the annals of recorded theatre history the first public performance of a Bengali play (i.e. by a local group and for an audience which bought tickets) took place at a private residence on 7 December 1872. The company was called the National Theatre. However, it was only with the staging of Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Shormishtha* (1859) on 16 August 1873, that women began playing the female parts. Binodini Dasi who came to the theatre in 1874, although not one of the first four professional actresses, was therefore amongst the first generation of women recruits who were paid to perform in the theatre.<sup>1</sup>

The origins of the *sadbaron rangalay*, as the public theatre was called, may be traced to the impact of the theatrical activities of the English in Calcutta, the consequent setting up of a 'native stage' by the Bengali gentry and, finally, in the need to stage performances that better reflected the aspirations of an intelligentsia growing up under the auspices of English education. In Calcutta, as in Bombay and other places in India, plays had been staged by the British for their own amusement from the eighteenth century onwards, comprising for the most part versions of Shakespeare and sundry light pieces.<sup>2</sup> In the initial stages female roles were played by male impersonators; but when Mrs. Emma Bristow, wife of a wealthy senior merchant, started a theatre in her home, she appeared in her own productions in 1789. She was also the first to bring English actresses to Calcutta for the theatre.

By the nineteenth century a sizeable number of theatre houses had appeared on (and disappeared from) the Calcutta scene: the Calcutta Theatre or the New Playhouse (1775-1808); the short-lived Wheler Place Theatre (1797-98); the Athenaeum (1812-14); the Chowringhee Theatre (1813-39); the Dum-Dum Theatre (1817-24); the Baitoconnah (Baithak'khana) Theatre (1824); the Sans Souci (1839-49); the Opera House (1867); the Lyceum (18?) and Mrs Lewis's Theatre (later, the Theatre Royal) (1872-76) were among the better known ones. With few exceptions, participation and spectatorship in these theatres was confined to members of the ruling class. Meanwhile, one of the more immediate results of the introduction and spread of English education was evident in the productions of Shakespeare by Bengali schoolboys.

Although still contained within the parameters of select educational establishments, these performances marked a territorial cross-over of sorts.<sup>3</sup> Besides the dramatic and all too brief intervention by Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedeff, there was as yet no play staged in Bangla.

In 1795, a Russian linguist-entrepreneur, Gerasim Lebedeff (1749–1817) made a brave attempt to produce plays in Bangla for a 'native' audience, with women playing the female roles. Despite a promising start, his Bengally Theatre at Domtollah was burnt down and Lebedeff's involvement with a 'Bengallie theatre'<sup>4</sup> was cut short abruptly. Almost three decades went by before the production of another Bengali play received equal attention in the newspapers, not least because of a sensational performance by 16-year old Radhamoni, who belonged to a group of professional performers.<sup>5</sup> However, the next real spate of theatrical activity only took place from the eighteen-fifties onwards under the patronage of the gentry: the Paikpara Rajas; the Pathuriaghata Thakurs; the Jorasanko Thakurs (Tagores); and individuals such as Ramgopal Mullick and Kaliprasanna Sinha among others. *Sakher theater* or amateur theatre was entirely an all-male activity, initially experimenting with social issues, but for the most part dazzling the audience with brilliant costumes and ingenious sets. It was in one of these performances that Saratchandra Ghosh, who was subsequently to play a crucial role in the setting up of professional theatres and who figures prominently in Binodini's autobiography, made his debut as Shakuntala. He is said to have worn Rs 20,000 worth of jewellery on his person for the role. It was inevitable that theatre as it was practised by the gentry, comprising primarily a repertory of reworked classical plays or operatic pieces that the gentry staged by and for themselves, would be found restricting by those groups who wished to open up theatre for a larger audience. 'Theatre' had already cast a spell on the minds of a generation of young boys from the growing middle class.

Conceived as a 'national theatre', the project of a *sadharon rangalay* or a public theatre became the subject of much writing in the press. The general argument is represented in the following advertisement of a 'prospectus' published in the *Hindoo Patriot* of 11 February 1860:

But as these Amateur Theatres cannot be expected to be accessible and open to the public at large, the object in such cases being the entertainment of private friends, a public theatre affording refined intellectual amusements and instructive moral entertainments [sic], calculated to improve and raise the national character constructed upon artistical [sic] principles . . . is much to be wished for. Having

such an object in view, the projectors have designed to set on foot The Calcutta Public Theatre.

As the term '*sadharon rangalay*' suggests, the new theatre was to be set up in contrast, if not in actual opposition to the exclusive theatre clubs of the upper classes. Such a theatre was set up amidst the intense forming and break-up of groups, itself a prelude to the combination of the idealism and factionalism which was to characterise the history of public theatre in Bengal. The question of hiring women to play the female roles did not yet figure on the agenda but, when it did, it proved to be pivotal in charting the directions of Bengali theatre and the space assigned to the actress by the Bengali bourgeoisie. For, unlike the projectors mentioned above or the practitioners of amateur theatre, Binodini Dasi and the other girls or women who were brought into the theatre halls were *employed* for their labour. And thereby, they were inserted almost overnight into a cultural enterprise in whose 'projection' they had never 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 (since no *bhadramahila* could be found to perform with the *bhadralok*), the stage actress was already read as a 'fallen woman' and outside of the nineteenth-century projects being constructed for women.<sup>6</sup>

For an actress then, to turn narrator of theatre history was in every sense a perilous exercise—for herself, for the cast in her story and for her middle-class reader. The role of narrator that Binodini Dasi took upon herself decades after the first public theatre was set up posed for her contemporaries, as it poses for us, the question whether the story of her life was not in fact, in itself, theatre history. The question gains urgency from the many representations of her own life in contemporary cultural history.

### *The natyanuragi or theatre enthusiasts*

The history of Bengali theatre is defined and determined by the affiliations and aspirations of the type whom we might in a generic way call the aficionado from the upper and middle class or the *anuragi bhadrasantan*, more specifically the theatre aficionado or the *natyanuragi*. Manoranjan Bhattacharyya uses the terms enthusiasts and enthusers (*utsabi* and *utsabadata* respectively) to describe this group. This is significant in view of Bhattacharyya's critique of the public theatre: he is at pains to point out the 'middle-class' location of the theatre in Bengal and its distance from the 'masses' or common people (*janagon*).<sup>7</sup> In

this book, the term *natyanuragi* spans the range between producer, performer and consumer, for very often the roles overlapped. Binodini Dasi's career and her writing have necessarily to be read 'in terms of' the aesthetics and politics of this class of theatre enthusiasts.

Although the enthusiasts came from varied backgrounds, they were nearly always upper-caste Hindus and from the ranks of the newly educated, more derogatorily dubbed the *ejus*, i.e. they were young men who had at least a fair amount of exposure to Western education and were reasonably aware of, if not familiar with, the 'great works of English literature'.<sup>8</sup> The split in literary production on the lines of Hindu and Muslim, the effervescence in one in contrast to the other, in nineteenth-century Bangla literature was most apparent in the works staged on the proscenium theatre.<sup>9</sup> Representations of 'the Musalman' on stage were shaped as much by this absence as they were by the proliferation of puranic themes and the later bhakti plays, and clearly extended with disconcerting ease into perceptions of 'the Musalman' in real life, as is evident from Binodini's account of her theatre life. (*My Story*, p. 69; *My Life*, p. 141.)

Binodini's own writings and the notes and appendices in this book make clear the continuum of patrons-producers-consumers and why they cannot be perceived as discrete groups. There was, nevertheless, the existence of very real differences between the actress and other theatre people, and this is best explored in a profile of the patrons and producers of the public theatre. There were broadly three categories of gentefolk connected to the theatre: the patrons and producers of the first era of private theatre, comprising zamindars (absentee landlords for the most part) or rajas, petty princes and the like; the second group was composed of social and/or religious reformer figures who saw the theatre as the means to a specific social/religious cause; and the third group comprising youngsters from middle and upper-middle class families who, quite simply, were 'in love' with the theatre. Those whom history has recorded as the founding fathers of the professional stage or the public theatre came primarily from this last group. Binodini Dasi spent her working life with this group.

The predominance of one group over the others may be chronologised for purposes of an overview, if we keep in mind the actual overlap among all three. This is particularly true of the gentry and the intellectual/religious crusader figures who initiated joint projects of 'social' and 'Indian' plays. As mentioned in the preceding section, the first group (largely members of the comprador class) inspired partly by inter-house competition, promoted

theatre amongst other cultural activities,<sup>10</sup> approximately from the 1830s to the 1860s. This was theatre adapted from classical Sanskrit drama, produced lavishly and at a great expense, often on the occasion of various domestic pujas that formed part of the seasonal calendar of most wealthy families. These spectacle-oriented productions could fall under the rubric of 'private theatricals' with the attendant implications of class snobbery and one-upmanship, but they also exemplified many of the virtues of individual sponsorship.

Amateur theatre or 'babu-theatre' as it has been called more pejoratively, also made a distinct attempt to project a constructed 'Indian' cultural identity against the perceived superiority of British 'culture', (synonymous with 'civilisation') on the lines of 'Kalidasa, the Indian Shakespeare' and so on. It does not come to us as a surprise to find that this incipient nationalism was derived in part from the orientalist discourse of a pre-decadent, even pre-Islamic wonder that was India, exemplified in the much lauded performance of William Jones's *Sacountala*.<sup>11</sup> The search for class identity also meant a gradual shift and self-conscious distancing from existing forms of entertainment. Popular culture, largely a street culture, though not exclusively a people's culture<sup>12</sup> in the case of a growing metropolis such as Calcutta, comprised a diverse range of performance forms ranging from *sankirtan*, *akbdai*, *half-akbdai*, *kobir gan* to *jhumur* and *kbemta*.<sup>13</sup> By the second quarter of the eighteenth century there was a substantial shift in the nature of the intercourse between rural and urban or semi-urban forms alongside the ongoing reordering of classes and castes among the Bengali population of the city.

It is in this context that we have to situate the upper-class's search for a cultural identity which would serve the twin purposes of establishing them as representatives (and indeed makers) of the 'Indian' intelligentsia, or at least patrons of culture, and at the same time, clearly establish their distance from the 'vulgar' entertainment of the streets, which an earlier generation had patronised. Their productions of classical pieces which were intended to set up new or modern Indian aesthetic models, were also aimed at constructing a 'Hindu' identity.<sup>14</sup> Stories from the *Mahabharat* such as those of Nala-Damayanti or Savitri-Satyavan were produced by the zamindar families directly as a consequence of the trend to 'revive the classics'—to establish 'real' Hindu culture as opposed to the popular culture of the streets and of the jatra.

A third and more important factor that determined the specific composition of private theatricals was social reform, revolving around the women's question.<sup>15</sup> This last issue became a central

one for the intellectuals and reformers to address problems of cultural and later, of political identity. It was also grist for the first of the 'social dramas', the *samajik nataks*.

The content as well as the context of the production of plays from this intermediate period (1850s–60s) suggest that private theatre was an extension of a growing bourgeois public sphere where reformists, traditionalists and reactionaries crossed swords in meetings (*sabhas*),<sup>16</sup> newspapers, as well as in articles in the journals brought out by the different groups. The primary thrust of the reformist campaign as it was propagated on the stage, was towards the promotion of widow remarriage<sup>17</sup> and in a campaign against the *kulin* system of infinite polygamy whereby a *kulin* brahman made it his profession (literally his business) to marry as many girls of his own caste as he was capable of during his lifetime. Thus, of the two plays *Kulinkulasarbasya* (1854) and *Naba Natak* (1867), written by Ramnarayan Tarkaratna (1822–86), a teacher of Sanskrit at Fort William College, the former was specially commissioned by a zamindar, Kalichandra Raychaudhuri, while the latter won the first prize in a theme-oriented drama competition organised by the Jorasanko Tagore family. The production contexts of these plays explicitly written around a theme, offer interesting examples of a network being forged by liberal landlords and pandits in an attempt to publicise, through dramatic performance, the women's question.

Of the reform figures from this second category of the natyanuragis, and only two may be cited to indicate the range of the spectrum under consideration, Pandit Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820–91) and Keshubchandra Sen (1838–84) were not enthusiasts proper, but certainly believers in the *medium* of theatre.<sup>18</sup> The Brahma leader Keshubchandra Sen's involvement with theatre was in keeping with his practice of public singing of *kirtans* and his leanings towards Vaishnavism. Not only was Keshub Sen the director or instructor (*abhinoy shikshak*) of the play *Bidhaba Bibab* (Widow Remarriage) staged in 1859, but he also took part in a performance of the play.<sup>19</sup> Keshubchandra's participation in plays takes on an ironic note when viewed against the almost legendary puritanism that came to be associated with the Brahma movement, especially as it was directed against the public theatre. Brahmaism did much to campaign for and promote women's education, worked against child marriage and *kulinism*, and even attempted to rework gender roles within the Brahma Samaj itself as well as through the various reform organisations it spawned. However it did little to take up in any radical way the problem of destitute or abandoned women, or women who turned to

prostitution—from whose ranks were recruited most of the actresses for the public theatre.<sup>20</sup>

It is in this context of 'reform from within', i.e. where the position unlike that of Young Bengal, was not to rebel against all of the existing social structures, but rather to reform selectively and judiciously, as in Vidyasagar's use of the *shastras* to promote widow remarriage, that we have to place Vidyasagar's initial advocacy and subsequent retreat from the theatre. In 1873, the wealthy Saratchandra Ghosh founded the Bengal Theatre and put together a committee of illustrious individuals which included Madhusudan Dutt, Umeshchandra Dutt and Pandit Satyabrata Samashrami. Not surprisingly, it was Madhusudan, the poet-dramatist, who insisted on hiring women for his play *Shormishtha*. When his proposal was accepted and women were hired from the prostitute quarters, Vidyasagar resigned from the committee.<sup>21</sup> This was also the end of Vidyasagar's association with the stage, although he continued to help Madhusudan for the rest of the latter's crisis-ridden life.

Binodini Dasi's entry to the stage coincides with this crucial transition point in the cultural history of the city. She joined the theatre because her mother saw in her employment by the 'babus' a way out of their poverty. But the little girl herself was fascinated by the conversation about this 'novel form' that she overheard in the room of their tenant, the singer Gangabai. It was a leap, as she says, "from my child world of toy pots and pans, of spoons and ladles, right into the dance rooms of the National Theatre".

The third group of theatre aficionados comprising the middle-class 'lads' formed the bulwark of the early public theatre. The Baghbazar Amateur Theatre Club (1868–72) was in many respects the nucleus and forerunner of what was to become the National Theatre. The members included Nagendranath Bandhopadhyay, Girishchandra Ghosh, Radhamadhab Kar and Ardhendushekar Mustafi, all from fairly well-off families with upper-class connections. A remarkable number of this group were 'problem kids', i.e. those who were school drop-outs or had been asked to leave by the principal. More importantly, they had a long involvement with indigenous forms like *jatra*, *tarja*, *panchali*, *kobi-gan* and *kata-katha* and had formed amateur 'concert groups' before starting their dramatic clubs. Thus, the Baghbazar Amateur Concert had existed prior to the Baghbazar Amateur Theatre Club. They were in some sense, rebels or misfits of the new educational system which was primarily aimed at producing respectable clerical and administrative job holders.

There are obvious connections between their distaste for formal education in the established schools of the day—Hare School, Hindu School, Duff School—and their affinity for and even expertise in different performance forms, particularly indigenous forms, as they were being practised in mid-nineteenth century Calcutta. (Despite their 'unprofessional academic qualifications' Amritalal Basu, Ardhendushekhar Mustafi and Dharmadas Sur, all three taught at some time at the Anglo Vernacular or AV School in Shyambazar.<sup>22</sup>) A small section might actually comprise trained musicians and singers displaced from an earlier tradition of courtly patronage in pre-British Bengal. The gravitation towards amateur theatricals seems inevitable, given that they did not fully belong either to the group of upper-class intellectuals who could carry on literary or theological debates through meetings and journals and newspapers, nor had the professional qualifications (and class backing) for a white collar job. Many among them did not really aspire to an ordinary office job, nor were they trained to do the work of an artisan or manual labourer, although as the early history of the public theatre attests, they were willing to endure physical hardship for their beloved theatre. Theatre afforded a group of declassé intellectuals an access, however limited, to a public sphere. Binodini's career (1872–86) was played out on this platform; her autobiographical writings addressed to this group as well as to others beyond its immediate orbit, came several decades later.

### *Recruiting the actress*

When I saw before me the rows of shining lights, and the eager excited gaze of a thousand eyes, my entire body became bathed in sweat, my heart began to beat dreadfully, my legs were actually trembling and it seemed to me that the dazzling scene was clouding over before my eyes. Backstage, my teachers tried to reassure me. Along with fear, anxiety and excitement, a certain eagerness too appeared to overwhelm me. How shall I describe this feeling? For one, I was a little girl and then too, the daughter of poor people. I had never had occasion to perform or even appear before such a gathering. (*My Story*, p. 67)

There is more to Binodini's stage fright than the universal fear of any child making her debut: it is a trembling that arises out of the violent uprooting from a familiar, if despised environment, to the completely alien world of the proscenium stage. Framed by the optics of the theatre house is an unusually sensitive little girl who is eager to prove her worth, exposed to the licensed gaze of the multitude.

It is curious that until the advent of the girls, the female roles had invariably been played by men and less frequently than we might suppose, by boys.<sup>23</sup> While most Indian performative forms of dance/theatre have traditionally had men playing the women's roles, just as the Bengali jatra had boys, in the case of colonial theatre in Bengal, the male impersonators were *bhadralok*, whose traditional occupation had never been theatre or dance. However, earlier accounts of Jyotirindranath Tagore as a *nati* (in this instance, meaning the actress who introduces the play in the prologue of Sanskrit drama), as well as contemporary reviews, for example, those praising Ardhendushekhar Mustafi and Khetrāmohan Ganguly, suggest that the men acquitted themselves very well and were proud of their female impersonations.

Firstly, change in forms of representation required same-sex impersonation: Madhusudan stated that "clean-shaven gentlemen just would not do any more for [his] heroines." Secondly, despite impressive social reform movements, increasingly, seclusion of women itself became a marker of respectability. Correspondingly, the taint of money—or 'professionalism', in what was perceived as art or a nationalist enterprise, was held against those who came to the theatre simply to earn a living. Speaking of her years at the Bengal Theatre, Binodini notes that a good part of the rehearsals were held in the evenings because many of the performers were office-going people. There were also the amateur actors, either with inherited incomes or in high-ranking professions such as that of a doctor in government service. In contrast, in her account of how her mother decided to apprentice her to the stage, Binodini uses the phrase, *theaterey deya* which literally means, to give to the stage. For little girls, 'acting' was primarily a means of extra income, somewhat in the manner in which little boys today are 'given' to a petrol pump or garage to learn the trade while they take on the role of a dogsbody.

The vulnerability of woman becomes apparent in this context: almost every little girl who joined the theatre came from what were designated as *a-bhadra* ('dis-respectable') households, usually those of women abandoned by husbands or lovers, or widows without any source of support. The settlement and flourishing of comprador activity in the city created a demand for women; in addition, widows and destitute kulin women, as well as poor women from the lower classes flocked to Calcutta to make a living. Sudhir Chakroborty points out that "in 1853, prostitutes numbered 12,419; by 1867, the number had gone up to 30,000."<sup>24</sup> Obviously, the reasons were migration, destitution and the problem of cast off and thence outcast women.

The women who came to perform in the public theatre were already outcasts. As one of the actresses herself observed, they lived under the shadow of an accursed birth, a *janmashap* from which there was no escape. Standard biographies of actresses in Bengali texts invariably allude to the ubiquitous 'forbidden' or 'anonymous' quarters or 'a certain place'.<sup>25</sup> Lacking the identity of the patriarch that society recognised as the only identity, residential locality and single status were reason enough for the woman concerned to be identified as a prostitute. Even those who were not directly recruited from prostitute quarters were regarded as public women because they consented to appear and perform in public. When Binodini refers to herself as a *janmadukhini* or one who is wretched from birth, she is not only describing her unique condition, but speaking for many women in her position.

It will not be possible here to indicate the differences in the reception to women performers along coordinates of class and region, and along the intersections of the transactions triggered off in the maintenance of colonial rule or instituted by Western education. The reception was also determined by administrative and legal measures introduced in areas as diverse as education and military affairs,<sup>26</sup> and in the religious context of performers and their group affiliations. But the following paragraphs we hope, will allow us to trace in Binodini Dasi's life and works the mutually informing role of the actress and the theatre; the ambiguous construction of her sexuality in performance and in the perception of the actress as a sex object; and, most importantly, the reworking of traditional material in the person and the body of the actress.

It seems useful to begin with questions such as the following: Was there any definitive or even definable break in the reception of female performers? How dependent were the changes in performance context on its patron-consumers? Without making these the focal point of his analysis, Sadhan Guha offers a possible answer when he singles out 'English education' for introducing the moral question vis-a-vis performance. Guha suggests that one reason why there had been no outcry against Lebedeff's hiring of women from prostitute quarters for his play was that English education had not yet been introduced by the administration.<sup>27</sup> He attributes the prejudice against women performers therefore to the inculcation of 'puritan values' through English education. This argument requires to be supplemented by related questions such as: How would one explain the long period

of hiring and continuing use of English actresses for the English theatres in Calcutta and other cities and in the provinces? Is the determining factor the changes in the attitudes of the colonisers themselves? Certainly, there was a shift in the moral climate from the first quarter of the nineteenth century to the third, as may be seen in two reports. On 2 October 1835, the *Hindu Paper* (a fortnightly started by the alumni of the Hindu College) had spoken glowingly of Nabinchandra Bose's theatre:

These are native performances, by people entirely Hindus, after the English fashion, in the vernacular language of their country; and what elates us with joy, as it should do all the friends of Indian improvement, is, that the fair sex of Bengal are always seen on the stage, as the female parts are almost exclusively performed by Hindu women.<sup>28</sup>

This positive response was in marked contrast to some of the virulent sentiments expressed over the hiring of women for the public theatre in letters and newspaper articles throughout the century old history of the Bengali stage. Of particular concern was the oft-repeated fear that the women would corrupt young and impressionable school and college-going boys.<sup>29</sup> The spectrum of outraged response over the public appearance of women, included other targets when Jnanadanandini Debi's (1850-1941) emergence from *purdah* became a public event: "It is impossible to say which event excited more comment in contemporary society: the entrance of Satyendranath [Tagore] into the ICS [the Indian Civil Service] or his taking his wife out of *Purdah*."<sup>30</sup>

When Saratchandra Ghosh acquiesced to Madhusudan's wishes and brought in the first four professional women: Golap, Shyama, Jagattarini and Elokeshi, the dam burst. Primarily because of the novelty of the spectacle—of being able to watch women from 'anonymous' quarters perform a rich variety of roles in public—the theatre became one of the prime attractions of city life. And once women were considered an essential ingredient in the box office, there was a steady flow of young girls who saw in the theatre a way out of, or a possible choice between, degrading prostitution and a means of reasonable if uncertain income.

It is important to distinguish between this emergent group of theatre actresses who, in the first decades of the public theatre, were for most part first-generation,<sup>31</sup> and the existing professionalised class of *baijis* (used here in a generic sense for courtesan singer-dancers). Women singers in Bengal had earlier been *kirtanias*, *bhikharinis*, and singers of *khemta* (this last considered to be obscene by the emerging middle-class); they performed as



street entertainers as well as in inner courtyards and temple precincts which gave to their activities a familial or community setting. Or, they derived from a more courtly tradition of the *baiji* or *tawwaif* and were performers who were usually heard in exclusive enclaves by the wealthy.<sup>32</sup> The (future) actress might well have links with any of these occupational identities, but since she was usually recruited from the prostitute quarters, the terms prostitute-actress or *barangana-abhinetri* came to be used interchangeably. (One of the frequent charges against Girish Ghosh was that he 'ran his theatre with whores'.) Secondly, the performance skills of the *tawwaif* were part of a larger, more complex, but certainly more clearly defined code of interaction with other social groups. Finally, the *tawwaif* culture comprised a heterogeneous mix of cultural codes, specific to region, musical training and affiliation (*gharana*), and generational identity, whereas the actresses were almost invariably Bengali and Hindus, although some may have changed their names and kept their religious identity a secret for professional convenience.<sup>33</sup> There was little or no place for the earlier heterogeneity in the design and practice of the new craft as it was projected by the theatre enthusiasts in the era of the public theatre. The residues of these earlier affiliations (the actress Golapsundari for example, trained originally as a *kitanya*) persisting in the popular imagination, as it may have figured in the everyday life of the actress herself, require our minute attention.

One possible reason why *tawwaifs* never entered the public theatre in a big way was also the uncertain fortunes of a theatre company and the fixed salary of the actress. A successful *tawwaif* could earn much more from a single performance if her patron was wealthy enough. The actress was dependent on the occasional bonus, presentations and perhaps a few benefit performances to augment her monthly wages; the theatre provided at best, even for a first grade actress, a tenuous life-line.<sup>34</sup> Only in a few instances did an actress acquire enough skill as a singer-dancer to set herself up as an independent artist without having to depend on the stage for a livelihood.<sup>35</sup>

Binodini Dasi had an exceptional career by all accounts. She joined as Draupadi's handmaid with a one-line part in the play *Shatru-Sanbar*, but was unanimously chosen to play the heroine in the very next play, *Hemlata*. For most actresses, graduating from playing a *sakhi* or a handmaid to a *nayika* or a heroine came after years of bit roles. Many only specialised in type roles of the *jhi* (the maid); some even playing the part of a statue on stage. We are told that in productions of *Ravan Badh* (1881)

Binodini's senior colleague, the otherwise exuberant Khetramoni, stood still on stage dressed as a statue of Durga with eight arms and heavy make-up for over half an hour; she collapsed only after the performance.<sup>36</sup>

The constant feuding within and amongst companies and the lack of a stock company, meant that the fortunes of the theatre were in any case too fluctuating for any woman to be entirely self-supporting. This explains in part the necessity of a protector, an *ashroydata*. The related term, *theaterer babu* or X or Y's babu, referred to the men who patronised the theatre and who also had a liaison with one of the actresses or who was married to her according to the norms of *gandharva vivah*.<sup>37</sup> Binodini takes care not to mention by name the men from respectable and upper-class families that she had lived with: they are referred to as \_\_\_-babu or by a term of endearment. (This practice has been followed in writings about her as well.) She refers to herself as an *ashrita*, literally, one who is protected or sheltered. Apart from the fact that the term sounded less harsh than *rakshita* or 'kept', there was also the subtle difference that although a 'sheltered' woman, the actress who was an *ashrita*, also had a career of her own.

In contrast to the many instances of the English actress who became the manager or part owner of a company in mid-nineteenth century London,<sup>38</sup> there was little possibility of a Bengali stage actress writing her own play or owning a theatre house or financing productions, although there were to be exceptional women who actually took on many of these roles.<sup>39</sup> Closer to home, there was Esther Leach (1809-43) known as 'the Indian Siddons' who charmed the English theatre-goers in Calcutta in the first half of the nineteenth century. Her remarkable career makes apparent the asymmetry of gender roles in the Bengali theatre in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Mrs Leach's efforts to take over and run the Sans Souci Theatre and the success of her daughter Mrs Anderson (who also became a well-known actress) are well documented. On the question of financial control, the asymmetry is also apparent if we glance briefly at the Marathi stage around the same period. The many crucial differences between the two traditions make a straightforward comparison problematic. There was not 'a single mixed company', i.e. with members of both sexes till 1929 in Maharashtra and the tradition of the 'male *nayika*' variously referred to as the 'stree-party actor', continued to dominate the Marathi stage until after 1915. Despite this absence of the actress, it is of interest that

Marathi theatre companies were often owned and founded by women.<sup>40</sup>

In the Bengali public theatre there was an inevitable reliance on 'father figures' from the theatre world for artistic and material advancement. This explains in part, Girish Ghosh's reluctance to let Binodini have proprietorship of the Star Theatre and her mother and grandmother's immediate support of his argument. (*My Story*, p. 92) Binodini Dasi's own contribution in making possible a theatre house owned by the theatre people themselves and not by businessmen, has to be evaluated against the virtually rootless position of the actress of the public theatre in Calcutta. As she affirms in the chapter 'On Matters Relating to the Star Theatre': "I had sacrificed what I did *for my own sake*, no one had compelled me to do so". (emphasis mine) The events leading up to the building and naming of the Star Theatre, subsequently a landmark in the city and in the history of Bengali theatre, offer a paradigmatic tale of the precise place of the actress in visible monuments of cultural production.

The formal induction of prostitutes and/or professional singers and dancers to play the female roles which began with the staging of Michael Madhusudan's *Shormistha* had several crucial results. It effectively meant that most of the leading lights of the Bengali intelligentsia either disassociated themselves from the public stage, or at best, held an ambivalent attitude towards it. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94), novelist, essayist and perhaps the most influential intellectual of his time provides a typical example. His novels were adapted for the stage from as early as 1873 and became extremely popular, but the novelist himself continued to have great reservations about the public theatre.<sup>41</sup> Secondly, it meant that once socially prominent personalities abandoned the idea of theatre as a platform for doctrinal purposes or for espousing a reformist agenda around women's issues, it was taken over almost completely by the younger and decidedly more conservative set who willy nilly had to put 'entertainment' before 'education' on their programme in order to draw an audience.<sup>42</sup> The men who were thus addicted to the theatre were branded as *nats*—since they performed with and kept the company of prostitutes. It needed the 'redemptive presence' of the holy man, Ramakrishna, in a public theatre in 1884 before the theatre people themselves could self-consciously project the stage as a platform for moral reform.

If we agree that from its inception, Bengali theatre revolves around the two key notions (usually overlapping) of profession (*pesha*) and addiction (*nesha*), we could see how the two—

profession and addiction—work differently for the two sexes. At the same time, theatre was undoubtedly more than just a job, for while the majority of the girls came or were 'put on' the stage for sheer survival, they were equally attracted by the power of performance. The return to the theatre long after they have outworn their part as actresses has been repeatedly documented.<sup>43</sup> Binodini's own writings and whatever little we know of her subsequent life is a moving testament to the pull of the stage. The opening sections of *My Life as an Actress* speaks not only for her self-exiled self but for generations of women who were drawn to the profession despite and perhaps because of their outcaste status.<sup>44</sup>

[W]hy do I try and polish back to their original brightness the rusty memories of those old days? There is no answer . . . [w]henver I speak, I remember before anything else all those days which are still as sweet to me as honeyed dreams, the power and scent of whose intoxication I cannot yet forget, which will remain perhaps my closest companion to the last days of my life. Perhaps that is why the desire to speak of my life as an actress. . . .

What an addiction it is! As if the theatre beckons me from the midst of all other work. I look at all the new actors and actresses, educated, refined and elegant, so many new plays, the spectators, the applause, the commotion and the hubbub and the footlights. One scene follows another and the bell rings as the curtain drops—all this and so much more come back to my mind!

In the incomplete autobiographical account that we have in *My Life as an Actress*, Binodini has chosen to forget the deceptions and indignities she had suffered in this very theatre world. Unlike the bitter burden of *My Story*, here she truly "remember[s] before anything else all those days which are still as sweet to me as honeyed dreams, the power and scent of whose intoxication I cannot yet forget." In what we have of Binodini Dasi's writings, there is always the tension between the adventure of production and the immense range of her imaginative world on the one hand, and on the other, the burden of being a social outcast coupled with a deep hunger for recognition.

### Scripting a life

From the late 1960s onwards, editors of selected writings of Binodini Dasi have pointed out that she has been denied her fair share of recognition as a writer, especially as a poet, because she was an actress. ". . . [T]herefore she is not mentioned in standard histories of Bangla literature", argue the 1987 editors of *Amar*

**Publication history of Binodini Dasi's writings**

Letters on theatre in the *Bharatbashi*, BS 1292/1885.

Three poems in three issues of *Saurabh*, BS 1302/1895 (later included in *Basana*).

*Basana* (collection of 40 poems), Calcutta: BS1303/1896, Bharatbandhu Press.

*Kanak o Nalini* (narrative poems), Calcutta: BS 1312/1905, Kalika Press.

*Abhinetrir Atmakatha* (serialised autobiographical account) in two issues of *Natya-mandir*, Bhadra; Aswin-Kartik BS 1317/1910 (first version of the present text of *My Story* upto 'The National Theatre').

*Amar Katha*, Part I (privately published book), Calcutta: Great Eden Press, BS 1319/1912 (a second volume was planned).

*Binodini Katha ba Amar Katha*, Part I, Calcutta: Bengal Medical Library, BS 1320/1913 ('reprint' of above with four art plates and preface by Girishchandra).

*Amar Abhinetri Jiban*, sometimes called *Abhinetrir Atmakatha*, (incomplete serialised autobiographical account) in eleven issues of *Roop o Rang*, BS 1331-1332.

*Katha o Anyanya Rachana* (hereafter *AK*) in their introduction (p. vi). Ashutosh Bhattacharya makes a similar argument in his 1987 Introduction to the selected works of Binodini. In her own times, Binodini's poems did not merit a place in an otherwise fairly exhaustive anthology of women poets, *Banger Mahila Kobi* (1930), edited by Jogendranath Gupta.<sup>45</sup> Even after she was resurrected, of the numerous publications about her, only a few attempt to evaluate her writings. Binodini Dasi has yet to qualify as a writer in a standard history of Bengali literature; her autobiography is only mentioned in the Sahitya Akademi's *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature* (Vol. 1, 1987, p. 275).

Binodini Dasi's professional life as an actress comorises exactly twelve years in the long seventy-eight years of her life. Her writing life (in terms of publication) spanned at least three decades. The complex and largely missing accounts of her writings and their publication further problematise the project of constructing a chronological and edited version of her texts. Binodini Dasi's autobiography, in particular, comes to us bearing the weight of its own uneven chronology. Even to a reader who is unaware of the many histories which produced it, *My Story* reads like a palimpsest. It comprises in fact discontinuous, multiple texts written at

different times, published in pieces and rewritten and edited by the author herself in their various reincarnations.

The Preface, Dedication, and Letters to Mahashoy which comprise the first section of *My Story* were not written at the same time, or even in any linear chronology. The letters written to Girish Ghosh were evidently part of an actual exchange between Binodini and her guru. They find mention in his introduction to the first published version of her autobiography, serialised as *Abhinetrir Katha (An Actress's Story)* in the theatre journal *Natya-mandir*. In this introductory essay Girishchandra refers to *An Actress's Story* as extracts, suggesting the existence of other sections of what was to be later published as the autobiography, *My Story*. The preface that Girishchandra had written on request to this book was initially rejected by Binodini and subsequently inserted when the book was reprinted the following year, for reasons she herself cites in her revised preface.

Binodini clearly intended to write a second part to *My Story* which was to be about her life with her protector—in her own words, 'the happiest thirty-one years of my life'. The projected Part II was never written, or at least did not see the light of publication. In contrast, *My Life as an Actress*, serialised thirteen years later in another magazine, although terminated abruptly,<sup>46</sup> appears to be much more 'of a piece'.

In its final version as we have it, the autobiography is made up of seven sections. It is possible to read the first and the last sections as 'frames' to the story of her actress-life, but to do so would be to split Binodini's life into the 'personal' and the 'professional'. A similar split may be read into the titles to the two autobiographical texts: *My Story (Amar Katha)* and *My Life as an Actress (Amar Abhinetri Jiban)*. The prescriptive lines drawn between personal and professional have implications other than the separation of the private and the public. Girish Ghosh faults Binodini's lifestory for being too personal, for containing too many details about her self, and for being a bitter social critique; it is simply not professional enough, he says, and wishes it were more concerned with details of her performances. It is possible that Binodini also had in mind her guru's criticism when she wrote *My Life as an Actress* although we do not know what shape it may have finally taken, had it been continued. Yet if *My Story* is to be characterised by any one distinctive feature, it would be precisely by its resistance to such a split.

Undoubtedly, there are many differences in the birth and intention of the two texts. *My Story*, which has a more fractured history of composition, is indeed a *bedona gatha*—a story of per-

sonal pain, completed almost immediately after the death of her protector. *My Life as an Actress* originates from the conscious desire to recall and record an age gone by, and is addressed specifically to young(er) actresses. *My Story* is written in mixed registers, combining often stilted and uneven literary Bangla with complex and evocative sentences, interspersed with the sudden vivid flashes of dramatic incidents; while *My Life* is composed in a colloquial Bangla unmatched in its controlled flow.<sup>47</sup> The incomplete *My Life* is a conscious attempt to recapture 'the intoxication of those honeyed years', and it is mellower in tone whereas *My Story* remains intransigent to the lure of reminiscences and, almost extravagantly, lays bare the writer's pain. In addition, there were significant differences in the composition and production contexts of the magazines in which her autobiographical writings appeared.

Despite all these differences, the reader finds that in both texts, it is her life as an actress that continues to glow in Binodini's memory. Her actress self makes alive the pain and pleasure strung into every line of the prose.

The critic is always faced with the problem of negotiating a delicate balance between privileging, or simply situating within a larger tradition, any particular text. This is particularly true of what is now loosely defined as 'women's writing'. The strength of Binodini Dasi's writings emerges from a relational study between Binodini and contemporary bhadramahila writers and the various institutions, practices and beliefs that shaped their lives and their writings.<sup>48</sup> The very category then—'bhadramahila writing'—becomes also the object of our interrogation.

The fairly substantial output of women's published writings in Bangla that we have from the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, comprises articles in newspapers and journals, poems, pamphlets, tracts, novels, short stories, autobiographies and memoirs (including all those forms sometimes categorised as personal narratives), besides a surprising number of plays or dramatic pieces which were rarely performed.<sup>49</sup> Most of these are writings by bhadramahilas and while that label by itself cannot erase the differences of social locations, education and other affiliations of the writers, or suggest a commonality of purpose or target readership, Binodini's writing does stand on very different ground. Dubbed by the contemporary press as the 'Signora', and the 'Flower of the Native Stage', Binodini Dasi was a public figure with a professional career. And, or thus, she was not a bhadramahila. Also, she had very little formal education and

was considered to have acquired her learning from her years in the theatre.

By the time Binodini Dasi's work began to be published—for we do not know when she actually began writing—there was more than half a century of women's writing in print. According to Chitra Deb, the names of 194 writers who wrote between 1859–1910 have been found; in addition, there were at least another fifty women who wished to remain anonymous.<sup>50</sup> The *Sambad Prabbakar*, edited by the renowned poet Iswar Gupta (1831–33; 1836–39), published both prose and poetry by women. Later, periodicals such as the *Bamabodhini*, *Bangabandhu* and *Abalahandhu* were published exclusively for women. The *Bamabodhini Patrika*, brought out from 1863 onwards by the Brahmo Samaj, even had a special section, *Bamarachana bibhag*, meant for writings by women. An anthology of women's writings, *Bamarchanabali*, was compiled in 1872 from the contributions to these journals. Other journals from a later period which published women were *Prabashi*, *Bharatvarsha*, *Basumati*, *Bangasree*, *Bangalaksbmi*, *Uttara* as well as Bankimchandra's *Bangadarshan*.

Binodini Dasi's works are aligned in a peculiar trajectory vis-a-vis the contributions to most of these periodicals. The contributors were for the most part, daughters, wives and mothers of men from the urban propertied classes. The difference lies not in Binodini's own class origins but in the kind of readership she was addressing. This will be evident if we quickly pass in review the corpus of her published writing: *Saurabh*, the short-lived literary journal which published poems by Binodini and her famous contemporary Tarasundari Dasi (1879–1948), had been founded and edited by theatre people. Girishchandra's introductory note to the poems makes clear the extent of this venture: "I do not know if we have a place in civilised society, and I do not wish to know if we do. Because, from the earliest phase of my youth, having been committed to the upliftment of the stage, I have been the object of scorn of the masses. However that may be, in my eyes, actors and actresses are undoubtedly as sons and daughters to me. It is not my desire that their talents do not see the light of day. Accordingly, I have published the following two poems in the magazine." *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, as was the BS 1320 version of *My Story*. Most significantly, her prose writings were published not in any of the upper or middle class women's journals listed above, but in theatre magazines.

The construction of the bhadramahila identity in print,

comprising largely though not exclusively, of exhortatory and didactic literature was part of the reformist movement initiated by men, but one in which women participated in a significant measure. Recent studies on the 'wider communicative space of the print media' have focussed on 'the educational writings of the women reformers, the end-of-the-century women intelligentsia'<sup>51</sup> However, writing as a literary activity takes on a new direction with the proliferation of theatre magazines in the first decades of the century and is greatly shaped by some of the consumption patterns the latter catered to.<sup>52</sup> The *Natya-mandir*, the theatre journal in which Binodini's autobiography was first serialised, had an elaborate subscription plan and was targeted both at the theatre-going audience as well as those who would be curious about theatre gossip, but might not necessarily be regular theatre-goers.<sup>53</sup> The first editorial said that the journal wished to include pieces by actresses who were skilled in composition (*rachanakusbali abhinetri*). In reality, the journal became a public forum not so much *for* but *about* the actress. Most of the periodicals from this time appeared to be participating in a project of rehabilitation of the actress, and through her seeking to establish the legitimacy of theatre as an artistic, moral and educational 'temple' of society.

While actresses did write from time to time and the theatre magazines almost always carried their photographs, the bulk of the articles were by male writers who not infrequently wrote fictitious first-person women's lives, usually of *actress-like* figures. Serials such as 'Othello' (which ran for three years in the *Natya-mandir*, BS 1319–22?) or a novella such as Amarendranath Dutta's *Abhinetrir Roop* (which appeared in twelve instalments from BS 1317–20), were the mainstay of the journal.<sup>54</sup>

As part of their agenda to undertake historical surveys, the magazines often ran serialised lives of famous British stage actors. The latter included contemporaries as well as actors from earlier centuries. Binodini's *My Life as an Actress* was published alongside a serialised life of Edmund Kean entitled 'Abhineta Kean' or 'The Actor Kean'. The magazines also provided the usual fare of in-house scandal, allegations and accolades—the kind of exchanges that one might also expect between members or enthusiasts sharing a profession, characteristic of a sub-culture. Amongst other features, we may note the space (columns) reserved for foreign actresses, particularly screen idols, whose 'current' lives were usually written up in a chatty, almost intimate tone by a male correspondent.<sup>55</sup> The terms of reference used for a 'Miss Gladys Young' and those for the homegrown abhinetri would make for an interesting comparative study. Sarah Bernhardt

(1844–1923), for example, became a great favourite in the contemporary theatre magazines of the 1920s. Her death triggered off a flood of retrospectives, such as the one which appeared in *Nachghar* (34, 3 Magh BS 1331). Issue No. 7 of the same journal carried a life of Ellen Terry (4th year, 23 Ashar BS 1334) who is mentioned in Binodini's writings.

Binodini Dasi's lifestory was introduced most elaborately in the *Natya-mandir*. First came a photograph with the caption:

The well-known actress Srimati Binodini as 'Gopa'  
in the play, 'Buddhadeb'.

The beloved pupil of Natyacharya Srijukta Girish Ghosh  
*Natya-mandir*, Sraban BS 1317, No. 1.

This was followed by a notice of her forthcoming autobiography: "An exquisite account of her life by the above actress, written by herself in beautiful and melodious language of bhava, will be published in a serialised form in the 'Natya-mandir' from the Bhadra issue onwards."

The photograph and the announcement accompanying it thus becomes the pivot around which the magazine could launch a brave new world. However, '*An Actress's Autobiography*' in the *Natya-mandir* ran only for two issues, after which it was abruptly terminated.<sup>56</sup> Thirteen years later, a similar announcement was made in another popular theatre magazine *Roop o Rang* about her other autobiographical account (*My Life as an Actress*). The editorial essay had only fulsome praise for every aspect of her talents as an actress. The editors attest to Binodini's innovations in dress and make-up, suggesting that she kept herself informed about the art of make-up and costuming from 'English books on the theatre'. (*Roop o Rang*, 1st year, No. 11, BS 1331). But as Chattopadhyay and Acharya have noted in their Introduction, in this instance, too, her writing was discontinued (after eleven issues), again without any explanations offered. This time her writings had appeared alongside a stream of generic 'actress stories' or *abhinetri kabini*, variously subtitled, 'story', 'fiction based on real-life' and 'autobiography', so that the blurring between fact and fiction, the literary and the historical was quite complete. The actress's story was already being accessed in a different mode.

At the time Binodini wrote her autobiography, many of her male colleagues had already written and some others were to write their own reminiscences. They spoke frequently at public meetings and provided authoritative accounts of theatre history in memorial meetings and in published obituaries of their fellow

theatre workers.<sup>57</sup> Many of these public utterances were subsequently published in the journals of which they were often themselves founder-editors. As mentioned earlier, Girishchandra himself was reluctant to write an autobiography, but his writings, apart from his many plays and dramatizations of novels and poems, include essays which span a range of subjects: making up for the theatre, women's education, the relationship between religion and physics and so on. Most of his essays relating to the theatre are a complex mix of passionate involvement and dispassionate critique. There are also the more explicitly personal essays recording Girishchandra's own encounters with Ramakrishna and his spiritual experiences, many of which came out in the publications of the recently established Belur Muth.<sup>58</sup> Girishchandra was also lucky to have his own Ganesh, Abinashchandra Gangopadhyay: the latter not only took down the plays in dictation but has left behind one of the most authoritative biographies of the director-playwright.

Amongst other contemporaries of Binodini, Amrital Basu (1853–1929) was perhaps the most prolific writer as well as being the most engaging of stylists. Basu's essays move back and forth with great facility (and humour) from the theatre to other social centres of the metropolis, and indeed to other 'Bengali cultural centres' such as Kashi (Benaras). They reflect the writer's own ease and acceptance in social circles beyond those of the theatre world, his political thoughts, and the increasing connections of the theatre people themselves with the burgeoning Ramakrishna Mission. Similarly, the pioneer stage designer and manager, Dharmadas Sur's (1852–1910) memoirs do precisely that—memorialise his contributions to the stage. There is little sense of the persona of an outcast in these memoirs which were dictated at his deathbed and published posthumously around the same time as Binodini's, also in the *Natya-mandir*. In general, the writings by the men indicate a self-consciousness about the historical location of the public theatre and the theatre people's roles as part of a cultural vanguard. In the few instances that well-known actresses were published, the compositions included poems, musical notations and, in one quite exceptional instance, speeches on the occasion of Girishchandra's death.<sup>59</sup> From this outline of 'personal theatrical writings' and the preceding one of 'bhadramahila writing' may be roughly gleaned the exceptional location of Binodini Dasi's writings, or more properly, of a Binodini Dasi—writing.

An overwhelming number of features would suggest that Binodini Dasi's writings fall clearly into the stereotypes of the

'feminine'—the personal, the confessional, the lament and so on. Our attempt here would be to examine some of these categories against the grain of existing models and so reconstruct the writerly self of the actress.

At first sight, it is the similarity in the titles of the personal narratives of women that is striking: the preference for example, for '*katha*', which means story, narrative and word, or simply, 'about oneself', suggesting an informal discourse which is both confession and assertion. *Atmakatha*, *atmacharit* were favoured titles, but generally women chose *katha* and the first person possessive pronoun, *amar*, meaning 'my' or 'mine', as in the well-known Rassundari Dasi's (1809–1900) *Amar Jiban* (My Life) (1868–69), Saratkumari Deb's (1862–1941) *Amar Sansar* (My Family Life) (not dated) or Indira Debi Chaudhurani's (1863–1939) reminiscences of her childhood in *Amar Khata* (My Notebook) (not dated). When Binodini reworked the core of her theatre reminiscences entitled *Abhinetrir Katha* (An Actress's Story) into book form and published it after the death of her protector, she called it *Amar Katha* (My Story). In the second version of her book, there was greater emphasis on her identity—*Binodini's Story or My Story* (*Binodini Katha ba Amar Katha*). The change of titles from the generic to the personal is only one indicator in the shift from a commissioned/excerpted article in a theatre journal to the book she privately published.

Biographical literature or *charit-sahitya* had a fairly respectable history in Bengali literature and was largely modelled on Western classics, rather than on the tradition of the *nama* available from Persian and Arabic sources.<sup>60</sup> Amongst the foremost conventions of the *charit-sahitya* was the almost mandatory introduction through patrilineal genealogy (*pitri parichoy*) and the affiliations of caste or clan (*kula parichoy*). Binodini's autobiographical text stands out from those of her contemporaries, male and female, by virtue of the absent father who is never once invoked. Instead, as I have emphasised in the Afterword, the book is constructed almost around a series of the now absent men in her life, although it testifies to the warmth she felt for many women: her mother and grandmother, the kindly neighbour of her childhood, her first teacher, Gangabai, her senior colleague Raja (Rajkumari) among others.

Given the class and literary background of the theatre enthusiasts and the general class of bhadramahila writers, some questions that can be posed are: Is Binodini an aspirant in both disciplines of theatre and literature? To what extent, then, has

Binodini Dasi internalised norms of bhadramahila writing? What is the relationship between education, experience, performance and writing? Is there a flow or fit between the languages—actually spoken, of the plays, of available literary texts, of theatre journals?

In a study of working-class women's autobiographies, to the question, how are neo-writers going to express experiences unprecedented in discourse, Julia Swindells has argued persuasively that in writing "they take . . . the literary as moral" or "[T]he literary enters as the moral mediator", in a sense, as "a compensation for those areas of experience which are tainted".<sup>61</sup> Binodini would have been exposed to the stigmatisation of the actress as the fallen woman, the publicity built around the actress in whatever role—devotee, romantic heroine, a caricature of the 'modern miss'—and have faced at the same time, the actual working conditions of the female professional in the theatre. As I have said in the preceding section, there is also enough evidence to suggest that she was exposed to a wide range of printed material besides, of course, the varied literary pieces that she performed, and even internalised, as preparation for performance. Material enough to foment a singular sort of heady brew.

How then does the 'literary' work as it finally emerges as her text?

Binodini Dasi lacked formal education but not, perhaps, mentors. Also the theatre was new, not only to her, but even to those men who were then in the process of moulding it to something like a respectable art. Literacy and literary skills came in unexpected ways to nineteenth century women. Usually as part of the reformist agenda for women's education (*streeshiksha*) and usually within well-guarded parameters. What were the models that Binodini may have had access to? What place do they have in her writing? A familiarity with literary conventions is apparent in Binodini's writings, although she makes few explicit references to the range of her readings, as made, for instance, by Rassundari Dasi in her autobiography.

The sub-headings to the sections in *My Story*, (For example, 'From bud to leaf') suggest a knowledge of popular works such as Pramathanath Sharma's (pseudonym of Bhabanicharan Mukhopadhyay) *Naba'babu'bilas* (1825) and *Naba'bibi'bilas* (1830). Both these satirical (and didactic) texts are divided into sections entitled *ankur* (seed or germ), *pallab* (leaf), *kusum* (flower) and *phal* (fruit)—with a view to underlining the 'pro-

gress', as in the Hogarthian prints, of the rake (the babu) and the harlot (the bibi), respectively.<sup>62</sup> This 'organic' frame, reminiscent of the taxonomy of a play in the *Natyashastra*, acquires an erotic sub-text in Bhabanicharan's study of metropolitan manners and morals: 'fruition' signifies the fullness of moral corruption and is just short of imminent destruction. Binodini Dasi makes use of this convention in her account of her professional career as a performer, signposting in the process, the history of the public stage. She is thus mapping her career as it moved through stages of apprenticeship to full-fledged flights where she realised her potential as an actress. Significantly, the final chapters in *My Story* break off from this frame and have very different headings: viz. 'The Last Border' and 'A Few Last Words to Part I'.

Binodini's poems, including the long narrative (called an *akhyān kavya*) are written within fairly well-entrenched traditions. For example, the poems dedicated to the memory of her daughter form part of an existing tradition of memorial verses.<sup>63</sup> Again, the invocation to Saraswati, the goddess of learning (as Bharati) is part of contemporary practice in continuation of older traditions.<sup>64</sup>

It is probably in Binodini's definition of *gatha* that we find a singularly effective meld of available literary forms in order to represent an experience that the writer projects as being uniquely hers. *Gatha* in Bangla literature was a fairly popular genre in the nineteenth century and was used to refer to longish narrative in verse.<sup>65</sup> The most common forms were *prem-gatha* and *marmagatha* both expressing the subjectivity of romantic love. In *Kanak o Nalini*, Binodini had composed a *gatha-kavya* about unfulfilled love. However, the *shok-gatha* (memorial verse), also an approved literary genre, had a specific public dimension for the male composer. The act of actually reading it out before an assembled audience of worthies allowed for the identification and construction of middle-class intellectual groups and a pecking order within and between these groups.

The expression of grief followed a different trajectory in the case of women writers. Besides the formal inscription of memorial verses after the death of a near and dear one, many otherwise unknown women wrote about unexpected deaths in their family. As may be seen in the case of a relatively obscure contemporary work, the death of a husband invariably meant a sudden, even dramatic change in the material conditions of existence. *Amar Jiban* (My Life, BS 1317) by a Tinkari Dasi (not the well-known actress by the same name) is a slim book describing, in anguished and broken prose, the successive deaths of the author's little child,



mother-in-law and husband. *My Life*, like Binodini's autobiography was also published by the author, but Tinkari Dasi's non-metropolitan location is foregrounded in a simple post-script to her preface: 'Village—Shyampur'. Such autobiographical writing arising from the death of a near one signified much more than the loss of an individual—it was a lament for the writer's own life. At the same time, breaking into lament was itself the means by which an otherwise ordinary woman recorded her feelings in print and possibly shared these feelings with an extended readership.

The personal narrative emerging from this particular matrix was in some sense an attempt at recuperation. It involved giving birth to words, to be published in a text which was felt to have a material reality. It promised a transportation of feelings beyond one's limited sphere and at least, entertained aspirations of being cherished by others. Many otherwise conventional conceits, used by writers of both sexes, take on another life when the writer is a woman. We may consider here the fairly common reference to one's work as a *daughter*, as opposed to the more neutral 'child' (*santan*).<sup>66</sup> A woman writer (mother) is allowed to express the kind of hope for her book (daughter) that she may not on behalf of her real-life daughter. At the same time, the convention cannot be subverted completely. The mixed tone of apology and ambition in the prefaces reflects in some part, precisely the same feelings that must have been felt by a woman about a cherished daughter of marriageable age, vulnerable to the scorn of the world.<sup>67</sup>

Binodini consistently describes her 'story' as a *bedona-gatha*, a narrative of pain, thereby inscribing into her writings more than the topos of despair or melancholy (*bishad*) which has been seen as characteristic of Bengali women poets and indeed, of women's writing in general.<sup>68</sup> Binodini's daughter, for whom she had aspirations besides the usual one of marriage, i.e. for education, appears in her writing as 'that heavenly flower'—the *parijat*. Despite the few direct references to her, the dead daughter is present in the text not only as the loss which explains Binodini's grief, her aloneness and her loss of faith, but also as an indirect indictment of a social reality which proves incapable of sustaining the 'pure aspirations' epitomised in the little girl. Binodini had, after all, named her daughter after Kalidasa's quintessential innocent *nayika*, Shakuntala.

As an autobiography, *My Story*, is both brought into existence as well as brings to life, several deaths. Of these, the death of her daughter and her protector are perhaps the most bitterly

etched, and that of the young man who betrayed her the most dramatic, but the deaths of protector figures, of Girishchandra and Ramakrishna are also invoked with some desperation for promises not kept. Binodini deploys the elegiac and commemorative function of the *shok-gatha* to eulogise an almost divine protector (variously called her *bridoidebata*, *pranomoydebata*) in order to unravel to the reader the extent of her loss. She mourns him as a nurturing, caring and compassionate companion in the metaphor of the god-like-tree (*deb-taru*), granting to him a generally feminine role, almost that of a surrogate mother. Thus, in reworking the elegy (*shok-gatha*) into a *bedona-gatha*, Binodini is also introducing and thereby legitimising a narrative of personal pain.

A song of pain might too easily be dismissed as narcissism, the indulgence of a cloistered and claustrophobic consciousness, and the modern reader might well find the excess of the earlier chapters hard to bear.<sup>69</sup> However, for those interested in the contexts of literary production, the intertextual affiliations of *My Story* with a derived literary mode make more evident the serrated edges of the writer's social location and her memories. They intensify the sharp critiques and sense of betrayal that the autobiography is meant to memorialise. And in doing so *My Story* ultimately leaves behind the pale models of fictional biographies of 'actresses' serialised in the theatre magazines.

There is also another, more intriguing aspect to Binodini Dasi's repeatedly referring to her story as a 'narrative of pain': the autobiography is ridden with doubts about the author's ability to express her pain in ink. The two words 'ink' and 'paper' appear more frequently, especially in the preface, than it has been possible to translate into English. In these frequent, almost obsessive references to her lack of writing skill, Binodini moves beyond a formal imitation of literary etiquette. While Binodini questions the *worth* of her many talents as an actress—which included her skills in acting, hair-dressing, make-up and costume—she does not at any point deny or doubt her talent or her own brilliance as an actress. This extends to representations of herself as a child when she emphasises her high spirits, her extreme liveliness and a certain native intelligence which allowed her, she says, to soon outstrip the senior actresses.

In contrast, in the arena of writing there was the very real fear that she was stepping into territory traditionally reserved for male writers or for women writers who came from the *bhadramahila* class. (The anthologies of verse Binodini had earlier published were in some sense quite anonymous; they would have easily slipped into the extensive corpus of poetry composed and



published by women.) She was also violating the unspoken taboo of presenting to the public in print, her personal experience of the theatre world, different from the world of the *andarmahal* or the women's inner quarters. This was the first time that a woman was speaking of the 'inner story' of the public world of the theatre.

But the anxieties and fears of Binodini Dasi, the writer, stem from reasons other than those of trespassing beyond the boundaries of her gender and class. It is paradoxically, her very confidence about her acting prowess that makes her doubly anxious about her skills as a writer. The narrator of *My Story* reiterates her desire to *see* her pain in ink—in print—before her eyes. As one who has perfect mastery over the language of theatre or, in her own words, the control over *bhava* which allows her to affect a live audience, it is the invisible but judgmental reader that she now begins to fear.

From 1887 onwards Binodini lived within the confines of a bhadramahila's household, yet lacked the freedom or the social status enjoyed by some bhadramahilas of her time. Not being a legitimate wife, it was unlikely that she was also allowed to participate in the *andarmahal* activities. Starved of an audience as she had been for many decades after her exit from the stage, Binodini shifted the training of her theatre days into another medium which was both more personal as well as more public. Writing afforded Binodini Dasi a substitute for acting, or rather, she used prose in order to translate the expression of *bhava* manifested in acting into its expression in words. In this autobiographical narrative is the primary challenge of the move from performance on stage to expression in print.

### *The sympathetic reader*

Introducing Binodini to readers of the *Natya-mandir*, Girishchandra said in his essay: "Finally, in order to keep her unruly heart occupied in work, I requested her to write about her 'life on stage'. This she has accomplished. . ."

Binodini does not reveal to us the history of her writing self but *My Story*, like many autobiographical writings, offers stories of its own genesis. In the concluding chapter, 'A Few Last Words to Part I', she reveals to the reader the disjunctions between writing and publishing her book. Her own death-like illness and the long year of convalescence is followed by two losses, of her guru and of the man she had lived with for decades after she left the theatre. The chapter opens nevertheless, almost on a note

of quiet celebration: "At long last, my work had, tree-like, blossomed forth in all its fullness, and had stretched out its manifold branches into the unknown sky of my future."

The work is veined with connections between her experiences and the impulses that give birth to what her *hridayebata* had (affectionately?) referred to as "these mad black scrawls". Anticipating the indifference and scorn with which she expects her account to be read, Binodini herself refers to it in more disparaging terms, particularly towards the very end. Accordingly she seams her writing with the censure she knows it will provoke. The strategy is evident from the preface.

What need for a preface to this insignificant story? asks Binodini Dasi of herself and to her readers in a startling inversion of the conventions of preface writing. Even before she has allowed her readers to move into the narrative proper, she erases all connections between what she desired to write and their inscription.

She writes, says Binodini, because she is alone and has no one to share her burden of memories that consume her daily, no one to understand her feelings of worthlessness. She writes because she is unable to accept her isolation from the theatre world. She writes because she seeks, like another outstanding actress of her times, a *sabridoy pathak* or *pathika*—a sympathetic reader;<sup>70</sup> but she has at the back of her mind and even explicitly addresses a reader whom she assumes will be unsympathetic—one who will come to her text with curiosity but not compassion. The last lines of *My Story* reveal a brutal awareness of this fact, but the entire text shows that Binodini Dasi is prepared for attacks on herself on grounds of morality, and for a reception laced with contempt.

The immediate necessity to write is to let *Mabashoy* (the persona she constructed for Girish Ghosh as addressee) know her story, and *perhaps* to speak to some other woman: "The talented, the wise and the learned write in order to educate people, to do good to others. 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." (*My Story*, p. 107) The last phrase is a familiar enough refrain, and not only in theatre magazines. The admonitory note is often the chief defense of a male-authored erotic text, usually written in a female first-person confessional voice.<sup>71</sup> Such a note almost compels us to read a lifestory as 'a tract of repentance'. Therefore the need to juxtapose the ostensible warning with Binodini's record of her own crisis of faith. For above all, Binodini writes to record a crisis of faith that runs counter to every other contemporary record and against the very training that made her excel as an actress in *bhakti* roles.

And so the separation of the two groups of writers (between the talented, the wise and the learned, and an unfortunate woman such as herself or the many other unfortunates she sees before and after her) and the different reasons each group may have for writing are ultimately undercut. In effect, she only draws the first group closer into her circle of readers.

To speak is also to re-live and experience the presence of what is now lost: "I have said that by day and by night, my heart is set constantly on that lovable image. It is painful to speak of her; yet, it is only in speaking of her that I find my happiness. There is no other happiness in the heart of one who has lost a child."<sup>72</sup> 'Katha' or the immediate oral communication, emerges in unexpected ways. They constitute pleas for a hearing which rhythmically break the narration: "Mahashoy will you listen. . . ." or "Listen now to my . . ." or "If you will kindly listen. . ." They recall the reader from the theatre world Binodini appears to conjure up so effortlessly to the immediate, almost claustrophobic, grief being poured out by the writer. *My Story* is the search for a reader, a listener who will understand, although it is to her guru, Girishchandra Ghosh, that the pleas are ostensibly addressed. Binodini's story is therefore an understandable amalgam of an apologia and a defense, and the various pre-texts to the story proper, are part of a continuous and painstaking strategy to contextualise her own position, vis-a-vis the events in her life.

### *The raw material of life*

Even as a child, Binodini enjoys the company of others and revels in the excitement of travelling, of adventures and misadventures and of visitations from other worlds. To read her self-representation in writing as having been constructed primarily by a colonial grid is to ignore whole domains of experience, responses and internalisations. There is a sense of humour which sees through some of her own fears and anxieties and can laugh at some of the ridiculous situations brought about by her profession. The writer who refers earnestly to the 'luminaries' of nineteenth-century Calcutta who frequented the theatre is the very same who recalls with much humour, in both texts, the 'rare opportunity of a visit to Brindaban'. (*My Story*, p. 70; *My Life*, pp. 144-45) Curiously, in both the autobiographical pieces, despite the repeated reference to the worship of 'Gobinji', it is really the comic incident of 'feeding the *Brajbabis*', the satiric reference to the greedy monkeys, that is recounted, not any intimations of immortality. This is significant considering that Brindaban-Mathura comprised,

along with Puri and Dwarka, the sacred locale of Vaishnavism. Invariably, it is the spontaneous reaction of the curious or the adventure-seeking child that is privileged over any received response that she has internalised, either from the readings of the plays in which she has performed or from the English education that has been imparted to her in those informal sessions.

On the other hand, the death of her little brother and of the unfortunate youth Umichand are both recounted as harrowing tales, but with a clear-eyed attention to detail, recovered with strange power from the experiences of a horrified child or a young girl. It is the play of passions in liminal situations that is realised most powerfully in her writing. The promised appearance of an erstwhile lover while she is half-asleep or the appearance of her dead daughter's likeness before a relative occur in flashes within the longer passages of pure lament. Binodini clearly distinguishes herself as spectacle and her self as the thinking questioning subject. The latter position is still situated within certain paradigms of womanhood (*nari jati*); it is this she privileges in her analysis of her roles on stage.

Thus, the use of the epistolary frame is to initiate a relational mode primarily through interrogation. Beginning with a direct address to her guru, Girishchandra Ghosh, the interrogation continues to surface at unexpected moments throughout the autobiography: it allows for role creation and the projection of many selves. By approving of her uneven writing as indicative of the writer's spontaneity and sincerity, Girishchandra has set his seal on a reading that does not quite acknowledge the sophisticated construction of multiple personas in writing.

Binodini's intense consciousness of her writerly self illumines the murkiest and the most horrific of her passages—as in the extended dialogue she stages between the ashes from the funeral pyre and the woman bereft at the death of her hridaydebata. The ashes—of those consumed by the pain of their memories—ask her, almost tauntingly, "Has your consciousness (*cbaitanya*) not yet awakened?" They impress upon her her totally friendless condition and the inevitability of her fate. The long sentences of lament are outlined starkly by her awareness that her life is indeed the stuff of drama, although there are numerous disclaimers that she is unable to do justice to some of these remarkable events: "And now, if you still have patience enough, listen to the dramatic story of my life", she says early in *My Story* (p. 66) and later, after a particularly vivid description of the sudden death of the hapless Umichand, she says that only if she were a novelist could she have done justice to the incident (*My Story*, p. 74).

If the mastery of bhava is the motor of her writing, how is the resulting dramatization of self any different from conventional 'romantic expressiveness', which in its most facile manifestation is no more than posturing. In his study of 'the anti-theatrical prejudice' Jonas Barish has observed of Romantics such as Byron and Chateaubriand: "The craving to demonstrate individuality leads to a histrionic turning outward: the unique spirit collects spectators, wraps itself in picturesque costumes, executes magniloquent gestures."<sup>73</sup> In a more direct connection, Gayatri Spivak refers to the 'romantic narcissism' of Binodini 'communing with nature' by the banks of the Coochbehar river; but, as we discuss later, the narcissism is as much a conscious projection of the actress-writer's acting skills, as it is a product of her 'English education.'

Binodini's profession, her experiences as an actress, as well as the parts she plays provide her with several models. Significantly, it is in popular representations of Binodini (in anthologies, popular journalism or dramatised productions) rather than in her own that Swindell's observation is most operative, that the "sexual ideology inscribed in melodrama" . . . [where] "the heroine, the victim, the martyr are the only means of representing an experience unprecedented in discourse."<sup>74</sup> In contrast, her own writings cannot be 'fitted' within the melodramatic mode, although they share a common discourse. To the extent then, that the autobiography reveals a reworking of bhava and is therefore narcissistic, self-reflexive and dependent on self-conscious role-playing, the epithet 'nati' may be reinscribed into Binodini's identity as writer. Although, as we point out in the Afterword, Binodini herself never uses 'nati' to describe herself or her contemporaries.

The diversity and depth of her experiences and more importantly, her receptivity to this wealth, is borne out by the unruliness of the literary strands in her writings giving them a characteristic unevenness that only the overly zealous translator would wish to reform.

Consider, for example that Mughal miniature of the Lahore women frolicking in the nude in the waters of the Ravi (like *gopis* without a Krishna) and the subsequent one of the bathing tanks in 'Golap Bagh' with an imagined badshah smoking amber-scented tobacco as he delights in the frolics of his harem woman (in an imaginary scene) (*My Life*, p. 140). To this refracted vision, the reader might add a third perspective in a scene entirely imagined a third presence, that of the child-actress herself, having fun—playing in the water. And Binodini in old age printing all of this, many decades later, in her 'black scrawls'. This painterly

painterly rendering of the many patinas of images and imagination that make up memory pulls into question the 'artless remembering' suggested by other extended passages.

Then, that graphic, almost brisk sketch of the elephant ride: the storm, the high grass, the invisible tiger, the motionless elephant and the freezing rain; above all, the shivering little girl huddled on top of the howdah—distressed, yet relishing the high drama. In contrast, how much more conventional are her poems and their nature imagery: the flower, the bee, the moon have not only a well-worn symbolic intent, but are clearly inflected with a contemporary European romantic sensibility. Almost always, the return is to a 'woman's heart' or a *nari bridoy*.

An earlier and more elite model may be found in many passages from Bankimchandra's novels which valorise a generic *nari bridoy* and the sentiments that are perceived as being intrinsic to this generic woman's heart, as may be seen in the following narratorial comment in *Rajsingha*: "Zebunissa had understood that the Badshahzadi was also a woman, her heart was a woman's heart; a woman's heart that lacked love was like a river without water—containing only sand; or like a pond without water, containing only mud."<sup>75</sup> Undoubtedly, Binodini's language is formed to a great extent by such writings particularly when she describes 'characters' she excels in playing, as, for example, Bankimchandra's Ayesha (*My Story*, pp. 72–73). But the self-consciously 'high' literary style does not inevitably imply that it is the narrative mode which will bring in or determine the appropriate event it will contain. Often, the effect is one of subversion.

The writings are propelled by many contradictory desires, chief amongst which is that of an approximation in print of the dramatic techniques of self-representation that Binodini had internalised since childhood. In recent times, Jogen Choudhury's portrait of Binodini, strongly reminiscent of the many dark women painted by Rabindranath Tagore, foregrounds the actress's uncovered breasts and directs us to her gaze.<sup>76</sup> The actress's impassioned writing often takes recourse to rhetorical questions, while a mingling of registers and metaphors suggest an overwhelming tide of emotion which her black scrawls cannot quite contain. This is reinforced by recurring words of indictment which function clearly as anticipatory defence. Two instances may be placed here.

In Binodini's own writings, *patita* is the adjective as also the attribute used most frequently to refer to herself. Translating it into 'fallen woman' in English greatly diminishes the reverberations of this word as it is found elsewhere in the discourse of her times.

Other terms of self-reference in the third person, such as 'this unfortunate one' (*ei abbagini*) or 'this wretched one' (*ei hattho-bbagini*), are gender inflected and the invariable literary accompaniment of descriptions of women in fiction as well as other writing. (*Naroker keet*, literally 'vermin of hell' has a different resonance since it is an explicit comment on her sinfulness, whereas the earlier terms are essentially a comment on her wretchedness.) Patita is also the sometimes unwritten and often written synonym for all actresses of the public theatre.

Binodini uses another adjective to characterise her life (*jiban*), her life-story (*jibani*) and her self as a woman (*streetok*)—and that is 'khudro'. Literally, khudro means little or tiny, but it spans an entire range of the modesty topos and may variously mean insignificant, trivial, unimportant, inconsequential, humble and unworthy. The word may be found in the writings of her more established and socially acceptable male contemporaries, and even in the writings of bhadramahila who wrote many decades later.<sup>77</sup> In Binodini's case, convention is darkened by a sense of unworthiness and fear in presuming to write and present before Bengali readers her own story.

### *The language and locus of desire*

Part of the difficulty of any other than a redemptive reading of Binodini Dasi has been the explicit nature of some of the desires and dreams she has spoken of in her writings. Binodini dared to want too much: she wanted a full career, a committed (and monogamous) relationship with a man, material independence and security. In addition, she wanted her daughter to be educated, i.e. she also wanted social acceptance for her daughter and for herself. In this she, as well as many of her other female colleagues, came to see education as a marker of the social mobility denied in her profession as an actress. In this instance, material security is no more than a desire to be financially independent, a fact underlined by the actress in her account of the bitterness in the aftermath of the inauguration of the Star Theatre. The question of money could well have overwhelmed all other considerations given her fearful childhood of poverty, marked by her brother's death, the rude economic constraints of both her own and her little brother's marriage, the temporary madness of her mother, the experience of not having enough to eat or clothes to wear or gifts to buy even after she was earning from the stage. Despite Binodini's drawing the reader's attention to these material facts of her existence, they are often glossed over

and, in fact, erased from the productions we have of her life.

In juxtaposing this refrain of poverty with the sporadic laments on the 'maya-enmeshed' mind, as when Binodini speaks of being "trapped in the maya of theatre", we have to include a range of material exigencies which were categorised as worldly riches. This is not therefore a traditional metaphysics of renouncing maya<sup>78</sup> and its gendered attributes. Binodini's 'maya-enmeshed' mind finds its linguistic equivalent in evanescent and dissolving images of the quicksands, of deserts and wasteland, both in her narrative as well as in her poetry. One might say that in order to describe her 'self', the moral, emotional and physical landscapes of her condition are in the nature of 'a metaphorical naming'.<sup>79</sup>

A translator finds herself engaged, above all, with a language of intense desire; an individual wanting affection, admiration, indulgence, generosity and care. Binodini was never quite able to deny or negate that wanting, desiring self, although she felt she had exhausted this self at the time she finished writing her autobiography: "Hope, motivation, trust and excitement, a joyous and live imagination—they have all disowned me. At every moment I feel only the intense stings of pain. This is me—in the little shade of a cool banyan tree waiting on the edges of sansar for that time when eternal peace bringing death will look kindly upon me." In *My Story*, she casts herself predominantly as the woman who is fallen (*patita*), unfortunate (*abbagini*), despised and despicable (*ghrinita*), a sinner (*papi*) and a lowly woman (*adhama nari*), and repeatedly refers to herself as a prostitute (*barnari*).

But her passionate attachment to life, and the desire to express the range of that attachment in more than one language found fulfilment both in *My Story* as well as in *My Life as an Actress*, as it had on stage. This then was her religion, and the *manch* or the stage was for her, as it was to a great many other actresses, her dharma. The dharma which demanded repentance and a self image as a patita she can never completely accept, and so she falls into guilt as one who *lacks* belief.

The continuously evolving nature of Binodini Dasi's identity as actress-writer may be seen from the introductory notes to her writings and indeed from the glimpses of her own writing that we have excerpted thus far. It is not quite the case that Binodini Dasi completely faded out from public memory after her exit from the stage. Certainly she did not wish to. This is evident from the care that went into the production of the two editions of her

autobiography: for example, the design of angels riding clouds and little cherubs at the end of each chapter and the attention lavished on the photographs (a portfolio of four art plates) in the second edition of *My Story*, BS 1320. The introductory photograph shows her with a bouquet of flowers and a blouse with mutton sleeves, like any other contemporary bhadramahila. In her book, Binodini presents herself as a bhadramahila writing.

Yet, this did not mean a denial of her actress life. The gatha, *Kanak o Nalini* (BS 1312) was subtitled: 'Presented by Srimati Binodini Dasi the ex-actress of the National and the Star Theatres', while the subtitles to both editions of the autobiography read: 'Presented by the ex-actress of the Bengal, the Great National, the National and the Star Theatre, Srimati Binodini Dasi'. (The book must have sold very well for it to have been published by the well-known Bengal Medical Library in its second version the following year.)

One cannot help noting the deliberate contrasts between form and content and the contradictions in Binodini presenting herself as actress-bhadramahila writer: both as the brilliant actress as well as the wretched fallen woman. The question of Binodini Dasi's identity embodies, to some extent, the range of reception to the new form and the new conventions of representation—the novelty of theatre. As Binodini's own elaborations on her roles reveal, the metropolitan theatre, that most modern of dramatic representations in colonial India, paradoxically, came to house the most conservative statements about women.

## NOTES

1. There is some controversy about whether they were four or five women in the first group of recruits. The first four actresses were certainly Golap (Sukumari Dutta), Elokeshi, Shyama and Jagattarani.
2. The usual repertoire ranged from Shakespeare, Congreve, Sheridan and Goldsmith to lesser known authors of farces and musical pieces with titles such as *The Broken Sword*, *The Lying Valet*, *The Handsome Husband*, *The Romp*, and so on. See Amal Mitra, 'Edeshe biletī rangaloy' in *Sbatabarshe Natyashala*, Ashutosh Bhattacharya and Ajit Kumar Ghosh, eds. (Calcutta: Jatiya Sahitya Parishad, 1973), pp. 87–121.
3. In the words of the advertisement, 'the first native gentleman' to perform was a student, Baishnabcharan Addho, at the Sans Souci on 17 August 1848. Not surprisingly, he played Othello. Shakespeare was also staged by the students of the Oriental Theatre from 1853–57.
4. Lebedeff translated the piece into Bangla from English with the help of his Bengali teacher, Golaknath Das. In the original, the play had been set in Spain; the advertisement announced that the play was 'entirely Bengalese'.
5. This was an extravagant and successful spectacle of *Bidya-Sundar* under the sponsorship of Nabinchandra Basu which took place in 1835 at the short-lived Shyambazar Manch. Approximately 300,000 rupees were spent for this performance.
6. See Sumit Sarkar, 'The Women's Question in Nineteenth Century Bengal' in *A Critique of Colonial India* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1983).
7. See for example, 'Janagon o Theater', *Natya Akademi Patrika*, No.2, Calcutta, 1992, pp. 142–43. Girishchandra also uses 'natyashilpi' or theatre artist of Dharmadas Sur in his preface to Sur's *Atmajibani*, probably distinguishing him from a mere aficionado.
8. The relationship between English education, English literature and the Bengali public theatre is yet to be studied in detail but, clearly, the new education also opened up western models other than English. Jyotirindranath Tagore translated and adapted Molière into Bangla; Girishchandra Ghosh dramatised Nabinchandra Sen's *Palashir Juddho* (1875–76) which was influenced by Byron's work; and Madhusudan's sustained study and use of European rather than English models was part of a conscious agenda to 'embellish [ . . . ] the tongue of my father [sic]'. Letter to Gour Das Bysack, dated 18th August, 1849. Cited by Jogindranath Basu in *Michael Madhusudan Duttar Jiban-Charit* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Press Depository, 1893), p. 155.
9. Muhammad Majir Uddin, *Bangla Nataka Muslim Sadhana* (Rajshahi: North Bengal Publishers, 1970).
10. As Binoy Ghosh points out, their forefathers had lavished vast sums in ostentatious ceremonies—of weddings, births, deaths. With the advent of theatricals, an evening's entertainment might be staged

instead of the traditional jatra on a social occasion, such as a wedding or a birthday or the *annaprasan* ceremony of a child or during the week-long Durga puja festivities. The practice was to continue in later times when professional companies were sometimes hired for an evening's performance in the city (eg. by the No. 5 Jorasanko Thakur family) or in the provinces.

11. William Jones's translation of Kalidasa's play into English (via Latin) was published in 1789.
12. As early as 1919, Sushil Kumar De distinguished between 'popular' versus 'people's' entertainment in his study of nineteenth century Bengali literature. He observed that while the performative forms mentioned in the footnote below, were indeed the new forms of urban entertainment, they were still presented *within established forms* including the literary conventions of Vaishnav poetry. The content was often stripped of metaphysical subtleties and presented in a manner intended to appeal to the immediate audience which comprised both the *nouveau riche* babus of the eighteenth century as well the 'general public'. In De's words, 'Kabi-poetry was still concerned with a given repertoire of conventional poetry, but not with the loves or lives of the people' (emphasis added). *Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century: 1757-1857* (1919) (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1962), p. 288.
13. Kobi-poetry (1760-1860) included *Kobi-gan* (extempore songs) *akhdai* (meant for the drawing room); the hybrid *half-akhdai*; and, *kheud* (erotic songs). *Ibid.*, p. 273ff. For a general account of 'babu culture' and 'street culture' see essays in *Calcutta: The Living City, Vol. 1: The Past*, Sukanta Chaudhuri, ed. (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990). More detailed accounts are to be found in Sukumar Sen's *Bangla Sahityer Itihās*, Vol. 2 (1940) (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1991), pp. 515-20.
14. The theatre started by Prasanna Kumar Thakur (of the Pathuriaghata Thakur family) in the premises of his own home in 1833 was called the 'Hindu Theatre.' As is evident, the term Hindu itself is undergoing a process of continuous construction. Entire histories are encapsulated between the name of this private theatre in the 1830s and the 'Hindu Revivalism' of the bhakti-phase on the public stage half a century later.
15. The centrality of the women's question was evident not only in the more explicit discourse of reform—in popular discourse and in legislation—but it also became the major concern of Bangla literature through its exploration and depiction of romantic/conjugal love.
16. The mushrooming of sabhas or societies and organisations, evident from the early decades of the nineteenth century peaked during the middle decades: for example, Dharma Sabha (1830), Patinaddhar Sabha (1851), Hindu Hitaisini Samaj (1865) and the Brahma Bama Hitaisini Sabha (1871). *Hitb* (good or welfare) is probably the single most commonly used word of reformist discourse.

17. The Widow Remarriage Act had been passed in Bengal at the initiative of Vidyasagar in 1856. 'Women's issues', especially those centring around widow remarriage and child marriage were favourite topics for drama in different parts of the country. In 1857 we have Guniram Barua's *Ramnavami*, an Assamese play on this theme; a few decades later there came *Balvidhava Santap Natak* (1883) in Hindi (anon.), and *Kanyavikraya* (1887) by Dhareshvara S. Narnappa in Kannada against child marriage. There were many counter plays as well, such as the poet Harishchandra Mitra's farces against widow remarriage, *Maeo Dhorbey ke?* and *Shubhashya Shighran* (1862).
18. Pandit Vidyasagar was one of the 'Adjudicators' of the play-writing competition on social themes organised by the Jorasanko Theatre. We are told that he came to see practically every performance of *Bidhaha Bibah Natak* as well as Tarkaratna's *Kulinkulsarvasya* (Kiron Raha, *Kolkata Theater*, p. 37). Vidyasagar also translated into Bangla Kalidasa's *Shakuntalam* and Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* (as *Bhrantibilas*) in 1854 and 1869 respectively, although the translation of the Sanskrit play was probably in the interest of Bangla prose, rather than for actual production.
19. *Bidhaha Bibah Natak* (1856) was written by Umeshchandra Mitra, prominent member of the Bhavanipur Brahma Samaj and close associate of Vidyasagar. The list of actors (for, of course, no woman could take part in this production) comprised respectable personalities such as the editor of the *Indian Mirror*, Akhshoychandra Majumdar, Keshub's own brother Krishnachandra Sen, and his class friend, Biharilal Chattopadhyay who played the role of the heroine, Sulochana.
20. Public appearances of (and speeches by) Brahma women were encouraged by the leaders of the movement, but they took place sporadically and in relatively 'protected' situations. Usha Chakraborty, *Condition of Bengali Women Around the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Calcutta: Firma KL Mukhopadhyay, 1963), pp. 100ff. Manoranjan Bhattacharya holds: "The excessively Christian 'touch-me-not' attitude of the Brahmohsamaj alienated the Samaj from popular pulse of Bengal." ('Janogon o theater', p. 82) For the mixed reception of theatre and theatre people by Brahmohs in nineteenth-century Dhaka see also Muntasir Mamoon, *Unish Shatake Dhakar Theater* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, 1979).
21. Various reasons have been offered for Vidyasagar's decision. For example, Sadhan Guha holds that Vidyasagar was afraid ("quite rightly, as it turned out") that the presence of the prostitute-actress would attract many of those [men] who would see the theatre only as yet another brothel. 'Ghath Pratighatmoy Bangla Manche Mahila Shilpi: Ekti Antadrishti' in a special issue of *Group Theatre on Bengali stage actresses* (Vol. 10, No. 1, Aug-Oct 1987). See also Ajit Kumar Ghosh in his essay on 'Bangla natak, rangamanch o

- Iswarchandra Vidyasagar', *Natya Akademi Patrika*, No. 2, 1992, pp. 66-87.
22. Radharaman Mitra, *Kolkata-Darpan* (1980) (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1993), pp. 302-03.
  23. Many of the minor roles were performed by young boys hired for the purpose, but as Amritalal Basu, the actor-director himself confessed, they were generally found to be indisciplined and disinterested, in sharp contrast to the actresses. Rimli Bhattacharya, 'Public Women: Early Actresses of the Bengali Stage—Role and Reality' (henceforth 'Public Women') in *The Calcutta Psyche*, Geeti Sen, ed., *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 17, Nos. 3-4, Winter 1990-1991 p. 165, note 8.
  24. Sudhir Chakraborty, 'Ganer Kolkata', *Desh Binodon*, 1989, p. 91.
  25. Apareschandra Mukhopadhyay, *Rangalaye Trish Batsar*, Swapan Mazumdar, ed. (Calcutta, 1979), p. 16.
  26. Sumanta Banerjee, 'Prostitution in nineteenth-century Bengal through the eyes of the colonizer and colonized' (unpublished ms, 1993) and 'The "Beshya" and the "Babu": Prostitute and her Clientele in 19th century Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 45, Nov 6, 1993.
  27. Sadhan Guha, op. cit.
  28. The performance was much praised in the *Hindoo Pioneer* and attacked in *The Englishman and the Military Chronicle*.
  29. For reports of anti-theatrical diatribes over a period of time see 'Rangalaye Barangana' by Jogendranath Bandopadhyay in *Aryudarsan*, Bhadra BS 1284, pp. 226-31 and 'Rangamanch—shiksha-mandir', *Rangamanch*, Aswin-Kartik BS 1317, pp. 125-26.
  30. Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal, *The Bengali Press and Literary Writing (1818-1831)* (Dhaka University Press Ltd., 1977), p. 67; also Chitra Deb, *Antahpurur Atmakatha* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1981), pp. 24-27.
  31. Nineteenth-century England also had numerous 'theatrical families' or stage families who 'intermarried and raised children for the stage.' Consequently, actresses who were thus 'born into the profession' usually kept a distance from those who chose it as a career. See, Christopher Kent, 'Image and Reality: The Actress and Society' in *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, Martha Vicinus, ed. (Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1980), p. 96.
  32. *Tawwafs* from various cities of Northern India, Agra, Delhi, Lucknow and Benaras have traditionally flocked to the pre-British Muslim courts in Bengal, through the days of John Company upto the present times. 'Nautch girls' or baijis became the rage in the babu culture of eighteenth-century Calcutta and amongst the landed gentry elsewhere in Bengal. See Somenath Chakrovorty, *Kolkatar Baijibilas* (Calcutta: Bookland, 1991).
  33. Suggested also by Muhamynad Majir Uddin, *Bangla Nataka Muslim Sadhana*, p. 18.
  34. Spectator-patrons were often invited to present gifts after the

- performance as token of their appreciation of a particular actor or actresses. Such gifts might range from a gold necklace to a modest cash prize or a medal. The public presentation of prizes was probably a carry-over of courtly practices.
35. The case of Jadumoni, a contemporary of Bindodini, who became a court singer, is quite exceptional. In the following generation there was Manoroma or 'Kaptan Mona' (born 1896) who learnt *khayal*, *tappa* and *thumri* and periodically left the theatre to freelance as a *mujra* performer. Debnarayan Gupta, *Banglar Nat-Nati*, Vol. 2 (Calcutta: Sahityalok, 1990), pp. 242-47.
  36. Ajit Kumar Ghosh, *Bangla Natyabhinayer Itibas* (Calcutta: West Bengal State Book Board, 1985), p. 195.
  37. The prostitute's regular customer is also referred to as her 'babu'. 'Protector' was also the term used for many of the courtesan-actresses of the Second Empire in France. See also, Cornelia Otis-Skinner, *Madame Sarah: Sarah Bernhardt*, (1967) (New York: Paragon Publishers, 1988), pp. 36, 48.
  38. Christopher Kent, op. cit., pp. 104-05.
  39. In sharp contrast is the fairly substantial number of plays written and published by women during the same period. Sukumari Dutta (1852-1890) wrote and produced a play for her own benefit performance at a time of financial crisis (1875). She was also part of the Hindoo Female Theatre, an all-woman's company which performed in the 1880s and later tried unsuccessfully to run an acting school. Only a few actresses were allowed to be teachers or acknowledged as such. Tarasundari Dasi's (1879-1948) teaching skills are acknowledged even today; in her later years she also financed many productions. Niharbala (1898-1954) who was one of most versatile singer-dancer-actresses of the stage, choreographed dance sequences in many plays and trained several dancers. (Debnarayan Gupta, op. cit., p. 124.) Most recently, Tripti Mitra (1925-89), opened her own drama school, Arabdha, in 1983.
  40. Neera Adarkar, 'In Search of Women in History of Marathi Theatre, 1843 to 1933', *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 26, 1991.
  41. Bankimchandra's ambivalence stemmed in part from his unhappiness with the stage versions of his novels: he himself felt that the Bengali language was not yet ready for drama. Some theatre scholars have ascribed his distance from the public theatre to the death of his daughter. She is believed to have been murdered by her husband because he was having an affair with a stage actress. Bankimchandra certainly ridiculed the culturally rootless young man who made the 'National Theatre his pilgrimage place.' Subir Raychaudhuri, *Bilati Jatra Theke Swadeshi Theater*, (Calcutta, Jadavpur University, 1972), p. 12.
  42. Girish Ghosh, for example, consistently expressed his frustration at having to appease the public with light fare. He was grieved when his production of *Macbeth* (1893) did not run, although Teenkori Dasi (1870-1917) played a splendid Lady Macbeth (Girish played



- the title role himself), and the production was appreciated by the critics.
43. Debnarayan Gupta, *Banglar Nat-Nati*, Vol. 2, p. 246; 'Public Women', op. cit., p. 159.
  44. Between 1873–1910 the names of at least 60 actresses appear in the roster of advertised performances.
  45. Jogendranath Gupta, *Banger Mahila Kobi* (Calcutta: BS 1337) (1st ed.).
  46. On the abrupt termination of *My Life as an Actress*, see Introduction, *AK*, 1987.
  47. For stylistic differences in the two texts, see Introduction, *AK*, Chattopadhyay and Acharya, eds., 1964; and Asitkumar Bandhopadhyay's two-part 'Ranganati Binodini' in *Sabitya o Sanskriti*, Magh-Chaitra and Kartik-Paus BS 1374.
  48. Undertaken in Chitra Deb's pioneering and exhaustive survey in *Antabpurer Atmakatha*, op. cit. Meenakshi Mukherjee's 'The Unperceived Self: A Study of Nineteenth Century Biographies' focussing specifically on five women's autobiographies, in *Socialisation, Education and Women: Explorations in Gender Identity*, Karuna Channa, ed. (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1988), pp. 249–71; and more recently, as part of a more ambitious project, an excerpt with a brief introduction in 'Binodini Dasi', *Women Writing in India* Susie Tharu and K. Lalita eds., (Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 290–96. However, none of these studies attempt to situate Binodini on home ground, i.e. in contemporary theatre.
  49. Usha Chakraborty, *Condition of Bengali Women*, Appendix.
  50. Chitra Deb, *Thakurbarir Andarmahal*, pp. 5, 40–42. It has also been the case that many men often wrote under women's names.
  51. Himani Bannerji, 'Fashioning a Self: Educational Proposals for and by Women in Popular Magazines in Colonial Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Oct 26, 1991. See also Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from Within* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 58 and 94.
  52. Some of the better known Bangla theatre journals which came into their own in the 1920s: *Roop o Rang* (1924), *Sachitra Sisir* (1923), *Mahila* (1924), *Falguni* (1926), *Sisir* (1923), *Nabayuga* (1924), *Nachghar* (1924) although *Theatre* (1914) and the *Natya-mandir* dated from the earlier decade. (Compiled from Sushil Kumar Mukherjee, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres*, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1982, pp. 755–57.)  
As to the general question of female readers: as early as 1849 Bethune noted, 'in . . . Battollah, there are a great many printing presses, employed in printing books, of which many are bought by respectable Hindu ladies.' *Calcutta Review*, Vol. xi, No. xxii, 1849, p. xxviii.
  53. For a recent account, see Prabhat Kumar Das, 'Natyamandir o sampadak Amarendranath Dutta' in *West Bengal Natya Akademi Patrika* (Calcutta: 1992), pp. 144–73.

54. Rimli Bhattacharya, 'Actress-Stories and the "Female" Confessional Voice in Bengali Theatre Magazines (1910–1925)', *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, No. 5, pp. 1–25.
55. For example, the series entitled 'Bilati Rangini' (English Actresses) which ran in the *Natya-mandir* from BS 1317–19.
56. Amarendranath Dutta subsequently conceived of brief biographical accounts (with photographs and illustrations) 'of all those actors and actresses who had contributed to the founding of the Bengali theatre'. Binodini Dasi did not figure in this project which was brought out as a book entitled *Abhinetre Kabini*. See advertisement in *Natya-mandir*, Issues 7 and 8, Ashar BS 1319. The book was edited by Amarendranath and was published in 1915.
57. For example, Girishchandra Ghosh's essays on 'Rangalaye Nepen', 'Bel-babu: Kaptan Bel'; 'Aghorenath Pathak'; 'Amritalal Mitra'; 'Natyashilpi Dharmadas'; 'Nat-churamoni swargiya Ardhendhushekhara Mustafi'. *GR*, Vol. 5.
58. The complete works of Girishchandra, in the *Girish Rachanabali* (referred to as *GR* in this volume) run into five volumes comprising plays, essays, short stories and poems, as well as his adaptations of Bankimchandra's novels for the stage.
59. 'Star theatrey smriti sabha', *Natya-mandir*, Aswin-Kartik BS 1319.
60. Debipada Bhattacharya, *Bangla Charit Sabitya* (Calcutta: 1982).
61. Julia Swindells, *Victorian Writing and Working Women* (UK: Polity Press, 1985), pp. 140–41.
62. For an extended treatment of Bhabanicharan's canon see Abu Hena Mustapha Kamal, op. cit., pp. 159–60.
63. Jibanbala Debi's *Jyoti* (1910); Pankajkumari Basu/ Guha Mustafi's *Jibanta Putul*; Priyambada Debi's (Banerjee/Bagchi) *Tara* (1907); Sureshwari Debi's *Marmabhedhi* (Calcutta: 1912) are amongst the many anthologies of poems and 'laments'. The first three were written for daughters, the last for a son.
64. The range would include Dinabandhu Mitra's *Surodhoni Kabya* (Part I, verse 1) (1853) and *Sikhita Patitar Atmacharit* (1929), an autobiography by the anonymous author who wrote under the pseudonym of 'Manodasundari Dasi'.
65. The *gatha* was reconstituted from its rural and folk connections by metropolitan writers and became associated with plays, ballads and like forms for which there was a rage in nineteenth-century Europe. According to one account, it was Saratkumari's husband, Akshoykumar Choudhury who began writing *gathakavyas*. The form was then taken up by Swamakumari Debi, Rabindranath and others. (Chitra Deb, *Thakurbarir Andarmahal*, p. 33.)
66. The conceit was even used by reviewers to refer to a literary work; see for example, review of Upendranath Das's *Sarat-Sarojini Natak* in the *Sadbaroni*, published as part of the book.
67. For example, Lakshminoni Debi's *Cbirasanyasini Natak* (Calcutta: 1872).
68. Jogendranath Gupta's preface to *Banger Mahila Kobi* identifies



*bisbad* as characteristic of the work of all women poets. 'Despair' and 'melancholy' are also seen as characteristic of the 'genteel female tradition' of writing in American literature as in *The Genteel Female, An Anthology*, Clifton Joseph Furness, ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1931):

69. A rare contemporary comment on Binodini's autobiography in *Roop o Rang* in fact makes this charge. The editor of the openly mocking *Rangadarshan* (1st year, 6th week, 5 Aswin BS 1332, p. 24) has grudging praise for Apareshchandra Mukhopadhyay's *Thirty Years of Theatre (Rangalaye Trish Batsar)* in comparison with Binodini's work: 'I'd thought that this too, like the autobiographies of Amrit [Amritalal Basu] and Binodini would be engaged in heralding 'the self'. But I must say without hesitation, that it is quite rare to find such writing on the Bengali theatre which reads so well and is so full of facts and is knowledgable as well. . . . We are in favour of objective criticism. This we shall expect from Aparesh-babu.'
70. See Sukumari Dutta (Golapsundari's) preface to her play, *Apurba Sati* (1875).
71. Ihara Saikaku's *Five Women who Loved Love* or *The Diary of an Amorous Woman* (1686) and Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) are examples in this genre from two very different cultures produced around the same time.
72. Strangely reminiscent of the tenth-century *Tosa Diary (Tosa no Nikki)*, written in the persona of a mother remembering her dead daughter on a voyage home. See *Japanese Poetic Diaries*, Earl Miner, tr. and ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 59-91.
73. Jonas Barish, *The Anti-Theatrical Discourse* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1981), p. 326.
74. Swindells, op. cit., p. 153.
75. *Bankim Rachanabali* [hereafter *BR*] Jogeshchandra Bagal, ed. (BS 1360) (Calcutta: Sahitya Sansad, BS 1399), p. 649.
76. The ink and pastel portrait is reproduced and discussed in a recent study of the artist Jogen Choudhury by Geeti Sen, *Image and Imagination* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1996) p. 70.
77. Amritalal refers to his '*khudro jiban*' in Arun Mitra, *Amritalal Basu Jibani o Sahitya* (Calcutta: Navanna, 1970), p. 184. See also, the apologia prefacing Indira Debi Choudhurani's reminiscences of her uncle in *Rabindrasmriti* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Publications, 1960).
78. As in the case of the female Bhakti poet, Mirabai. See Kumkum Sangari, 'The Political Economy of Bhakti', Occasional Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, p. 29.
79. J. Hillis Miller, 'The clarification of Clara Middleton' in *The Representation of Women in Fiction*, Carolyn Heilbrun and Margaret R. Higonnet, eds. (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), New series, No. 7, p. 108. Miller describes this naming as 'a sequence of figures, fleeting, evanescent, each succeeded by another which contradicts it.' (p. 111).

## My Story

Binodini Dasi

*In me you've created an ill-fated woman  
Whom the three worlds call a sinner.  
Desires cry out and die within: but to speak of my pain  
Is to invite contempt.*

*In Bharat born as an unfortunate woman,  
Merciful Bharati, grant me grace.  
In your worship let my imagination blossom,  
My desire to serve you, awaken by your grace.*

Excerpted from the poem 'Bharati' in *Basana*,  
a collection of verse by Binodini Dasi

## Preface

### *And why a Preface to my Story of Pain?*

These are only the shadows of an unfortunate woman's heartache. There is nothing in this world for me but everlasting despair and the fears of a heart filled with sorrow. And yet, there is not a soul who will listen even to this. There is no one in this world before whom I can lay bare my pain, for the world sees me as a sinner—a fallen woman. I have no kith or kin, no society, no friend—no one in this world whom I may call my own.

Yet, it is Almighty God who has granted the great and the small, the wise and the ignorant, the power to experience joy and sorrow, and who, in order to make me bear the fruits of my karma, has also given me the power to feel both pain and consolation. But He has not given me anyone to whom I may recount my sorrows and who may comfort me. For I am a social outcast—a despicable prostitute. Why should people feel compassion for me? Before whom shall I make known the anguish of my heart? I have therefore put pen to paper . . . I realise only now that I have no words to make known my anguish. Perhaps the learned and distinguished pandits, know the means of expressing the pain that crushes every atom of my being and runs wild within me. But I know too well that this uneducated, ignorant, lowly woman has not been able to achieve anything.

Alas! Nothing has been realised of what I had hoped to see before my eyes when I put pen to paper. All I have done is to waste so much paper and ink. I have realised that the anguish of the heart can only be comprehended within oneself; there is no means of expressing it without. And so I say, what need for a preface or a foreword to that which was never realised.

## A Gift

*For the one who has given me shelter,  
At the feet of the god of my life,<sup>1</sup>  
is offered with true gratitude  
this little gift.*

That eternal, omnipotent, unknown Mahapurush who lives in the devotee's heart as God—He is beyond the ken of mortal eyes, beyond description and knowing! That inexpressible, incomprehensible Being has forever been beyond conception. There is no hope either, of my ever comprehending His limits in this, my limited life.

But it was at the wish of that eternal Being who wills that this life steeped in sorrow, this broken heart, found shelter at the feet of one whose tears of consolation have been as nectar to this pitiful and sinful life, allowing it to still survive in this body. It was His mercy which had gifted to me that delicate creature filled with delight whom I have now lost because of my own karma, while I am still alive!

At the feet of that compassionate god, I offer this pain-ridden *Amar Katha*—the story of my life. This heart had once been filled with invaluable riches. Nothing of that remains. I have lost all through carelessness and disregard. I have only burning memories, bound with life and death and drenched with tears. Dear lord, accept as offering this molten flow of tears and grant this wretched woman a place at your feet—I have nothing more, my lord.

When the book had first been written, I turned to the person for whom this preface was 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.

The compassionate being to whom this gift was dedicated is no more in this world. (It is true that no one lives on for ever in this world.) He is in heaven. It would seem that Hindu men and women believe unquestioningly in heaven and hell and in this life and in the one to come! There is yet another reason and consolation behind this belief. All that goes by the name of affection and love transformed into the honeyed delights of desires, the waves of feeling that are constantly set in playful

motion within our heart, are perhaps like the bonds of Mahamaya's seductive strength.<sup>2</sup> I believe it is the primary life-force in our everyday existence. It was in this sense that the late Bankim-babu mahashoy's Nagendranath had said, "My Surjamukhi lives in this paradise. She is not with me, but she is in my paradise."<sup>3</sup> It was by virtue of the strength of this same loving mesmerising force that Pygmalion's Galatea turned from a stone statue into a living image and appeared before him. And the pangs of despair turned her once more into stone.<sup>4</sup>

I too say that although he is not anymore on this earth, he is in heaven. And certainly, he sees everything from there. He understands too the heartache of this unfortunate woman. Of course this is so, only if our Hindu dharma be true, if the gods be true, and if birth and rebirth also be the truth.

*What is the gift?  
A blossom of love!*

That is why I have offered *My Story* to the feet of my beloved lord who is now in heaven. I give back to him what is actually his. Wherever he may be, this fervent offering from my heart will certainly touch his pure soul. Because he is bound to me by truth, and the truth of a virtuous man can never be destroyed, particularly in view of the noble family to which he belongs. No one descended from such a lineage can ever be a liar. The three worlds know it to be so.

He was unable to speak when he departed from this world, but his pleading eyes and anxious heart were proof enough that he had not forgotten his vow. I was there at his feet up to the very last moment of his life, because he had made me touch his head and swear a thousand times, that I would be present at his deathbed. By keeping me at his side, he was true to his oath.

I went to sit by his side, barring with iron doors that part of my stone heart which I had formerly felt free to call my own and which had now become dependent on the mercy of others. He looked at me with beseeching eyes. Raising his head from the pillow he laid it most pitifully on the lap of this sinner, as though he were telling me, "That I am bound to you by truth is known to all; those who know me, know you too. Those who know me—they all know you. He who I know to be a part of my life, the person who has touched my feet and agreed to take on all responsibility—he whom you have raised from childhood to thirty-one years of age with the love due to a son,<sup>5</sup> remains. Dharma remains."

He looked at me and his lotus eyes filled with tears. His pleading gaze went deep into my heart and struck every vein in my body. Controlling myself with great difficulty, I asked him fearfully, "Why are you so upset? What is it that troubles you? Tell me, only tell me once, what pains you?" Alas, he did not say a word. He only lay on my lap and continued to look at my face with pitiable eyes. Unfortunate woman that I am! Even a last word of consolation was denied me.

During these past thirty-one years, that noble and loving soul had vowed almost a million times before God and had told me: "If I have the least bit of faith in and devotion to God, if I have indeed been born into a worthy, virtuous family, then you will

never be dependent on anyone's mercy. Since I have all these days, for almost my entire life, disregarded censure and honour to give you a place in my affections, you will not be denied in your last years." But alas, before you, Death, the strong and the weak, the religious and the heretic, the wise and the ignorant—no one has strength. Only your strength triumphs. Ah! Perhaps there was so much he had wanted to say, but he could not speak. He left this world, his heart heavy with anguish.

When he lived, he had said a hundred times: "I will leave this world before you do, I will never let you go before I do. But only be present at my deathbed—there is something that I shall tell you." Alas! Alas! Those unspoken words of the later years of his life never left his heart. Like the moon which has but a single blemish, that just, truthful and compassionate god has left me behind in this eternal sea of torment.

*My Story* continues only upto this point in this volume. But since there is no end to my anguished life, there is no end to my story either. I wish to include in the second part<sup>6</sup> an account of these last unhappy years of my life, and of that happy part of my life—those thirty-one years spent with the man who had given me shelter after my life on stage with whom I shared the best third of my life, with whose relatives I had enjoyed equal treatment; that virtuous being who being bound by truth, had given me protection all these years. Accursed fate! Where is the loving being who had given me equal status as his family members and whose absence has now made me a woman born in sorrow, a *janmadukhini*? I wonder now at how the world changes.

*yadupateh kva gata mathurapuri  
raghupateh kva gatottarkosbala  
iti vibintya kurushva manahsthiram  
na sadidam jagadityavadharaya*<sup>7</sup>

## Dedication\*

### *An Unworthy Woman's Dedication*

After I had written this autobiography at the request of my guru, the late Girishchandra Ghosh mahashoy, I handed it to him that he might look through it. While he advised me in what manner it might be composed, he said to me: "The beauty of your simple and unostentatious language would be destroyed if you were to begin criss-crossing and rearranging things. Let it be printed just as you have written it. I will write a preface to your book."

He did write a preface, but I was not very happy with it. Of course, it was very well written; the reason for my unhappiness was that many facts had not been mentioned in it. When I had brought up this point, he replied, "If the truth be unsavoury and bitter, it is not always right to express it." In this world, rare is the occasion when women such as ourselves may indulge in *man-abbiman*, in feeling hurt or upset; that is why we become most demanding towards those who have in the generosity of their natures been indulgent towards us. As it is, women are short-sighted and besides, my heart was then full of wounded pride. I forgot that Girish-babu mahashoy was on his sick bed; I forgot the pain he suffered because of his illness; and I urged him to write a new preface which would refer to the incidents as they had really happened. He had agreed to write another preface. I had thought that if he—my shiksha-guru and most brilliant fellow actor—did not mention all the incidents in his preface, then my writing an autobiography would remain an incomplete task. I began to press him to write me a preface at the earliest. My affectionate gurudev assured me: "I shall not die without writing your preface."

On the stage, I was the late Mahashoy Girish-babu's right hand. There was a time when I was known in the theatre world as the first and foremost of his pupils. He would rush to fulfil the most trivial of my whims. But gone is Ayodhya and gone too is Ram.<sup>8</sup> There were two people who had been present to assuage my hurt and protect my honour: one replete in learning, talent and highly respected and the other occupying the highest seat in wealth, fame, pride and honour. Neither is alive today. Bengal's Garrick, Girish-babu<sup>9</sup> will not come back to fulfil my trivial desires. His

reassurance, "I shall not die without writing your preface," was not fated to be fulfilled. I had planned that after he had rewritten the preface, I would bring out a new edition of my autobiography. But by leaving the preface unwritten, my guru has taught me that all our worldly desires are not meant to be fulfilled.

Well, they are not to be fulfilled; but as to what we already have, why should that disappear? When I went to enquire about that first preface written earlier by Girish-babu, I was told that the respected Sri Abinashchandra Gangopadhyay mahashoy, the constant and close companion of Girish-babu in his later life, had put away the preface with great care. I have taken it back from him and have strung it on to this, my insignificant narrative. My autobiography is being published at the special request and the encouragement of my late master, the revered Girishchandra Ghosh. But he is not here with us. Alas O world! Truly, you do not allow anything to achieve fruition. Unfulfilled remains my wish to present at his feet this insignificant story.

Humbly,  
Srimati Binodini Dasi

\*From the second edition, *Binodini's Katha ba Amar Katha*, BS 1320.

## Childhood

### *The Seed*

Letter 1

1st Sraban, 1316

Mahashoy!

Many days have gone by. A long time ago when my life was not thus hidden from Mahashoy, you had told me, repeatedly: "God does not create living beings without reason. We all come to this world to do His work. We do our work and once it is done we forsake the world and depart." How often have I pondered over these words! But I have never been able to understand from my own life of what use an inferior being such as myself has been to God; what work of His have I been able to do; and if I have indeed been of some use, then why after having worked for so many years will there not be an end to the work? Whatever it is that I have done throughout my life: has that been work for God? Such low acts: could they have been for God?

My restless heart asks time and again, "What is my work in this world?" The time fast approaches when it will be time to take leave of this rest-house known as the world. Then, what have I achieved in all these years? With what words of consolation shall I take leave of this world! What is to support me when I become a traveller of that final voyage! Mahashoy, you have given me much advice on various matters: explain to me, in what part of the Lord's scheme have I ever been of any use? In what part am I still of use or will ever be?

One who is beholden

\*

Letter 2

7th Sraban

Mahashoy!

Just as the thirst-maddened being of the traveller who has fallen down in the desert finds comfort at the sight of the distant cool waters, so have your words of hope once more shed light in the corners of my heart. But where is the Lord whose name is celebrated in the world? Where is that Merciful Being who grants grace to a sinner like me?

You have written: "We have no right to know why we come to this world. Only He knows who is the master of all actions." Certainly, He knows. He who is omniscient will surely know all. But what of me? My pain remains as before and the emptiness continues. What has he left me with as consolation? As a last means of support, He had given me a darling daughter. I had not asked for her; it was He who had given me a daughter. Then why did He snatch her away from me? I had been told that the gift of the gods is never exhausted! Is this the proof? Or is this the fate of an unfortunate woman? Alas! if Fate be so powerful, why is He called *Patitpaban*, the Redeemer of sinners? If I am not ill-fated, then why do I yearn, why should I have to weep so much? He who has faith and devotion takes by force. Prahlad, Dhruva and so many other devotees have after all taken what is due to them by force.<sup>10</sup> If a lowly creature such as myself is to go to everlasting hell bearing the burden of eternal pain, then how is his name as the Redeemer of the sinful to be honoured?

You had written: "You have achieved much in your life: from the stage, you have brought pleasure to the hearts of hundreds of people. Your ability to bring alive with your marvellous acting skills different characters from various plays, is surely no mean achievement. As Chaitanya in my *Chaitanya-Lila*, you have aroused devotional fervour in the hearts of many and have earned the blessings of many a Vaishnav."<sup>11</sup> No one who is ordinary is capable of such work. The many characters you have brought alive with your acting could only have been understood with deep study. If you have not been able to receive the fruits of your labour, it is not because of your faults but rather because of the situation into which you have fallen; and your repentance makes it clear that in the near future you will possess the fruits of your labour."

Mahashoy says that I have pleased the audience. But did the members of the audience ever see my inner self? When I had the opportunity to pronounce Krishna's name, with what absolute yearning had I called out to Him; was the viewer ever able to perceive this? Then why did my only lamp of hope flicker away?

As to repentance! My entire life has been wasted in repentance. I have been repentant at every step; had there been the means to correct my life I would have realised the fruits of repentance. But has repentance borne anything? Even now I am swept along like a bit of grass overwhelmed by the current. I do not then know, what you mean by repentance. Why do I not receive mercy when I lie at His vast doors, my heart burdened with pain? I decide never again to call or cry out for Him but still I cry out

'Krishna! Krishna!' from the hidden depths of my heart. But where indeed is Hari?

How can I speak of the many wishes, the many desires, the many simple and honest inclinations of my childhood which have since disappeared into the folds of time? Remembering the name of Krishna, there were desires that sought to speed on the way of truth towards the well-beloved Lord of the World; but the mind ensnared in delusion immediately submerged them in illusory quicksands. I wished to force my way out, but like one who has fallen into the quicksands and is sinking, and in attempting to struggle only brings on himself a load of sand from all sides which drive him still deeper into the underworld, so too the world of delusion has pressed down the harder on my weak desires. My feeble desires have found no support and have sunk. They have sunk struggling like someone who is being buried in quicksands! And that is why I realise now with my little store of understanding, that desire and inclination yearn always to move upwards. But someone—I do not know who—seems to push them down with brute force and compels one to drown thus. However much I may plead and cry out, still I drown. I drown because I lack strength, because I am weak. If I were to have my say, I would have to say far too much! Mahashoy, there is so much that comes forth in a rush. Whosoever I look up to and in my orphaned state cling to and try and make my own, I am still left at a distance. I will not annoy you by saying too much. I take leave of you this very moment.

An unfortunate woman

\*

Letter 3

Mahashoy!

Whatever may have been the earlier situation, of what use am I in my present condition? I am sick and feeble, lacking all hope in the future. Unchangingly, the days follow the nights: I lack all enthusiasm for life. Facing the bitter blows of sickness and grief, engulfed in a listless torpor, I am caught in the flow of an unchanging current. Food, sleep and my cares: the image of one day is to be found in any other—nothing changes from this day to the next. The only difference is in the intensity of the pain which sometimes increases while uneasiness remains a constant companion. When someone is concerned enough to try and console me by saying that I must learn to be at peace with

myself, I can only laugh silently because their consolation is as follows: "Stay well. Do not allow yourself to fret."

I feel they do not understand my condition. They do not understand that if it were possible to try and stay healthy, then that effort has been made a hundred thousand times, and was not awaiting their saying so to me. I pray to God that they might never have to comprehend the true condition of a luckless woman such as myself, because one does not understand such a condition unless one has personally encountered it. I keep wondering if to be forever absorbed in this hopeless anxiety be indeed work for God? At all times I ask God, how much longer, my Lord? If there be no end to my sorrows, let me at least gain respite from the torture of memories that burn, for that pain is intense. I ask you in all humility—to be lying in some corner of this world in a state of torpor in this worn-out body of mine—does this, in your opinion, constitute service to God?

\*

Letter 4

Mahashoy!

When I write letters to you expressing my sorrow, your words of consolation in reply to my letters send a thin ray of sunlight in my heart. But how transient is that light—like the flash of lightning in an overcast night.

You know that, without my asking, I had been granted a daughter who had been like light to my darkened mind. That daughter is no more. And now my densely-darkened mind has sunk deeper into blackness. All efforts at consolation have proved useless. It is true I cry out at all times, 'Lord have mercy on me!', 'Hari have mercy on me!' But in the depths of my mind I perceive that I yearn only for that spirit of my life. Like the needle of a compass forever pointing to the north is my mind set on that lost horizon. One who does not know the pain of a mother will not truly comprehend my pain. Every incident of her life—from her birth to her death—is reflected in the mirror of my mind. Is there peace to be found in such a state of mind? I wonder, have I been created only to endure such pain. Perhaps I might have gained peace if I had been able to establish faith in my own ethical speeches. But I do not have such faith! I have learnt to be an unbeliever since childhood, under the pressures of worldly life. My guardians, my worldly situation and I myself, are responsible for this unbelief. But of what use is it to shift the burden of

responsibility! Unbelief persists. The mind has always been made to move in a direction that contradicted its natural predilection. Today, my mind and my body are both worn out by such battles of contrariness.

I have said that by day and by night, my heart is set constantly on that lovable image. It is painful to speak of her; yet, it is only in speaking of her that I find my happiness. There is no other happiness in the heart of one who has lost a child. If I were to tell you the many chronicles of my life you would understand how unbelief has grown deeper roots and settled down inside me. You say that if you heard the entire story of my life you would be able to explain to me how I have been created for the Lord's work. I too will unfold these incidents from the beginning to the end. If you kindly listen, you will realise how my unbelief has only deepened and how impossible it would be to uproot it. The root of peace is faith; this I might, perhaps, be able to understand, but where is that faith? Taking courage from the boundless affection you have for me, I will begin to narrate all. Kindly listen to me. And as you listen, should you begin to feel irritation, then tear to pieces my letter. Will you listen?

Mahashoy, you have wanted to listen to my insignificant life story; it is a matter of no mean honour for me. If you should listen kindly to my entire narrative I shall be grateful to you. Unburdening my heart before a noble person such as yourself would lighten too, in some measure, the unendurable burden on my heart.

## The First Story: From Bud to Leaf

### *Prelude to My Entry to the Stage*

#### CHILDHOOD

I was born in the metropolis of Calcutta, in a family without means or property. It could not be said that we were miserably poor, for somehow we managed to eke out an existence. However, there was no prosperity, only want. My grandmother had a house of her own which had several rooms of mud and thatch. That house, No. 145 on Cornwallis Street, is now in my possession.<sup>12</sup> All those rooms were occupied by many poor tenants and our household was run with money from their rent. Things were cheap those days and we were a small family—there was my grandmother, my mother, and the two of us, my brother and I. But as we grew up, our poverty and our sorrows grew with us. Then, my grandmother married off my five-year-old brother to a little motherless child who was two and a half years old and who brought with her marriage her mother's ornaments to our house. We lived for a while on the money brought in by the sale of these ornaments. Whatever my grandmother and mother had possessed, had all been sold off long ago. My mother and my grandmother were both very affectionate. They had been selling off their ornaments, one by one to the goldsmith, and using the money to buy food. They gave us the food, never grieving about the jewellery they had been forced to sell.

I recall something from those times. Once, when I was about seven years old, my mother had gone to some one's *sraddha* ceremony and had asked for a few *sandesh* for us. They were gifts of charity and consequently were already ten or fifteen days old before they could be parted with and given to my mother. If one were to have them today certainly we would have to cover our noses for the smell. Mother came home and with great pleasure gave them to all three of us. We nibbled at each one for half an hour fearing that those smelly sweets would be finished all too soon. This is one scene from my happy childhood.

My little brother forsook at a very early age the company of us hellish creatures, leaving my mother desolate for life. My grandmother and my mother were both left stunned at his death.

For lack of money, my brother had to be taken to the charity hospital when he fell ill. The two of us little girls stayed on at home. A kindly neighbour ensured that we didn't have to worry



about food; she took us along with her and carried food for my grandmother and mother when she went to visit my brother. On some days she sent them both home to eat something while she sat at my brother's bedside. Later, on their return to the hospital, she brought us back home. It wasn't as if she helped only us, it was part of her nature to be concerned about others. If someone happened to call on her at two o'clock in the night with news of a crisis at home, she would immediately set off with the person taking with her whatever money she happened to have with her. Whether it was with money or with her person, she tried to help others to the best of her ability. It is hard to come by such a selfless person in these times. She had a little property of her own and no family or anyone else in the world; she was committed to helping others.

My brother died in the free hospital that I have mentioned. It is a day that burns vividly in my memory. I began to wonder then, will my brother not come back? I had not yet comprehended fully that Yama never returns what he once seizes. My grandmother loved my brother to distraction, but she was also capable of great restraint. She had heard that if someone died in a hospital, the authorities did not allow you to cremate the body but they cut it up. As soon as my brother died, she picked up the dead body and running down three flights of stairs, she rushed towards the Ganga ghat. We held on to our mother's hand and, weeping, went along with her. My mother had started to behave strangely: she would break into wild laughter from time to time. The head doctor at the hospital tried to reassure us when he saw our state: "Don't be upset, we shall not keep the body." But my grandmother did not listen. She carried the body all the way to the bank of the Ganga and only laid it down once she was there. A doctor had been kind enough to follow her the entire way to tell them: "Do not cremate the body immediately . . . we've been treating him with very poisonous medicine. Wait, I shall come back." They had sat waiting by the river, the dead body on their laps, for over an hour. Only after the doctor returned with the permission could they bring the body to Kashi Mittir's ghat<sup>13</sup> and lay it on a pyre. Meanwhile, that kindly neighbour of ours had arrived on the scene. She had brought with her some money from her home. Realising that my brother's condition was getting progressively worse, my brother's wife and I had spent the earlier night at our neighbour's.

In the midst of all this we were narrowly saved from yet another tragedy. While my grandmother and our neighbour had been occupied with the cremation, my mother had gradually

walked into the river till she was waist deep in the Ganga. I clung to her sari and screamed loudly, at which my grandmother ran towards us. She then led my mother away. After this my mother remained half mad for a long time. She never cried, but rather, laughed out loud from time to time. This made my grandmother very alert; she never let anyone talk about my brother in my mother's hearing. This was despite the fact that my grandmother loved my brother the most among us all, because we have never had a male child in our family . . . there were only three generations of daughters. Yet, observing her daughter's condition she had fallen completely silent. One night, when we were all asleep, my mother suddenly cried out, "Where have you gone, my darling . . ." and began crying loudly. "Thank God!" said my grandmother. When I tried to call out "Ma! Ma!", she said, "Hush! Let her cry". Terrified, I remained silent. But I, too, was on the verge of breaking down.

I have heard that I too had been married,<sup>14</sup> and this seems to remind me of a beautiful boy slightly older than me, with whom my brother, his little girl bride and a neighbouring girl—all of us—used to play. Everyone said that this beautiful boy was my husband. However, after some time I did not see him any more. I have heard that I had an aunt-in-law; it was she who had taken away my husband and had never let him come back. I have never seen him since. I would hear other people say that he had married and had a family; he too is now no more in this world. While my brother was alive they had tried hard several times to bring my husband home. Because I was the only girl, my mother and my grandmother both desired that he come to live with us, for he too was the child of poor folk. But his aunt never let him come again.

So much for my childhood. Later, when I was about nine years old, a singer came to live in our house. There was a cemented room on the ground floor of our house; she lived in this room. She did not have any parents; my mother and grandmother loved her as a daughter. She was called Ganga baiji. Eventually, the very same Ganga baiji became a famous singer at the Star Theatre. In the manner of a young girl of those times, I had pledged eternal friendship with her. As a token of our pact, we called each other 'Golap'.<sup>15</sup> She had come to our house in a helpless state and had received from my mother the love and affection that is usually reserved for one's own daughter; this she remembered till the last days of her life. Although with the passage of time and with

differences in our own situation, we were obliged to stay apart from each other, these childhood memories stayed with her as well. And it was because she was truly generous and liberal that she greatly respected my mother and my grandmother. Nowadays, there are many who find it shameful and beneath their dignity to acknowledge old debts of gratitude, but Gangamoni remained unaffected by pride or vanity even as she occupied the high position of a singer-actress at the Star. A noble-hearted childhood companion, the late Gangamoni was a person I deeply respected and honoured.

When my mother saw that we had no other means of survival, she apprenticed me to Gangamoni the baiji, to learn singing. I must have been about seven or eight years old at that time. Whatever be the nature of my singing or music lessons with her, my chief source of delight then lay in listening to the stories told by the many visitors who came to her. And everybody loved me because I was quite bright. I enjoyed their affection as would any lively little girl. I had no idea whether what I did was good or bad. But I did not mix too freely with them; somehow, I was a little afraid and felt shy. I was a bit distant, because since childhood I had quite despised the behaviour of our tenants, the ones who lived in the thatched rooms. They were not husband and wife, but lived together as a couple. They lived off their daily earnings and from time to time fought so fiercely that it seemed that they would never again exchange a single word. But then I would find that the very next moment they would be eating together, laughing and joking all the while. Although I was then a little child, I could not help but be surprised and scared by their behaviour. I felt that I would never want to be thus despised. I did not know that Fate had amassed such dark clouds over my head. I used to feel that I would spend the rest of my life innocently and simply in the warmth of my mother's affection. Secure in this belief, I was happy to spend the whole day playing with my childhood friends and at nightfall came to seek the comfort of my loving mother's arms.

Some time after my brother's death, two gentlemen called Babu Purnachandra Mukhopadhyay and Brajanath Seth came frequently to Gangamoni to hear her sing. I had heard that they had vowed to enact a *geetnatya*<sup>16</sup> called *Sitar Bonobas* (The Exile of Sita)<sup>17</sup> in some place or the other. One of them called my grandmother over one day and said to her: "I can see that you are going through very difficult times; why don't you apprentice this granddaughter of yours to the stage? Initially, she'll get a little something to take care of the cost of her food, but after she has

learnt a bit she'll get better wages." There were only two theatres those days: one was Sri Bhuvanmohan Neogi's National Theatre and the other the late Saratchandra Ghosh mahashoy's Bengal Theatre. My grandmother discussed the matter with several others and eventually decided to apprentice me to the stage as Purna-babu had advised. Accordingly, Purna-babu had me admitted to the famous National Theatre<sup>18</sup> at a monthly salary of ten rupees. Although Ganga baiji was an accomplished singer, she was quite illiterate. Therefore, many days after my entry to the theatre, she entered the profession with very little education. Later, she advanced little by little and upto the last years of her life was dedicated to her profession as an actress.

My new life began to be put together from this time onwards. In those years of childhood, that luxurious new world, the instruction I received and the work—everything—seemed to be new to me. I did not understand anything, I did not know anything; but whatever was taught to me I followed faithfully to the best of my ability. I was spurred on whenever I remembered the difficulties besetting our household. My enthusiasm quickened at the thought of my mother's sorrowful face. I felt that if I could earn something during this period of sorrow in my mother's life, then our financial burdens too would be somewhat lightened.

It was true that on the stage I worked according to the instructions that were given me. However, at all times there was a certain desire, an eagerness hovering within me. I thought to myself about how I could learn at the earliest the skills of these well known actresses. My mind was constantly involved in the performances of these actresses. Those days there were only four actresses at the National Theatre: Raja, Khetrmoni, Lakkhi and Narayani. Khetrmoni, who is no longer alive was a famous actress. People were astonished at the naturalness of her acting. Mr Thompson, the Governor, himself remarked on seeing her performance as the maid in *Bibab Bibbrat* (The Matrimonial Fix): "Such actresses are scarce even in our own England!" *Bibab Bibbrat* had been performed at a highly-placed individual's house in Chowringhee. The Governor was one of the guests at this gathering of many sahebs and Bengalis.<sup>19</sup> Mahashoy, I am afraid to say more. I will stop here because it may irritate you to have to listen to the dull stories of a life past. But I shall add only this much: with care and effort, I could match the skills of the other actresses within a very short while.

## The Second Leaf: On Stage

Mahashoy!

Your patience at wanting to hear the sorrowful story of my life is indicative of your unwarranted affection for me. You have said in every line you have written me, that with every character that I have played, I have imprinted *devbhava*, the image of God, in people's minds. It is true the audience has been entertained and has attentively watched the performance, but I do not understand how I may have imprinted the divine image in their minds. Should you have the occasion, do explain this to me. And now, if you still have patience enough, listen to the dramatic story of my life.

When I first joined the theatre, rehearsals used to be held in one of Rasik Neogi's houses<sup>20</sup> by the river ghat. I do not remember the place very well, but some memories have stayed with me. It was a beautiful place: The house and the verandah overlooked the Ganga; just below us was a nicely shored-up ghat, and on either side were the rest rooms for travellers on their final journey. That beautiful picture from my childhood days has stayed on as a distant memory in my mind. How the Ganga gurgled past the house! I would run all along that long, winding verandah and in my happiness many were the dreams that sprang forth in my mind.

Perhaps it was because I was a child or perhaps it was because they sensed my special interest in learning, everybody loved me in a special way and took care of me. I have already said that we were very poor those days. There was the house that we lived in, but other than that, we had no nice clothes, or food or possessions of our own. Raja, who was the most important actress of the time, got two short-sleeved printed blouses<sup>21</sup> made for me. Those two blouses were my chief means of defence against the winter cold.

Everyone said, "If this girl is instructed properly, she is sure to perform very well." The late Dharmadas Sur was our manager, the late Abinashchandra Kar the assistant manager, and perhaps it was Babu Mahendranath Basu who was our instructor. I don't remember everything, but I believe that Bel-babu, Mahendra-babu, Ardhendu-babu and Gopal-babu were the people who taught us acting. Babu Radhamadhab Kar also acted in the National Theatre and the now famous doctor, the respected Sri Radhagobinda Kar,

was also a member of the National Theatre, but as an amateur. After much discussion these people decided to give me a small role in a play called *Beni-Sanbar* (The Binding of the Braid).<sup>22</sup> The role was that of Draupadi's *sakhi* or handmaid, and I was required to say only a few words. In those days when a play was being prepared, the dress rehearsals were held in the *natya mandir*. I wasn't particularly scared the day we had the dress rehearsal for the play, because among the people who saw me rehearse in our usual 'rehearsal house' were my instructors and a few others.

But I simply cannot describe my condition and my extreme nervousness on the day I was actually to perform my part before the public. When I saw before me the rows of shining lights, and the eager excited gaze of a thousand eyes, my entire body became bathed in sweat, my heart began to beat dreadfully, my legs were actually trembling and it seemed to me that the dazzling scene was clouding over before my eyes. Backstage, my teachers tried to reassure me. Along with fear, anxiety and excitement, a certain eagerness too appeared to overwhelm me. How shall I describe this feeling? For one, I was a little girl and then too, the daughter of poor people. I had never had occasion to perform or even appear before such a gathering. In my childhood I had often heard my mother say, "Call on Hari when you are frightened." I remembered him, and following the instructions I had received during the rehearsals, uttered the few words I had been trained to deliver with the appropriate gestures, and then came back to the wings. As I did so, the audience clapped loudly to show their appreciation. I was still shaking all over, whether with fear or excitement, I do not know. My teachers embraced me as soon as I went backstage. But I did not know then what the clapping signified. Later, the others explained to me that people clapped in pleasure if the performance was a successful one.

A few days after this, my teachers consulted among themselves and began to instruct me in the role of Hemlata in a play of that name written by Haralal Ray.<sup>23</sup> When they saw my eagerness to learn my part, they would remark to each other: "This girl is sure to perform well as Hemlata!" Around this time another girl came to our theatre and Madanmohan Burman joined the company as the opera master. The new actress was Kadambini Dasi. Kadambini continued for many years winning many honours in the course of her career. She is now retired.

My heart seemed to overflow with enthusiasm and delight during the period that I was being instructed to play Hemlata.

When I returned home from my workplace, the day's work would be etched on my mind. Whatever they had taught me to say, the many ways in which I was to express myself, surrounded me like playmates. Even when I played at home, an unspoken power drew me towards them. I did not feel like staying at home; I thought constantly about when the carriage would come to fetch me<sup>24</sup> so I could begin to learn new roles. Although I was very young then, there was a sense of delicious excitement within me. When the period of instruction was over and the time came to perform, I was quite scared, although it was nothing like the fear that I had experienced the first time. I was to play the part of a princess—my dazzling costume thrilled me. I had never before set eyes on such a costume, let alone worn one. Anyway, by God's grace I played Hemlata creditably. Since then, people have remarked, "God has been kind to her." I too feel in retrospect, that without the grace of God, how could a weak little girl like me have managed to perform such a momentous task. I had no talent and I was not well educated then, nor could I sing well. But then I was eager to learn.

From that time onwards, I was obliged to play the main parts. There were several senior actresses; within a very short while I became equal to them in performance although I was not as old as them. A few months later, the Great National Theatre Company went out on a tour of the west<sup>25</sup> and they took me and my mother on this tour, giving me a raise of five rupees. They travelled to several regions. I shall narrate to you a few incidents from this period of our performances in the west. They are interesting incidents in themselves; although they are not about me, they are of interest nevertheless.

One night we were playing *Neeldarpan*<sup>26</sup> (The Indigo Mirror) at the Chhatramandi in Lucknow.<sup>27</sup> Almost all the sahebs of Lucknow city came that evening to see our play. At the point where Rogue Saheb attempts to assault Khetramoni, Torap beats him with a door he has broken down and then Nabinmadhab takes Khetramoni away. The play was being performed quite brilliantly; in addition, Babu Motilal Sur played Torap and Abinash Kar mahashoy played Rogue Saheb with unusual competence. The sahebs were extremely upset at this particular scene. A commotion arose and one of the sahebs actually climbed up the stage intending to beat up 'Torap'. We were in tears, our instructors were frightened and our manager, Dharmadas Sur all a tremble. We stopped the performance and somehow putting together our

costumes and the sets, fled the scene. Only after we left Lucknow, early the following day, could we breathe normally.

After this episode we travelled to many other places, but I don't remember much about them. However, Delhi was a home for flies. Other than one's bedding, nothing was visible. I recall how I did not wish to bathe in the water drawn up by a *bhishti*.<sup>28</sup> My mother too wept continuously and was not satisfied until I finally managed to draw water from a well and get her the water for washing and cooking. The rest of us had been provided with water drawn by the *bhishti*.

There was another little incident that had occurred while we were in Delhi; it is one I remember well. One day I was running around playing in the open terrace of the house where we were staying in Delhi. I don't remember exactly why, but Kadambini found this insufferable; she held me by my hands and she slapped me twice. My mother and I cried that entire day. Ma did not eat anything in her grief and I too sat next to my mother all day. Eventually, the theatre people came to me in the evening and persuaded me to eat. But my mother refused to eat anything that day. As it is, my mother had been upset and had been weeping all along at the predominance of Musalmans in Delhi. We were poor and I was a mere girl. Although the theatre authorities took care of us, the senior actresses were aware of their worth, while we were quite dependent on their mercy. And, I don't quite know why — Kadambini was the proudest of all the actresses; she appeared to be jealous of me and treated me with contempt whenever she could.

From Delhi we had to go to Lahore. We had to stay longer in Lahore where we performed several plays. I played different roles—Radhika in *Sati ki Kalankini* (Virtuous or Notorious?);<sup>29</sup> Kamini in *Nabeen Tapaswini* (The Young Aspirant); Kanchan in *Sadhabar Ekadoshi* (Widowhood in Married Life); Fati in *Biye Pagla Buro* (Old Man in Love with Marriage)<sup>30</sup> and many more. But I should add that I realised that the dressers were irked by the fact that they had to dress me up to look like a young woman when in fact I was only a little girl. At times though, they would joke, "We'll have to send you to the smiths and they'll pound you to a bigger size!"

While we were performing in Lahore, a curious incident took place involving me. A rich landlord called Golap Singh took it into his head that he wished to marry me and he offered my mother whatever amount she wished. The zamindar began to pester Dharmadas Sur and Ardhendu-babu, putting them in a very awkward position. Apparently, the man was a particularly rich

landowner of the region. We were in foreign lands and upon hearing this latest information, my mother was absolutely distraught. I too was terrified. We had to quit Lahore soon after this incident.<sup>31</sup>

We came home stopping at SriSriBrindaban on our return journey. I had behaved in a rather childish manner during our stay there. The incident was as follows . . . When the theatre company reached SriBrindaban, they had food prepared for forty people, after which they set off to have a *darshan* of Srijiu [Sri Gobindji]. I was told, "You're still a little girl and you have just travelled by train. Now drink some water, keep the door locked and stay at home—we'll come back after our darshan of the gods." So I stayed back and kept the door locked while all of them went off to worship before the divine image of Sri Gobindjiu. I was a little sad and angry too, but what could I do? I kept my hurt feelings to myself.

There I sat with the door locked, when all of a sudden, a monkey appeared. He sat down holding on to the wooden part of the window. I was excited (as was natural for a girl my age) and I gave it a slice of cucumber. While he was eating, two other monkeys appeared. I gave them something to eat but then a couple more appeared and I gave them some food too. I thought that if I gave them each a little food they would all go away. There were four or five windows in that room. The more I fed them, the more monkeys appeared—at the windows, on the roof, the place soon swarmed with monkeys! Then I began to be very afraid. I wept bitterly and continued to give away practically all the food that had been kept aside, and all the while I kept hoping that they would now begin to go away. But the horde of monkeys only grew larger, the more food they got, and I continued to give away the food, crying as I did so. Meanwhile the COMPANY people returned to find that the roof, the verandah and the windows were all quite run over with monkeys. I unlocked the door, crying all the while. When they quizzed me on what had happened I told them everything. My mother gave me two slaps and began scolding me when she had heard my story. But although I had caused such damage, the company people began laughing and forbade my mother to scold me. "Don't beat her," they said, "she's just a little girl, what does she know? It's really our fault, we ought to have taken her along with us." Ardhendu-babu said, "Stupid girl, you've given the *Brajabashis*<sup>32</sup> a nice feast with our food, now tell us please, what are we to eat?" Then, only after the snacks had been bought from somewhere, could they get to eat or drink anything.

For long, Neelmadhab-babu continued to tease me about this incident. "Binod, aren't you going to go to SriBrindaban to give the monkeys a feast?" he would say. Neelmadhab Chakraborty is very well known in the theatre world. Everybody has heard of him. He had been with us during this tour of the west and had taken great care of me. When all the ACTRESSES bought extra shawls and clothes with their own money in Delhi, he bought me an embroidered shawl and a sari because I didn't have any money of my own. Long have I treasured those gifts of love as remembrances from the past.

And there was yet another 'first present', a gift of sincere love from a friend. The respected doctor, Mahashoy Radhagobinda Kar gave me a silver flower that had been crafted in Dhaka and a glass flower to play with. Those gifts of love had given me great delight as a child. Won over as I was then by his selfless affection, I am still consoled now in my present state of grief and illness. I will forever be obliged to him for his genuine kindness. This highly honoured doctor will forever be an object of devotion for this unfortunate woman.

Thus was spent my theatre life as a child.

After this we returned to Calcutta. About four or five months later the Great National closed down.<sup>33</sup> At this point I was hired by the late Saratchandra Ghosh mahashoy in his Bengal Theatre at a starting salary of twenty-five rupees. 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 intelligent acting. Memorable from this period was the incomparable love and affection shown by the late Saratchandra Ghosh. He cared for me greatly; I doubt if he had a daughter of his own whether she could have enjoyed greater love.

Mahashoy has been kind to me and that is why I have been so bold as to narrate . . . If you grant me permission, I shall tell you of events from my acting days at the Bengal Theatre.

## The Bengal Theatre

In the first phase of my youth, I began working under the worthy Saratchandra Ghosh mahashoy, the instructor of the Bengal Theatre. I do not remember exactly why I left the Great National Theatre. It was the Bengal Theatre which was responsible for the advancement of my career: it was here, under the guidance of Saratchandra Ghosh mahashoy, that I began acting the main roles within a very short while. The respected Sarat-babu loved me as a daughter—his boundless affection and his many talents, I cannot describe in a few words. The famous singer Bonobiharini (Bhuni), Sukumari Dutta (Golapi) and Elokeshi were the actresses at the Bengal during this time. Michael Madhusudan's *Meghnad Badh Kabya* had been adapted for the stage and was being prepared for performance. I played seven roles in the course of the same performance in this play. First, Chitrangada; second, Pramila; third, Baruni; fourth, Rati; fifth, Maya; sixth Mahamaya; and, seventh, Sita.

I played Manorama in Bankim-babu's *Mrinalini*, and Ayesha and Tilottama in *Durgeshnandini*; when required, I would play both these roles at the same time, in the same night. Ayesha and Tilottama do not encounter each other, excepting for a scene inside the prison! Tilottama does not have any lines in the prison scene. Another person wearing Tilottama's costume would enter the prison, and on hearing Jagat Singh cry out, "Who's that—Birendra Singh's daughter?", she would fall into a swoon. And just then, came the best part of Ayesha's exchange with Osman. One moment I was the excessively shy and timid princess, and the very next, the generous, proud and extraordinarily spirited woman in love—Ayesha, the nawab's daughter! To split oneself in two in this manner requires tremendous resourcefulness. It was not as though I had to do this every day; but a sudden turn of circumstances obliged me to play this double role quite a few times.

Once I had left home dressed in a beautiful costume, prepared to play Ayesha, when I was told at the theatre that the person who was to play Asmani had not come. The theatre hall was packed! The directors were discussing in hushed tones: "Who is going to ask Binod to play Asmani's part? Except for Binod, there's no one here today who can do it." Not one of them dared to say anything to me, because I'd come from home attired as Ayesha. When suddenly, Babu Amritlal Basu came up to me and

said with great affection, "Binod, my dearest little sister, the person who was to play Asmani is ill, you must make it up somehow, otherwise we shall be in great trouble." Although I did protest several times, "No, I can't do it", and although I was in fact quite angry that I would have to get out of the dress and take off the make-up I'd worn as the Nawab's daughter to dress as the maid, and knew that there were bound to be many flaws when I would have to dress up once again as Ayesha, I did realise that this was an emergency and did what they told me to. During my years at the Bengal Theatre, newspapers such as *The Englishman*, *The Statesman* and others referred to me variously as the 'Signora' and the 'Flower of the Native Stage'. Even now, when I meet my friends from the old days, they ask of me, Are you keeping well 'Signora'?

I mentioned earlier that it was in this theatre that Bankim-babu's *Mrinalini* was performed. Those were simply indescribable performances. The novel has probably never been performed so well in any other place, either then or even now. For this production of *Mrinalini*, Hari Vaishnab was Hemchandra; Kiron Banerjee—Pashupati; Golap (Sukumari Dutta)—Girijaya; Bhuni—*Mrinalini*, and I—Manorama.

I shall say a few more things before I conclude my account of Bengal Theatre. Once, the entire company was on the way to Chuadanga; we had reserved a coach for this purpose. We were all travelling together. I do not recall what month it was, nor the name of the station but it was undoubtedly one of the major stops. Umichand, a relative of Choto-babu mahashoy's (we addressed the venerable Saratchandra Ghosh mahashoy as 'Choto-babu') and a few other actors got off at the station to get food for the company. The others returned with food and leaf-plates but Umichand-babu was long in coming. The train was about to start, so Choto-babu put out his head from the window and began calling out, "Umichand! Hurry up, hurry up . . . the train is setting off." And the train did begin to move out slowly from the station when Umichand-babu boarded the train in a desperate sort of way, and then, it picked up speed. Suddenly, Umichand-babu fell down, quite senseless. Choto-babu and the others cried out, "Some water, give him some water. He must have had a heat stroke", and Charuchandra-babu began fanning him. However, it was so unfortunate, there was not one person in that carriage who had even a drop of water to offer the dying man.

Bhuni, who had only recently been employed by the Bengal Theatre, had her baby girl with her. When she saw there was no way out, she put some of the milk from her breast into a little

feeding spoon and poured it into Umichand's mouth. But at that very instant he breathed his last. This mishap took place in the space of perhaps ten or fifteen minutes. The coach-full of people were completely distraught and terrified by this incident. Choto-babu put his head on Umichand's breast and broke out sobbing like a little boy. I was but a little girl myself; besides, I had never seen anyone die like this. I hid myself in my mother's lap in fear. The expression on Umichand-babu's face in the throes of death was enacted repeatedly before my mind's eye. When he saw my condition, Charu-babu mahashoy told Choto-babu, "Stop it, Sarat. What has happened, has happened. If the rail authorities come to know of this incident, they will cut off the coach, and that will be another disaster, stranded midway with so many people." "What shall I go and tell Umi's mother?" asked Choto-babu, "She had told me so many things about Umichand when we left." (Umichand-babu was his mother's only son.) Anyhow, we got off at Chuadanga around evening with this awful calamity looming over our heads. It was almost evening then. We told the station master that the incident had taken place only in the last station. Then we went to where we had to stay and in a daze lay down in whatever corner we could find for ourselves. Choto-babu and a few other actors went to cremate the body. We were there for three days and returned to Calcutta in great distress. If some worthy writer were to describe this sorrowful account, then it would come out in frightening colours.

And there was one other time when we were in the greatest of danger. Then too, it was with the Bengal Theatre; we were going to Sahebganj or some such wild place.<sup>34</sup> In order to get to our appointed destination we had to go through the forest on elephant back and in bullock-carts. Four elephants and some bullock-carts were engaged for us. Those who were to travel on the bullock-carts left at three o'clock. In a fit of childish fancy, I declared, "I will go on elephant back." Choto-babu mahashoy forbade me to do so many times. But I had never before seen an elephant, let alone ride one! I was delighted and I told Golap, "Didi, I shall go with you on elephant back." "Alright", said Golap, "come along." She kept me by her side. Ma went on ahead, scolding and grumbling all the while. When we mounted the elephants, it was getting on to be evening: Golap and I and two other men on one of the elephants, and four people each on the other three animals. When we had gone on for some distance, we found ourselves on a road, the like of which we had never seen before. The path was just a foot wide! And on either side, the jungle rose up to our chests. I don't know whether it was

paddy fields or what—and the rain! As it got darker, the rain fell with greater intensity and it became stormy. The elephants began to tremble. They ended up taking all of us to a cane forest. On top of everything it began to hail. There was no covering above us over the elephants; the rain and the storm and the thundering clouds, and finally, the hailstones proved too much. I cried distractedly.

Golap too had begun crying. The elephants refused to budge. Their trunks raised above their heads, their forefeet planted a step forwards, they stood unmoving. Then the *mabout* said, "They're not moving because a tiger is out." All the four mahouts began shouting "Hoi, Hoi!" I was stiff all over, the thrill of an elephant ride had quite vanished by then. I was trembling in fear and crying while one of the men on our elephant held on to me lest I fall off the animal. Much later, after a great deal of trouble we reached our destination, half dead with exhaustion. We had become so numb in the rain and in the cold that we did not even have the strength to climb down the elephants. Choto-babu himself came over to set me down; he then lit a fire and applied hot fomentation all over me. Ma was crying even as she scolded me. Her refrain was: "The wretched girl doesn't listen to anything she's told." We were to have performed that day, but because of the terrible weather and our poor physical condition no show was held that day. Once, we were in danger during a boat journey. And again once when we were in the hills, caught unawares by a storm, we took shelter in the home of some mountain people. Afterwards, they brought us back to our camp.

Then once, I was badly hurt when I fell off a horse while performing for the royal family of Krishnanagar. I had to play Pramila seated on a horse.<sup>35</sup> A platform made of mud had been constructed for the purpose: just as I was about to exit, the platform gave way and the horse stumbled and fell. I too fell down from a height of about two feet and suffered a grave injury. I did not even have the strength to rise. However, there was still quite a bit left of my part. What was to be done? Charu-babu made me drink up some medicine and then he bandaged me from my knees up to my stomach. And Choto-babu said most affectionately, "Dear Binod, just finish this show and save us." Half my pain left me when I heard his affectionate and consoling words. Somehow, I did what I had to that day. On our return to Calcutta, I was laid up for a month.

Anyway, my years at the Bengal Theatre were fairly happy since I was not too ambitious at that time and was satisfied with whatever I got. Whatever little improvement I had made, I



considered to be adequate. I had no high expectations, nor was there any reason to be dissatisfied. Everyone loved me dearly and I spent my days laughing and singing.

During this time, the respected Kedarnath Choudhury and Sri Babu Girishchandra Ghosh often came to the Bengal Theatre. On seeing my Kapalkundala, Kedar-babu had said, "This girl is a veritable Kapalkundala. The innocence of Nature is brought out so beautifully in her performance."<sup>36</sup> I heard later, that Girish-babu Mahashoy had told Choto-babu, "We are thinking of starting our own theatre. It would be a good thing if you could let us have Binod for our theatre." Choto-babu was a generous man. He had replied, "I love Binod very much. Besides, I would suffer losses if I let go of her. However, since I cannot turn down your request, you may have Binod."

Then one day, Choto-babu asked me, "Tell me Binod, won't you be upset if you were to leave us and go off somewhere else?" I was silent. The other day, Sri Amritalal Basu also reminded me of this incident: "I too remember well that story. Even after we brought you over, Sarat-babu mahashoy took you back a couple of times with our permission. Once, it was to play Ayesha in *Durgeshmandini* for Michael Madhusudan's BENEFIT NIGHT.<sup>37</sup> He took you away on several other occasions as well."

At any rate, it was from this time that I began working with the respected Girish-babu mahashoy. Beginning from my early youth, the best years of my life were spent under his tutelage.

## The National Theatre

### IN EARLY YOUTH

After leaving the Bengal Theatre I was free to join the late Kedarnath-babu's National Theatre. For several months I had the main roles in old plays like *Meghnad Badh* and *Mrinalini*, in small geetinatyas like *Agomoni* and *Dol-Lila*<sup>38</sup> and in numerous other farces and PANTOMIMES. Almost all of these were written by Girish-babu. Soon after, my connection with both Girish-babu and the theatre lessened somewhat. The National Theatre was then going through a very bad time. Within a short while the theatre went up for auction and a certain Marwari businessman called Pratapchand Johuree became the new owner.

The theatre continued to be called the National even under Pratapchand-babu. Girish-babu was once again appointed manager. The very first play that was produced was *Hamir*, written by the poet, the late Surendranath Mazumdar.<sup>39</sup> I was the heroine in this play. However, the National Theatre had already earned a bad reputation by then and, although the play was announced and produced with great fanfare, it failed to attract many people.

The good plays had all been staged already and were now old; new plays that were worth producing were not to be found. Girish-babu composed a small geetinatya called *Maya Taru* (The Enchanting Tree).<sup>40</sup> This geetinatya was first staged together with *Palashir Juddho* (The Battle of Palashi).<sup>41</sup> Within a few nights, the audience began to crowd the theatre, attracted by the geetinatya. My performance as Phulhashi in this play made the editor of *Reis and Rayyet*, the late Shambhuchandra Mukhopadhyay, write, "Binodini was simply charming."<sup>42</sup>

Gradually, Girish-babu's *Mobini Protima* (The Enchanting Statue) and *Anando Rabo* (Be Happy) began to draw crowds.<sup>43</sup> With *Ravan Badh* (The Slaying of Ravan) the hall began to be completely packed.<sup>44</sup> All the upstairs seats would be filled up every show day and, those rich and learned people who despised the theatre were the very ones who bought tickets a day or two in advance. The extraordinarily rapid success of the theatre made the proprietor Pratapchand remark, "Binod has achieved the impossible!" He meant that the success was magical. Eventually, we staged plays like *Sitar Bonobas* (The Exile of Sita).<sup>45</sup> Our



theatre's name spread far and wide as did the fame of this humble narrator.

From this time onwards, right up to the final phase of the Star Theatre on Beadon Street, I have worked continuously with Girish-babu. He was my teacher in my field of work and I was his first and foremost disciple. It was I who played the chief women characters in his plays. On his part, he would guide me with the greatest of care to bring my work upto his own standard.

The famous actor, the late Amritlal Mitra, joined our theatre at the time that Kedar-babu worked with us. I have heard Girish-babu say that Amrit Mitra used to act in a jatra troupe before he came to us; Girish-babu brought him to the stage after hearing his beautiful voice. I have already mentioned that earlier, *Meghnad Badh*, *Bishbriksba*, *Sadhabar Ekadoshi*, *Mrinalini*, *Palasbir Juddho* and other such plays written by well-known authors were produced after being adapted for the stage. Amritlal played Ravan in *Meghnad Badh* and here too, I played seven characters, while Girish-babu played Meghnad and Ram. In *Mrinalini*, Girish-babu was Pashupati and I was Manoroma; in *Durgeshnandini*, he was Jagat Singh and I was Ayesha; in *Bishbriksba*, Girish-babu was Nagendranath and I was Kundanandini; in *Palasbir Juddho*, he was Clive and I, Britannia, while Amritlal Mitra was Jagat Seth and Kadambini was Rani Bhabani.

How many plays shall I list! In all of them, Girish-babu, Amrit Mitra, Amrit Basu and I had the major roles. Girish-babu would instruct me with great care on my role. His was a wonderful teaching method: first, he would explain the *bhava* of the role in question; then, he asked me to memorise the lines. After this was done, he would, at his convenience, come to our home and along with Amrit Mitra, Amrit-babu (Bhuni-babu) and several others, talk to us about numerous English actresses and the works of famous English poets such as Shakespeare, Byron, Milton and Pope. He discussed their works in the form of stories and sometimes he read out sections from the texts to explain them the better. He taught us a range of behaviour, discussing every aspect separately.

With this kind of special attention, I began to learn about the art of acting, using my intelligence and my knowledge. Whatever I had learnt earlier was like the cleverness of a bird that has been taught to speak; I had myself not experienced much. I had not understood anything, nor had I been able to speak logically and with arguments. From this time onwards I understood my acting in terms of the role I had chosen to play. I would be anxious to see the performances of any famous British actor or actress who happened to come to the city. The proprietors of the theatres also

took pains to arrange for me to see English plays. When I came back home after the performances, Girish-babu would say, "Well now, let's hear something about what you've seen." I would tell him whatever I had felt and understood; if he felt this was incorrect he would explain my mistakes to me.

The late Kedarnath was the owner of the theatre for about a year. Then the two brothers Haradhan and Krishnadhan Bandhopadhyay, ran the theatre for a few months. The next proprietor was a certain Sri Shibendranath Chaudhury, from the family of Prannath Chaudhury in Kashipur. Girish-babu was the manager and motion master during this entire period. But all of these proprietors were at the head of affairs. Girish-babu did not have much time left to devote to the theatre, because of his office work. This resulted in so much confusion that these pleasure loving proprietors who lacked business sense eventually left the theatre empty handed and then filed for insolvency. Yet, I remember clearly that we had successive nights of packed houses. The acting was of such a superior quality that the audience was enchanted and the spectators said with one voice, "We do not know if this is acting or if it is actually taking place before our very eyes!" I cannot say why these gentlemen of rich families became paupers despite such successful sale of tickets. People said that the theatre was ill-omened; no one could prosper in this plot of land.

When I used to appear on stage, trained and instructed by Girish-babu mahashoy, having benefited immensely from his many counsels, I did not feel I was any other person, but that I had become the very character I was representing. My trance-like involvement continued for as long as I was acting. The management loved me greatly for the extent of my commitment to theatre, the pains I took and my excitement. Some treated me as their daughter, some as their sister, and others as a companion, a sakhi. And, loved and cared for as I was, I took great advantage of their fondness for me. My demeanour towards them was like that of a spoiled child to her parents, seeking indulgence and creating problems without rhyme or reason. I had become like the youngest child in a family, quarrelling without cause with the older ones and then making up again.

During this period, while I played the roles of superior characters, my mind seemed to want to move towards higher things. But then sometimes, enraptured by the innumerable attractions surrounding me, I felt like I was lost and confused. I was the child of poor people, my strength and intellectual

capabilities were also very limited. On the one hand, high ideals prevented me from sacrificing myself, on the other hand; the dazzling images of countless attractions beckoned me constantly. How long may a feeble will—power such as mine be able to withstand the impact of such powerful and contrary pulls? But I tried my best to control myself; if I was not able to save myself for lack of wisdom and because of Fate, I was at least never unmindful of my work. I did not have the power even to be unmindful. Acting was the chief treasure, the mainstay of my life. It had become as if an inextricable part of my nature, to study my role, to envisage a scene according to the demands of the part, and imprinting it in my mind, to stand before a huge mirror internalising the modes and gestures of each of those natural behavioural patterns; and then, to watch these pictures of the mind with rapt attention. So much so, that every aspect of the movement—walking, sitting, lying down—had also become my own.

I did not care very much for conversation and stories. But 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. He even told us of an actress in England who practised her notes with the birds in the forest. I was also told about the kind of costume that Ellen Terry wore; how Bandmann dressed in his role as Hamlet; how Ophelia always wore a dress made of flowers. . .<sup>46</sup> and about the book that had influenced Bankimchandra's *Durgeshnandini* and the English one which had inspired the composition of *Rajani*.<sup>47</sup> I will not be able to finish describing the numerous works of the many authors -- English, Greek, French and German, that I have heard discussed, thanks to Girish-babu mahashoy and his other affectionate friends. I did not merely listen to these stories, but absorbed from them whatever I could of their bhava and then constantly meditated on it. Consequently, my nature had become such that if we were visiting a garden, I did not care for the house, but went looking for a lonely spot surrounded by wild plants and flowers. I felt as though I lived there, that I had been adopted and nurtured by the forest. The beauty of every creeper, every leaf, made my heart overflow. My spirit seemed to dance in ecstasy!

If I went to a river, every wave invited a response in my heart, and I felt as though I had been playing forever on the banks of

that very river. The waves had just now left my heart to leap into the water. The bank of the Coochbehar river was exceedingly beautiful—the sand was sprinkled with mica. I often slipped out of the house and went off far away to spend my time in solitude. I lay on the sands and watched the river flow: it seemed as though the waves were talking to me.

In order to experience as many bhavas as possible, I kept my mind constantly occupied, living in the world of imagination. I could surrender myself to my imagination. Perhaps that is why, whatever role I happened to play, I never lacked the bhava necessary to portray that character. I never felt that I was acting in order to dazzle others or simply because I was a salaried actress. I forgot my own self: the joys and sorrows of the character I played were mine and I was always surprised to find that I was only acting out these emotions. That is why everyone regarded me with deep affection.

One day, Bankimchandra came to see his *Mrinalini* being performed; I was playing the part of Manorama. When he had seen Manorama on stage, Bankim-babu pronounced, "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!"<sup>48</sup> It has only been a few months now, when Amritalal Basu, the manager of the Star Theatre said to me, "Binod, are you the same Binod whose performance made Bankimchandra remark, 'I see Manorama live before my eyes?'" He asked me this, since I am now an invalid, crippled by illness and sorrow.

Dedicated to acting at an early age, I had from the early years of understanding, become so enthusiastic and high spirited under the tutelage of Girish-babu, that I would be very upset by the slightest harsh word from anyone. I always craved love and affection. And my theatre friends too gave me immense love. At any rate, from this time onwards I had begun to sense within me a growing self-confidence.

Let me recount yet another incident from this period of my life. Soon after joining Pratap Johuree's theatre, or perhaps just before I had joined his theatre, our circumstances obliged me to become the ashrita of a rich young man. He was an extremely good man, of an exceedingly amiable disposition; and he cared for me from his heart. I had been bound to him by the power of his sincere love for me. At first, he felt that I should not continue on the stage, but when I wouldn't agree to this on any account, he said, "Well then, work as an AMATEUR, without pay. My carriage will take you to the theatre and bring you back." This put me in a difficult

position. I had always worked for money. My mother believed that theatre work had finally put an end to our poverty—in the theatre was enshrined our Lakshmi. And things had come to a pass where it was not possible for me to work on an amateur basis. It was back-breaking work in any case, and working without wages did not make sense. I told Girish-babu about my predicament. He said, 'Well, that shouldn't be a problem. Just tell 'X' that you don't accept money. I shall go over and hand your salary to your mother.'

Although deceit is our constant companion and deception in the life of a fallen woman is considered to be the mainstay of her business, nevertheless, I was saddened by this decision. Even though I was a despised prostitute, I had received higher education and I hated deception and untruth from the core of my being. Although distrust was at the root of our profession, I trusted everyone and was loved by all. I did not like subtleties and intrigues. But there was nothing else for me to do but agree with Girish-babu's suggestion. Girish-babu had good relations with the above-mentioned person who was such a gentleman that he had me sent to the theatre ahead of time, in case the theatre people suspected anything.

Pratap Johuree's theatre ran well; he himself was a soft-spoken, capable man. Of all the people who have worked in this field, Pratap-babu was the only one who did not incur losses. He never told us of course, if he made profits, but it was well known that at least he did not suffer losses. Sales were brisk every night and discipline was maintained all round. His business was also very well organised: everyone knew then, as they do now, that he was a businessman in every respect.

Let me conclude this chapter by saying why I left this theatre and how the Star Theatre came into being. We had to work very hard on the new plays and the pantomimes being produced by Girish-babu. The excessive labour that I undertook every day took its toll and I began to fall sick. I applied for a month's leave; after much insistence, he granted me leave for fifteen days. I went to blessed Kashi-dham in order to recuperate during this period; but my illness only worsened while I was there. It took me almost a month therefore, before I could come back to Calcutta. I rejoined the theatre, but came to know that Pratap-babu did not want to give me wages for the duration of the leave. Girish-babu told him, "If you don't pay her the wages for the duration of the leave, Binod will stop working here; and then we shall be in great difficulty." I had not heard exactly what had transpired, but when I heard something of this sort, it made my blood boil. I was

furiously. A little thing was enough to set me on fire and I would be quite blinded by rage. When Pratap-babu came into the theatre that day, I asked him for my salary. "What salary?" he laughed. And said, "You've not done any work." That was enough. "So, you will not give me my salary!" I said, and went away. And did not go back.

Then Girish-babu and Amrit-babu came to our home. I told Girish-babu then, "Mahashoy, I want a higher salary, and whatever money is due to me has to be put down in a contract; otherwise I shan't work." At that Amrit-babu said, "Now, come on, Binod, don't be difficult. There's a Marwari's son who would like to build a new theatre; he's willing to pay whatever is necessary. Just keep quiet for a few days, let's see how things move."

The making of the Star Theatre may be traced from this incident. I too did not say anything more to Pratap-babu as per Girish-babu's words; but secretly, I began to find out as to who this new person was who wanted to start the new theatre.

## On Matters Relating to the Star Theatre

Letter

Mahashoy!

This was the time when I fell into the direst of circumstances. Unfortunate and fallen women, prostitutes such as us, have always to endure changes of fortune, but there is a limit even to such transitions—my Fate has always worked against me. I was an ignorant lowly woman, unfamiliar with the path of both good and evil. The path that we are destined to take is always condemned; but it seems to be a rule of our life that whenever we want to walk on the path of virtue, evil will inevitably appear to waylay us. People say that it is necessary always to defend oneself, but even our attempts to protect ourselves invite censure. There is no one to look upon us with affection or to help us in our times of difficulty. However, attend now to my story of pain.

I too had resolved to leave the late Pratap-babu mahashoy's theatre. A certain incident which had taken place shortly before this had hurt me grievously. The rich youth who was my protector was unmarried. He had married a few months ago and like many a rich young man, had behaved unfairly towards me. I had been deeply affected by this incident. I felt, therefore, since God has given me the means to earn my living, and if I am capable of taking care of myself and the expenses of my family through my physical exertions, I need not add to my burden of sins by selling my body, and torment myself besides. If a playhouse could be put together through my offices, then it would forever afford me a source of sustenance.

It was while I was occupied with these thoughts that the late Gurmukh Rai was busy trying to set up the Star Theatre—so I heard from my fellow ACTORS. It so happened that the respectable young man who was my protector was away on work in a far-off place precisely at this time. Meanwhile the actors began to pressure me with their entreaties. However you can, they said, help us make a theatre! I was not averse to having a theatre built; but to leave the protection of one person and accept in an unethical manner the protection of another was something that went against my nature. On the other hand, there were the urgent pleas of my theatre friends! I was in a quandry.

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. My imagination soared and I was filled with excitement at his words. My theatre friends continued to plead with me. I realised too that it was upto me whether or not we were going to build a theatre for ourselves. But I was increasingly reminded of the young man under whose protection I had been living. Gradually, the absence of the young man on the one hand and the presence and the urgent pleas of my theatre companions on the other, meant that my mind began to be swayed by the prospect of a new theatre. I began to think that he who had given me protection had been bound to me by truth. Yet he had broken his word and had deceived me like any other deceiving male. He had sworn repeatedly, by all that is dharma, that I was the sole object of his love and his love for me was eternal. But what acutally happened was quite different. He had pretended to go to his ancestral village on the pretext of work; however, the real reason for the visit was not work, but marriage. Where then was his love for me? Such deceitfulness! In what way was I then bound to him?

Then again, I would suddenly begin to think that the young man was not really to blame; he had been forced to marry under pressure from his relations. And I—the sole object of his affections—what was I to do? I spent sleepless nights when such feelings possessed me. But in the morning, when my friends appeared, their pleas battered me like waves and swept aside all the misgivings of the night. I decided we must have the theatre. I find now that my heart had not been deceiving me at that time. I have received enough evidence of this. But what has gone by will never return. Those days never did return. I shall tell you later Mahashoy, in brief, the nature of this evidence.

I had decided on the theatre, and why not? Those with whom I had passed so many years of my life as brothers and sisters; those whom I have always adored, they too spoke rightly: if a theatre was set up because of me, then we would spend the rest of our lives as members of one family. Our resolve hardened. We made our decision and with Gurmukh Rai's help began work on the theatre.

Although it has always been our practice to move from the protection of one man to that of another, the incident I refer to caused me great pain. Perhaps people will laugh if they hear that we too are sensible to pain, that our deceptions cost us much agony. But if they were to give this some consideration 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. He had given us everything, but fate

willed that we lose everything. But 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? Who will give us their hearts in return for our own? There is no lack of those who come greedily to talk to us of love, hoping all the while to seduce us; but is there one who would put his heart to the test and find out whether we have anything like a heart? Has anyone ever sought to know whether it was we who first deceived or whether we learnt deception only after we were ourselves deceived?

It was one of us prostitutes, who was sent by the heads of the Hindu society to seduce that devotee of Vishnu, the lord Haridas, but the attitude of that Vaishnav converted her into a Vaishnavi. This story is known to all. If she were really without a heart, she could never have become a devotee of Vishnu.<sup>49</sup> Love has never yet been bought with money. We have never sold our love. The fault lies with *sansar*. The poem called 'Barangana' (Prostitute) by the dramatist Girishchandra gives an accurate portrait of these unfortunates: "Like other women she too had a lotus heart".<sup>50</sup> You will find that in many a place, drops of water have accumulated and over a time they have turned into stone. Our story is similar. Our hearts have become petrified after repeated misfortunes—when we have fallen into distressing circumstances. However, let me not speak any more of this.

The theatre people and I endured much in order to accept the change in the situation I have spoken of. This was so because when the rich youth heard that I had given myself to another man and was planning to be forever associated with the theatre, he tried to create innumerable obstacles in my path—whether out of rage or obstinacy I cannot say. How complicated were the obstacles he devised! He had *lathiyals*<sup>\*</sup> brought over from his estate and they surrounded our homes. At this, Gurmukh-babu too brought over some notorious thugs. There were fights and the police had to intervene.

One day my very life was in danger. It was about six in the morning and I had fallen asleep in my room after REHEARSALS. Suddenly my sleep was broken by the sound of footsteps and of something rattling. I found the young man right inside my room. He stood facing me in military gear with a sword at his side. "Meni," he demanded, "why are you sleeping so soundly?"

\* Men trained professionally to fight with sticks (*lathis*).

Startled, I sat up, whereupon he said, "Now, Binod, you must leave their company. I'll give back all the money that's been spent for you. Here, take this ten thousand. If you want more, I shall give you more!"

I have always been obstinate: if anyone proved stubborn, I would become so angry that I would lose all sense of what ought to be done. If I had once set my mind on doing something, no one could persuade me to change it. I could only be persuaded by sweet and affectionate words; forbidding me with vehemence or force never served to deter me from my purpose. There was no one who could compel me to do anything. Consequently, the young man's arrogance made me furious and I said, "No, never. I have given them my word and I cannot act otherwise." "If it is money that is the problem," he said, "I shall give you ten thousand more." I was enraged at his words. I stood up and told him, "You can keep your money. It is I who have earned the money and not the other way round. If it is so fated, then many more such tens and twenty thousands will come my way. Leave me now!"

When I had said these words, his anger knew no bounds and he drew out the sword that hung by his side. "Is that so! Do you think I'm going to let you off so easily? I'll cut you to pieces. The twenty thousand I had wanted to give you, I shall spend elsewhere. I don't care what happens!" Even as he said those words he unsheathed his sword and in a second had struck, aiming at my forehead. I had kept my eyes on his sword. Just as he had raised it to strike me I sat down by the side of a table-harmonium. The sword struck the cover of the harmonium and went several inches into it. In a moment he had prised it out and had struck again. But I was not fated to die and that blow too fell on the stool on which I had kept some music. I got up immediately and caught hold of his upraised hand. "What are you doing?" I demanded. "If you must cut me up, then do so . . . later. But of what use will it be? How does it matter whether my sinful life be ended or not. But think of what this means for you . . . think of your forefathers. Are you going to leave this world burdened with sin, on account of a despicable prostitute? Shame on you! Listen, you must be calm. Calm yourself. Tell me what to do. Cool down."

I have heard that once the first impulse of an overriding anger is subdued, the person returns to normal and so it happened in this instance. He cast aside the sword and sat down right there, his hand over his face. His timidity at this point was truly pitiable. Let all go to the winds, I thought, I would return to him. But I

had been bound by ties as strong as life, by my friends and by Girish-babu. There was no way of returning. At any rate, I had been saved, at least for that day. He left me without saying another word.

Meanwhile those of us who had formed a group left the late Pratap-babu's theatre at the same time. And the late Gurmukh-babu also insisted that if I did not give myself solely to him, he would never do any work for the theatre. In order to settle this unpleasant business, the others decided after some consultation that I should be sent away somewhere and lie low for a month or two. I had to spend this period in sundry places, sometimes in Raniganj and sometimes elsewhere.

Throughout this time, work went on in preparation for the theatre and in deciding on construction plans. Later, when it was decided that we would take a lease on Priyo Mitra's place on Beadon Street and it would take how long to build the theatre and how many rupees it would cost, I returned to Calcutta. A few days after my return, Gurmukh-babu said to me, "Binod, there's no point getting into this mess of a theatre. Please accept this fifty thousand rupees from me. I'll give it to you right away, directly to you," and he took out the currency notes from his pocket. I loved the theatre with a passion. Although I am a despicable prostitute, I rejected immediately the half a lakh that was offered me. When Amrit Mitra and the others heard that Gurmukh Rai wanted to give me fifty thousand rupees in lieu of the theatre, they were extremely worried. No effort was spared to ensure that I did not accept the money, but then no effort was really necessary. I had set my mind on acting and had resolved that on no account would I be bound to him if the theatre was not made for me. Then, it was at my insistence that land was leased on Beadon Street and Gurmukh Rai began spending unlimited sums of his money. And it was on the same Beadon Street that Banamali Chakraborty mahashoy's house was rented and we began rehearsing. One by one, the other senior actors and actresses came away and joined us. Girish-babu mahashoy was our [motion] master and manager and he began writing new plays for the theatre.

It was at this time that the worthy Amritlal Basu (presently the manager of the Star Theatre) came to join us. He had LEASED the Bengal Theatre sometime prior to this, when we had probably been working with Pratap-babu. A house had been rented at Shimle,<sup>51</sup> close to the twin mandirs. Bhuni-babu (Amritlal Basu) was a frequent visitor to this house and he had even stayed there for a few days on work. He had been unable to occupy the

theatre house because he had a disagreement with the authorities at the Bengal Theatre. It was we who helped out Bhuni-babu by bringing over *latbials* from distant parts of the countryside and getting them to occupy the theatre. Later, when we had our own theatre, Bhuni-babu joined our group.

Professor Jaharlal Dhar was our stage manager. Girish-babu made Dasu-babu the assistant stage manager although the latter was very young, because he wanted him to learn on the job. And he also brought over the present proprietor, Babu Hariprasad Basu, in order that the entire burden of the accounts and overall responsibility of the theatre might be handed over to him.<sup>52</sup> Hari-babu has always been a learned and worthy person. Girish-babu often spent so much of his time in teaching, that he had little time left over to do anything else he wanted to do for the betterment of the theatre. Therefore he selected many worthy people and assigned specific responsibilities to each one of them.

Work on the new theatre went on amid great excitement and much happiness. We would go for REHEARSALS around two or three in the afternoon and once they were over, we went to the site. When the others had left, I filled up with earth the foundation area of the ~~PRR~~ and the back seats. I carried basket-loads of earth on my head. Sometimes, in order to encourage the labourers, I paid them something extra per basket-load. Work carried on late into the night to ensure speedy construction. Everyone would leave except me, Gurmukh-babu, and a few others. We stayed on all night supervising the work. Those were truly days of excitement and happiness.

This went on for perhaps a year or so.<sup>53</sup> And now there is something I must say. While the theatre was being built, they had all told me, "The theatre house that is coming up is going to be linked with your name, so that your name will continue to live, even after your death. That is to say, the theatre is to be called the 'B Theatre'." This had only added to my enthusiasm. But I do not know why, when it came to the actual event, they did not keep their promise. For as long as the theatre had been constructed and had not been REGISTERED, I had known that it was going to be named after me. But when they came back after the registration (everything was ready by then . . . the theatre was to open within a few weeks) I asked them anxiously what name they had given the new theatre. "The Star," Dasu-babu had said with some satisfaction.<sup>54</sup> I was so affected by this news that I sat down and was incapable of speech for the next two minutes. A little later, controlling myself, I said, "Alright."

I wondered afterwards, was all their love and affection only a

show of words in order to get some work out of me? But what could I do? I was then completely in their hands. And I had never dreamt that they would deceive me and behave in such a dishonest manner. The grief that I had not felt in my refusal of such a huge sum of money I now felt intensely, at their behaviour. Although I never said a word to anyone, this was something I could never forget. I have remembered, throughout, their treatment of me. Besides, the theatre has always been my love, I have always regarded it as my own. At least a new theatre had been built. And so my own grievance was buried. But even after the theatre was ready, there were times when I was not treated well. They all tried their best to ensure that I did not continue as a salaried actress in the new theatre. It went so far, that thanks to their efforts and enterprise, I had to sit idle at home for two months and it was only because of Girish-babu's concern for me and by virtue of his authority as a shareholder that he could insist on my return. People said that the proprietor himself felt, "Such injustice towards the very person who had made the theatre possible . . . and for us to now work without the very person who had made the theatre possible! This can never happen! I shall burn everything down." However, if we live together, there are bound to be mistakes, and I too had my share of faults. Yet there were many who loved me; in particular, the great affection that I received from the respected Girish-babu only encouraged my *abbiman*. I was indulged. Consequently, it was I who was to blame. However, everyone praised me for my enthusiasm and for my acting prowess, and, quite forgetting all my mistakes and my faults, above all they gave me affection. Whatever be the bit of good I may or may not have done in all my years of theatre life, it is also true that because of the failings of my nature and my lack of wisdom I have done many wrong things. But I have also had to endure many blows and suffer injuries on account of this work. In this manner, after many such ups and downs, when we staged the new play *Daksha-yajna* (The Sacrifice Held by Daksha)<sup>55</sup> in our new theatre, we forgot, more or less, our earlier unpleasantness. All of us knew that this theatre was our own: just as we had made it glamorous on the outside, so we planned to make it even more beautiful within, by making it a repository of talent. So with love and excitement and joy, we all took pains to add to the glory of the performance.

The first play we performed here was *Daksha-yajna*. Girish-babu mahashoy was Daksha; Amrit Mitra, Mahadev; and Bhuni-babu, Dadhichi. I played Sati; Kadambini was Prostuti; other worthy people played the remaining roles. It is beyond my

powers to describe the crowds of people on the first day or express how our hearts trembled with fear at the sight of people hanging from the shutters and sitting atop the walls so that they might glimpse our play. We ourselves appeared to have become a sacrifice of the *yajna!*<sup>56</sup> But once the play began it seemed as if the gods had granted us a boon: that we might achieve our objectives with renewed versatility. The spectators fell silent when they beheld on stage the solemn but powerful presence of Bengal's Garrick—Girish Ghosh.

As for the excitement generated by the performance . . . it is simply indescribable. Any one who has seen Girish-babu's *Daksha* and Amrit Mitra's *Mahadev* will perhaps never be able to forget their performance. There was probably not a soul in the audience who did not start in fear when Amrit came on stage crying out furiously,

"Who's there! Give me, give me my Sati,"<sup>57</sup>

And probably, Sati quite forgot herself when she heard her husband criticised by Daksha and prepared to end her life. It was as if there was a fire raging on the stage during the performance.

However, it was probably as a result of the pains taken by Girish-babu and the devotion and enthusiasm shown by the actors and actresses that the new theatre began to prosper rapidly. It was while I worked in this theatre that I came into contact with many people who were scholarly, talented, knowledgeable and respectable. It was because of their encouragement that I realised the seriousness of my profession. Acting was not mere fun in a playhouse, but something to be learnt and to be initiated into, as a dharma. I became capable of comprehending that acting meant combining the heart and the mind, and I learnt how much of one's self had to be drawn out and poured out in the process. I realised too, the extent of preparation required by a characterless woman of little intelligence such as myself, before I could be capable of achieving excellence. That is why I used to try in a thousand ways to control my passions. I felt that acting was my work and my life. I tried with my heart and soul to uphold the honour of the lofty characters I played on the stage.

After this piece we performed all the superior plays written by Girishbabu. But in the middle of it all, Gurmukh Rai let go of his shares in the company; I do not know whether this was because of social pressures or for other reasons. Hari-babu, Amrit Mitra, Dasu-babu put in some money of their own, borrowed some more from the late Haridhan Dutta mahashoy and raised the remaining sum from the daily sale of theatre tickets at the Exhibition then running in Calcutta.<sup>58</sup> So they put together enough



funds to become the new owners of the Star Theatre. Sri Amritalal Basu too became one of the new proprietors. Around this time Gurmukh-babu was obliged, because of illness and various other reasons to relinquish his shares. "I want to transfer the shares to the person who has made this theatre possible. She should have at least half of the shares, otherwise I shall not be party to this transaction," he stated.

Once Gurmukh Rai expressed this desire, it began to be said that I should have at least fifty per cent of the shares. I heard from other people that Gurmukh Rai had said, "If Binod does not agree to this then I will never hand over the shares to the others." However, Mahashoy Girish Ghosh did not agree. He explained to my mother: "Binod's Ma, you needn't bother yourself with these matters. You are women, you will never be able to bear such trouble. After all we are all small fry, what have we to do with big business? I shall never work anywhere without your daughter. And no one can deny that when it comes to any kind of theatre work, Binod is absolutely indispensable. We shall continue to work. There's no reason why you should take on an additional burden. Let the others do the donkey work."

After these words of Girish-babu, my mother would by no means agree to my holding any shares in the company. My grandmother too had the greatest respect for and faith in Girish-babu mahashoy. They did not want at all to disregard his wishes. On account of this and similar incidents, many people believed that I owned a large percentage of the shares of the Star, so much so, that sometimes they have directly enquired of me, "What is the percentage you own?"

Once the theatre came into their hands, work went on with twice as much enthusiasm. I have mentioned earlier the Exhibition which was on at this time—Calcutta was teeming with people from diverse places. Who could rein in our joy and excitement, our commitment to work! Once again we were united in our common struggle. We worked as though it was all a personal affair. *Nala-Damayanti*, *Dbruba charitra*, *Sribatsa-Chinta* and *Prabhad charitra* were all produced during this phase.<sup>59</sup>

The more famous our theatre became, the more care Girish-babu took to instruct me in various ways so that I might perform better. Then *Chaitanya-Lila* was written and we started rehearsing for the new play.<sup>60</sup> The editor of *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Sri Sisir-babu mahashoy, himself a most esteemed Vaishnav, would often attend the rehearsals.<sup>61</sup> He advised a lowly woman such as I on how best to bring alive and in the most subtle manner, the character of that divine being. He would tell me time and again

that I should think of Chaitanya's lotus-feet. He was Patitpaban and His grace was boundless. I listened to him fearfully and I tried to keep my mind on the lotus feet of Mahaprabhu. My mind was tormented by doubts and I wondered how I was ever to find a way out of the abyss. I called out to Him at all times: O Patitpaban, Gaur Hari! Look kindly upon this lowly fallen woman!

The night before my first performance in *Chaitanya-Lila*, I could hardly sleep, my heart was so full of an intense apprehension. I rose early that morning and went to bathe in the Ganga. Then I wrote out Durga's name a hundred and eight times and fell at His feet, praying that Mahaprabhu would stand by my side in this moment of crisis. I prayed that I might receive His grace. Later, I learnt that my search for refuge at His feet had perhaps not been in vain. That I had indeed received His grace was confirmed by the response of the many wise and discerning members of the audience. And within myself I realised that God was being kind to me because while I enacted Sri Chaitanya's childhood, and sang:

I have no one but Radha  
I play the flute, calling upon Radha,<sup>62</sup>

it was as though a powerful light filled my heart. When I put on the garland I had taken from Malini and asked her, "What do you see Malini?" my vision was directed inwards and I perceived the truth within. I could see nothing that was around me. I felt as if it was the exquisite lotus-feet of Gaur Hari. Yes, it was Gaurango himself. He it was who spoke; I only listened and echoed His words. My body thrilled and all of me filled with a blossoming. Everything around me appeared obscured by a mist. When I argued with the teacher and said, "Prabhu, what is one to another? All is Krishna!" I truly felt what indeed was one person to another? And later, when in joy and exultation I cried—

In Gaya I saw at Krishna's feet,  
Sucking honey from the lotus,  
Tens of thousands  
of body-less beings!<sup>63</sup>

—I felt that there was someone in my heart who sang these words. I was no one. There was no consciousness of the 'I' within me.

When I had become a sanyasin and was taking leave of Sachidevi, my mother, I sang—



Cry Krishna, dear Mother  
and not Nimai.  
All will be yours if you cry  
Krishna.  
Tears for Nimai will  
lose you  
Krishna and Nimai! <sup>64</sup>

At this, some of the women in the audience would sob so loudly that my own heart trembled. The heart-rending cries of my Sachimata, my own excitement and the enthusiasm of the spectators would affect me to a point where I would be completely overwhelmed by my own tears. And finally, as the sanyasi singing kirtans, I sang—

You have stolen my heart, Hari,  
Left me alone in this world.  
Reveal yourself, my life companion,  
Let my life lie at your feet. <sup>65</sup>

I cannot express in writing the state of my mind when I sang these lines. I really felt that, yes, truly, I was alone in this world; there is none whom I may call my own. It seemed as if my own spirit leapt out from within me and sought refuge at the lotus-feet of Hari. The samkirtan I danced as one possessed. On some days it came to such a pass that, unable to bear the pressure of performance, I would faint on the stage.

One day I had fainted thus in the middle of the play. There was a huge audience that day. We had unusually large crowds all through the run of *Chaitanya-Lila*. However, if foreigners happened to come, the theatre would be packed. Amongst them were many talented and venerable personages. The respected Father Lafont Saheb had come on this particular occasion. After the DROP-SCENE had fallen, he went backstage. When he learnt from Girish-babu about the state I was in, he said, 'Come, let me take a look!' Girish-babu led him to the GREEN ROOM. When I regained consciousness I found that a huge bearded saheb wearing flowing garments, was running his hands all over my body, from my head to my feet. When I sat up, Girish-babu told me, "Pay your respects to him. This great pandit is Father Lafont." I had heard of him but had not seen him until then. I bowed before him with folded hands. He stroked my head and asked me to drink a glass of water. After I had drunk it, I felt recovered enough to continue with my acting. I did not continue with my performance lifelessly,

as I had done on the former occasions when I had fainted on stage. I cannot say why this was so.

Innumerable were the people, the *mahamahopadhyays* and pandits whose blessings I had received as a result of my performance in *Chaitanya-Lila*. Mathurnath Padmaratna mahashoy of Nabadweep, notable among the devotees of Vishnu, had himself come up to the stage. <sup>66</sup> I had taken the dust of his feet and he had blessed me with his hands. By the grace of Mahaprabhu, I was the recipient of boundless kindness from so many learned and worthy people. And it was during this performance of *Chaitanya-Lila*, that is to say, not only this performance, but the incident around it which became the source of greatest pride in all my life, that I a sinner, was granted grace by the Paramhansadeb SriRamakrishna mahashoy. Because it was after seeing me perform in *Chaitanya-Lila*, that the most divine of beings granted me refuge at his feet. When the performance was over I would present myself and sit at his feet, in the office room. He would rise and begin to dance joyously, singing as he did so: "Our Guru is Hari! Hari is our Guru!" He asked me to sing this along with him. He would place his hands on my head and cleansing with his touch my sinful body, he blessed me, "Ma, may you have *chaitanya!*" Poignant indeed was the sight of his gentle and compassionate image before an inferior creature such as myself. The Patitpaban himself was reassuring me, but alas, I am truly unfortunate; even so I have been unable to recognise him. Once again, I have been ensnared by temptation and illusion and made my life a veritable hell.

And once, when he lay ill in the house at Shyampukur I had gone for a *darshan*. <sup>67</sup> Then, too, his body had radiated a calm contentment "Come, sit down, my child," he said to me. How affectionate were his words; as though he was truly reaching out to forgive this creature of hell. How many times have I heard in the theatre hall, the melodious voice of his chief disciple Narendranath (he who later became known as Swami Vivekananda) singing the Satyam Shivam *mangalgeet*. <sup>68</sup> My body that was dedicated to the theatre had truly been blessed. If the world looks upon me with contempt, it does not matter to me, for I know that he who was the most worthy of worship, Ramakrishna Paramhansadeb, has been kind to me. His pure words, his words of hope: "Hari is our Guru! Our Guru is Hari" continue to give me strength. When I am subdued by the unbearable burden of my heart, it is then that his all-forgiving contented image appears within me and exhorts me to recite, "Hari is our Guru! Our Guru is Hari!" I do not recall how often

he came to the theatre after the performance of *Chaitanya-Lila*, but it seems as if I have often seen his smiling face in the BOX.<sup>69</sup>

We next staged Part II of *Chaitanya-Lila*. The second part was more difficult than the first; it contained many long SPEECHES. Also, Chaitanya's role was the most important in this second part.<sup>70</sup> I suffered from a severe headache for over a month after I had memorised the lines for this part. The part was, in general, difficult and required the portrayal of madness, but only those who have seen this second part, can comprehend the extent of madness and the loss of self conveyed in Mahaprabhu's logical discourse with Sarvabhamu Thakur on form and formlessness. This is when Sri Chaitanya manifests himself as the six-armed one, in his *sharabhujamurti*.<sup>71</sup> At such points, not only was the mind stretched to its limits, but the body too had to be exerted to the utmost. The movement from a low to a high, and thence finally to the highest pitch of cerebral excitement made me feel as though I was on the brink of something and would come crashing down any moment. And then to depict the complete loss of self when he enters the holy Jagannath temple, quite oblivious of himself as he cries out, "Here, here is my Kalachand!" It is fearful even to remember, how difficult it was to perform what I can now speak of so easily. As I reflect on those days in my present old and useless condition, I wonder how I had ever managed to do it all so well. That is why I feel, what could I have ever accomplished were it not for the grace of Mahaprabhu? The second part of *Chaitanya-Lila* has never been performed since my leaving the theatre.

Around this time, Amritalal Basu mahashoy's most outstanding farce, *Bibab Bibhrat*,<sup>72</sup> was prepared for the stage. I had the role of Bilasini Karforma in this play! What a tremendous difference between these two roles! On the one hand, the character of the divine Mahaprabhu Chaitanya; and on the other, the woman of the nineteenth century—educated and enlightened Bilasini Karforma who rebelled against Hindu society! For about six or eight months I was afraid to play Chaitanya and Bilasini at the same time. It was much later that I could sum up enough courage to do so. There were so many obstacles and dangers during the performance, that I wonder now as to how I was able to deal with them. From time to time, I would be so ill that my health

would suffer. Then I would take up a little place by the Ganga and would come in to the city only on Saturdays and Sundays for the shows. Whatever expenses were considered necessary for maintaining my health was gladly borne by the theatre authorities.

There was one other change which took place at this time. Because of my illness and various other obstacles, I underwent a change of heart. I felt I would not subordinate myself to any one any more. I would continue to live on whatever earnings that might come my way from my god-given ability. I resolved to be financially independent. This conviction lasted for about a year and I spent my days in great peace during this time. I would go to my place of work in the evenings and after my work was over, I listened to the conversation between Bhuni-babu and Girish-babu. They talked of stories from all over the world, about the theatre world in particular, and we discussed how best to improve a particular piece or what was a problem in another piece, and other such aspects of our profession.

When I went back home, how lovingly my mother served me food. She would get up at that late hour to sit beside me while I ate. After my meal was over, I would meditate on Him and go to sleep contentedly. But eventually, it became virtually impossible to continue working in the theatre because of various kinds of estrangements and betrayals. Those who had been as loving brothers, friends, kinsmen and companions during our years of work had suddenly turned into wealthy upcoming authority figures. Perhaps it was because of this, or perhaps, it was because of my own faults that many mistakes were committed. Consequently, I had to take leave from the stage.

<sup>69</sup> Colloquial name for Krishna.

## The Last Border

Letter

Mahashoy!

How much longer shall I continue to plague you? How much longer shall I torment you with the sinful account of the life of a wretched and tainted woman such as myself? But remembering your kindness and generosity, I venture to present to you the events of this sinful life; and that is why I request that if you have, in your kindness, listened patiently for all these days to my story of pain, then hear me out to the end.

If man could only know his future, the sins of vanity and pride would surely disappear from the face of this earth. What I was then and what am I now! If I had realised then, that the Almighty Lord can both give and take away, I would not have spent my days in futile games of *abbiman*. The days have gone by and all that is left to me are words, the pain of memories, and repentance for my sins.

But, it is certain the Lord is kind: no living creature is denied His grace, however lowly may be his place. It is He who gives and He who takes away. I do not rail against this. That infinitely generous Being has granted this hapless sinner a comforting place of refuge where I may sit down and go to sleep in peace even with a heart racked with unbearable pain. Now listen to these last words.

Let me speak of a few events from my theatre days. I had become dedicated to the stage at such an early age that when I played Sarojini in the play of that name, he who is now the worthy manager of Star Theatre would take on the role of Bijoy Singh.<sup>73</sup> He tells me even now, "I used to feel quite shy about doing the love scenes with you in those days. But the acting was of such a superior standard that one day when Bhairavacharya was about to sacrifice Sarojini, the spectators were so provoked that they jumped over the footlights and came on to the stage. There was a huge commotion and we had to stop the performance for a while. Do you remember all this?"

I used to play Kunda in *Bishbriksha*. Excitable women like us had to play this timid quiet soul. Boundless love lay hidden within the tiny heart of this girl discarded by her relations, raised in another's house and who, whether because of her own erroneous thinking, or as a result of ill fortune, decides to give away her

heart, silently and fearfully, to her benefactor. One who is a hundred times superior to her, in beauty, talent and in social status and wealth. She conceals her anguish and offers herself to the benefactor, passing her days like a sensitive fawn. And there is nothing she can do. She has no means of support, no one that she may call her own and no confidence in herself. Only she who has acted in a similar role will understand the extreme patience required to play such a role. Girish-babu mahashoy played Nagendranath to my Kunda.

And immediately after playing Kunda in *Bishbriksha* to play Kanchan in *Sadbabar Ekadoshi*. What a world of difference—in their temperament and in their actions. I cannot say into how many selves I had divided myself during the time of performance. On the completion of one bhava it was necessary to gather enough resources for another. This had become a part of my nature. Even when I was not on stage, I was constantly engrossed in different bhavas.

Unless one has seen *Mrinalini* being performed, it would be impossible to understand how difficult it was to maintain that just balance in the character of Manorama: she is a young woman in love, a minister giving wise counsel, and finally, a pure-hearted sati desiring to die along with her husband—all at the same time. Whoever takes on the role of Manorama has to reveal to the audience all these sides of her self. It would be difficult to imagine how much thought and effort goes into the rapid switch from seriousness to something quite different, as exhibited in her conversation with 'Pashupati' which she breaks off abruptly to exclaim childishly, "Let me go see the ducks in the pond!"<sup>74</sup> If one cannot naturally abandon the serious mood of the child-woman and take on immediately the playful childish mood of the girl, then such a remark only becomes laughable and the actress becomes a butt of ridicule for her 'coyness'. That is why the late Bankim-babu mahashoy had said, "I had written out Manorama's character in a book, but I had never expected that I would see her before me; today, Binod's acting has dispelled all such doubts in me."

Needless to say, my acting was discussed extensively in print. Naturally, the criticism comprised both praise and censure, but as to the proportion of the praise and censure, I leave for those who've seen me perform to decide . . . I did not read too much criticism, because I felt that if I heard too much praise, then my weak character might be totally ruined. However, the Lord in His kindness has rescued me from such a fate: I felt just as lowly and despised by the world then, as I do now. I was a beggar; I

begged the kindness of the wise and the discerning. I place before you a small section of one of the weekly pieces written by the most venerable Shambhunath Mukhopadhyay in praise of my acting skills in the *Reis and Rayyet*.

But last not least [sic] shall we say of Binodini? She is not only the Moon of Star company, but absolutely at the head of her profession in India. She must be a woman of considerable culture to be able to show such unaffected sympathy with so many and various characters and such capacity of reproducing them. She is certainly a Lady of much refinement of feeling as she shows herself to be one of inimitable grace. On Wednesday she played two very distinct and widely divergent roles, and did perfect justice to both. Her Mrs. Bilasini Karforma, the girl graduate, exhibited so to say an iron grip of the queer phenomenon, the Girl of the period as she appears in Bengal Society. Her Chaitanya showed a wonderful mastery of the suitable forces dominating one of the greatest of religious characters who was taken to be the Lord himself and is to this day worshipped as such by millions. For a young Miss to enter into such a being so as to give it perfect expression, is a miracle. All we can say is that genius like faith can move mountains.

And there were many who criticised me; their criticism had nothing to do with my acting. They censured me saying that it was a sin for people of my sort to even act the part of such lofty characters.<sup>75</sup> Each one said whatever he thought; in our times, just as there was praise, so there was equally strong censure if a mistake had been made. They abused us in the vilest of language for the most trifling of mistakes.

Then, from time to time I had to encounter so many disasters during the course of my work in the theatre. Once, when as Pramila I was going around the pyre, my hair and the veil caught fire.<sup>76</sup> And once, as Britannia, as I hung suspended by a wire, I fell to the stage from a considerable height.<sup>77</sup> There were too many incidents of this kind for me to recount them here.

Just as I concentrated on the character I was playing, so too was I concerned about the costume and make-up. I was well known for my ability to dress according to the character and to dress others as well. When *Nala-Damayanti* was being performed for the first time, a saheb had come from a foreign company to make up Nala.<sup>78</sup> Amritlal Mitra (who was playing Nala) was dark-complexioned and consequently quite a lot of money was spent on the make-up and the wig. There were many who told me, "Why don't you get yourself made up as well?" "Let me see how Nala mahashoy is made up," I replied. Later, I was not pleased at what had been done—in fact, I was quite amused at the total

effect. It was as if he had been smeared with oil. So I told the man, "Sir, watch me do my own make-up and costume."

I then took care of the entire costume and the colouring; everybody felt that the colouring had been well done. From that time onwards, whenever Amrit-babu played Nala, I would do his make-up; he never cared for anyone else's efforts. This annoyed the other actresses from time to time. Once, when I was in a hurry, an actress called Bonobiharini (Bhuni) had said, "Come, Amrit-babu, let me paint you up!" Amrit-babu had replied, "Binod's taste in costume and make-up is superior in every respect to everybody else's!"

I always looked after my own make-up and wardrobe; the dressers only got everything ready for me. There was almost no one who criticised my dress or make-up because both were done very tastefully. So too with my hair; I could do what I pleased with it. The curls would come out so well, that Girish-babu would affectionately tell me, "There was an Italian poet who used to say that he was willing to give his life for a little mole on the face of a beautiful young girl in one of his books. If he only saw your CURLING, it's hard to say what price he would have put on it!" It is possible that Girish-babu said this only because he cared so much for me, but then not one of my dressers had ever criticised me.

The present manager of the Star Theatre, the worthy Amritlal Basu mahashoy, also praised my skills in dressing. It is crucial that the stage actress keep an eye on her costume: because it is the same person who presents herself before the spectators, changing her appearance according to the different stages of her life, childhood, youth and old age. When this person has to portray happiness and sorrow, joy, peace and solemnity, then she has also to show various kinds of facial expressions and movements. Therefore, costumes too have to be changed. After all, "We first see and only then judge the skill!"

As I have said earlier, during that period when I had made theatre work the means of my livelihood, whether or not I did any good, there must have been much that I did that was bad because of imperfect thinking. So many were the blows I had to endure while the Star Theatre was being set up that they continued to have an effect on me, long after I had taken leave of the stage.

Let me tell you what took place one night. When I was to become the mistress of Gurmukh Rai, I was obliged to spend a lot of time in hiding because of the extreme reaction of the

wealthy young gentleman, my erstwhile protector. When all the work (on the theatre) had been completed, the above mentioned young man came to me and said, "You have deceived me Binod, and got all your work done. But this was wrong of you. How long will you be able to stay in hiding? I will be your enemy for as long as I live. I shall not go back on my word. You may rest assured that my words will not be proved false. I warn you, I shall come to you even after I am dead."

I had not believed him at that time; perhaps there had lurked a smile of disbelief on my face. But I was forced to accept the truth of what he said on his death on 3 Agrahan 1296. I was then at home, having retired from the theatre. On that particular Sunday, the lamps had just been lit in my room. I was lying on my bed that evening in a somewhat indolent mood. I remember very well that I had not fallen asleep, but my mind was somewhat disturbed and numbed: that was why I had been lying down that evening. Although there was no reason to feel that way, my mind and body both seemed to have reached the depths of fatigue. A sense of lassitude—mental and physical overtook me. My half-shut eyes were turned towards the door, when suddenly I saw, very clearly, \_\_\_-babu slowly enter my room with a woebegone expression and slowly stand before me. He put his hand on my bed and addressed me in the most calm and composed manner imaginable. "I have come Meni", he said. (He often called me by that name.)

I remember well that when he entered my room, my vision was directed continuously at him. Now, as soon as he stood by my bed, I stared at his face in surprise and shock. "What is this? Why have you come again?" He seemed to look at me with timid, beseeching eyes: "I am leaving, that is why I have come to see you." While he spoke his body was still and nothing on his face moved, as if the words came out from the mouth of a clay doll.

I felt once, that he raised his hand while moving towards me. I was also frightened. I moved back a little in my fear and said, "Where on earth are you going? And why have you become so weak?" He seemed to turn even paler as he replied, "Do not be afraid, I shall not say anything. I had told you that I would let you know before I left and so I have come to say that I am leaving." Having pronounced these words, he slowly left the room, as remote and as rigid as a marble statue.

Frightened and surprised, I rose immediately from my bed and went outside, but there was no one to be seen. Then I called out loudly to my mother, "Who had come upstairs, Ma?" "Who would go upstairs?" she replied, "I've been sitting right here at

the foot of the stairs." "But mother, \_\_\_-babu had come!" I said. My mother laughed and said, "There's Mishir at the door (Mishir was our darwan) and I can see right to the front door. Who would come up? Have you been dreaming? Mishir always lets us know in advance if anyone from outside enters the house." At that I did not say anything more but lay down quietly, immersed in deep thought, wondering as to what had happened. Had I really been dreaming? The next evening I was sitting in the verandah inside the house and my mother had gone to the front door on some work, when someone in a hired coach on the street was heard saying, "Have you heard, my dear, \_\_\_-babu died last evening." The man who said this was in the employment of the deceased. I clearly heard these words spoken in the street and I trembled inwardly: had he then really been true to his words after his death? My blood turned cold as ice when I remembered the incident of the previous evening.

There is no particular reason for writing about this little incident: I could never have imagined that it was possible for a dead person to appear in his own likeness before another living being. But I have written about it, in case any one else has gone through the same experience; my account will serve to strengthen their belief in their own experience.

There was another such incident which a relative of mine had herself experienced. Although there is little connection between mine and the one I give below, I write about it because of a certain similarity. When my youngest daughter died,<sup>79</sup> exactly on the same day and at the very moment of her death, she or her deceiving likeness appeared before my relative. Like me, she too had been lying down indoors in a state of lassitude. When she saw my daughter's likeness, she cried out, "How is this, is this Kalo?<sup>80</sup> How are you here?" "Yes," replied the likeness. My surprised relative said, "But my dear, how have you come here when you are so sick?" The shadowy figure simply said, "I've come." After they had exchanged a few more words, just as my relative sat up, she could not see the likeness anymore. It had disappeared in a moment.

The ultimate outcome of human life is death, but who is to decide what is to be our final state? Different philosophers hold differing views on the subject. My writing therefore, remains mute on this point. But it is strange that dead people can speak. I may have been mistaken and many will say so, but only if someone has encountered a spirit, will he or she accept my words as truth. But if the spirit is indeed indestructible and if WILL-POWER alone can

give it form, then whatever I have narrated will perhaps not be so unbelievable.

There is no particular reason for my writing about the Star Theatre in this, my insignificant story. However, I am now far removed from the Star Theatre which had been so famous and so highly regarded in our own land and beyond. Perhaps, the very memory of my existence is now effaced from the Star, because I speak of events of long ago. Our days do not pass in an even manner: those who now proudly carry the burden of the Star Theatre's widespread fame, they too, had once regarded this most insignificant of women as a dear one! There are some whom it would not be possible to meet today even if one offered a hundred prayers; but there was a time when but for the self-sacrifice of this most insignificant person, who knows who would have been left behind in some obscure corner! That is why I say, our days do not always pass in the same manner.

When the heart is wounded by grief and afflicted by blows, when it is restless with pain, then, hoping to gain their sympathy, we remember our dear ones or those who had once treated us with warmth. Then the old memories come back, naturally. That is why I have spoken of the old days. There is nothing here that has been exaggerated. And how may an insignificant woman such as myself dare to level exaggerated charges against those who are amongst the most respected today? Nor have I said anything out of pride! I had sacrificed what I did for my own sake; no one had compelled me to do so. All this has come up only because of the weakness of an ignorant woman; otherwise this insignificant episode is not worthy of mention. Also, because it is a story of long ago, there may be mistakes here and there. Those who have still kept a semblance of courteous behaviour towards me will not, I hope, turn hostile to me on account of this. It is possible that in writing about what had taken place many years ago a few slips may have occurred.

And in this way, the days had slipped by at my place of work in the first radiant phase of my life. Utterly despicable and degraded is our our status in society, but let them not read it who will despise or ridicule this insignificant bit of writing. Let them refrain from sprinkling salt to further irritate the deepest wound in a woman's life. Those who in their kindness show some sympathy because the writer is a sad and unfortunate woman, will understand the intense pain in this heart. Innumerable sighs hold together the heart of this luckless woman. An intolerable burden of pain has been covered by smiles, as despair fights hopelessness relentlessly, day and night. How many are the unfulfilled longings,

the wounds burning with pain that are alight in her heart: has anyone ever seen any of this? They 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! But we have been struck against stone from the very beginning and like the bit of iron which becomes magnetised having been repeatedly struck against a magnet, likewise, we, having been struck against stone, have turned into stone ourselves! Let me add one thing more: We are not all the same; there's a sort of life which engulfs one in darkness and in ignorance, that sort of life moves on in listless fashion, like a bit of inanimate matter. And, there is a kind of life which illuminates [others] in the distance; but being fallen, one is deprived of society, relations, friends and companions. None but a fellow sufferer will understand how painful and tortured this life is.

A prostitute's life is certainly tainted and despicable; but where does the pollution come from? Surely they were not despicable from the time that they were in the mother's womb? If birth and death be decreed by the Lord, then surely they were not responsible for their birth? We have to think of who it is that first made them despicable in this life? It may be that there are some who of their own accord plunge themselves into darkness and clear the paths to hell. But there are many who are taken in by the artfulness of men and trusting in them are doomed to carry an everlasting stigma and bear the pain of unending hell. Who are all these men? Are there not some among them who are respected and adored in society? Those who show hatred when in the company of others, but secretly, away from the eyes of men, pretend that they are the best of lovers and take you to the brink of complete surrender thus causing the ruin of trustful and helpless women; they who show love, but abandon those women who have surrendered totally to them after lighting the lamp of poison in their hearts—these men are not to blame at all! Who is at fault? Those women who have drunk poison believing it to be nectar and who suffer the torments of their heart for the rest of their lives—are they to blame? Those unfortunate women who having been deceived have made their own lives into an everlasting cremation ground, a *shamsan*, only they know how painful is the prostitute's life. It is they who have experienced with every atom of their being the intensity of pain. And it is these tempters of the helpless who become leaders of

society and pass moral judgement on these insecure women in order to crush them at every step of their existence! Just as they have ruined these unfortunate women, if ever any one of the latter tries to build a school or undertake any such other activity so that their boy or girl might stay on the right path, then it is these heads of society who exert their utmost to drive away the children from the school. Thanks to the morality of these leaders of society, the hapless children are obliged to take to a path of evil in order to earn their livelihood and thenceforth look at the world with hate-filled eyes. Before the innocence and the purity of the little girl has had a chance to disappear, before the natural sweetness of her heart has ebbed away, her little heart is filled with the pangs of mistrust. There are many such brave men who consider it a sign of manliness to be thus controlled by their own natures, incapable of any self-control, forever destroying the peace of a helpless woman, making her despicable in the eyes of society and an object of insult by people, depriving her of friends and relatives and marking with pain every fibre of her being. Alas! You wretched woman, how you ruin yourself. God accepts with bowed head the lotus which blooms in the mud because He is God. And human beings wrench pure-minded young girls away from the creeper and trample upon them because they are human beings. Let that be! Only they understand what a devastating mistake it is—that one mistake which poisons forever the rest of their life. Nothing is lost for a man even if a hundred mistakes are made but, 'a woman is doomed if her step but falter one bit'.

I had taken retirement from the stage for various reasons and had been living a life of joy and sorrow in isolation. The chief one of these many reasons was that I was extremely hurt by the deceptions that were practised on me, when after having tempted me in various ways, I was used to get something done. I worked and did whatever I had done because I loved the theatre very much. But I have not been able to forget the blows of deception. Therefore, I retired when the time was ripe. I had found a reason for joy in this sorrowful life. A pure blossom had, because of a curse, found its way from heaven and brought some peace to my tainted life. But the karma of this wretched woman begrudged her even this pleasure! In order to punish me in the most extreme manner possible, the unsullied heavenly *parijat* flower left me in eternal sorrow, returning to the heaven from whence she had come, plunging this joyless life in the fires of constant torment.

She had been a most precious treasure of my love and hope. The beauty of heaven overflowed from her pure and innocent eyes! In that loving, trusting heart of hers was manifested the

purity of the goddess Devi, the exquisite splendour of flowers, the pure sound of the gurgling waters of the river Jahnavi. Like a blossoming lotus, the purity of her sweet nature brought constant happiness to my life. Her pure desires and aspirations drew forth my own. She was a gift of kindness from God; and the bounty of God was not to be a part of this unfortunate woman's Fate. Uprooting every hope that I ever had and forever lighting the lamp of poison in my darkened heart she has left me. Now I am alone on this earth, I have no one. There is only myself, alone. Now my life is empty, bereft of all delights. I have no kith, no kin, no religion, no work, no rationale, no reason for living! I sit looking deathwards in these last years of my life, broken-hearted and wracked by suffering, bearing the burden of an intolerable pain.

Hope, motivation, trust and excitement, a joyous and lively imagination—they have all disowned me. At every moment I feel only the intense sting of pain. This is me—in the little shade of a cool banyan tree waiting on the edges of sansar for that time when eternal peace bringing death will look kindly upon me. That huge and shady tree is my place of refuge! I have written this, however laughable people may find my inner pain . . . because I have no more fear of being ridiculed by people. It is they who have cured me of such a fear. Their censure or praise, all is as one to me. The talented, the wise and the learned write in order to educate people, to do good to others. 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. Because I have no relations, I am despised. I am a prostitute, a social outcast; there is no one to listen or to read what I feel within! That is why I have let you know my story in pen and paper. Like my own tainted and polluted heart, I have tainted these pure white pages with writing. But what else could I do! A polluted being can do nothing other than pollute!



## A Few Last Words to Part I

At long last, my work had, tree-like, blossomed forth in all its fullness and had stretched out its manifold branches into the unknown sky of my future. Now, finally, all was right. I shall explain to you why this was so. It is a long time since I began writing about my life on the stage at the request of the late Girishchandra Ghosh mahashoy. He looked at every sentence, every line, of my writing. It is true he went through it all and commented on the work, but he never wrote a single line. He believed that whatever I wrote in my simple unadorned language would be of delight to him.

And this was how I wrote about my life and called it 'my story', *Amar Katha*, and decided to publish it. He too was very enthusiastic about it, but recurrent illness and various other problems protracted the process. Later, his companion, Babu Abinashchandra Gangopadhyay planned to have it published. But because of my inability to decide and many similar reasons the matter was not taken up. Then I fell ill and lay like one dead for four months—there was no hope of survival. The great, kind and generous man that is my benefactor, spent hundreds and thousands of rupees on my treatment and spared no effort in time, energy and money, trying out a range of medicines, foregoing sleep and food, and brought me back from the jaws of death. Everyone—doctors, fakirs, sanayasis, *mahantos*, our friends and relatives—all said to him, "It is only by the intensity of your desire (WILL FORCE) that she has regained her life." That compassionate gentleman had put aside his wealth and his prestige, just as he had cast aside the sinful, tainted life of this insignificant sinner, to rescue me from the toils of a mortal disease.

When I would lose consciousness from the pain I suffered, he would place his hand on my forehead. Keeping his loving eyes on mine, he would speak to me in a firm tone, "Listen, you must look at me, why are you like this? Are you in great pain? Do not allow yourself to become numb. I shall not let you die while I live. If you have completed your allotted lifespan, then, may the gods be witness, may the brahman be a witness, may this, your death-like body be witness, I give to you one half of my lifespan. May you recover. Whilst I live you shall never be allowed to die."

\* Temple heads.

When he addressed me thus, it seemed as if a ray of ambrosial light poured forth from his eyes and bathed my disease-racked body in its cool embrace. As if all my pain and illness had left me. For as long as his affectionate hands caressed my forehead, the pain would leave me. This had happened at least two or three times and on all these occasions it was his determination that prevented death from taking me. I am told that one season, I had to be put on OXYGEN GAS for about a fortnight. Those who had been his friends and mine at that time, are still alive. Everyone knows how the worthy Amritalal Basu mahashoy, Upen-babu, Kashi-babu and others would come everyday to look after me.

Perhaps Fate had conspired with his resolve to make me thus endure with a healthy body, the burden of extreme pain; to appear before people with an empty heart; and, to be washed away thus in the sea of worldly cares bearing a burden of unending pain. Perhaps that was why I did not die then. Or, it may have been that the Lord brought me back from my deathbed so that the words of his great devotee might not be found false. For, my *bridoydebata*, the lord of my heart, had said to me a hundred times, "I perform my worldly duties, because I must; that is why I tell you that you will never be able to die before me." I would cling to his feet and cry out, "Do not speak of such things now. There is no one in all the three worlds to protect this wretched woman. When you brought this sinner away from her world and gave her shelter at your feet, she had everything. Grandmother, mother, a daughter who made life worth living, the pleasures and good fortune of the stage, fame, wealth beyond expectations, the unlimited love and affection of her contemporaries in the Bengali theatre world—I had given it up, all for you. You must not give me up and leave this world. Where will I be if you leave me?" He would laugh. "Do not worry on this account," he would say determinedly, "except for my absence, you will not suffer the lack of anything. I have not been born into a family where after having granted you refuge for all these years, having provided for you with such care and affection, I can go away leaving you in extreme want, at this time of your life—now, when you are so ill. The proof of that lies in the fact that I have always granted you shelter in like manner with my relatives. He who deprives you knowing all of this will be tormented by my curse."

A noble being such as he said what he could to comfort me; but in reality my Fate stood before me with cruel sharp talons and tore to shreds the blue skies that had made up my existence. Three months have passed since then and this helpless, luckless



woman has not even spent three days in the company of a single sympathetic soul; such has been the fate of this unfortunate woman. No one is to blame—it is Fate! The just desserts of another life!! Punishment for the sins of a sinful woman!

After I recovered from this illness I was laid up for more than a year, practically unable to move. Later, on the advice of the doctors my beloved hridaydebata took me to various places for a change of air and restored to me my health.

For many such reasons this book was not published then. The late Girish-babu also passed away after a terrible illness. He too had told me, "Binod, you have been moulded by my own hands into a living image; I shall write the preface to your book with my own hands and only then shall I die." But there is a saying in English which goes, 'Man proposes, God disposes'. My life is a veritable illustration of this saying.

I thought later that come what may, whether there is a book or not, it had long been a cherished desire of mine that the shadow, cool and comforting, of that life-giving, sheltering tree would be as a balm to this hurt mind, so that I could thus fall into eternal slumber and leave behind my sinful life concealed by his selfless love. But as they say, go wherever I may, ill luck follows my way.

I am reminded of a story that a person had once told me about his fate which went as follows: A well-educated man was living in great difficulty unable to find a job in his own country despite all his efforts. One day a friend told him, "Since you are unable to find anything here, my friend, why don't you try your luck abroad?" He managed to put together enough resources and set off for Rangoon. There, too, he struggled for some time to earn a living. Finally, unable to achieve anything, he sat down after a whole afternoon's wandering under the shade of a tree. Suddenly, with the fiery afternoon wind that blew on his back, came the sound of mocking laughter. Startled, he asked, "Who is it?" "Your Fate!" came the reply. "Well," said the man, "it appears that you too got yourself a berth on the ship and followed me here. In that case, let's go back to our own land and there you may continue to spin me like a top at your whim!"

I too realised with a start one day, that plagued by my fate, the comforting life-giving tree which had been as a refuge to me, had been uprooted by the tumultuous storm of time and had sunk into its bottomless depths. Before I had sufficiently recovered from my daze, I found myself lying in a shamsan, on the glowing

embers of a pyre. All those tormented souls who, in the throes of extreme grief, had been transformed into the ashes of a funeral pyre, now surrounded me on all sides to sympathise with my innermost pain. "Look," they said, "there's not much you can do. There's nothing to be done. God does not grant mercy, or perhaps, He does not know how to be merciful. We too have been burnt and consumed, but our pain has not left us. Nothing of that pain is gone! Even when reduced to ashes on the funeral pyre in the shamsan, the pain of memories have not left us. What can one do? There's nothing to be done. But if ever a compassionate god takes the form of man or of a tree and descends to this earth, then at times, he may be able to grant some comfort to unfortunate women such as you. Are not such people gods? They do not care for what the people of this world may say and they are indifferent to the words of the mean-spirited. Just as the sun shines equally on the rubbish heap and the temple of the gods, and the flower spreads its fragrance without calculating who will inhale it, so also are those who neither glance at the selfish, the carping, and the womanisers, nor heed their praise or censure.

"They come from the home of the gods with hearts full of unbounded affection for the sad creatures of this mortal world, in order to be kind to them and to express sympathy amongst their relatives. They come with the desire to be equally sympathetic to their friends, to raise their children with the fullest affection and care, to express in manifold ways their love for their wife—they are like obedient followers forever ready to fulfil the needs of others. To sacrifice their heart before the one they love, to forget themselves in their love for the desired one, to nurture with contentment the sheltered, to give generously and in secret (how embarrassed he would be if anyone felt ashamed), to recognise in one's heart the desire to be completely faithful to God, to be happy in the service of God, to work untiringly for others—I could go on and on. . . . People of their kind may only be compared with themselves—they are made of the stuff of divine beings and descend to this pain-ridden world of mortals to be kind to the wretched of this earth.

"When that god-like man or tree is distraught and vanquished by the poisonous looks from the petty-minded in the course of everyday life, he leaves this world. Those among the luckless men and women who go to sleep forever in the secure comfort of that pure shadow, who never awaken to the sounds of everyday strife, perhaps it is only they who, blessed by their contact with that divine heart, can go to the final abode of peace. And those who by virtue of their fate are denied the peace and delight of the

tree's shade, it is they who will forever suffer in agony, like you, on the tormenting pyre of ashes.

"Unfortunates such as you, have nothing else left! Those who have lost the priceless gem after once possessing it, have nothing else left! And sinners such as yourself have very hard hearts: they do not burn or break easily, although, even iron would have melted by now. Perhaps there is none among us who is as accursed as you are. There is no way out for such a hard, stone-hearted creature such as yourself. What are you to do?" With these words, the burning embers of pain and torment lamented loudly.

When I heard them lamenting thus from within the embers, I recovered partial consciousness. It was as if I had been hit by a jolt of current; I remembered that I too had been in the cool shade of such a tree. Then was it indeed a *deb-taru*, a god-like tree controlled by the life force of the divine? All those qualities mentioned by these embers and many more talents besides, had all been present in that god. A sea of kindness, the soul of innocence, a picture of happiness and enthusiasm, soft-spoken and affectionate towards all, ever-smiling, lost in himself, an ocean of love, handsome in form, beautiful to look at, gifted with modesty and gentleness—that was the kind of tree he was. I had heard that it is only the gods who from time to time take the form of human beings or trees and come down to this earth. That is why Sri Ram had affectionately addressed Guhak Chandak as 'friend'. And that is why Sri Krishna had eaten the humble husk in the home of Vidur—son of a maidservant. Mahaprabhu Chaitanyadeb too had been kind to Yavan Haridas.<sup>81</sup> Surely there is nothing wrong in being kind to a poor orphan; does the touchstone lose its quality at the touch of iron? Or does proximity to coal affect the brilliance of the diamond?

The moon in the heavens bears in its bosom the sins of the earth and gives pleasure to mankind with the radiance of its cool light. People on earth are illumined by the light and ridicule it by calling it 'the tainted moon', the tainted moon! The more people scorn her, the more generously does the moon spread her silver rays over the earth, playing hide and seek as she floats in the heavens.

I too had received shelter from that god-like tree. Where is he now, my god who had sheltered me? Where indeed is he? Where is the peace that had been part of the wilderness in my heart?

The funeral ash from the pyre answered me immediately, "Ah! you wretched creature, has your *chaitanya* not yet been awakened? Listen! Do you not see the sun god descending in his inimitable form on this, the ninth day of Basanti Pujā in the month

of Chaitra, at seven o'clock in the morning of the highly auspicious day of Sri Ramnavami? Do you not see how the pure Bhagirathi dances in joy and runs laughingly towards the sea? The priest who has just completed the worship before Gopalji emerges out of the Gopal temple and is now departing with his five-stemmed lamp in hand: whose worship has he just completed? The Hari samkirtan you hear being chanted all around you, the name of Hari, the name of Brahma that resounds all around you; what do you think explains their presence? What is this? Have the gods come to the banks of the river? Does the wind roam about carrying the fragrance of the morning flowers? Why the sound of conch shells in the temple? For whom has the sun god descended in his chariot driving down the rays of light? Do you not understand even this?"

And I am startled to discover that thirty-one years of sweet dreams have suddenly collapsed today. This sad and lowly creature had been immersed for thirty-one years, in a dream world where she had reigned supreme as a queen; a single breath of Eternal Time had sufficed to send it within a space of twelve hours into the bottomless depths of the ocean of time. I fell unconscious on the ground and hurt my head. A thousand fireflies seemed to glow past me. When I regained consciousness I remembered that I had written a heap of nonsense called *Amar Katha*. The last words had been: "I sit waiting for death. People may hope at least for death; it is after all our last chance of rest." Dearest, I have no more an end or a beginning. That last hope had left me on this Wednesday morning, the fourteenth of Chaitra, 1318.\*

The little hope that I had cherished, of claiming some peace with my death is now over. There will never be a final death. Never. Never. I listen now to the lament of the ashes while I endure in little slivers the pain of death. And having lost that divine tree which had given me shelter, I, a great sinner, sit under the huge spreading tree with its myriad branches, fruits and flowers, which are all the sins of my karma.

Listen, you fortunate beings of this earth, and having listened, turn your face away from me. And you too, the sheltering tree of the orphan, you god from heaven, listen . . . Whether it be man or god, it is extremely difficult to follow in one's deeds what one says in words. Love cannot change one's fortune, dear one. Nor can it change one's fate. See now, how the ash moves further

\* The second edition (*Binodini Katha ba Amar Katha*, BS 1320) ends at this point.

away, lamenting all the while.

This is me. I lie now in the agonising shamsan of these ash heaps, bound forever to my Fate. And now, just as people take the name of Ram or Shiv or Durga or turn away their faces to say Hari when they come upon some ill-omened thing, let them all call on whosoever they believe in, and wipe away for ever the sinful words of this great sinner. This is the only prayer of this unfortunate, destitute, fallen woman.

FINIS

11 Baisakh 1319

NOTES

1. *Amar Katha* is dedicated to the man whose co-wife Binodini became after she left the stage. Binodini does not mention his name in her autobiography, but refers to him either as her *pranomoy-debata* or *bridoidebata*—literally, the divine creature or god, the lord of her heart or her life. The word used here is *pranomoy*. See Introduction for details.
2. Mahamaya or 'the great universal mother-goddess, sometimes identified as Durga (*Katika Puran*)'. D.D. Kosambi, *Myth and Reality* (1962) (New Delhi: Popular Prakashan, 1994), p. 108.
3. The reference is to Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Bishbriksha* (The Poison Tree) (1873) which was successfully adapted for the stage by Girishchandra, when other geetinatyas did not run well. First performed at the National Theatre on 27 April 1873.

Nagendra is torn between Surjamukhi, his wife of many years and his attraction for Kundanandini, the young girl he has brought home and whom he finally takes as a co-wife. Here, in a conversation with his brother-in-law, Srishchandra, Nagendra laments the death of the estranged Surjamukhi when he is told that she has perished in a fire. He wishes that he too might die. The narratorial comment in the novel is significant: 'Srishchandra knew that earlier, Nagendra had not believed in [a] heaven; he realized that he did so now. He realized that it was love and desire which had created this heaven. "Surjamukhi is nowhere" was an intolerable thought; "Surjamukhi is in heaven"—there was much happiness in such a thought.' (*BR*, Vol. 1, p. 234.) Binodini played Kundanandini to Girishchandra's Nagendranath. See chapter entitled 'The Last Border' in *My Story* for Binodini's interpretation of the role of Kundanandini.

4. Possibly a reference to W.S. Gilbert's *Pygmalion and Galatea* (1871). Pygmalion is transliterated as 'Pykmalion' in the original Bangla text.
5. Not thirty-one but twenty-five years; it is possible that Binodini is speaking of the entire period that she knew him, i.e. about six years before she left the theatre.
6. Part II of *Amar Katha* was never written.
7. One of the many popularly quoted Sanskrit *slokas* whose source is hard to trace. A rough translation would be:  
Whither has gone the Mathurapuri of Yadupati (i.e. Krishna's)?  
Whither has gone the Uttar Koshala of Raghupati (i.e. Ram's)?  
Thinking on this, one should firmly hold on to the truth:  
There is nothing in this world that endures.

As is the usual practice with Bengali writers, Binodini has written the sloka in Bangla, not Devanagari. (My thanks to Rita Bhattacharya and Arindam Chakraborti for their help with the sloka.)

8. A reference to the Sanskrit verse quoted in the earlier page, on the end of a golden age with the passage of time.

9. The precise reasons for this connection, i.e. Girishchandra as 'Bengal's Garrick' (rather than Irving, Kean or any other equally famous contemporary British actor) is not known, but it appears to be the most enduring of the epithets bestowed on him. The comparison was first made by Madhusudan Dutt to refer to Keshubchandra Ganguly. It was at a much later date, that an article in *The Bengalee* magazine speaks of 'our Indian Garrick (sic), Girish Chunder'. [cited in *GR*, Vol. 3, p. 24.] Another advertisement dated 30 July 1881 in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, referred to "A new drama Rabon badh—destruction of Ravana, written in verse by the 'Garrick of the Hindu Stage". In like manner, Bankimchandra was called 'Banglar Scott' (the Scott of Bengal) while Rabindranath Tagore was called 'Banglar Shelley' for some time, until it was felt perhaps that he had surpassed Shelley.
10. *Dhruba charitra* and *Prahlad charitra*, celebrating the bhakti of Dhruba and Prahlad respectively, the heroic boy-devotees of puranic fame, were amongst the most successful of Girish's plays. While the lives of both were popular material for jatra, Prahlad as the well-known exemplar of bhakta from the *Vishnu Puran*, inspired various stage versions from the 1870s to 1916 onwards. See 'On Matters Relating to the Star Theatre', *My Story*, for details.
11. Girishchandra's *Chaitanya-Lila*, based on Brindavan Das's *Chaitanya Bhagavat*, depicts the early life of Chaitanya (Nimai), ending with his renunciation of home. Binodini's performance as Bengal's most charismatic saint was to determine subsequent readings of her life. The 1884 production at the Star Theatre was a great success and set the trend for the 'biographical devotional' on the public stage. For Binodini's account of the play, its reception and her involvement in the role, see chapter 'On Matters Related to the Star Theatre'.
12. Most Indians lived in tiled or straw huts, and some in brick buildings in nineteenth-century Calcutta. Binodini speaks of *kbolar gbar*, a typical *kuchcha* construction. She and most of the other actresses came from urban slums, usually from prostitute quarters; their tenements were let out to other women, or couples—often, as in this instance, the owners (landladies) lived in more wretched conditions than their tenants.
13. A well-known ghat and cremation ground in North Calcutta.
14. This child-marriage is also mentioned in *My Life*.
15. 'Naming each other' (*nam pata* or *shoi pata*) as a pact of friendship was fairly common amongst young girls or women who were not related by blood. Not unlike the practice of 'blood brothers', this mutual conferring of usually literary names had a certain piquancy in a social context where, increasingly, respectable women were confined for the most part in the inner quarters. Novels of the time often made dramatic use of such 'inscribed' friendships (for example, Rabindranath Tagore's first novel, *Chokher Bali* (literally, grit-in-the-eye) after the heroine's given name. The practice appears

to have cut across classes; Indira Debi speaks of it at length in her *Jiban Katha, Ekshan* (Calcutta: 1992), pp. 29–30.

*Golap* or rose is the flower that Binodini confesses to liking the most and it is the flower which appears most frequently in her poems. Interestingly, nineteenth century popular representations of courtesans in the Kalighat prints, invariably showed her with a rose in her hand, so that the flower is actually read by some critics as an 'emblem of the courtesan'. See Mildred Archer, *Popular Painting in the India Office Library* (London: HMSO, 1977), p. 151 and comment on plate 88: 'Elokeshi. . . sits on a chair holding a rose'; 'the rose indicating her fallen state.

16. For details on *geetinatya*, see 'Notes on the Bengali Public Theatre'.
  17. Girishchandra's *geetinatya*, *Sitar Bonobas*, was written only in 1881; Binodini is probably referring to an earlier version by another dramatist.
  18. Binodini first joined the Great National Theatre and not the National.
  19. *Bibab Bibhrat* (1884) was a hugely popular farce by Amrital Basu. The heroine, Bilasini Karforma (preparing for her MA) is singled out for satire as is her husband, Gourikanta Karforma; so too Nandalal, the foreign-returned young man who affects an ignorance of his own culture. The play attacks English education, women's education, foreign travel, social reform, Brahmo beliefs amongst other things. Binodini played Bilasini; Amrital played the anglicised Mr. Singh; and Khetramoni played brilliantly, the sharp-tongued *jbi* or maid. First performed on 22 November 1884.
- Lieutenant-Governor, Sir August Rivers Thompson is said to have stated of Khetramoni: "So powerful an artist can scarcely be seen even in a London Theatre of those days". This performance took place on January 23, 1885 at the house of Jagadananda Mukhopadhyay in Bhowanipur for an invited audience which included Lady Dufferin, the wife of the Governor as well as the Lt. Governor Thompson. The performance is mentioned by Lady Dufferin in her account of *Our Viceregal Life in India: Selections from my Journal, 1884–1888*, Vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1889), pp. 65–67.
- Jagadananda Mukhopadhyay had earlier been the butt of satire on the stage because of his excessive zeal in welcoming the Prince of Wales, the future Edward VII.
20. Rasiklal Neogi was the grandfather of Bhubanmohan Neogi who founded the Great National Theatre; the ghat was also named after him. Bhubanmohan, a great theatre enthusiast, gave the players of the original National Theatre the use of the huge hall and other amenities for their rehearsals when they were desperate for funds and space. The building was torn down in 1875 by the Calcutta Port Trust for building rail lines. According to Girishchandra, it was in this house by the Ganga that he first saw Binodini rehearsing for a play. (Afterword, p. 219).
  21. Binodini uses the word *jama*, which was used generically to mean stitched clothes. It came specifically to mean an upper garment for

women, what we now call 'blouse'. Women of all classes usually wore only a sari; it was only when 'respectable' women began appearing in public that all kinds of experiments with a suitable attire began. A strange looking dress called the 'oriental gown' was first devised; much later, Jnanadanandini Tagore introduced the 'jacket' and an adaptation of the Parsi style of wearing the sari. More innovations were added by the maharanis of Coochbehar and Mayurbhanj. (Chitra Deb, *Thakurbarir Andarmahal*, pp. 32-33) Subsequently, this became known as the Brahmika sari or the Thakurbarir sari.

See also Meredith Borthwick for an account of 'reformed dress' in *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 248-49. Borthwick also informs us that Rajlakshmi Sen, member of the Bama Hitaisini Sabha noted that women dressing in the reformed style had to avoid not only 'denationalisation' but also the danger of being mistaken for prostitutes, some of whom wore chemises, jackets and shoes with their saris. Excessive jewellery was also seen as being barbaric (p. 247). The actresses soon became models for the latest in clothes and hairstyle, their 'fashion' earning censure and inspiring imitation.

22. The play was actually *Sbatru-Sanbar* (Destruction of the Enemy) written by Haralal Roy after Bhattanarayan's *Beni-Sanbar*, about the revenge of the Pandavas on the Kauravas. It was first performed on 10 February 1874; published on 15 August 1874.
23. *Hemlata Natak* was first published in 1873 and ran into three editions, the last of which came out in 1882. It had been performed many times before Binodini was chosen to play the title role on 28 April 1874 at the Great National. The play was named after Hemlata, the daughter of Vikram Singh of Chitor and is about her love for Satyasakha, son of Pratap Singh of Udaipur. The two are united after a series of obstacles. Although a 'romantic drama', set in medieval Rajasthan, the influence of the Hindu Mela is quite clear: nationalist sentiments directed against the Muslim 'occupation' predominate. The success of *Hemlata* inspired the author, Haralal Ray, Headmaster of the Hare School, to write *Banger Sukhabasan* (1874) about Bakhtiyar Khilji's occupation of Bengal.
24. From the early days of the theatre, carriages were sent to fetch the actresses to the theatre and to take them back to their living quarters, usually with strict injunctions not to show themselves during the journey. For women who were otherwise considered to be public women, 'invisibility' before and after performances was obviously a means of creating star appeal. Binodini records that when she was \_\_\_-babu's mistress, he insisted on her using his personal carriage.
25. The word used is *paschim*, literally, the west, variously translated as 'westwards', 'western provinces' or 'western region'. See Notes on the Bengali Public Theatre.
26. *Neeldarpan* or the full form, *Neeldarpanam Natakam* (1860), was

first performed to inaugurate the National Theatre on 7 Dec 1872 at 365 Upper Chitpur Road—the house of Madhusudan Sanyal. Motilal Sur had made such a brilliant impression as 'Torap' in this show, that it was never thought to be bettered by any other actor. See 'Notes on the Bengali Public Theatre', p. 172. The Lucknow 'incident' has been used by Bharucha to prove the 'essential naiveté and amateur spirit of the professional theatre in Bengal': 'The Lucknow production of *Neeldarpan* was less a political disturbance than a shindy. What Binodini in her panic failed to realise was the red-faced soldiers were, in all probability, drunk. Her fears that they intended to behead her colleagues cannot be taken too seriously. The very fact that the Magistrate Sahab offered the actors police protection indicates that the play was not politically offensive.' Rustom Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1983), p. 20.

27. Probably the Chattar Manzil, by the Gomti river. Binodini says 'sahebs', meaning Europeans rather than upper-class people in general.
  28. However despicable the social status of the actresses, it is significant that most of them were usually rigid about caste rules. The agenda of the public theatre, was entirely a Hindu world—for Binodini's mother to be so horror-stricken at the 'reign of the Musalmans' in the 'west' is therefore not very surprising. It also explains this extreme reaction to using water drawn by the low-caste *bhishti* or water carrier and carried in large leather containers.
  29. *Sati ki Kalankini ba Kalanka Bhanjan* (first published on 10 September 1874; 2nd edition in 1879) is a geetinatya in which the chastity of Radha is established by an ordeal. The authorship is disputed: attributed to Nagendranth Bandhyopadhyay in most instances, and elsewhere to his elder brother, Debendranath Bandhyopadhyay. It was performed with great success at the Great National on 19 September 1874 and continued for long to figure on the public stage.
  30. All three plays are by Dinabandhu Mitra and fall under the general rubric of 'samajik natak' or social plays. *Nabeen Tapaswini* (1863) was written against polygamy. After various complications the story of Bijoy and Kamini ends on a note of harmonious union. However, the comic sub-plot around Malati and Jaladhar almost takes over the main plot and even blunts the polemical thrust of the play. Binodini's comments (*My Life*, pp. 135-36) on Ardhendushekhar's lines in this play, suggests that that the play might have had a similar effect on her.
- Sadbabar Ekadoshi* (1868), often referred to in contemporary accounts as 'Widowhood in Married Life', was a satire on the excesses of Young Bengal, particularly in and through the person of Neemay (Neemchand) Dutta. Kanchan, the dazzling prostitute, is singled out by Pramathanath Bishi as Dinabandhu's outstanding woman character because of her supreme indifference. She is truly

*nirmam* or heartless, for she is attracted to no one and is attached to nothing. Her exit from Atal's life is final. In Pramathanath Bishi's reading, Kanchan almost becomes a subversion of the bloody battlefield that is a woman's heart. *Bangla Sabityer Nar-nari* (Calcutta: 1953). For Binodini's comment on playing this character, see *My Story*, p. 99. *Sadhabar Ekadoshi* was first performed in 1868 by members of the Bagbazar Amateur Theatre and subsequently by the National Theatre Company at the Sanyal's home on 28 December 1872.

*Biye Pagla Buro*, a farce ridiculing an old and lecherous man still desirous of marriage, and his subsequent humiliation at the hands of youngsters, was published in 1866.

31. The incident also figures in *My Life as an Actress*, pp. 145-46.
32. A conventional term for the inhabitants of Braj, part of Krishna-land in mythology, song and poetry. Here, the monkeys are cast in the role of cowherds, milkmaids and the assorted characters who people Krishna-Lila.
33. The Great National closed down for about seven months in 1876 because of Lord Northbrook's Ordinance issued against the theatre. It reopened on 21 October 1876 with the *geetinatya*, *Adarsba Sati*.
34. Sahebganj, in the eastern part of present day Bihar, was an important transit point on the Ganga for the crossover to northern Bihar.
35. In Madhusudan's *Meghnad Badh Kabya*, Pramila, the young wife of the hero Meghnad, is depicted as a *birangana*, the archetype of the martial woman. However, Pramila's valour and her defiance of the rules of the courtly decorum imposed on royal women, ultimately derives from her love for her husband and the defence of his honour.
36. Kapalkundala, the eponymous heroine of Bankimchandra's second novel (1886). As a romantic conception of the innocent and independent child of nature, indifferent to conjugal happiness, she remains as disturbing a creation as many of Bankim's girl-women. Another such enigmatic girl-woman is Manorama in *Mrinalini* to whom Binodini and Girishchandra refer at length.
37. The benefit performance for Michael Madhusudan, to raise funds for his widow and children, was held at the Opera House on 16 July 1873.
38. *Meghnad Badh Kabya* (1861) by Madhusudan Dutt, modelled consciously after European epics, was first staged by the Bengal Theatre around 1875. It was later adapted by Girishchandra as *Meghnad Badh*, and performed at the National Theatre on 2 Feb 1877 with Girishchandra playing the parts of Ram and Meghnad. Binodini first played Pramila and subsequently six other roles in the course of the same show. The dramatised version followed Madhusudan's epic poem in focusing on the slaying of Meghnad; the incident of Lakshman's magic weapon, the *shakti-shael*; and the self-immolation of Pramila after her husband's death. The play was

translated into English as *The Meghnad Badh/or/The Death of the Prince of Lanka/A Tragedy in Five Acts*. Madhusudan's poem was a prescribed text in zenana education. (Malavika Karlekar, *Voices From Within*, p. 86.)

Bankimchandra's novel *Mrinalini* (1861) was dramatised by Girishchandra at the request of the management at the Great National Theatre, and first staged on 21 February 1874. Girish Ghosh played the role of Pashupati; Binodini that of his girl-wife Manorama, who commits sati on her husband's pyre. Manorama, a striking character in the novel, appears to have been 'the main role' in the play, rather than Mrinalini after whom the play is named. Binodini and Girishchandra have both dwelt on the difficulty of the part.

*Agomoni*, first performed on 29 September 1877, published a few days later; and *Dol-Lila*, performed on 8 March 1877, published the same month (1878), are two of Girishchandra's first original pieces for the Great National. As the name suggests, *Agomoni*, written in three scenes, was composed specifically for the Durga Puja season and derived from the well-loved theme, celebrated in Ramprasad's songs, of Uma's separation from her mother and her annual return in autumn. *Dol-Lila*, strictly an entertainment piece in two acts, was based on *ras-lila*; the songs adapted from Hindustani *bori*.

39. *Hamir* by Surendranath Majumdar (1838-78), published posthumously in 1881. The story was based on James Tod's *Annals* which Majumdar had translated into Bangla. Girishchandra added four songs to the original play and played the title role. However, the play was not a hit.
40. *Maya Taru*, first performed at the National Theatre on 22 January 1881, was published February 1881.
41. *Palashir Juddho*, a historical play by Girishchandra, based on Nabinchandra Sen's (1847-1909) *gatha-kavya* of the same name. Nabinchandra's poem (1875-76), written in the then popular genre of the romantic narrative, was also prescribed as a school textbook by the Calcutta School Textbook Committee. For more details about the production of this play see *My Life*, p. 154.
42. Shambhucharan Mukhopadhyay, the editor of the weekly *Reis and Rayyet* in a review dated 10 October 1885. In *Amar Katha*, the quotation is in the original English followed by a translation in Bangla by Binodini.
43. *Mobini Protima* (1881), a *geetinatya* by Girishchandra, was inspired by the success of his *Maya Taru* and adapted from W.S. Gilbert's *Pygmalion and Galatea*. Gilbert's play, written in 1871, was first produced at the Haymarket in London in 1872.

*Anando Rabo ba Akbar* (1881), advertised as 'a historical play' was not one of Girishchandra's successes at the box office. Said to be influenced by Jyotirindranath Tagore's *Asrumati* (1879), the piece is set in Akbar's court, one of the main characters being Rana Pratap Singh. First performed on 21 May 1881.

44. *Ravan Badh* (1881), like all the other plays of Girishchandra with themes from Ramayan, was based on the Bangla Krittivas version of the epic. An immediate success, both with the audience as well as with literary critics, it concludes with Sita's trial by fire. In Girishchandra's version Ravan was conceived as a devotee of Ram. Following the success of *Ravan Badh*, Girishchandra wrote seven puranic plays between 1881–82.
45. *Sitar Bonobas* (1881) by Girishchandra, a play in four acts, brought 'respectable' women to the theatre because of its emphasis on *karun rasa*. First performed at the National on 17 September 1881.
46. Mrs. Siddons appears as 'Miss Sidnis' in the Bangla original and Ellen Terry as 'Elenteri'. The latter would appear to be conventional orthography and not peculiar to a self-taught writer such as Binodini: for example, Girishchandra writes Dave Carson as 'Debkarson' in his essay on 'Nat-churamoni swargiya Ardhendushkhar Mustafi' in *GR*, Vol. 5, p. 352.
- Mrs Sarah Siddons (1755–1831) performed at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. She was married to the actor William Siddons; John Philip Kemble her elder brother. Best known for her Lady Macbeth and other Shakespearean heroines.
- In 1882, Herr Bandmann came with his troupe, the Bandmann Company, to tour and perform in Calcutta at the Theatre Royal. The repertoire included *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *Othello* and other Shakespearean plays. (There was also a Maurice E. Bandmann who came as the manager for the Bandmann Opera Company and performed at the Corinthian Theatre in 1900 and 1905.)
- Ellen Alicia Terry (1847–1928), made her debut in 1856 as Mamillus in *The Winter's Tale*. Spent the best part of her acting life at the Lyceum with Sir Henry Irving (1838–1905). Other Shakespearean heroines made famous by her include Ophelia, Portia, Rosamond. She was conferred the LLD Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire in 1922. Her great originality in dressing was much discussed, even in contemporary Bengali theatre magazines.
- Girishchandra's essay 'Abhinoy o abhineta' (Acting and the actor), first published in *Archana*, 6th Year, Ashar-Sravan-Bhadra BS 1316; excerpted in *Natya-mandir*, 1st Year, Jyestha BS 1318. *GR*, Vol. 3, pp. 829–44, has references to Bandmann, Miss [sic] Siddons and 'Sarah' playing Lady Macbeth; 'Ellen' and Miss Marlowe's Portia, followed by an extensive discussion of Sarah Bernhardt's autobiography. It is difficult to evaluate the influence of distant or visiting actresses on the Bengali actress: according to some sources, Miss Fanny Anson's Galatea served as a model for Binodini's Sahana in *Mobini Protima*. See Hemendranath Dasgupta, *The Indian Stage*, Vol. 4, 1944, p. 211.
47. Bankimchandra's *Durgeshnandini* (1865) was influenced by Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, and the novelette, *Rajani* (1877), according to the author's preface, by the blind flower girl in Lord Bulwer Lytton's

- The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). Bankimchandra also said that he took the technique of the first person narrative for each of his characters from Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860).
48. In his preface, Girishchandra states that he cannot substantiate this praise of the actress by Bankimchandra (Afterword, p. 218). Bankimchandra had a barely tolerant relationship with the public theatre, although adaptations of his novels proved to be the most enduring of the stage successes. See Amitrasudhan Bhattacharya, *Rangamanche Bankim* (Calcutta: Deys Publishing, 1982), pp. 9–31.
49. Binodini is referring to 'Yavan-Haridas', one of the three foremost propagators of Vaishnavism who came under the influence of Chaitanya in Bengal. The Haridas Muth near the Jagannath temple in Puri is named after him. Haridas was said to be born of Muslim parents, or according to some sources, raised by Muslim foster parents—hence the by now pejorative epithet 'Yavan'. Haridas was under attack by both Hindus and Muslims: by the former for defiling their god and by the latter for repudiating his own faith. The exemplum indicates the catholicity and the power of Harinam or chanting Hari's name: firstly because Haridas survives the series of tortures inflicted on him and converts, with his unaffected piety, even the prostitute sent to seduce him and secondly, because Haridas is the Muslim turned Vaishnav devotee.
50. The poem 'Barangana' comprises seven verses in *Kavitali*, Part I, *GR*, Vol 5, pp. 188–89.
51. Shimle, in North Calcutta, occupies the area between present-day Bidhan Sarani and Maniktala.
52. Hariprasad Basu had a small dispensary on Chitpur Road. He was brought over by Girishchandra to be in charge of the accounts of the Star Theatre because of his skills in book-keeping. He continued to be involved with theatre upto the late 1920s.
53. In fact, the construction work on the Star continued for less than a year or so.
54. Shankar Bhattacharya has provided a plausible account as to why the members specifically chose 'Star' as the name of the new theatre. After *Ravan Badh*, on 4 February 1883, Girishchandra quit Pratapchand Johuree's National Theatre, taking with him most of the theatre members—Binodini, Kadambini, Khetramoni, Aghorenath Pathak, Neelmadhab Chakravorty and others. He formed a new company called the Calcutta Star Company. The Company performed at the Bengal Theatre stage in the intervening months until the new theatre funded by Gurmukh Rai was inaugurated on 21 July 1883 as the Star Theatre. (*AK*, pp. 156–57.)
55. *Daksha-yajna* (1883) by Girish Ghosh, inaugurated the Star Theatre. Manomohan Basu's *Sati Natak* (1873) was on the same theme; during and after Girish's version, the story became very popular in jatras. Binodini played Sati, daughter of Daksha and wife of Shiv. According to versions of the *Devibhagvat* and the *Kalika Puran*, Daksha did not invite his son-in-law, Shiv, to his sacrifice (yajna)



- and this humiliation led Sati to destroy her own body. Sati's dismembered body fell in different parts of the country, each of which became a *pithstan* or seat of worship. In Girish's play, Daksha appears as arrogant and wilful, the women characters sensitive and helpless. Sati attempts to mediate between the two worlds and sacrifices herself in the process. A particularly tender relationship is drawn between Sati and her mother, Prosuti, who is also threatened by Daksha to renounce their daughter and her husband. There is considerable attempt by Girish to explicate the myth in terms of gender and social roles against the more generalised laws of a ruler's responsibility towards his subjects and the maintenance of social order. The music for the play was composed by Benimadhab Adhikari.
56. According to one estimate, the audience must have comprised about 1500 spectators (Chittaranjan Ghosh, *Desb*, April 93, p. 25), but no data is available to corroborate this unusually large number. One reason for the success was undoubtedly the special effects achieved by Jaharlal Dhar, experimenting with lights and reflectors.
57. Act IV, scene 2, Mahadev enters Daksha's sacrificial area to claim the lifeless body of Sati, breaking into a long speech of lament.
58. The International Exhibition, as it was called, was inaugurated on 4 December 1883 in the Maidan in Calcutta. The Exhibition witnessed great crowds and an influx of princes and heads of state to the city. A special 'Royal Box' was set up at the Star Theatre which had an extremely profitable run of *Nala-Damayanti* during this period. (Abinashchandra Gangopadhyay, op. cit., p. 193.)
59. *Dhruva charitra*, *Srivatsa-Chinta* and *Prabhad charitra* belong to the Bhakti phase of Girishchandra's career as a dramatist. In *Dhruva charitra* (1883), Binodini played the part of the wicked queen Suruchi, while the title role of the boy devotee was played by another actress—Bhushankumari. *Dhruva charitra* was staged at the Star on 11 August 1883.
- Srivatsa-Chinta* was first performed at the Star on Beadon Street on 7 June 1884. It had already been made into a jatra—Naranarayan Ray's *Srivatsa charit*—in 1870; and into two other plays in 1884 and 1886 respectively. The influence of the older *Bidyā-Sundar* on Girish's play has been noted. *Prabhad charitra* was first performed at the Star, 22 November 1884.
60. See *My Story*, note 11.
61. The reference is to Sisirkumar Ghosh. See Appendix IV.
62. *GR*, Vol. 5, *Chaitanya-Lila*.
63. *Chaitanya-Lila*, Act III, scene 2. After his return from Gaya, Nimai is tormented by his love for Hari and his inner conflict between Krishnadharmā and sansardharma: Nimai's swoons; crying out aloud for Krishna puts him in confrontation with his erstwhile teacher Gangaprasad.
64. *Chaitanya-Lila*, Act IV, scene 2 takes place in the inner apartments

- of the Mishra household. When Nimai announces to his mother his decision to renounce the world, she swoons. Nimai persuades her of his divine mission, arguing that instead of being only her son, he will now be able to serve all mankind.
65. *Chaitanya-Lila*, Act IV, scene 3. Nimai's decision to leave Nadia upsets his disciples who entreat him not to leave. His mother swoons and the play ends with the *sankirtan*.
66. The testimony from a Nabadweep pandit is significant. Nabadweep was Chaitanya's birthplace.
67. Ramakrishna suffered from cancer of the throat from which he died in 1886. In the course of his illness, he rested for a few months in a rented house in Shyampukur Street where entry to his chamber was strictly guarded by zealous disciples; Binodini, disguised as a saheb, succeeded in meeting him with the help of another devotee.
68. Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), born Narendranath Datta, later the chief disciple of Ramakrishna. He composed and sang religious hymns, many of which were addressed to Kali and Shiv.
69. There are two other recorded instances of Ramakrishna's presence at the theatre: *Prabhad charitra* on 14 December 1884; *Brishketu* and *Bibah Bibhrat* on 25 February 1885.
70. Part II of *Chaitanya-Lila* or *Sannyas-Lila* was first performed on 10 January 1885 and last on 24 October 1885.
71. *Chaitanya-Lila*, Part II. The *sharabhuja* or six-armed form of Chaitanya is often the subject of popular representation in Bengal, as in Kalighat pats dating from the 1880s. The face of the figure is that of Radha, while the arms hold objects associated with the iconography of Vishnu and Krishna. The yellow-bodied composite figure with elements of all these divinities is that of Chaitanya's.
72. Shankar Bhattacharya's note suggests that Binodini probably played Chaitanya and Bilasini Karforma in the space of the same show less than half a dozen times. (*AK*, p. 199.)
73. *Sarojini* or *Chittor Akraman Natak* (Sarojini or the Attack of Chittor) (1875) by Jyotirindranath Tagore. First performed at the Great National on 15 January 1875/6. There was an earlier version by Rajanath Bardhan (1873). The motif of a virgin's sacrifice is said to be modelled after Racine's *Iphigénie*. Advertisements for the play highlighted the spectacular funeral scene in Act VI in which Sarojini jumps into the funeral pyre. Bijoy Singh was played by Amritalal Basu, who was 'the worthy manager' of the Star at the time Binodini was writing her autobiography.
74. *Mrinalini*, *BR*. See Afterword, p. 218.
75. Col. Olcott's open letter to the *Reis and Rayyet* was in response to a letter which had made precisely such a charge. (Dated 7 November 1885, pp. 512–13.)
76. Pramila, the young wife of Meghnad in *Meghad Badh*. Read by most literary critics as the type of the 'birangana' for encouraging her husband in war and even leaving the confines of the royal



apartments when the situation demands it. She finally commits *jaubar* with her attendants on news of her husband's death. The 'immolation' scene along with the battle scenes were amongst the most popular items in this play.

77. Nabinchandra Sen's (1847-1909) long poem *Palashir Juddho* (1875-76). It became a school text book and was considered 'seditious' after almost two decades of publication. Amiya P. Sen, *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal: 1872-1905* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 152. Girishchandra's performance in the role of Clive is said to have impressed Nabinchandra.

Britannia makes an appearance in *Palashir Juddho*. This misadventure is recounted in greater detail in *My Life*, p. 154. Britannia appears on the English stage from the eighteenth century onwards. 'Interestingly, she was originally used as an ante-bellum allegorical figure, but with the success of the Empire came increasingly to be representative of Britain's imperialistic agenda, particularly in nineteenth century melodrama. Britannia, in her original guise, was not all the symbol of militant jingoism later generations have taken her for. In fact, quite the reverse!' (from the 'Historical notes' of the production brochure of Century Theatre's 'Barnstormers', May 1992)

78. *Nala-Damayanti* (1883?) based on the *Mahabharat* episode of the separation of Nala and Damayanti by the power of Kali and their eventual reunion, was for long a favourite jatra theme. Girish Ghosh's play in four acts proved to be very popular. The songs were written in the contemporary idiom of *akbdai* and *half-akbdai*. There were two songs by the lotus maids who then disappear into the flowers, advertised in contemporary newspapers as 'photo-electric' lotuses.
79. As far as is known, Binodini's only child was her daughter Shakuntala Dasi who died on 27 Falgun BS 1310. The reference to the 'youngest daughter' is either a printing error or a reference to her adopted daughter (see Afterword).
80. 'Kalo', the pet name of Binodini's daughter, Shakuntala. She also refers to her daughter as 'Puturani' in the poem 'Ore amar khuki manik' in the collection *Basana*.
81. Guhak Chandal appears as a true friend of Ram's in Girishchandra's *Ramer Bonobas* (Act V, scene i). In the *Mahabharat*, Vidur, step-brother of Dhritarashtra and Pandu, was born to Ambalika's chief maid by the sage Vyas. Ambalika herself was repelled by Vyas and could not even bear to look upon him. Although inferior in lineage, Vidur was the wisest and the most respected of the brothers.

In the scene before Advaita's home, discussing the miracle of Yavan-Haridas, to indicate the catholicity [and superiority] of Harinam. (*Chaitanya-Lila*, Act II, scene ii, *GR*, Vol. 3, p. 827.)

## My Life as an Actress

Binodini Dasi

apartments when the situation demands it. She finally commits *jaubar* with her attendants on news of her husband's death. The 'immolation' scene along with the battle scenes were amongst the most popular items in this play.

77. Nabinchandra Sen's (1847-1909) long poem *Palashir Juddho* (1875-76). It became a school text book and was considered 'seditious' after almost two decades of publication. Amiya P. Sen, *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal: 1872-1905* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 152. Girishchandra's performance in the role of Clive is said to have impressed Nabinchandra.
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## My Life as an Actress

Binodini Dasi

After the furious travels of a lifetime, when it is now time to take leave of this guest-house known as the world, why do I drag my old and withered body away from the horizons of death; why do I try and polish back to their original brightness the rusty memories of those old days? There is no answer. I cannot find an answer. But it seems to me, that when I was little, my pure mind was first deeply dyed in red. So many coloured years have failed to remove that original red which lingers on even now in my mist-ridden mind. It is a colour which seeps in through the curtains of time and still continues to show itself in glimpses in the recesses of my mind. And so, whenever I speak, I remember before anything else all those days which are still as sweet to me as honeyed dreams, the power and scent of whose intoxication I cannot yet forget, which will remain perhaps my closest companion to the last days of my life. Perhaps that is why the desire to speak of my life as an actress.

Well, I have the desire. But what powers do I possess? And what shall I speak of? What to say and what not to? How little I know! From time to time I come to see performances. What an addiction it is! As if the theatre beckons to me from the midst of all other work. I look at all the new actors and actresses, educated, refined and elegant, so many new plays, the spectators, the applause, the commotion, the hubbub and the FOOTLIGHTS. One scene follows another and the bell rings as the curtain falls—all this and so much more comes back to my mind!

There was a time when we too dressed like this. I remember the spectators of those days, my theatre companions, the costumes of that age, the plays, the footlights illumined by GAS, the atmosphere of another era. My feeble memory seems to drag me to the dream world of another age in the past. I would like to recount properly all that had taken place in that age—what I have never forgotten and can never forget, what I loved once with all my heart and soul, whose attractions continue still to bind me—I wish to talk about that theatre to the young actresses of today. But everything seems to grow blurred and confusing. However, I shall say something of those days, I shall try to speak of those days. They are simple truths, knowing which the readers and spectators of today will realise what sort of mud lying in the bottom of the ponds they used—they who founded the theatre in this land—to fashion living, speaking dolls. And how these creations fashioned by their hands, moved about on the stage, how they spoke and gave pleasure to the spectators.

I was the daughter of poor people. I had never seen a play before I went to perform in a theatre. Let me tell you how it was that I happened to come into that world. It is a story of long ago—I do not recall the exact date. Sri Bhubanmohan Neogi (from the family of the Baghbazar Neogis) was then the owner of the Great National and it was to his theatre that I first went. I was then around nine or ten. In our house lived Gangabai, a good singer, who eventually became a famous actress. But of that later.

The late Purnachandra Mukhopadhyay and Brajanath Seth used to give Gangamoni singing lessons because they wished to produce a play called *Sitar Bibah* (Sita's Wedding). Ganga had not yet joined the theatre; this was to be her first. While she was being taught, I would quite forget to play and sit quietly in a corner, listening intently to all of them. And one day, it was they who dragged me as well straight from my child world of toy pots and pans, of spoons and ladles, right into the dance rooms of the National Theatre.<sup>1</sup>

I was but a little girl and knew nothing. I had never been in the presence of so many gentlemen and I had no idea as to what a theatre was. I shrank in fear and anxiety in my shyness, as if I were a stork amongst swans. Purna-babu and Braja-babu fixed up my schedule. After I joined the theatre I came to know that the Great National had employed the well-known singer Jadumoni, and Khetramoni, Narayani, Lakkhimoni, Kadambini and Rajkumari. Alas! all whom I name are now no more.

Rajkumari was called Raja by everyone—she enjoyed quite a position in the theatre. Raja was extremely fond of me. I was a very lively little girl. Because I was so frisky everyone in our group scolded me; at such times I would sit silently, huddled up in a corner. And if the scolding was too harsh, I would even start crying. Then it was Raja who petted me, looked after me and if anyone scolded me, she would take my side. Consequently, I had become the darling, the little pet of an important actress.

I was the daughter of poor folk. I had no idea about how to dress properly. Sometimes, lacking a blouse, I would go to the theatre wearing only a sari. Raja had two blouses stitched for me. If I felt hungry, Raja would buy me food and if I happened to fall asleep in the theatre, she would wake me up and escort me to the carriage. All this happened many years ago, but Raja's love for me surrounds me even now like the fragrance of a flower newly blossomed. It is human nature to forget all with time, but we can perhaps never forget a debt of love.

Before I had joined the Great National Theatre—I do not recall exactly how many years it was before I joined them—I had heard

that the Sanyal-babus of Jorasanko were rich people. The National Theatre had been started with tickets sold from their house, but they had no actresses in their group: men played all the women's roles. It was the owners of the Bengal Theatre who first began to hire women for the stage. The Bengal Theatre was on Beadon Street, right next to Chhatu-babu's home. It had a roof of crude tiles, a mud floor and the beams were of the *sal* tree—one might as well call it a rude hut. Two of his grandsons, Charuchandra Ghosh and Saratchandra Ghosh, founded this theatre. Their patrons were well-connected, educated and wealthy people: Biharilal Chattopadhyay, Girish Chandra Ghosh (everyone called him Ladaru Girish), Mathur-babu and the like.

The Bengal Theatre was started before the Great National. They had actresses in their group: Elokeshi, Jagattarini, Shyama and Golap (later known as Sukumari Dutta). My acting career is intimately tied up with the Bengal Theatre. I worked for quite a long time in this theatre. But I shall speak of that elsewhere.

Let me tell you about my first role at the Great National. The Great National was located on Beadon Street which also housed the Minerva. It was wooden with a corrugated roof—quite something in those days. The plays were performed there, but our rehearsals were held in the drawing room of the Neogi-babus in their house by the Ganga. It was situated close to what is now called the Annapurna Ghat. That beautiful house has now hidden itself in the womb of the Ganga. Railway lines run over it now, people walk over it and boatmen pull their oars over the place where it once stood.

After I joined, the rehearsals for *Beni-Sanbar* began. My very first role was in this play; it was a handmaid's role with only a few lines. I learnt my part by heart and rehearsed it—there was little enough that I had to say. Bhimsen, the third of the Pandavas has just drunk the blood of Dusshasan and is on his way to the *abhimani*, the proud and brooding Draupadi, to tie up her hair with his still bloodied hands. I was supposed to give this information to Draupadi. Well, that was that. But how was I to know how frightening it was going to be to utter even these few words on the stage. Of course, this was my first appearance on the stage.

Finally, it was *the* day. Everyone acted out his or her part, until finally it was my turn. What a fearful trembling within me before I was to make an entrance. I was struck into a heap by my fear. How was I to go out before so many people and say my lines! I had never before faced so many people!

I was the daughter of poor folk. I had a brother but he died

when he was very young. I was married off at a very young age. We were Jat-Vaishnavs—in those days it was common for us to be married by the age of four or five. I had been married off too, but my husband never accepted me and I never saw him again. I had been given in marriage perhaps only because it was a convention, but that was all. My mother could not afford to look after me. I studied for a while in a free school in the neighbourhood and spent the day playing around. It was my mother who persuaded me to join the theatre in the hope that I might be able to earn my living from the stage.

But as soon as I entered the stage, my lines memorised, my stomach seemed to turn upside down. There I stood by the wings, excited and with trembling legs, quite forgetting what it was that I had to say or do. At times I felt that there was no point getting on to the stage; I'd just run away. But I was afraid to do so; what would the others say and then, where could I run away to? Dharmadas Sur was the manager of the the Great National in those days. I shall have to speak of him at some length. He was a friend and a neighbour of Bhubanmohan Neogi's. I have heard that an English company called the Lewis's Theatre had come to the Calcutta Maidan and Dharmadas-babu had the Great National built after their theatre. I'm told that Dharmadas-babu is to be credited with whatever innovations had been made in the Bengali stage. It was with his friend Bhubanmohan's capital that the first *pakka* 'Theatre House' was built in Bengal. The Bengal Theatre, with its tiled roof had been built earlier; I have already mentioned this. Perhaps it would not be too out of place if I spoke of how the Great National came into existence. I may as well speak of it since it has come up. Of course, my account is based on what I have heard later.

One day, Bhuban-babu and Dharmadas-babu went to see a play at the Bengal Theatre.<sup>2</sup> Presumably, they had *PASSES* or perhaps they knew people there and had gone as their friends; in any case, they went into the *GREENROOM* as well. The proprietors of the Bengal Theatre did not much care for their going inside and there was soon an exchange of words. The origins of the Great National may be traced to this quarrel.

Bhuban-babu was a wealthy man; he could not suffer this insult in silence. In a spirit of competitiveness against the Bengal Theatre, he started his own theatre with the help of Dharmadas-babu, and this was the Great National Theatre. As far as I remember, Dharmadas Sur was the first manager. He was the first and the most important stage manager of Bengal.

But to return to our original topic, that of my debut: There I



'Srijukta Binodini' as Sahana in male attire in Girishchandra's *Mobini Protima*, *Roop o Rang*, 1st year, no. 11, 26 Paush BS 1331. ('Copy Right [sic] reserved'), appears again in *Roop o Rang*, 1st year, no. 12, 4 Magh BS 1331.



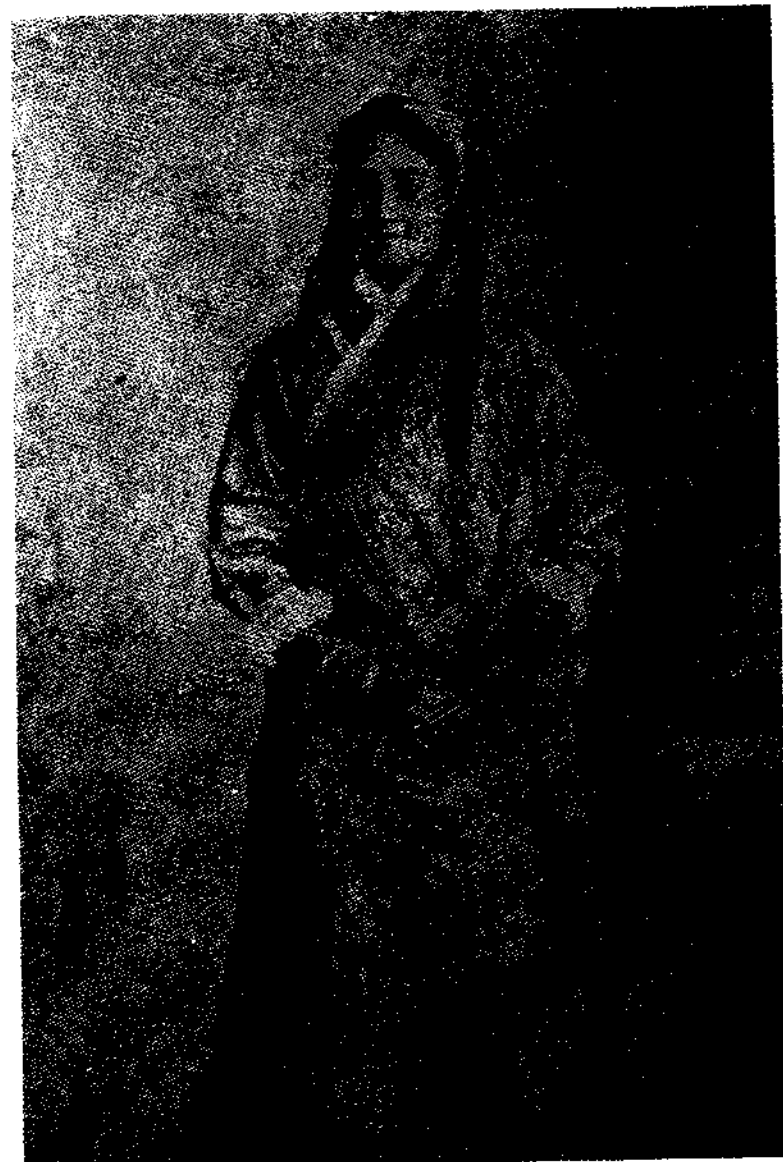
The photograph which introduced *Abhinetrir Katha*, when it was first published, as The well-known actress Srimati Binodini as "Gopa" in the play *Buddhadeb*, the beloved pupil of Natyacharya Srijukta Girish Ghosh', *Natya-mandir*, no. 1, Sraban, BS 1317



'Binodini as Motibibi', *Roop o Rang*, 1st year, no. 16, 19 Magh BS 1331 (The enigmatic woman from Bankimchandra's *Kapalkundala*). Courtesy, Siddhartha Ghosh and the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

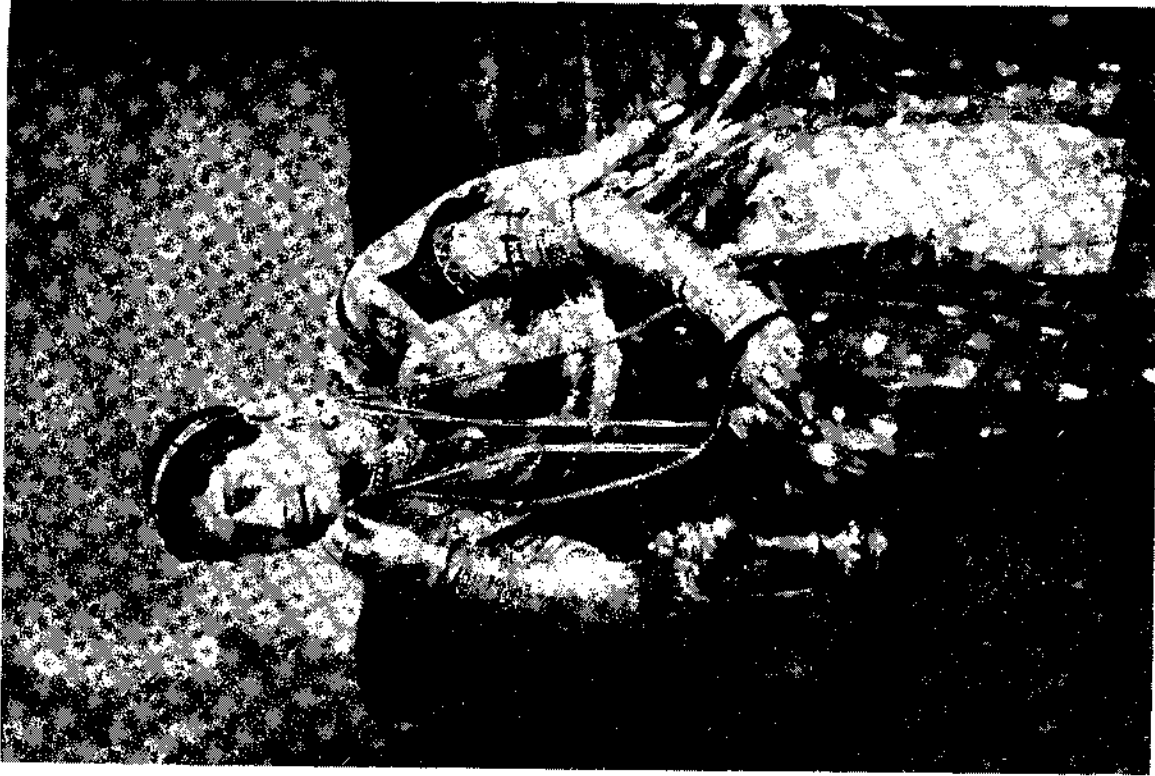


A rare photograph of Binodini Dasi in middle age. Courtesy, Siddhartha Ghosh and the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.



'Srimati Binodini as Bilasini Karforma', *Roop o Rang*, 1st year, no. 26. 12 Baisakh BS 1332 (the 'westernized miss' in Amritalal Basu's *Bibhat Bibhat* or The Matrimonial Fix).





Binodini 'in costume' in later years, *Roop o Rang*, 1st year, no. 16, 2  
Falgun BS 1331 (often reproduced as 'Binodini as Ayesha the princess,  
from Bankimchandra's *Durgeshbandini*' )



Binodini in the role of Cleopatra, *Roop o Rang*, 1st year, no. 15, 25  
Magh BS 1331. (There are similar photographs of other actresses  
dressed as Cleopatra; it is not known whether in fact Binodini played  
Cleopatra.)



# আমার কথা।

প্রথম খণ্ড।

বেঙ্গল, গ্রেট অ্যাশখাল, অ্যাশখাল ও

কীর থিয়েটারের কৃতপূর্ব

অভিনেত্রী

শ্রীমতী বিনোদিনী দাসী

কর্তৃক

প্রণীত ও প্রকাশিত।

৩১ নং রাজার বাগান ষ্ট্রিট, কলিকাতা।

কলিকাতা;

৬ নং জীব ঘোষের লেন,

গ্রেট ইডিন প্রেস হইতে

এস. সি. বসু কর্তৃক মুদ্রিত।

সন ১৩১২ সাল।

মূল্য ৫০ পয়সা।

Facsimile of title page of *Amar Katha*, Part I, BS 1319 (Courtesy, Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, Calcutta)

stood trembling in the wings. Possibly, I was even a little late in making my entrance. Dharmadas-babu ran up and pushed me on to the stage. I went up to Draupadi and bowing before her with folded hands, said whatever I had to say, exactly as I had been taught. I had quite naturally become as embarrassed and as humble as one would be before the gorgeously attired Pandava queen. I did not dare to even look at the audience! But either out of pity for me, realising what a state I was in, or for some other reason, the audience encouraged me greatly by applauding enthusiastically at the end of my speech. Somehow I finished what I had to say and walked backwards. (Dharmadas-babu had instructed me to make my exit in this manner.) I sighed with relief only when I had left the stage. Dharmadas-babu hugged me. He thumped my back and said, "Wonderful! That was done very well." And he blessed me. Even now as I remember that affectionate pat on the back, his blessings, my eyes grow dim with tears. Those companions of my first years of work, who had taken me by the hand and helped me on to the stage—they are all gone now.

The applause, and Dharmadas-babu's "Wonderful!", quite thrilled me. Dharmadas-babu said, "Run off now and change." I hopped and skipped my way to the greenroom. As though I'd just captured a city. The late Kartik Pal, who was the dresser in those days, said, "Come on, Puti, that was good."

This was the first PART in my acting career—that of a *paribarika*—a handmaid. After this, how often have I been a queen on the stage and have played many other characters, but like dreams of another world, remembering this one little role of a queen's handmaid gives me more pleasure than any other role.

There was no showing off when acting in those days. No airs of having done something special, of having dressed up specially for a show. It was all very natural, part of an everyday domestic routine. One went on stage and performed one's role. Our teachers had specifically instructed us never to look at the audience while acting; one had to pretend as if there was no audience in front of us. We had to carry on with our business amongst ourselves. There was no need at all to keep an eye on who was watching us or ponder over what they would think or say about our acting. I realized with time that this kind of teaching was intended to make us concentrate totally on our acting. It was necessary that we forgot everything else and did to the best of our ability whatever each one of us had to.

I do not remember for how long the play *Beni-Sanbar* had run. I think our training for *Hemlata* began after *Beni-Sanbar*. Haralal Ray was the dramatist and Hemlata was the heroine—her's was the title role. The question was, who was going to play Hemlata? After much discussion it was decided that I was to be Hemlata. Although I was then too young to play that particular role, I cannot say why the authorities decided to choose me. I was quite thrilled that I was to play the heroine, but at the same time, I was quite scared. However, I had become a little confident (since the last time) and my teachers were all very gifted. Satyasakha was the 'hero' in this play. That role was given to a youth whose real name I do not remember. But I do remember something of his acting, particularly the scenes of madness. Clad in saffron—his upper and lower garments all in saffron, the ends flowing loose, even trailing on the boards, and above all, his passionate acting: "Break, break! The cursed king's a fool. Here it all breaks. [sound effects] Slam! Bang! All breaks!" I remember all this even now. All my old memories awaken and I recall my old playmates, those whom I regarded as my own people. I have said that even now I go often to the theatre; it is all so dazzling, so many costumes, scenes, but that passionate acting, that simple style, I seem to miss very much. I cannot explain why that is so.

After *Hemlata*, we took up a new play called *Prakrita Bandhu* (A True Friend).<sup>3</sup> The late Madhu-babu was the hero of this play. His full name was Radha Madhab Kar, and he was the brother of the famous doctor R.G. Kar. Madhu-babu too was one of my instructors when I joined the theatre. He was an actor as well as a good singer. He was also respected as a teacher. Madhu-babu was the hero and I was the heroine, although I was then a very young girl. It wasn't a very complicated play. The plot was as follows: A king and his friend go to the forest for a hunt. In the forest lives a girl called Bonobala (the forest maid). Both the king and his friend fall in love with the girl. But at first, neither knows of the other's feelings. Later, they become aware of each other's feelings. The king contains his own passion and tells his friend that he should marry the girl. The girl too loved the king's friend who was called Radhamadhab Singh. There's a story behind the fact that the play had the same name as Madhab-babu: the dramatist, the late Deben-babu (I cannot remember his last name) was a close friend of Madhab-babu's and he had named the hero of his play after his friend. A splendid example of true friendship!

One day the forest maid, leaving her parents and the little hut in the forest, drawn by the power of love, arrived at the capital all by herself. She was amazed at the buildings and the other

structures that she saw before her in the capital. She had come walking all the way and was quite exhausted; not being used to such exertions, she stopped to rest a while under the trees. Meanwhile a maid from the palace found her sitting there and in the course of conversation discovered that the girl was in love with Kumar, the King's companion, and that it was in search of him that she had left the forest. Moved by her tale, the servant maid took her to the palace. The girl got to see Radhamadhab Singh and also the King. His friend Kumar told the King, "My friend, you should marry her." But the King was aware of Bonobala's feelings; he knew that she loved only Radhamadhab Singh and that was why she had left behind everything to come all this distance. The King took the initiative and got her married to Kumar and that was how the play ended! That's just the bare story, but there was quite a lot of action involved. But there's no point getting into that now. To get back to my role: just as Bonobasini was simple and innocent and quite wild, so too was I; even if not completely wild, quite simple, even a little stupid. No wonder the role suited me so perfectly. But the dresser had no end of trouble trying to dress me for the part. I was quite little but had to play the part of a young maid.

I acted with great pleasure. I found this work, the knowledge I gained and the play itself, all equally wonderful. And I would be increasingly eager to try out a new role. My acting was not a result of my talent but due to the teaching skills of my instructors, their hard work and care. It was with great labour indeed that they caught a wild thing like me and turned me into a 'HEROINE' to be presented before the audience.

As I grew older, we began to stage more difficult plays. This time we played *Lilabati*, yet another beautiful offering from Dinabandhu-babu's literary delights. Perhaps it was Mahendra-babu who played Lalitmohan in the play. I don't quite recall who played Hemchand, but remember well that Bel-babu played Naderchand and Neelmadhab-babu played Karta.

After that we staged *Nabeen Tapaswini*; Ardhendu-babu acted in this play. He was the main actor and played Jaladhar. Dharmadada played Bijoy; I was Kamini; Lakkhi and Narayani were Malati and Mallika respectively, Kadambini was Rani and Khetu-didi (Khetramoni) played Jagadamba. Jaladhar and Jagadamba—how beautifully matched were the two roles. As Jaladhar, Ardhendu-babu sang,

Malati, Malati, my precious flower  
You've brought to ruin my name and caste!

He sang these two lines as he moved on the stage accompanying the song with such unusual gestures that it was an unforgettable sight. It would be futile to try and write about it for one who has not seen the Jaladhar of those times, or expect anyone to understand what it was, merely by hearing an account of the performance.<sup>4</sup>

Not only did we have regular plays in those days, but also OPERAS and farces. Operas like *Sati ki Kalankini*, *Adarsha Sati*, *Kanak Kanan*, *Ananda-Lila*, *Kamini Kunjo* and farces like *Sadhabar Ekadoshi*, *Kinchat Jalojog*, *Chorer upor Bantpari*.<sup>5</sup>

Once we had to perform a farce that was improvised by Ardhendu-babu. It was great fun. It rained heavily one day. The performance was over but the rain refused to let up. The audience grew very restless. We just couldn't decide as to what was to be done, when suddenly Ardhendu-babu said, "Hold on, there's something we can do. Dharmadas, just tell the people out there, 'Do not be upset dear sirs, here is a small farce for your pleasure. You won't be wasting your time and the rain may actually stop while the farce is being performed.'"

The farce was to be called *Mustafi Saheb ka Pukka Tamasha*.<sup>6</sup> Ardhendu-babu was Mustafi Saheb, Khetu-didi played his mother and putting on a red-bordered sari, I played his wife. We began an impromptu REHEARSAL without any script or anything. Simultaneously, we began preparing a SCENE, that of a decrepit room. A table was put up with bricks and a plank, and a strip of cloth from a white sari had to do for a tablecloth.

Meanwhile, after an interval of ten minutes, the Concert began to play. Ardhendu-babu went into the greenroom and emerged with his face and hands all blackened, wearing a pair of ancient drawers and a torn coat. I was instructed to stand beside that broken-down scene and was told, "You are to peep in every now and then and then dart away as if frightened." Khetu-didi did not have to be told much, she knew what to do the moment she had a hint.

Mustafi Saheb emerged with a *kush\** in one hand, a carpet needle in the other. He sat down, English style, on that broken table munching on a piece of dry bread. He looked around and moved his neck from side to side in the manner of a saheb. Even before he had said a word the audience was in splits at the way he looked around him like a proper saheb. To say nothing of the reaction when he said his inimitable lines. When the mother finds her saheb son tearing away at the piece of dry bread, his

\* Ritual vessel for water

face distorted with hideous convulsions in the effort, she instructs her daughter-in-law, "Go fetch some of the *cholar dal* and the *mochar ghanto\*\** that we've made for ourselves." The girl- bride immediately runs off and comes back with the *dal* and the *ghanto* in two small bowls which she hands over to her mother-in-law. The mother approaches the table with a great deal of trepidation and softly enquires of her son, "Why don't you try some of this, dear, instead of just eating that piece of bread?" And that proves to be quite enough! What! Ask a saheb to eat vegetables cooked the Bengali way! The Saheb jumps up from the chair and looking quite violent, screams (in 'Hindustani'), "What? You ask me to eat Bangali *tarkar?*" Terrified by this display of temper the bowl of food drops from the mother's hands and the food splatters all over the floor. The mother holds on to her daughter-in-law's hands and fearfully rushes indoors. But after all, how is it possible to swallow such exquisitely dry bread? The Saheb looks around furtively and picks up some of the *dal* and the *ghanto* lying on the floor and eats it up. His expression suggests that he quite relishes the stuff. Immediately, he turns to the door and calls out, "Ema, Ema, Amma!" and then looks around him. "What is it, my dear?" cries the mother emerging hurriedly. The Saheb points to the *dal* and says in broken Hindustani, "Ema, e mafik kya le aya? Dheo to *bamake*."\* whereupon she rushes off, bustling and happy, "Certainly, my dear, I'll get it, my dear." It would be impossible for anyone who has not seen these scenes for himself to make sense of any of this. What a repertoire of ingenious gestures did Khetu-didi have and what lively eyes.

Meanwhile, there appears a peon from the Municipality with a notice in his hand, to the effect that someone has dumped a bit of garbage on the street. The moment he says, "*Sabo notees ochi*,"\*\* the Saheb turns on him in a rage, "Look here, you black Bangali, *neechu ja ab!*"<sup>oo</sup> The *Urrey*<sup>oo</sup> draws back a couple of steps and raising his hands in dismay, 'Lord help me, how deep am I to go—inside a deep well?' and exits. Mustafi Saheb then does such a polka, lifting up his long legs ever so high and springing around all over the stage even as he sings lines that are quite nonsensical. . .

\* Savoury Bengali dishes.

\*\* "What's this stuff you've brought? Give me some."

oo "Sahib, I've brought a notice."

oo . . . get down."

oo Used pejoratively by Bengalis of a man from Orissa.

I am the big saheb of the world and you a little one.  
I eat shrimps and you live on onions.

... as he gestures towards the spectators. I needn't tell you how the audience laughed at that. And he made two hours pass in this manner. The rain had let up by then; the spectators went home quite happy and contented. We too went home rolling with laughter. It was probably after this incident that Ardhendu began to be called the 'Saheb'. Now, of course, this name is fairly well known all over.

So that was how Mustafi Saheb's impromptu farce got performed! In a similar manner, 'Kapten' Bell (Amritalal Mukhopadhyay) would dress up as a clown for the stage. He himself planned out the costume, the dialogue and everything else for the part of the clown.

At that time, when *Neeldarpan* was playing with great success, Bhuni-babu (Srijukta Amritalal Basu) joined our theatre. I had not seen him prior to this; I heard that he used to play the younger daughter-in-law in *Neeldarpan* in the plays performed at the Sanyal's Jorasanko house. After he joined our theatre, he didn't have to dress up as the younger daughter-in-law any more; this time he played the husband, Bindumadhab.

Several plays were produced, one after the other: Michael Madhusudan's *Shormishtha*, *Krishnakumari*, *Buro Shaliker Gbare Ro*, and *Ekei ki Bole Sabhyata* (Is This Civilization?); Upendranath Das's *Sarat-Sarojini*, *Surendra-Binodini*, the late Manmohan Basu's *Pronoy Parikbha* (The Test of Love), *Jenana Juddho* (The Battle of Women) and another farce. As far as I remember, *Jenana Juddho* was not a separate play, but a part of Dinabandhu's *Jamai Bari* (Sons-in-law in Barracks)—about a quarrel between two co-wives. How many of the others can I list? As soon as we began to perform one play, immediately REHEARSALS for the next one began. Rehearsals would be held in the evenings, because many of the group were office-going people. The rehearsals for the opera went on during the day. Everybody was enthusiastic and enterprising, and rehearsals were rarely missed those days.

I cannot quite explain why, but as for myself, I thought only of when the carriage would come to fetch me and when I would find myself in the theatre. I wanted to see how the others conducted themselves on the stage. I forgot almost to sleep or eat in my excitement: I could only practise in secret how Kadu had spoken at a particular point, or how Lakhhi had said

something on another occasion. I was rather young and I did not have a room of my own; it was inevitable that the others would catch me at my activities and laugh at me. I would run off whenever that happened.

Some time after I had joined the theatre (I do not remember exactly when), our company left for a theatrical tour of the west. I too had to go with the rest and since my mother would not let me go on my own, she too accompanied us.

I think it was to Delhi that we first went. Well, we went to Delhi and we discovered it was very much the land of Musalmans—you could hardly find Bengalis. How strange they all looked: an assortment of beards, and of outfits, no way of understanding their incomprehensible language; some of them had appearances that could strike terror into our hearts. I was in tears: to have come all the way from Bengal to such a strange land! How we all cried! I remember to this day our tears. The *bhisti* supplied us with water: we could never drink that water. In fact, at first we couldn't even bathe in it. We drew water in little metal pots from the well and that was the water we used for drinking and bathing. Subsequently, however, as we continued to stay I was obliged to bathe in the water drawn by the *bhisti*. I had to wash away the make-up and who was going to draw water so late at night—mother would have fallen asleep by then. But my mother would never even touch that water, she herself drew whatever water she needed. She cooked a meal for herself everyday and took some milk and perhaps a little fruit at night. How much did she endure for my sake! I had no one other than a little brother who had died some time ago, at the age of ten. Since that time my loving mother had always kept me by her side; she never let go of me even for a single moment. When we were in Calcutta she accompanied me to the theatre practically everyday. She sat waiting until I had finished with my work and then she took me back home with her.

We performed in Delhi for about seven days or so. We didn't do too well in Delhi, but we stayed on for about another week. We got to see whatever was worth seeing. One day all of us got into a bullock-cart and went off to see the Kutab Minar. We ran into great danger on our way: a tiger emerged and gave chase to our bullock-cart. There were screams and shouts all around, flares were lit and we began to cry. What a sight it was! But the tiger could not finally get at the cows since there were a lot of people with us. After this narrow escape we left Delhi and went to Lahore.

We stayed for quite long in Lahore. But we did not have shows

everyday—only for ten or twelve days. Plays with a lot of singing and dancing went down well, we hardly performed any drama. Ardhendu-babu had made himself agreeable among the local inhabitants and he was frequently invited by the rich gentry. It was for his sake that we stayed on for such a length of time in Lahore. All of us spent our time in great fun and comfort. Sometimes we would go to bathe in the Ravi river and sometimes go to watch others bathe. The women would take off all their clothes and leave them on the bank, like the *gopis*, the milkmaids, of Brindaban. Perhaps they did not have a Kalachand like ours who would steal their clothes! That was a mercy indeed, otherwise the husbands would be ruined if they had to buy a new set of clothes everyday for their wives. The women would dance and sport in the water in that state; these naked ones had not a glance to spare for all the people passing by on the banks. They seemed to regard the passers-by as one would stray cats or dogs or monkeys. They laughed along with us as much as we did at this state of affairs.

Besides this, we often went for walks to Golap Bagh.<sup>8</sup> I do not know if there is any such other beautiful garden in the entire world. I shall never forget the scenes from that garden: it was a three-storied garden, with many tiers, the levels descending from top to bottom, rather than the other way round. The waters of the fountain flowed incessantly, from the third to the second level and from the second to the first. There was also a huge tank; one could well call it a cluster of little ponds, bound on all sides by white marble. It was about twenty feet long and fifteen feet broad and quite deep; the water came up to the neck of a man as tall as Ardhendu-babu.

Surrounding the ponds were almost a thousand little niches. Apparently, when the begums came to bathe, a lamp was lit in each one of these niches. Close by stood a marble seat on which the badshah seated himself and watched the women bathing. Little channels had been cut around the marble seat; if the water overflowed, it was diverted along the channels to the garden. When I looked upon these things, I used to wonder how wonderful the women, in the prime of their youth and beauty, must have looked when the droplets from the fountain fell on their upturned faces. And the badshah sat with his golden hookah under the pearl canopy, smoking amber-scented tobacco,<sup>9</sup> drunk at the sight of all those bathing beauties and their water sports.

And what shall I say of the flowers, the many flowers that were all around us? Wherever one looked one could see roses—tens of thousands of roses and roses alone. I cannot describe how

happy I would feel at this scene. I have loved flowers since my childhood and even now at this age I care very much for flowers. The rose is my best loved flower. I would bring back an *anchal* full of flowers from the garden and arrange them with great care. I forget all when I have flowers. It pains me greatly when people pluck flowers—it must hurt the flowers.

Ardhendu-babu had struck up a friendship with the person who was in charge of looking after Golap Bagh. Consequently, we had free access to the garden at all times. I would go there whenever I wanted and pick as many flowers as I wished—there was no one to forbid me. One day some of us got into the tank and created quite a racket. Dharmadas-babu, who was sitting on the marble seat made for the badshah, began scolding us. The others were scared and one by one they left the water, but I didn't. I've always been the spoilt pet!

Neelmadhab-babu was there as well. It was he who came forward to drag me out, holding me by my hands. He wrung out my wet clothes and rubbed me dry. He then gave me two shawls. I folded one in two halves and wore it, and the other I draped over my shoulders and dressed in this manner I went home that day.

While in Lahore, we lived in a five-storeyed house. But when you saw it from the outside it seemed as if it was only two-storeyed, because three of its floors were underground. We were told by the local people that the extreme heat made such a construction necessary. Besides, when the Musalmans ruled over the land, such rooms were built also for hiding young women lest they be attacked or persecuted. There was also the danger of snakes. Many said that they had even seen these snakes—seven or eight feet long ones. I hadn't seen any though. There was a separate set of stairs for women right inside the house—you could get to the inner apartments from a narrow long passage. Neelmadhab-babu would stand there and strike with his stick, at which apparently, the snakes would slowly remove themselves and then the women could enter their rooms. But I was so terrified, I'd never venture near these stairs, preferring to use the other set of stairs outside. Of course, we women were forbidden to go up these open stairs. But then who was going to listen to such prohibitions! Whatever I did was bound to be forgiven! In any case, the snake story seems somewhat dubious to me . . .

To market went my sister-in-law's ma,  
Said she saw a tiger's cub;

You told me and I heard it all:  
Ma! I saw a tiger.

Eventually it was time to say goodbye. On the night of the last performance Ardhendu-babu composed a special song. I remember one of the lines which went like this:

We bid you farewell with heavy hearts  
O people of Lahore!

It was sung to the tune of the following song:

O cruel god, why have you sent me  
To the land of Bharat as a woman born.

There was a gathering after the performance. We took leave of the Lahore-*babhis* with tears in our eyes.

A funny incident, involving me, took place while we were in Lahore. It was just as if it was from a story. There was a certain rich man called Gopal Singh who was called a 'Raja' by everyone. He decided he wanted to marry me and elevate my social status. He wanted my mother to go back to her home with Rs 5000, but also added that if she wanted to she could stay back with me; he would pay her Rs 500 every month. My mother wept bitterly on hearing this—she was afraid that he might try and keep me by force. Dharmadas-babu tried to reassure her: "They're gentlemen; they would not act dishonestly. And in any case we shall be leaving shortly. Where's the danger!" I had seen Singhji. He was very handsome, but what a long beard he had! It frightened me just to look at him. I just could not bear men with beards even when I was little. And yes, there's one little detail that I haven't mentioned: I had dressed up as Radhika in *Sati ki Kalankini*, and it was this sight of me that had caught his fancy and made him want to marry me. Well, it ended as in a story, we didn't marry each other after all.

The money offered was actually a paltry sum; during the course of my acting life I have once or twice had access to fifty thousand rupees. But caught in the *maya* of theatre, I have brushed off these sums as dust, far away from myself. I really regret my attitude. However, there is no point crying over spilt milk.

From Lahore we went to Meerut where we performed only for three days. From thence we went on to Lucknow, where we

landed in a great mess. I shall speak of that later. On the way to Meerut from Lucknow we stopped at Agra for a few days where we did some PLAYS. We did not stay too long at Agra probably because tickets did not sell well. We were in Agra only for three or four days. The shows were on during the evenings, the mornings we spent wandering on the banks of the Jamuna and looking at all the grand mansions along the river. Dharmadas-babu and Abhinash-babu would take us around. We trusted them and had come abroad on this tour and they justified our faith in them by taking good care of us and showing us what was to be seen; their behaviour towards us was exemplary.

While we were in Agra, it was felt that since we were so close to Brindaban, it would be quite un-Hindu like if we were to return home without having had a *darshan* of Gobindji. As a result, all the people in our group decided that we would stop at Brindaban *en route* to Lucknow. Immediately, all the necessary arrangements were made.

In those days there was no rail-line connecting Agra to Brindaban. We set off on camel-drawn carts. We got on to the carts after our midday meal. The cart was a two-tiered affair; I promptly seated myself on the second level, Lakkhi and Narayani came and sat with me. Ma, Khetu-didi and the others, including Kadambini, were seated below us. She [Kadambini] did not mix too much with us but kept herself at a distance; she was a singer and one the most famous actresses besides. All night long we endured the bumpy ride on the camel cart and reached Brindaban at seven o'clock the next morning.

There was such fun along the way—everyone was thrilled that they were to have a glimpse of the deity. Gobindji had made it possible for us to fulfil our one great desire in life through our work in the theatre. Was there a more fortunate event that could happen in those days? Of all the people in our group my mother and Khetu-didi seemed the most pleased.

We settled ourselves in a huge half-ruined house—you could almost call it a mansion—on the banks of the Jamuna. The *pandab*, the head priest, had probably fixed it up for us in advance. Then there was such a rush to go barefoot for a *darshan* of Gobindji. Dharmadas-babu and Ardhendu-babu were the most keen. Breakfast was bought for all of us and kept in the house while everyone left for the darshan, but unfortunate that I was, no one agreed to take me along. It would be a while before they came back, they said, and the sun would be strong; I might as well stay back and look after the food. I would be taken later in the evening. I cried my heart out and begged to go with them,

but my tears had absolutely no effect. Ardhendu-babu coaxed and cajoled and eventually persuaded me: I was told to keep the door shut and remain indoors (all by myself) because if the doors were left open it was likely that the monkeys would plague us. Monkeys have always been a problem in Brindaban, then and even now.

What was I to do? I had perforce to agree to their plans. A little later, I got tired of sitting by myself. And, I *was* a little hungry too. I took out some food from the food basket and seating myself near the window proceeded to eat. The windows had heavy iron bars; I had just taken a bite when I saw a monkey sitting on the roof across our house, holding out his hand for some food. I was curious. I broke off some of my own food and gave it to him. And that was enough! In a trice the roof was full of monkeys, appearing singly at first, then in twos and threes. My excitement rose with their numbers and I began to give all of them some food. A little later I found yet another troop of monkeys on the roof and meanwhile the food-basket was quite empty. A couple of the monkeys came up and began rattling the bars on the window. I was scared stiff and began to cry in my helplessness. The monkey however, did not appear to understand my tears; perhaps no monkey ever does. All of them jumped up and down and thrust out their hands demanding food. The more I sought to explain, "My dear fellow, there's no more food in my store", the more they danced around, grimacing and baring their teeth. Monkeys all over the roof and me inside, having given away all the food, feeling very much like a monkey myself—such was the situation when all the theatre people came back to the house. I hurriedly opened the doors. I was terrified because all the food had been finished. My mother, Khetu-didi and some of the others began to scold me. Ardhendu-babu laughed, "You've done the right thing—fed all the Brajabashis. We didn't let her come along; now we've got our just desserts." Later in the evening they took me for a darshan of Gobindji—I cannot describe the effect it had on me.

The next day we went to see the forest called 'Nidhuban'.<sup>10</sup> Before we set off the pandahs warned us to be very careful not to take any food along with us, otherwise we would be in great trouble: the monkeys would be sure to create problems. We were so drunk with happiness that we didn't pay any heed to what the pandah had told us. Roasted gram was being sold at a little distance away from the wood. I managed to collect a paisa or two each from this person and that and bought myself some. I put it away in my anchal and clutching it tightly, went on ahead

before the others, dancing and skipping. Just as I had left our group some distance behind me, a monkey, as big as myself, appeared from somewhere and grabbed at my sari. What could I do but quickly let go of the gram. I shut my eyes and screamed loudly for the others. They all came running up to me and the monkey too ran away. The pandahs said that the monkey must have seen me buying the fried gram and had followed me.

We returned to Agra the very next day from Sri Brindaban-dham on the camel carts. We rested for a night in Agra and then left for Lucknow. We had sent a man in advance who had arranged for a house where we could stay; we went there directly after reaching Lucknow. Dharmadas-babu hung up the SCENES at the Chhattar-manjil and made it look like a stage. On the whole it looked quite good. People came running from all over the place when they heard that the famous National Theatre from Calcutta had come to perform.<sup>11</sup> They fought to buy tickets. Our stage had been set up inside a huge house. There were gaslights all around and the entire house was full of people—during show time it took on a festive air.

The first day we performed *Lilabati*.<sup>12</sup> Then, an opera, either *Sati ki Kalankini* or *Kamini Kunjo*—these were the two operas most frequently performed. After two days of performance we had a rest day. That was when we went on a tour of the city. How many gardens and palaces of begums we saw! We then went to see the Nabab's fort. During the MUTINY, an explosive had struck a huge house and we were able to see this house.<sup>13</sup> The marks from the explosion were still visible on the walls of the house; you could still see where the plaster had come off in some places and where parts had broken off.

The following day the magistrate saheb was invited to the show. All the important sahebs and memsahebs, all the rich people were to come to the theatre, so we decided to stage *Neeldarpan* since this was the play that we performed best, and it went down the best with the audience as well. The audience was always most excited and enthusiastic whenever this play was staged.

Neelmadhab-babu played the Karta; Nabinmadhab was played by Mahendra-babu; Bindumadhab by a new man named Bholanath; Ardhendu-babu played Saheb; Motilal Sur played Torap and Abinash Kar was Rogue Saheb. Abinash-babu was extremely handsome and was a somewhat crusty, stubborn and impatient sort of person; he was greatly suited to the role of the heartless, self-willed saheb of the Neelkuthi. He looked exactly as one might imagine Rogue Saheb. So too did the tall and broad-shouldered



Mustafi Saheb in the role of Wood Saheb. As for Motilal Sur's Torap—suffice it to say that there never was another such Torap. Not only did he look the part, but his acting was of a distinctive kind. Bindhumadhab was a good soul, just like the character Neelmadhab-babu played, that of Karta. AS FOR THE FEMALE PARTS, Khetu-didi played Sabitri; Kadambini was Sairondhri; I played Sarala; Lakkhi played Khetramoni while Narayani played the role of the dasi. *Neeldarpan* had been performed in several other places in the west, but nowhere was it done so successfully as it was in that house in Lucknow.

That day the house was absolutely full. There were many important sahebs who had come with their womenfolk. They outnumbered everybody else: wherever you looked you only saw red faces. There were quite a few Musalmans, but very few Bengalis.

The show began. And, yes, I should mention here that on that particular day the programme had been printed in English and the plot had been explained in a couple of sentences. We were somehow a bit scared that day, but as we went on our fears subsided. Eventually we came to that part of the play where Rogue Saheb molests Khetramoni and she, in an effort to save her honour cries out, 'Saheb, you are my father, I'm your daughter, let me be, I beg of you, let go of me!', at which point Torap makes an appearance and proceeds to strangle the saheb, using his knees to straddle him and pounding him with blows. Immediately there was a hue and cry from among the saheb spectators. They all rose from their seats and the people behind them rushed up to gather before the footlights. It was quite a sight! Some of the red-faced *goras* unsheathed their swords and jumped on to the stage. Half a dozen people were hard-pressed trying to control them. Such a running away and such a rushing around there was! The *drop* was pulled down immediately. We trembled and cried. We thought that this was the end, there was nothing to be done, now they would surely cut us up into pieces.

At any event, some of the sahebs went away; another half a dozen men came to deal with those who remained on the stage. The magistrate had soldiers brought over from the fort—all in all there was a huge to do. The magistrate saheb immediately had the performance stopped and sent for the manager. Everyone began to hunt for Dharmadas-babu who was nowhere to be seen. After quite a bit of searching he was discovered sitting quietly under the stage at the back; Kartik Pal tried to pull him out by force but he refused to budge. When he was not to be dislodged from his little hole, the assistant manager, Abinash-babu, took

Ardhendu-babu with him and appeared before the magistrate.

The magistrate saheb said, "There's no point in your performing here anymore. I shall provide police escort for you, take them and get the FEMALES home. The police will stand guard there tonight. The sahebs are highly agitated, there's no point in your continuing here."

We boarded the carriage and headed homewards, calling on the gods to protect us. Many of the actors too followed our carriage on *ekkas*, the special two-wheeled horse drawn vehicles. The SCENES and our DRESSES were all left behind, although the police stayed on to look after them. It was decided that we would pick up all our things the next morning. Somehow, we managed to get to our house, all out of breath. We couldn't stop trembling. Eating became of secondary importance—many of us didn't eat a thing. All that we could discuss was how we were to get back to Calcutta the next morning. No one slept a wink that night—as if it were at all possible to sleep under such circumstances!

The next morning, Dharmadas-babu too accompanied us to the station. Someone spoke of fetching the SCENES and the DRESSES: "I'm not going there again," declared Dharmadas-babu, "let them lie there." The local Bengalis helped us greatly during this time. They sent coolies and got the scenes and the costumes back for us and packed them up as luggage. They were very keen that we stay on and perform for a couple of days and said as much when they came to the station to see us off. "Why don't you put up a stage in the field near the station and perform for another two days?" they suggested, but no one was willing to stay on.

We had gone to the station long before the train was scheduled to leave. By then, our fears had somewhat subsided; after all we were in the station and as soon as we managed to board the train we would be on our way to Calcutta. We even began to long for certain things—we'd come all the way to Lucknow and were now returning empty-handed without having bought anything special from here. Neelmadhab-babu happened to overhear my words and he had someone buy me some wooden toys and an embroidered cotton shawl. I cannot tell you how thrilled I was to get these things. My fears were simply swept away and I sat down to play with my toys. There were many who could not stand me because I was a very excitable little girl. The concert people quite hated me, because I would often run off with something or the other from their rooms. But Ardhendu-babu loved me and always spoke affectionately to me.

There's one other thing that I should mention at this point: That embroidered wrap given so long ago by Neelmadhab-babu as a



token of his generous love for me, is still with me. I have carefully preserved it.

At any event, after two nights on the train we finally breathed a sigh of relief when we reached Calcutta. We had been away from Calcutta for three months; everything appeared unfamiliar and new to me. So, in this way we came back home after three-four months of travelling in the west. As far as I know, since the time of the National Theatre, no other company had, up till now travelled for so long in foreign lands. It was no mean thing for homebodies like us Bengali women, to have gone travelling, to distant lands in the first phase of our career. It is doubtful whether a present-day actress would be willing to travel abroad for so long a time. What is novel and unfamiliar has always been valued more and the theatre in those days, was for us a completely new thing. We wanted the theatre to run well, we wanted people at home and abroad to have a chance to see it—these perhaps were the chief reasons for our tours abroad. Otherwise, would love of money be enough to make anyone set off like gypsies to pitch camp in strange outlying lands? In any case, there was not much money to speak of in the theatre of those days. Our salaries then were so much lower in comparison with present-day rates, that it is best not to speak of it at all. Most people took to acting for the love of it, because they wanted to start something new in the country and not only for their livelihood. And I feel that it was because they had willingly sacrificed much at the early stages, that Bengali theatre is today doing so well.

After we returned to Calcutta, I worked at the National Theatre for one or perhaps two months. Then, probably on account of the National folding up, I joined the Bengal Theatre. I have already mentioned, the owners of the Bengal Theatre were the two grandsons of Satu-babu, Saratchandra Ghosh and Charuchandra Ghosh.

The Bengal Theatre used to have a tiled roof in the old days. This time I found that a corrugated roof had been put up and there were many other alterations to the exterior of the building as well. However, despite these changes, the platform was still the same old earthen embankment. There was earth all around the platform, some wooden boards in the middle and tunnels inside. One could go directly from inside the stage to the auditorium. The musicians who played at the concert used this path. There was a reason for the earthen platform: many of the plays in the Bengal Theatre used a horse during the performance. Sarat-babu himself was very fond of horses and was himself a good rider. We were told that there was no other Bengali who

equalled him in equestrian skills. Sarat-babu had many stories to tell us about his horsemanship. We too have seen that a horse which was frisky on the stage quietened down immediately if Sarat-babu once patted it or put his hand on it. Sarat-babu had kept a horse for his pleasure; he would ride this horse up the stairs of his home and go right up to the third storey where he would stop before the puja room. His grandmother would then give the horse the fruits and flowers from the ritual worship.

When I joined the Bengal Theatre, they had actors such as the late Biharilal Chattopadhyay, Hari Vaishnab, Girish Ghosh (Ladaru) and Mathur-babu, who is still alive. Sarat-babu himself would still act. Then there was Umichand, a nephew of Sarat-babu and others whose names I do not remember. Among the actresses were Golap (later, Sukumari Dutta), Elokeshi, Bhuni and lastly, myself.

There were many amateur actors in the Bengal Theatre company. Among the directors were Kumar Bahadur, Pandit Satyabrata Samasrami, Brahmabrata Samadhayi, a barrister or lawyer called Haldar mahashoy and Bhushan-babu.<sup>14</sup> They would come to the theatre almost every day and would be involved in every discussion. I do not know how many of them are still alive; I do not meet them any more. Numerous other men, educated, respected gentlemen, would also come—they were all so excited about the theatre. The theatre in those days was a place for literary discussions. There was so much discussion on so many varied topics—I understood very little of it then, but I did realise that theatre was in those times a meeting ground for a distinguished group of bhadralok.

When I remember the death of Umichand whom I have mentioned earlier, my heart cries out even now at the memory of that painful sight.

Our company had been invited to perform by the royal family of Krishnanagar. We arrived in a group, each one with our boxes and bundles and got into our compartment from the Sealdah railway station. We had a reserved coach and there were about thirty or forty of us in the same coach. We left Calcutta and the train stopped at Kanchrapara, when Choto-babu (the late Charu-babu\*) said, "Umichand, we've not brought any food. This is quite a big station, see if you can get us something to eat." Umichand-babu got off the train to get us some food. He came back a little

\* A slip on Binodini's part: Choto-babu is Sarat-babu, not Charu-babu.

later with the food, but because he had made a mistake he rushed back again to the shop. A disaster had been fated! Before they could come back the signal for departure was sounded. Choto-babu opened the door of the compartment and putting out his head began to shout, 'Umichand! Umichand!' Umichand-babu could not be seen! Finally he came running and somehow managed to get on to the running train; Choto-babu almost pulled him in. But even though he did manage to haul him in, Umichand-babu collapsed on a bench as soon as he had got in. He couldn't say a word. He had suffered a heat stroke. And the train sped on. Water! water! from all sides was heard the cry for water. But the planets conspired against us—there were about forty, fifty of us, with not a drop of water between all of us. There was pandemonium inside the compartment. What was to be done! Here was a traveller on his last journey and not a drop of water to be had for his parched throat. Alas, you can imagine how we felt at that time.

Among us, the actress Bhuni had her little daughter with her. With no other alternative in sight, some of Bhuni's breast-milk was put into a child's feeding spoon and given to the dying Umichand. But of what use was that? Before he had even had a few spoons of milk, Umichand had left us forever. The compartment full of people broke into tears. Choto-babu sobbed like a little boy, 'Umichand, what shall I tell your mother? How can I ever show my face to her again? You were the only child of your mother!' Fearing that they might detach the compartment from the train if anyone heard the commotion, the people inside remained quiet. Not a word escaped anyone's lips. A sheet was draped over Umichand-babu, as if he was sleeping. He *was* indeed asleep. But it was the sleep from which one never awakens.

The train stopped at the station at its appointed time. Choto-babu and the others made arrangements for the cremation of the corpse. And we went on to Krishnanagar, having lost Umichand halfway through our journey. We performed there. Nothing was changed or stopped. Such things happen regularly in the theatre of our everyday life, the *natyashala* of sansar. Nothing stops for anybody, only he who is gone is gone. Those who have stayed on, perform their assigned roles and then leave. No one waited for Umichand. A couple of days later, and no one even remembers him very well. Such indeed is the world.

When we returned from our engagement at Krishnanagar, not a smile was to be seen on anyone's face; the shadow of a grave sorrow had fallen on each one of us. The sudden and frightening death of Umichand weighed heavily on us all for a long time.

But now, let me come back to what I was saying earlier. At the Bengal Theatre, the great poet, Michael Madhusudan's immortal poem, *Meghnad Badh*, was then being adapted into a play and preparations were on for staging it. Apparently, Girish-babu had helped make the play stageworthy. 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. You will easily comprehend how extremely difficult it was for uneducated or half-educated women like us to master this play. However, it was because of the talents of those who were in charge of instructing us that we managed to make the impossible possible. Our teachers had a splendid way of teaching; we would read the part a couple of times according to how they had instructed us, and then, they would explain to us the meaning of the play. When we had understood it quite well, they would make us sit down right there and recite the part. Then they would try and make it into something that was suitable for the stage. I do not have words to describe the kind of hard work that they had to put in. Their patience was truly remarkable. As I have said earlier, the women were taught during the day. Whether or not the rehearsals were over, no work was done after ten at night. No one stayed on after ten.

It was at the Bengal Theatre that Bankim-babu's *Durgeshnandini*<sup>15</sup> and *Mrinalini* were first performed. In *Durgeshnandini*, Sarat-babu played Jagat Singh, Hari Vaishnab played Osman; Bihari-babu played Katul Khan; Bimala was played by Golap; Asmani by Elokeshi; Ayesha by myself and Tilottama by Bhuni. But quite often I had to play both Ayesha and Tilottama because Bhuni was very irregular and didn't turn up from time to time. Except for one situation, Ayesha and Tilottama were never face to face at any point in the play. But we had no trouble managing even this one place, since Tilottama is lying in a swoon when she gets to meet Ayesha and consequently does not have to say anything. Nevertheless it was quite difficult for me to do both these roles in the same play.

In *Mrinalini*, Kiron-babu played Pashupati, Hari Vaishnab played Hemchandra, Choto-babu played Bakhtiar, Bihari-babu was Abhiramswami,<sup>16</sup> Ladaru Girish played Digvijaya, Bhuni played Mrinalini, I was Manorama and Golap was Girijaya. In my role as Manorama, the leading English newspapers of those times had spoken of me as 'The Flower of the Native Stage' and as 'Signora Binodini'.

*Kapalkundala* had also been staged in the Bengal theatre. Hari

Vaishnab played Nabakumar and Bihari-babu played the Kapalik. How dreadful Vaishnab looked when he appeared on stage in the guise of a *kapalik*\*. I played Kapalkundala and Golap was Motibibi. My heart beat dreadfully when I had to appear before the Kapalik.

These are stories from days long past, but these memories have remained firmly imprinted in my mind. How simple and natural was our acting in those days! I have not been able, nor will I be able, to express in words how full of life was our acting. Those images are still alive in my heart today; they run around wildly in my heart, gambolling and alive, but I am unable to bring them out and present them before others. They are not to be described but understood with feeling. I continue to often go to the theatre and seem to look for something that I never seem able to find. From time to time I become so absent-minded that the acting and the gestures are pushed away by my memories which take on a form and appear before me, and the old gestures and feelings, faces and expressions flare up brilliantly before my confused eyes.

Once, Jyotirindranath Thakur mahashoy's *Asrumati* and *Sarojini* were being performed. *Sarojini* was a play which always went down well. We would completely forget ourselves as we acted. It wasn't just us, but all those who saw us perform would be equally enraptured. My point will become clear if I tell you of one particular incident. I would play *Sarojini*. *Sarojini* is brought near the pedestal in order that she might be sacrificed. The king stands crying with bowed head, having ignored the importunate entreaties of his queen and having decided to sacrifice his daughter for the good of the kingdom. An excited Ranajit Singh urges them to finish the act as soon as possible. The crafty Bhairavacharya, disguised as a brahman, is about to kill *Sarojini* with the sword in his hand, when Bijoy Singh runs in shouting, "Lies! It is all lies! Bhairavacharya is not a brahman, but a Musalman. He's the spy of a Musalman!" At this, the entire audience grew so agitated that they could not restrain themselves anymore and leapt over the footlights crying murder. Immediately, they [the performers] swooned in excitement. The curtain was dropped right away and they were picked up from the stage and restored to consciousness. Only when they were restored to normalcy did the performance continue.

There's one thing that I must say: it is that when we were dressed in our costumes and on stage we would become quite oblivious of our selves. We would even forget our very identities.

\* Practitioner of particular tantric rites.

When I remember such things now, they send shivers down my spine. There's a scene in the play *Sarojini* where the Rajput women circle the pyre, singing all the while. This scene with pyres burning furiously in three or four spots and the flames, ferocious and devouring, rising several feet high seemed to madden the spectators. We had no electricity those days; sheets of tin, about four or five feet long, would be spread on the stage and thin sticks of wood would be laid on them and then set aflame. Dressed in red saris came groups of Rajput women, some decked in flower ornaments, some with garlands in their hands. They sang:

Burn, the pyre, burn twice as bright,  
The widowed maid will give her life.  
Burn, the flames of the funeral pyre,  
The pain of life will soon be stilled.  
Know you Yavans, note it well,  
The pain you've lit in our hearts,  
The gods have seen and will send  
grief to you in just revenge.<sup>17</sup>

Singing thus, they circled the fire and then suddenly, one by one, they threw themselves into the flames. The fire would then be fanned by kerosene squirted from the long nozzles of *pichkaris*. The flames would rise and somebody's hair would be burnt, some others' clothes would catch fire, but no one cared—they would continue to circle and once more one of them jump into the flames. I cannot quite express in my writing the kind of agitation we experienced at such times.

Once, I was going round the pyre as Pramila, when my hair and a part of my veil happened to catch fire. However, I was so engrossed in my part that I did not feel anything. My hair was burning, my clothes were on fire, and I was not aware of anything. I jumped into the fire in that state. Upendra Mitra mahashoy was Ravan; realising the danger I was in, he immediately jumped in and stamped out the fire with his bare hands. The curtain had only half fallen at this time. However, other people came running and somehow they managed to save me, for this time at least, from sure death. Upen-babu's hand was scorched and I had blisters all over my body. I am not in a position to comment on how the actors and actresses of that age had looked upon each other, but there was in those days, a very special bond of love and affection among the theatre people—they regarded each other as the closest of relations.

There were yet other dangers that the actors and actresses had to face during the course of their acting career. I too had to face such dangers. Let me recount two such incidents. Once, at the Great National, I was descending from mid-air, dressed as Britannia, when suddenly the wires snapped and I crashed to the stage. Girish-babu mahashoy who was playing Clive happened to be standing there. I happened to fall right in front of him. He was quite astounded when he saw me land there all of a sudden. I had a map of England in my left hand and a sceptre in my right. I used the sceptre and somehow managed not to fall flat on my face. Promptly, I began to recite "England's goddess of fortune am I . . ." <sup>18</sup> Girish-babu appeared to breathe a sigh of relief. Meanwhile, the wise spectators restrained themselves from clapping. Dharmadas-babu was the stage manager for this production; Girish-babu was ready to beat him up after the show was over.

Another time we were performing *Nala-Damayanti* at the Star Theatre. There was a scene by a pond full of lotus flowers. In the middle was the biggest lotus and from inside it would appear a lotus-maid. On emerging she would put out her foot and step onto yet another trembling lotus. In this way, one by one, six lotus-maids would emerge from the flowers. They would also have to sing. Every day, from ten in the morning to six in the evening, Girish-babu would himself teach and supervise the the sakhis. They had to endure a lot of harsh words from Girish-babu in order to master this song and dance sequence. This pond scene was indeed a very beautiful one. Jahar Dhar mahashoy, who had done the setting, was truly a master artist.

I had just come out of the greenroom dressed as Damayanti, when the spectators began clapping. I was told that the curtain was late in going up because one of sakhis had not come, hence this incessant clapping. It was impossible to delay the show any longer. Girish-babu came up to me and said, "Binod, you must go." I could only stare at him, open mouthed. Horrors! My heart would beat wildly even when I saw those sakhis perched atop the trembling lotuses. And now I was asked to go stand on such a lotus! I'd not had a day's practice! This was a real calamity. Besides, I had come all prepared as Damayanti, my hair done up in a particular way; if I had to put on a crown of flowers as one of the lotus-maidens now, my hairstyle would be ruined. There was not such a variety of false head pieces available in those days. I would dress my own hair just as I wished to. By the grace of God I had quite a fine head of hair and it was so soft that I could twist it and arrange it any way I liked. Consequently, I was

never obliged to wear borrowed hair. I was known for my talent in hairdressing. But that is another matter. Anyway, Girish-babu coaxed and wheedled, and after a lot of sweet talk somehow pushed me on the stage as a sakhi. There's a proverb which says, 'It's the lame one who falls into a ditch!' and 'The unpracticed always stands out'. Well, they both proved true in my case. Just as I was being lifted up by the crane, a thick bunch of my open hair got entangled with the cable and began to tear. Only a part of my face had then emerged from the lotus; there was no way I could get down, but my hair hurt terribly. "Her hair! It's being torn!" shouted Dasu-babu, and with a pair of scissors he cut off my hair in three or four different places and so extricated me.

I came inside and broke into a fit of passionate tears. I was determined that I would not dress up any more—nothing on earth would make me dress up. Girish-babu came up and patted me comfortingly on the back and began explaining, "This sort of thing happens frequently. You're crying because you've lost some of your hair, but do you know that many of the famous actresses in England don't have any hair on their heads, nor a single tooth. Why should you cry for your hair? Come, let me tell you a story and while I tell it, put on your costume." And he began his story: A very famous English actress returned home after her performance and took off her dress, then she took off her head of false curls. Both sets of her teeth were false; these she drew out from her mouth. Her daughter who was four or five year old had been watching this entire scene; she now went up to her mother and began tugging at her nose. She thought that her mother's nose and her ears were also stuck on to her face! Was it possible for me to remain angry after this? Somehow managing to suppress my laughter, I said, "That's enough sir, do not speak any more with me" and laughing, went back to the stage. He too went off laughing at having achieved his purpose.

With Girish-babu there was always a bit of tussle, of arguments and quarrels and of making up. He loved me greatly and indulged me. No wonder that I had become very spoilt. Sometimes I would behave unfairly towards him, but he never rebuked me even once for any of this, let alone disregard or insult me. But then neither did I, even for a single day, do anything that would harm him in any way.

## NOTES

1. Not the National, but the Great National.
2. Perhaps the extremely topical *Mabanter ei ki Kaj* by Lakshminarayan Das—one of the innumerable pieces produced in the wake of the Mahanto-Elokeshi scandal.
3. *Prakrita Bandhu* (1875) by Brajendrakumar Ray (Chaudhury), also known as Dighu-babu of Hatkhola; first performed at the Great National on 8 January 1876.
4. See *GR*, Vol. 5, p. 349 for a detailed account of the stages in the composition of this quite 'untranslatable' couplet. The Bangla original: 'Malati, Malati, Malati phul/ Majale, majale, majale kul', plays on dynamic contradiction between the two rhyming lines. See Shankar Bhattacharya, op. cit., p. 15.
5. *Sati ki Kalankini*, see *My Story*, note 29.  
Atulkrishna Mitra's (1857–1912) *Adarsha Sati* (1876). First performed at the Great National Theatre on 21 October 1876. Music by Ramtaran Sanyal. *Adarsha Sati*, also a geetinatya by Radhagobinda Kar, (2nd ed., 1878). On the tremendous popularity of the play, see *GR*, Vol. 5, p. 334.  
There is no confirmed information on the two plays: *Kanak Kanan* (Binodebihari Mitra, published 1879?) and *Ananda Lila* (possibly Ramtaran Sanyal's *Ananda milan*, performed in 1878?).  
*Kamini Kunjo* (translated in contemporary sources as 'Fascinating Grove'), by Gopalchandra Mukhopadhyay, is considered to be the first geetinatya devised after the Italian opera. First performed on 18 January 1879 at the National Theatre. See Notes on Theatre for details.  
*Kinchi Jalojog*, (published 1872), an early farce by Jyotirindranath Tagore is a critique of new marriage laws and possibility of divorce. Of topical interest is its focus on the differences between the Adi Brahma Samaj and the Bharatvarshiya Brahma Samaj on the 1872 Marriage Act. Jyotirindranath did not have the farce reprinted in his Collected Works subsequently, when he had become a champion of women's rights. First performed on 26 April 1873 by the National Theatre group.  
*Chorer upor Banipari* (published 1876), a farce by Amrital Basu, advertised as 'a one-act extravaganza.'
6. *Mustafee Sabeb ka Pukka Tamasha*, first performed on 15 January 1873 at the National Theatre, was Ardhendushekar's retort to an Englishman, Dave Carson's dig at 'the Bengali Baboo'. The farce continued to be performed in other theatres until 1878. 'Kapten Bel' or Amritalal Mitra also devised his own comic piece called '*Bel Sabeb ka tamasha*', advertised in *The Statesman*, 24 August 1878.  
Carson's piece, advertised in *The Englishman* as '*Dave Carson Sabeb Ka Pukka Tamasha*' was performed at the English Opera House. It is interesting that following his death on 24 February 1896, the Star Theatre remained closed on 26 February 1896 as a mark

- of respect. (Shankar Bhattacharya, op. cit., pp. 2–3; Brajendranath Bandopadhyay, BS 1398, pp. 121–22; AK, p. 207.)
7. In this one sentence Binodini Dasi covers almost the entire spectrum of the public theatre's early repertoire of plays:  
Madhusudan Dutt's first play *Shormistha* (1859) in five acts, was based on the story of Shormistha who was Devjani's maid and secretly married to Yayati. Written for the private theatre of the Paikpara Rajas where it was first performed on 3 September 1859, it marked the successful inauguration of the Bengal Theatre on 16 August 1873.  
*Krishnakumari* (published 1861) by Madhusudan Dutt was first performed for the Sovabazar Natyashala in 1869, and by the National Theatre on 22 February 1873. *Buro Shaliker Ghare Ro* (published 1860) by Madhusudan Dutt, in two acts, four scenes, a powerful farce about the hypocritical and exploitative old zamindar (Bhaktaprasad) and his poor tenants (Hanif and Fatima). First performed by a private theatre in 1867.  
Upendranath Das's *Sarat-Sarojini* (1874), the story of Sarat, the young and nationalist zamindar, his sister Sukumari, and Sarojini, the young girl raised in his home. The actress Golapsundari began to be called Sukumari after her success in this role. Infused with swadeshi sentiments long before the swadeshi movement, the depiction of anti-British sentiments in the play included the physical assault on whites. Although sensational and violent, the play has a happy ending of lovers united. First performed on 2 January 1875 at the Great National.  
*Surendra-Binodini* (1875) by Upendranath Das in four acts, performed at the Bengal Theatre in 1875. The English magistrate, Macrendell, is the villain of the piece. He is opposed by the hero Surendra, who is eventually united with Binodini. The play was found offensive for its depiction of the British and initiated the passing of the Dramatic Performances Control Act. First performed on 14 August 1875 by the New Aryan Theatre. Upendranath Das (1848–95) wrote these plays under the pseudonym of 'Durgadas Das'. Das himself became something of a legendary figure in theatre history, the *Bidrobi Nayak* (The Rebellious Hero) of Debnarayan Gupta's play in 1973.  
Dinabandhu Mitra's *Jamai Barik* (Sons-in-law in Barracks) (published 1872). First performed in December of the same year by the National Theatre. Dinabandhu's critique of out-dated social norms, in this instance, of the practice of 'Adyaras' in alliances made solely for reasons of economic or caste mobility. The play shows a barrack-full of sons-in-law who have deserted their first wives, while their second marriages cast them only in a role of a stud. Popular on stage as well as a published text, *Jamai Barik* was reprinted five times within ten years of publication.  
*Pronoy Parikkha* (published 1869) by Manomohan Basu, against polygamy: the story of Shantsheel and his wives, Mahamaya and

- Sarala Mahamaya's intrigues against Sarala end only with the death of the second wife, Sarala. First performed on 17 January 1874 at the Great National.
8. Golap Bagh or Gol Bagh in Binodini's writings probably refers to the Lawrence Gardens, better known as the Mughal Gardens in Lahore. I am grateful to Randhir Singh for clearing up my confusion (and Binodini's) about the name.
  9. The original is 'amburi': Amburi and Irani were the two well known brands of sweet-scented tobacco in nineteenth century Calcutta.
  10. 'Bel-ban' rather than 'Nidhu-ban' was the better known of the forests that made up the sacred topography of Brindaban.
  11. The Great National Theatre, not the National.
  12. Dinabandhu Mitra's *Lilabati* (1867) set in contemporary society, focuses on the conflict between old and new values. Full of dramatic situations, including episodes of cross-dressing, the play revolves around the question of the heroine's right to choose her own husband. The man she loves, Lalit, is eligible in every way excepting that he is not of the same caste. The play has pieces of poetic dialogue.
  13. Probably a reference to the Residency in Lucknow which had been used as a fortress during the Uprising of 1857.
  14. Many of the original members of the committee formed during the founding of the Bengal Theatre. Pandit Vidyasagar had resigned from the committee over the question of hiring prostitutes for acting. See also Introduction, pp. 8-9.
  15. Bankimchandra's historical novel, *Durgeshnandini* (1865), was first adapted by the rival Bengal Theatre for the stage in December 1873. It was a great success; subsequently, Girish also dramatised the novel and staged it on 22 June 1875. In Girish's version, Osman-Aeysha take prominence over the Jagat Singh-Tilottama duo.
  16. Bihari-babu (the actor Biharilal Chattopadhyay) played the part of Madhavacharya, not Abhiramswami, in *Durgeshnandini*.
  17. Apparently it was young Rabindranath (then 14 years old) who composed this song even as the proofs for *Sarojini* were being read. In Jyotirindranath's original version, the Rajput queen had been given a 'speech' after which the women threw themselves, one by one, into the fire. Cited from *Jyotirindra Smriti* in Sujit Kumar Sen-gupta's *Rabindranath Thakur Ebong* (Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh Publishers, 1991), pp. 44-45. My thanks to Rekha Sen for this reference.  
A rough translation of the last couplet of the song:  
Come dear sister, come dear friend, / Lay down our bodies  
in the burning fire. / In the burning pyre, immerse our  
*sattitva*. / In the burning pyre lay down our lives.
  18. The word in Binodini's lines is *rajlaksmi* which is an intriguing coinage, indicating Britannia's status as a national or state Lakshmi. The incident refers to the performance of *Palashvir Juddho* at the National Theatre where Binodini played the role of Britannia. See note 77 in 'The Last Border', *My Story*.

## Notes on the Bengali Public Theatre

### The semantics of 'theatre'

What exactly is the 'theatre' when it begins to go 'public'? Historians of Bengali theatre as well as theatre practitioners have emphasised that like the word, the practice of (proscenium) theatre was an import, foreign to the Indian context.<sup>1</sup> The connections between western education and the proscenium theatre in Bengal have been pointed out by theatre historians, most notably by Brajendranath Bandhopadhyay.<sup>2</sup> However, in the actual processes of appropriation, assimilation and reworking entailed in the production of plays, traditional indigenous performance forms exercised more influence than did Western models: Shakespeare, for example, never became the staple of the Bengali public stage.

The story of influences has been read in various ways: Bhudev Choudhury credits the dramatist Manomohan Basu for realising that despite borrowing the 'theatre' from Europe, the two societies were essentially different, and 'swadeshi tastes' would be necessarily different from the country of origin.<sup>3</sup> The rise and currency of new words such as the 'opera', *geetinatya*, *natyageeti* and *geetabhinoy* in theatre vocabulary and the often contradictory range of meaning they came to occupy in contemporary discourse (in advertisements, personal correspondence, essays, reviews in newspapers and journals) reflects the many cross-currents feeding into this new form. The preference by theatre practitioners, inspired by consumer success, for some terms over others also indicates the directions in which the public theatre was to move and the reasons for its increasing dependence on the actress. Binodini Dasi's evaluation of her workplace and the audience reception of various genres are best considered in the context of a brief excursus on the semantic range covered by terms such as *theater*, *natya*, *natak*, 'opera', *geetabhinoy* and *geetinatak*.

While 'theatre' came to signify the proscenium theatre (as opposed to the jatra or other traditional forms), the Sanskrit word 'natak' was used as a blanket term to include all kinds of plays, but more specifically to refer to a full-fledged drama, as indicated in titles such as *Shormishtha Natak*, *Purubikram Natak*, *Sati Natak*, or, *Hemlata Natak*, the play in which Binodini made her debut as a heroine. 'Natak' was also used to distinguish the piece in question from a *geetinatak*, while 'opera' and *geetabhinoy* were used interchangeably; Binodini favours the term *geetinatya* over *geetinatak*. In addition, there were forms such as the *prahason* (farce); *panchrang* (pantomime; also called 'the Oriental pantomime' in advertisements); *naksba* (sketch) and *rupaknatya* or

'mask' (masque). The repertoire of the theatre therefore freely borrowed English names or translated them but created a package that was a mix of native and the foreign, in both innovative and derivative ways.

The *geetinatya*, whose name indicates the predominance of *geet* or song, had been brought into vogue in the era of the amateur theatre by Manomohan Basu.<sup>4</sup> It turned to the *Purans*, rather than to classical Sanskrit drama for its subject. A combination of assorted factors, aesthetic as well as logistical, appears to have set the trend for this new form and led to its influence in the composition of *natak* in general. Brajendranath Bandhopadhyay identifies the 'geetabhinoy (opera)' as a new form which came up primarily because many young people aspiring to perform could not meet the expenses of a complete proscenium production; the *geetabhinoy* could be performed against the backdrop of a curtain. The *geetinatak* was specially popular in the mofussil presumably for the same reason, as also because there were no theatre houses there. The audience in the provinces would also be more attuned to a performance that drew upon the more familiar elements of jatra. Choric songs and dances by the handmaids or *sakhis* (played by little boys) were a common feature of Krishna-jatra. The interludes were intended to amuse the audience by providing relief after intensely emotional scenes. This practice was continued in the public theatre as well, where an entire piece might be strung around songs, functioning as an interlude between the more substantial five-act play.

The songs were usually lyrical pieces set to a classical beat (*tala*) and composition (*raga*)—some were devotional,<sup>5</sup> and some explicitly nationalist, although the two might not be mutually exclusive. It is significant that the reform-oriented plays of the first phase did not make such an effective use of songs, and certainly not dances, probably because song and dance were identified with 'degenerate babu-culture' and their unsavoury association with the (female) professional singers themselves. A rare instance of babu-culture collaborating with the reformist agenda to produce a hit song may be found, when after three performances in Calcutta, *Kulinkulasarbasya* was staged in Chunchura. According to Indra Mitra, "Roopchand Pakkhi [a renowned poet-singer of the time] composed the songs, taught them and went there [to Chunchura] himself. In the open markets and in the bazars and on the roads and the fields of Chunchura could be heard the song sung by a *nati*. . ."<sup>6</sup>

The *geetinatya* proved to be an instant hit with the new audience of the public theatre, primarily because of the visible



charms of the singer-actress. Women singers had earlier performed either on the streets or in semi-open spaces as *kirtanias*, *bhikharinis*, singers of *kheur*—the last was considered to be obscene by the standards of emerging middle-class norms—or as we said in the Introduction, the singers came from a courtly tradition of *baijis* or *tauwais*, in which case, even a public performance was relatively private. Public theatre afforded for the first time, a chance for a ticket-buying audience to hear and see the singer on stage, plotted as she was, in the links of an entertaining story. The following advertisement<sup>7</sup> from the *The Statesman*, 27 August 1884, provides a fairly representative example of the premium set on the singing and dancing:

CROWDED HOUSE! GLORIOUS THEATRE  
BENGAL THEATRE / BEADON STREET

Saturday, 23rd August, 1884, at 9 p.m.  
Second grand performance of that successful Opera

MANIMANDIR  
Dancing and Singing by fair Damsels  
Grand scene of Lunar Region  
Please Secure Seat early

'Opera' not only sounded foreign, it suggested a refinement and a tradition of high culture which fitted well with the aspirations of the natyanuragis. It made it possible, for example, to place the new import—theatre—in a caste above that of the indigenous jatra. As early as 1865, a review of Ananda Prasad Bandhopadhyay's *Sakontallah* in *The Hindoo Patriot* stated, 'This is the first Opera in Bengalee. The songs are appropriate and exquisite. . . we hope the Opera will supercede [sic] the degenerate JATRA.' [2 May 1865]. More than a decade later, an advertisement in *The Englishman* of 18 January 1879 makes a similar claim, describing the title piece as follows:

KAMINI KUNJO  
In the style of the Italian Opera  
First time on the Native Stage in India.  
Overture. . .<sup>8</sup>

The contention between high and low, morally elevating and degenerate, 'native' and 'English' in the theatre history of Bengal is highlighted in almost every use of the term, opera. In reality, only a handful of men actually had access to classical western

music of any sort, and very rarely to the opera, but 'opera' continued to figure in theatre vocabulary with increasing regularity until, in an interesting case of reverse highjacking, jatra companies added it to their names.<sup>9</sup> Although the literary historian, Sukumar Sen sums up the case thus: "Whatever the influence of the English opera on the Bengali geetika or geetabhinoy, the influence of jatra was much stronger",<sup>10</sup> it would not be wrong to say that for long, the proscenium theatre in Calcutta saw itself as a novel and superior art form, *in contrast* to the jatra.

By the end of the eighteen-seventies, as the list of Binodini's own performances shows (Appendix III), the geetinatya had become firmly ensconced in the playbills of the public theatre: even those plays which were recasting jatra themes for the stage, relied primarily on songs for their appeal. The popularity of Girishchandra's *Dol-Lila* (1877) which he called a 'natyageeti' was almost entirely due to its innovative songs; his *Prabhad charitra* had six songs including a tableau (*raas-manch*) of Krishna and his sakhis.

The public theatre was successful in harnessing in various ways existing communicative modes such as the *panchali*, the *kirtan* and the *samkirtan*,<sup>11</sup> drawing primarily on the essential lyrical or song-based character<sup>12</sup> of the various stratas of Bengali culture, but inventing new contexts for the songs. Music was provided by the 'Concert' which comprised instruments as diverse as the harmonium, organ, violin, clarinet, flute, cymbals, *dbol* and *tabla*. With the success of *Chaitanya-Lila*, the *mridang*, the chief accompaniment in kirtans, was added to the mixed bag of the concert party. Once Girishchandra had successfully used the samkirtan on stage in 1884, the rival Bengal Theatre also introduced it in their production of *Prabhad charitra* with equal success.

Songs were also crucial in Amritalal Basu's topical skits and comedies; with the advent of recording, they proved to be extremely popular in an independent genre known as the 'comic'—a combination of songs, doggerel and satiric commentary.

Perhaps the one common denominator in all these emergent or reworked forms was the importance accorded to songs and the essentially lyrical texts of most dramatic pieces. Binodini was not as brilliant a singer as many of her contemporaries, such as her first teacher and subsequently the famed singer-actress, Ganga baiji, or Sukumari (Golap) or Jadumoni, or stars like Kironbala or Sushilabala who came after her; but clearly singing and dancing comprised an intrinsic part of her performance skills. As a necessary ingredient of the public theatre it took on a new dimension in the phase of bhakti plays brought to a peak with



*Chaitanya-Lila* in 1884. In addition to the unstinting praise that Girishchandra reserved for Binodini for her dancing and her passionate rendering of the songs, he remarked elsewhere on her ability to teach the 'lower ranking actresses' the complicated dance movements for this play.<sup>13</sup> Theatre songs were eventually to reach a wider public when foreign record companies such as the Gramophone Company, Pathé, Nicole Frères, and the Beka Record Company flocked to India in the early decades of this century to tap the popularity of theatre artistes.<sup>14</sup>

There appears to be three Binodinis whose voices have been recorded: a Miss Binodini; a Binodini Dassi; and a Gayika Binodini. There is also some confusion regarding a turn-of-the-century actress who went by the familiar name of 'Hadi', but whose stage name was Binodini. The matter of recordings is as yet quite controversial. By the first decade of the twentieth century, Binodini Dasi had long left the theatre world. Her inaccessibility to the public coupled with the incident of being blessed by Ramakrishna, transformed her into something like 'a living legend'. It seems reasonable to suppose that her recordings—songs and dialogue from plays such as Girishchandra's *Bihvamangal* or *Jona*, would find a good market.<sup>15</sup>

I have dwelt at some length on the different factors that made singing and dancing (by women) central to the public theatre because it is the site at which it is possible to identify interchanges and reworking of the traditional with the new—the multiple pressures and diverse interests in the moulding of a new form in a colonial city. The history of the first quarter century of the proscenium theatre shows clearly the centrality of songs and music in the new media; how the song wound its way from the pre-histories of metropolitan colonial culture and asserted itself at crucial moments as the decisive marker of a 'genuine' cultural identity, whether it was defined as *deshiya* or anti-western, national or swadeshi.

The nineteenth-century English stage provides several points of reference to the focus of this essay. The operatic and the ballet stage was dominated by foreign prima donnas who were highly paid and both these forms of performances were patronised by the upper classes. By the end of the nineteenth century, the music halls had siphoned off much of the song and dance from the stage, and the Gilbert and Sullivan duo drew an 'English' opera audience, so that the 'legitimate stage' was left free for social dramas and drawing room comedies.<sup>16</sup> 'Theater' in Bengal tried to fulfil the functions of both and therefore struggled with an exhaustive bill of fare and produced plays that included both

adaptations of Shakespeare as well as the religious musical or what has been called 'the devotional biographical'. Binodini's Dasi's amazing versatility thrived on and was also produced by the demands of a form of cultural production which was rich in experimentation, however conservative it proved to be in its representations of the women's question.

### *The plays*

The peculiar intersections of the public theatre and the publishing business meant that the very notion of text was constantly being re-formed. For one, natak-writing became extremely popular as poetasters sought to make a name by publishing quite un-stageworthy pieces. Moreover, the theatre was catering to an audience in transition who had been nurtured on lyrical forms and oral traditions based primarily on puran-based themes. While enticed by the novelty of the natak form, they were still comfortable with topics familiar from jatra, served with bhakti rasa. It was not surprising, even to Girishchandra in his own times, why his puranic plays were so successful. Also, as consumers of a metropolitan culture, the majority of the new audience demanded a rapid change of fare, quite different from the predictable cycle of *palas* available in jatra. The managements of the different theatre companies were therefore under constant pressure to produce new items, designed to appeal to all tastes. Plays were written or adapted from other forms in record time. It was fairly common for playwrights to dictate a rough script and then give it final shape during rehearsals.<sup>17</sup> Very often, the play might be published only after several years of performance; one reason being that there was no provision for copyright protection.

Thus, improvisation and topicality, both elements of the traditional jatra or *katakatha* or even of kirtan traditions, as well of the typically metropolitan forms such as half-akh dai and kobi-gan, also characterised the public theatre. For all of the above reasons, the actress was required to repeatedly shift gears; in Binodini's words, move from one bhava to another, with a rapidity that demanded great expertise. A typical evening entertainment during Binodini's years on stage would comprise one major play—which could be bhakti-based or adapted from Bankimchandra's novels; a farce; and, as an extra offering, a *panchrang* or so.<sup>18</sup>

As an actress, Binodini Dasi's chief strength lay in her adaptability both to the material conditions of performance as well as to the needs of her role. Both *My Story* as well as *My Life as an Actress* devote considerable space to the demanding nature of the

public theatre's bill of fare, the unexpected stop-gap performances and the actual hazards and the thrill of performance. Her sensitive memory records the nuances of interpersonal relationships supporting many such performances as well as her own relationship with the roles in the course of her stage career.

The actress did not have a hand in selecting the plays although her stage presence could and did influence the choice of plays. Binodini played over eighty roles during her twelve-year career, of which ten years were in close association with Girish Ghosh, where he was playwright, director or co-actor or all three. Binodini's evolution as actress and the subjectivities of 'characters' explored in her writings have to be juxtaposed with the trajectories along which the compositions for the public theatre took shape in these early decades of its growth. Girishchandra's own contribution to the stage provides a convenient point of reference, since the phases in his extensive corpus of plays—adaptations and original—gives us a clue to the needs of the contemporary audience.

While the *geetnatya* continued to be the staple of the public theatre, playwrights were quick to take up topical events or issues, as in the scandal around Elokeshi and the Mahanto;<sup>19</sup> the murder mystery of the Maharajah of Gaekwad;<sup>20</sup> and the more political farce around the Prince of Wales's (future Edward VII's) visit to Calcutta.<sup>21</sup> The penalty for the last item was rather heavy—in 1875 the authorities announced the Dramatic Performances Control Bill. Made into an Act by the end of 1876, the Bill imposed harsh rules of censorship.<sup>22</sup> Choosing to be politic rather than political, the fledgling theatre industry concentrated on *geetnatyas* or 'operas' or adaptations of the works of Bankimchandra and Nabinchandra. Bankimchandra's novels were adapted as early as 1873, as in Girishchandra's dramatisation of *Kapalkundala*, which continued to be staged well into the twentieth century.

'Samajik natak' or the social play, as a category, was set up in contrast to puranic and historical play. It was meant to embrace any play that did not appear to make use of a puranic, mythological or religious theme, but dealt with current social problems ranging from the evils of dowry and polygamy, to excessive drinking, and occasionally, the condition of the peasantry.<sup>23</sup> Theatre historians have found a decline in the 'reform-oriented' thrust of drama which characterised print and production of plays from the mid-1850s to the mid-1870s.<sup>24</sup> Some of the favourite objects of attack in the farces were babus and their assorted vices and increasingly in the later years, ridicule of the newly-educated, westernised woman, or the 'modern' woman.<sup>25</sup> Certain

redeeming features of misogynist literature notwithstanding, the bulk of the farces were anti-woman.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, improvised farces such as *Mustafi Sabebe ka Pukka Tamasha* of which Binodini; as well as many of her contemporaries, give us a fairly detailed account, were among a minority. As mentioned earlier, in the notes to *My Life*, the '*Pucca Tamasha*' originated as a counter-attack to the racist skit on 'the Bengali Baboo' then being performed by an Englishman, Dave Carson.

However, the chief inspiration for theatrical splendour lay in the heroic tales of valour imputed to a pre-colonial past of virile Hindu nationhood. The turning back to the past was inspired in part by the publication of such works as Tod's *Annals and Antiquities* (1829-32), which probably had the single most effect on literary output in subsequent decades.<sup>27</sup> In later years, playwrights were to turn to Maratha history in order to construct a history of military might and resistance against the 'invader'.<sup>28</sup> Even when both original plays and adaptations of novels using Rajput heroic tales as their subject were not explicitly anti-Muslim, often, they aroused anti-Muslim sentiments during the performance.<sup>29</sup> (The reconstruction of historical heroes in Girishchandra's career as a playwright, began soon after the bhakti phase; at any event, it was a pre-swadeshi project.<sup>30</sup>) The overtly Hindu beginnings of the theatre and the virtual absence of plays by Muslim writers or of Muslims in the plays of the public theatre has been a matter of some speculation and has been addressed seriously only by a few literary scholars or historians.<sup>31</sup>

It is difficult to disagree with the midwifery role attributed to the Hindu Mela in giving birth to a 'national' theatre.<sup>32</sup> The inaugural song to the Hindu Mela of 1867 composed by Satyendranath Tagore went,

Children of Bharat, together sing  
to the same tune,  
The story of Bharat's fame.

The song was later used in Jyotirindranath Tagore's historical play *Purubikram* (1874). The complex strands informing the religious composition of this nationalism and its deployment of gender, especially in the novels of Bankimchandra, have been extensively discussed in recent years.<sup>33</sup> Jyotirindranath Tagore's plays, particularly *Sarojini* (1876), have similarly been marked out for their emplotment of a Hindu nationalism which takes as its other, the figure of 'the male Muslim' and his 'invader' status. At various

points in her writings, Binodini mentions incidents of spectators rushing on to the stage 'to beat up Muhamad Ali', the Muslim spy in *Sarojini*.<sup>34</sup>

Most of these plays invoked a heroine figure (as the titles indicate) and had great appeal for an audience used to traditional puranic tales or local history of love and war celebrated in ballads and geetikas. As more sanctions of Victorian morality were sought to be imposed on women from the middle and the lower-middle classes, the variety of the *birangana* (the heroic woman) in Madhusudan's works or the passionate heroines of Bankimchandra must have offered novel areas of escape. Madhusudan was echoing the sentiments of many a literary Bengali when he wrote in a letter: "We ought to take up Indo-Mussulman subjects. The Mahomedans [sic] are a fiercer race than ourselves, and would afford a splendid opportunity for the display of passion. Their women are more cut out for intrigues than ours. . . . After this we must look to 'Rizia' . . . The prejudice against Moslem names must be given up." (1 September 1860)<sup>35</sup>

Binodini Dasi's testament as an actress affords us particularly valuable insight into the construction of the interpenetrative discourses of Hindutva, patriotism and nationalism on the one hand and the representations of *nari-bridoy* and *streejati* on the other, as they were enunciated by the actress with respect to her own social position. The large number of plays around a woman's *sattitva* in a woman often culminating in the actual representation of sati on stage is discussed briefly in the section on spectacle. The titles of many other plays foreground the word *sati*, as in *Sati Natak*, *Sati ki Kalankini*, *Apurba Sati*.<sup>36</sup> *Sattitva* became inscribed in and was to be the mainstay of the commercial theatre until modern jatra took over some of the most reactionary themes of the commercial theatre.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the apparent difference of caste between jatra and the novel 'natak', proscenium theatre continued to borrow heavily from jatra. Among others, the very successful *Kamale Kamini* (1884) and *Nala-Damayanti Natak* (1883) had jatra origins and both had undergone several stage versions before Girish Ghosh produced them at the Star. However, the real reworking of jatra began when the explicitly religious was staged through the shift to Vaishnav figures—medieval as well as puranic devotees of Hari. Traditional jatra themes such as *Dhruba charitra* and *Prabhad charitra* were old favourites. They were absorbed into the theatre circuit primarily during the Bhakti phase (1880s onwards), but they were revamped to suit the proscenium stage and the new audience. It may be noted that while Bankimchandra's novels

continued to inspire dramatic productions, the bhakti phase marked a definite break with earlier dramatic tradition. The excessively emotional current of Vaishnavism popular in Bengal was reinducted for this new audience.<sup>38</sup> A crucial difference in the new performance context was that the saints or exemplar figures of bhakti were now being played by women (instead of boys)—the very women who were branded as 'fallen'. As I have said in the Afterword, this had major repercussions for the hierarchy of social relations *within* the theatre world, just as it made possible the appropriation of theatre as a metaphor for the world outside of the stage—of 'Lila' being all-pervasive.

Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neeldarpan*, with which the National Theatre had been inaugurated and to which Binodini refers at length, provides a glimpse of the ground realities within which the early public theatre functioned. Theatre historians such as Pulin Das, attribute the influence of the Hindu Mela on the choice of the play as the inaugural piece (besides the fact, that as a social play, it would not require expensive sets).<sup>39</sup> *The Englishman* (20 December 1872), which had moved away from its initial enthusiasm for a native professional theatre, editorialised about how the banned drama could be produced; but it may be noted that the production was an edited version and the performance was witnessed by the District Commissioner.

It has been argued that the play targets the intermediate white indigo planter or the 'Neel Saheb' as 'bad', but leaves the Empire intact, appealing in fact, to the benevolent intent of the Empire. (Dinabandhu praised Queen Victoria in the preface.) Other essays have focussed on intelligentsia's alliance with the landed class in the context of the indigo revolts.<sup>40</sup> Bankimchandra initially thought that the explicit social message of the play went against the aesthetics of drama (*Bangadarshan*, Bhadra BS 1280), but he was to praise it later, after it had become popular. While the exact political thrust of *Neeldarpan* may continue to be a matter of debate, the production of the play itself, in the perceptions of those who staged it and of those who saw it, was undoubtedly a political statement. This had greatly to do, I think, with the novelty of 'realistic representation' that the new theatre promoted: as in the instance of spectator reaction (of whites and Indians) when the poor *ryot* Torap beats up the exploitative Neel Saheb.<sup>41</sup>

At another end of the 'social play' could be a piece like Girishchandra's *Bellick Bazar* (the play in which Binodini made her final appearance on stage), written specially as a 'Christmas *panchrang*.' Binodini's role as Rangini consisted only of a song-dance item. The play is written in a Jonsonian style with disguises

and quick interchanges between gulls and con men, doctors and lawyers who are out to fleece the naive—a picture of a rapacious world.<sup>42</sup>

How 'national' were the plays of the public theatre in the last quarter of the nineteenth century? The theatre was one of the earliest visible sites of the contending forces from which was formed a notion of middle-class Bengali identity. The incipient attacks on the administration, on *incidents* of subservience or servility (the 'colonised mentality') rarely moved towards any sustained critique of the colonial power. Scandal and political imbroglio apart, the main target appears to be women who have transgressed 'traditional' roles of the sati. The 'national' element in the public theatre did not imply an exclusive focus on 'a pre-colonial past' as had been the case with the amateur theatre-wallahs. Although the beginnings of the public theatre was set amidst considerable discussion in the press on the implications of 'public' and 'national',<sup>43</sup> there was no self-conscious programme actually followed or even chalked out for a national theatre: playwrights and dramaturges borrowed liberally and even indiscriminately from the existing repertoire of traditional forms and subjects. Though certainly, the enterprise itself—of 'doing' theatre—might be called 'national'.

There were possibly three main factors behind the medley of middle-class theatricals. Firstly, the class and educational background of its founding fathers, outlined in the profile of the enthusiasts. Because there was no formal training or organised schooling behind the production of plays (as was the case, for example, with the government's involvement in the setting up of art schools),<sup>44</sup> the theatre manager-directors learnt the trade while they performed. Secondly, there were the actual economic demands of the medium: theatre was not subsidised or run by government funds. At best, it was a gamble as to what would flop and what would work at the box-office. Additionally, whatever existed by way of government intervention did not follow any sustained or stringent policy; it was limited to ad hoc proscription, except perhaps during the swadeshi era. But here too the jstras proved far more volatile than the proscenium theatre. Production in a competitive business meant that the exigencies of performance (including the process of dictating, scripting, improvising dramatic pieces) overshadowed all other considerations. There was no individual patron/consumer but a substantial body of consumers. The third, and perhaps the most important factor, was the presence of the actress. The playwright had constantly to keep in mind that the public theatre thrived because of the visible

charms (and the voice) of the woman in public and accordingly decided on the stage-worthiness of the play. Even if we take into account the effects of the 1876 Act, there appears to be a considerable gap between the choice of plays and the needs of production, between the avowed aims and beliefs about the purpose of a public stage and the actual perceptions about and reception to the public theatre. The chief and apparently irresolvable contradiction emblematic of this gap, is to be located in the person of the 'public woman'—the actress of the public theatre. The Afterword considers how the productions of Binodini Dasi seek to resolve this contradiction and bring back 'theatre' into the folds of middle class dharma by their representation of 'Nati Binodini.'

### *Ground realities*

Recalling her first years in the public theatre, Binodini Dasi often speaks of the National Theatre, when she means the Great National.<sup>45</sup> Her confusion is not entirely to be attributed to the many years between the recording and the occurrence of the event: it is symptomatic of the extremely short-lived tenure and the constant changing of hands (and names) that characterises the history of most theatre halls and companies in Calcutta. Filing for insolvency was in fact the unhappy denouement of most theatre-wallahs of the Bengali stage.<sup>46</sup>

The financial instability or incompetency of the owners, the lack of any sustained patronage by the gentry and the complete absence of any government patronage in the industry (their involvement was confined to the passage of the Bill and the subsequent censorship) meant that amongst all the theatre workers, it was the actress who was economically the most vulnerable. Almost as soon as the Bengali public theatre was launched, the business of theatre was taken over by Marwari and other non-Bengali businessmen. The story of the National Theatre offers an illustration: in 1871 Gopichand Shethi sub-leased the National Theatre from the lessees, since the owner, Bhubhanmohan Neogi, was unable to finance it any longer. Bhubhanmohan died a pauper after his years of involvement with the theatre. The theatre was then bought by Pratapchand Johuree (a trader in jewels) in 1881.

Pratapchand's ownership of the theatre also marked the introduction of Marwari spectators. Gurmukh Rai, also a Marwari businessman who came later in Binodini's life, had other reasons behind his interest in the theatre: he agreed to invest in a new

theatre only because he wanted Binodini as his mistress. The "withdrawal of the Bengali merchant from the macro-Indian bazar" had created a space for North Indian business groups with "a sound hold on inter-regional money circulation and the flow of imported cloth and spices".<sup>47</sup> By the last decades of the nineteenth century "the large scale purchase of land in Burabazar by Marwari, Gujrati and Khetri businessmen"<sup>48</sup> meant that by the time the public theatres came up in the city, the Bengali bhadrakok's subordinate status in the business world was well established.

The performance of *Neeldarpan* by the members of the National Theatre which marked the beginning of the public stage on 7 December 1872 took place in Madhusudan Sanyal's home. The practice of performing in the rented premises of private residences or in public buildings such as the Town Hall was to continue for long because there were few proper theatre halls, in contrast to the profusion of theatre companies. To add to the confusion of latter day theatre scholars, there was frequent changing of names of the companies themselves. The National was active in two phases: 7 December 1872–8 March 1873; and, 13 December 1873–28 February 1874. Subsequently it split into the National and the Hindu National.

The Great National, started by Bhubanmohan Neogi, was housed at 6 Beadon Street. It was the fourth public theatre in Bengal. A wooden house was built in 1873 at a cost of about Rs 13,000 on leased land. (Binodini mistakenly refers to it as a 'pukka' construction in *My Story*.) Binodini returned to Calcutta with the Great National after their tour of the west in mid-May 1875. With the performance of *Gajadananda* and *Surendra-Binodini*, cases were filed against the company for obscenity. After the Ordinance passed by the Governor, Lord Northbrook, the Great National remained closed for almost seven months from 8 April 1876 to 21 October 1876.

In August 1875, the brothers Krishnadhan and Haradhan Bandhopadhyay leased the Great National from Bhubanmohan Neogi. Around this time, it was also known briefly as 'The Indian (Late Great) National Theatre'; while Dharmadas Sur and some others left the Great National to perform at the Bengal stage under the name of 'The New Aryan (Late National Theatre)'. In October 1877, Girishchandra leased out the Great National from Bhubanmohan Neogi and ran it as the National Theatre. In 1878 after Kedamath Chattopadhyay became the director of the National, the company broke up during Girishchandra's absence. A series of conspiracies against Neogi ensured his bankruptcy and the Great National was auctioned off. The theatre was then bought by

Pratapchand Johuree in 1881. Binodini performed at the Great National from December 1874 to April 1876 and October 1877; and at the National from December 1877 to February 1883.

The short-lived Oriental Theatre ran from 15 February to 22 March 1873 in the house of Krishnachandra Deb on 222 Cornwallis Street. Performances were by students of the Oriental Seminary.

The Bengal Theatre founded by Saratchandra Ghosh in 1873 was the first to hire women as actresses. In order to set up the theatre, Rs 18,000 was raised as capital through the sale of shares to 18 shareholders. The theatre house had mud walls and a tiled roof and was built in the manner of the Lewis Theatre at the Maidan. In early 1875, the Bengal Theatre underwent repairs and the tiled roof was replaced with corrugated iron sheet ('korget' in Binodini's account). Binodini joined the Bengal in April 1876 and she worked in this theatre until August 1877.

In 1890 the Bengal Theatre Company performed excerpts from *Shakuntala* for Prince Albert (eldest son of Queen Victoria) at the Maidan; it was granted the title Royal and became the Royal Bengal Theatre. The theatre was closed down in 1901, the same year as the death of its long-time manager, Biharilal Chattopadhyay.

The Calcutta Star Theatre Company was founded by Girishchandra after February 1883 with members from Pratapchand Johuree's National Theatre. The Company rented the stage at the Bengal Theatre and had three shows during March and April 1883.

The Star Theatre which Binodini helped build, was located on 68 Beadon Street, at the north-eastern corner of the intersection between Beadon Street and present day Chittaranjan Avenue. The Star was really the first pukka theatre house in Bengal. It was inaugurated on 21 July 1883 with Girish Ghosh's *Daksha-yajna*. Binodini's last performance was at the Star on 1 January 1887. The last performance of the Star at the Beadon Street theatre took place on 31 July 1887, comprising *Buddhadeb Charit* and *Bellick Bazar*. The theatre was then bought by Gopal Lal Seal, who had little or no knowledge of the art or business of theatre, but who desired to possess a theatre-hall of his own. The shareholders sold him the theatre but reserved the right to the original name; the building was thereafter renamed the Emerald Theatre.<sup>49</sup> This theatre, the original Star built by Binodini Dasi, was demolished by the Calcutta Improvement Trust in 1931.

The members of the original Star moved to a new location on Hathibagan Street (75/3 Cornwallis Street); the theatre that was subsequently built on that site is referred to as the Hathibagan

Star'. Meanwhile, Seal had engaged the players of the National Theatre and appointed Kedarnath Choudhury as the director and the manager, but when sales did not pick up, within a month he had Girishchandra Ghosh join the Emerald at a salary of Rs 350 and a bonus of Rs 20,000. Since Girish was already bound to the Star as their instructor, he gave away Rs 16,000 from his bonus so that his group might build a new theatre: this was the Hathibagan Star. The cement building was planned by an engineer, Jogendranath Mitra, designed by Dharmadas Sur; and the gaslights (for the first time in the public theatre) provided by Messrs P.C. Mitra. Amritalal Basu was the chief shareholder as also the instructor for this company. Girishchandra continued to help the group by writing unsigned plays for them. The theatre was inaugurated with *Nasiram* in 1888. The Hathibagan Star burnt down in 1991 in what is believed to be a case of arson.

The extreme instability of the theatre world as evident from the condensed account of companies and theatre houses given above did not spare the male theatre person who took up the stage as his career. Girishchandra Ghosh went through a succession of clerical posts in various English firms; he was also headclerk and cashier of the Indian League for some time. He resigned from the job of a bookkeeper in the Parker Company where he was drawing a monthly salary of Rs 150 to devote himself full-time to the theatre. He became the manager of the National Theatre under Pratapchand Johuree's ownership (1880-81) and accepted a salary of Rs 100 per month, with the additional clause that his salary would rise in proportion to the profits from the theatre.

Binodini Dasi joined the theatre at a monthly salary of Rs 10 in 1874. She was given a raise when the Great National went on their tour of the west. The company obviously bore the travelling and other expenses incurred during their month-long travels. Even when they were on home ground, the hours of work were long, rehearsals were intensive, particularly for the women who had many dance sequences and were also perceived as being more in need of training than their male counterparts. Binodini's fight with Pratapchand Johuree was over the question of earned leave. (*My Story*, p. 82) From the men whose mistresses they became, the actresses would receive anything from a monthly allowance, to jewellery, or even a house depending on the income and inclination of the individual. Binodini evidently lived a life of material comfort during the twenty-five years that she lived with her hridayebata, but there is no definitive account of whether she acquired any property as a result of this alliance. Popular fiction has it that on his death, she left his house with nothing

but her 'Gopal'—the idol of the boy-Krishna. However, Binodini did have ownership of at least two houses in North Calcutta, in the theatre quarter of the city.

From its inception in Calcutta, the public theatre held benefit performances to raise funds for individuals connected to the theatre, for public institutions such as hospitals as well as for relief work in the event of natural disasters. We have two very different instances of such performances, for Michael Madhusudan and Sukumari Dutta respectively. *Apurba Sati* was staged as part of a benefit performance for Sukumari Dutta. She had left the theatre after her marriage with the bhadralok, Goshtobihari Dutta, but returned to the stage to support herself and their daughter, after her husband's sudden death in England. There is no record of a benefit performance for Binodini.

Given the extremely insecure means of livelihood that the theatre offered to even its star employees, Binodini's statement that she cared for theatre and not the money (*My Story*, p. 88) needs to be considered carefully. The offers of money that came her way (she recounts two such instances) were huge sums by any standard. Golap/Gopal Singh of Lahore who had wanted to marry the eleven-year old Binodini had offered her mother a sum of Rs 5,000 for her daughter if she herself wished to return to Calcutta, or a monthly allowance of Rs 500 if she chose to stay on with her daughter. In 1883, Gurmukh Rai wanted Binodini to quit all links with the theatre and accept Rs 50,000 from him. The amount may be compared with the actual sum paid for the rights of the Star when it was bought for Rs 11,000 by Amritalal Mitra, Dasucharan Neogi, Amritalal Basu and Hariprasad Basu. In the words of Amritalal Basu, Dasucharan appears to have made enough money from the theatre to "do what every Bengali Hindu aspires to . . . host his own Durga Puja, and that too in Benaras."<sup>50</sup>

Its ancient Sanskrit lineage notwithstanding, by the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the term *natak* has come to be invariably associated with the proscenium theatre, whether in a wealthy patron's inner courtyard (Radhakanta Deb's *nat-mandir*) or his *nach-ghar*; or in a mud-and-thatch 'theatre house' set up with meagre finances according to a British Indian model, such as Mrs. Lewis's Theatre at the Maidan which inspired Dharmadas Sur to construct the National Theatre. Lacking a house of its own, a company such as the Hindu National Theatre might rent the Opera House on Lindsay Street for shows. Benefit performances

might sometimes be staged in the Town Hall. The operative word is theatre *house*, which implies a major re-orientation in the physical layout of performance, in the logistics of staging and, most importantly, in the equation between performers and audience. In theory, anyone might buy a ticket<sup>51</sup> and have access to entertainment based on a western model, but ironically, the public theatre is enclosed and more contained, i.e. with specific hours of rehearsals and performance; ticketed entrance; and special shows on specific days, as opposed to the more flexible time and space of earlier performance forms. Initially, plays were performed on Saturdays and Sundays, and subsequently (from January 1873) on Wednesdays as well.

Performance time in the theatres changed as did the municipality laws governing show time,<sup>52</sup> but in general spanned the duration of one five-act play and assorted fillers. Shows began around six or eight in the evening. The Concert was used as a warm-up until the house was sufficiently full; it also played for considerable lengths of time in between acts, between different pieces, and of course during performance itself. Increasingly a substantial part of the theatre-going audience in Calcutta came from the provinces and it was to cater to this audience that shows went on till the early hours of the morning (3 am).

We find that it was primarily the lower middle class and the middle class—petty shopkeepers and traders, clerks—who made up the bulk of the audience, the rest comprising the upper and upper middle class patrons. Women and children started coming during the phase of bhakti plays. There was a separate seating enclosure for them in the balcony, usually advertised as 'Zenana seats'. The fervour of the women spectators watching bhakti plays has been documented by theatre people other than Binodini Dasi. In later years, the actor Ahindra Choudhury recounted that during the staging of Girish Ghosh's *Sitar Bonobas*, "many women were drawn to the theatre; in fact many [women] from the conservative families of Calcutta were also attracted." Choudhury also mentions that women spectators frequently swooned when *Meera* or *Sri Chaitanya* was performed.<sup>53</sup>

Theatre companies were based in and performed primarily in Calcutta, but went periodically on tours to mofussil towns such as Bankipur, Jamalpur, Behrampur, Rajshahi or as far away as Puri and Cuttack (by the turn of the century) and cities such as Dhaka.<sup>54</sup> Plays were also performed regularly by Calcutta companies in Benares. Kashi was a second home for most Bengalis of both sexes, both for rest, recreation and enforced 'retirement', but also the refuge of illicit love.

Most tours out of the metropolis was undertaken at the invitation of individual patrons, such as the Maharaja of Rajshahi who had the company perform on a social occasion. In the city itself, a well-placed individual such as Jagadananda Mukhopadhyay (a Junior pleader at the High Court, later made a Rai Bahadur) might hire a company to perform in his home for a selected audience comprising the Governor et al.<sup>55</sup> The Great National performed on invitation at the home of the Maharajah of Bethia, Harendra Krishna Sinha, for an audience comprising the Maharajah of Vizianagram, the ambassador from Burma, members of the royal family of the Holkars and the Mysore royal family.

Of particular interest in Binodini's writings are her accounts of their 'paschim visit', their trip westwards. (*Desb* is used to mean 'one's native land' rather than country, in which case it is 'Bharat'.) When Wellesley took over India's Governor Generalship in 1798, Bengal roughly included present day Bangladesh and West Bengal with the exception of Darjeeling District, the whole of Bihar, Silchar and Cachar of Assam and Benaras of Uttar Pradesh. In 1801 the Company acquired from the Nawab of Oudh seven districts which were added to Bengal. Presumably, any place outside of this area becomes '*bidesb*' in Binodini's narrative, although it is important to note that when she is actually writing, the political configurations have changed significantly. Until early this century, '*paschim*' was the all-encompassing term to mean any part of India outside of Bengal proper. The term has a semantic range which includes the notion of the distant, the exotic and the unknown. Most invalids (usually heroines but very often heroes) of Bengali nineteenth- and even twentieth-century fiction went *paschim* or westwards at some time or other for a change of air and most impecunious young men (in fiction) also faced the rigours of the 'alien west' to earn a living, far away from the warmth and congeniality of Bengal. Binodini's account of her travels with the theatre company (and the fact that she is neither a romantic invalid nor an impecunious young man) has to be read in this context. In *My Life*, she states:

It was no mean thing for homebodies like us, Bengali women, to have gone travelling to distant lands in the first phase of our career. It is doubtful whether a present day actress would be willing to travel abroad for so long a time. What is novel and unfamiliar has always been valued more and the theatre was for us in those days, a completely new thing. We wanted that the theatre should run well, that people at home and abroad have a chance to see it—these perhaps were the chief reasons for our tours abroad. Otherwise, would



love of money be enough to make anyone set off like gypsies to pitch camp in strange outlying lands? (p. 149)

We are reminded in her account that travelling actresses may also have been nursing mothers, as in the incident where the actress Bonobiharini (Bhuni) offers her own milk to the dying Umichand.

It is curious too how the company's business tour includes trips comprising both the pilgrim-circuit (Brindaban) along with the more typically western sight-seeing tours of ruins and monuments<sup>56</sup>—the Mughal ruins in Lahore and the marks of the barely two decades old 'Mutiny' in Lucknow. By this time the cult of the picturesque was well established by travelling Europeans and through the production and dissemination of their 'impressions.' The Great National group visits what is clearly the Residency in Lucknow, but the Mutiny is only mentioned in passing although much is made of the politically inflammable material of *Neeldarpan*.

The popularity of the railways, introduced in the 1850s, had made it possible for theatre companies all over the country to function as touring groups. In 1860 Bholanath Chandra made "a hurried trip" from Calcutta to Agra, leaving on October 19 and arriving in Agra on the evening of the 30th "with only rest stops along the way". He travelled by rail, steamer and stagecoach and in the late 1860s brought out an account of his travels. In Bengal, Brahma women were among the first to realize the educational benefits of travel. In 1871, Saudamini Mazumdar and Mahamaya Basu visited northwest and western India and recorded their impressions for the *Bambodhini Patrika*. (8, 100; December 1871) "While they were impressed by the relative social freedom of the Bombay women . . . their Brahma puritanism was disturbed by the women of the Panjab, who were known to bathe naked in the lake and to sing obscene songs publicly at certain festivals." Yet another traveller, Krishna Kumar Mitra was also taken aback to see Punjabi women bathing naked in full public view.<sup>57</sup> It is easy to see how the travel sections in Binodini's autobiography stand out from the corpus of contemporary women's writing.

### Spectacle

In some sense, the 'public woman' appearing on stage herself constituted the chief element of the spectacle. Her visibility before a ticket-buying audience was enhanced by her single or choric presence and movements in the song/dance or song-and-dance in the play. The intimacy of the open air performance space (*ashor*) was gone. The consumer could now see the actor and

actress from a distance, within the frame of the box stage: a live performance, but from a fixed distance, added to the desirability of the female performer.

The prevalence of the term *drishyakavya* to refer to the plays is significant: Girishchandra's *Abhimanyu Badh* (first performed on 26 November 1881) was published later as a *drishyakavya*, as was *Ravan Badh*, reviewed in *Bharati*. (Magh BS 1288) As indicated earlier, the gentry had in their amateur theatricals taken great care (and spent immense amounts of money) on exhibiting the literary delights of the play. Flat scenes—advertised as 'tasteful sceneries' were painted by a teacher called David Garrick at the Government Art College. The 'box scene' was first introduced by Amarendra-nath Dutta in his years at the Classic Theatre. This was also the time that realistic sets, such as actual pieces of furniture and so on, were first introduced to the Bengali stage.

Commercial theatre soon left the fairly realistic terrain of the 'social play' for the more popular *geetinatyas*, 'operas' and historical romances, and eventually the *bhakti*-plays. The choice of puranic matter alone was not the occasion for spectacle: consequently, Britannia could descend by means of 'a crane' in a historical piece such as *Palashvir Juddho* (*My Life*, p. 154), Sita appears 'suspended on a lotus-seat' prior to her descent as per the stage directions of Girish Ghosh's *Sitar Bonobas* while *Ravan Badh* concludes with Sita's trial by fire. Theatre advertisements invariably foregrounded the special effects often displacing in the process, the thematic centre of the original 'literary piece'. The most 'exciting' scenes were those of self-immolation, as in the highly popular one of Padmini throwing herself into the flames in Jyotirindranath's *Sarojini*. The mechanical lotuses of *Nala-Damayanti* which used to terrify Binodini for example, brought the designer, Jaharlal Dhar, much fame.<sup>58</sup>

The hero or heroine making an appearance on stage on horse back was in imitation of such spectacular events on the English stage. Horses, lions, water-filled tanks (for staging naval battles in 'aqua-drama') were all part of the ensemble of popular theatre in nineteenth-century England, where they were obviously creating and catering to a popular taste, to which even the patent theatres had to submit.<sup>59</sup> The emphasis on spectacle which had come to dominate the proscenium theatre in England increasingly became the norm in the Bengali public theatre as well. Advertisements for plays often billed 'a live tiger on stage' as a major attraction. The horse must have had a particular fascination for the Bengali audience who associated it with tales of heroism and valour—the 'martial races' of Rajputs and Marathas; as also the more visible



gora (white) mounted-police of the Raj. It would not be too harsh to suggest that in the case of Saratchandra Ghosh, the public theatre proved an irresistible site for the display of his equestrian skills.<sup>60</sup> The fascination for cantering on to the stage was not limited to the commercial theatre circuit; even in the more restrained productions of the Tagore household, Indira Debi recalls Dinendranath Tagore insisting on riding a horse onto the stage during a private performance of *Balmiki Pratibha*, at the Tagore family residence.

For Binodini, the novelty and the excitement of adventures on stage comprised therefore some of the actual physical dangers of performance. Performance provided the thrills of the circus performer but was framed in an explicit cultural agenda. In addition, there was the considerable aesthetic demand of internalising and playing roles: models such as the sati, the birangana, among others, as well as anti-models or objects of satire, such as the westernised miss or the scheming woman.

## NOTES

1. Badal Sircar, *Theaterer Bhasa* (Calcutta: BS 1390), p. 5. The view is reiterated by Manoranjan Bhattacharyya in many of his essays; see particularly, 'Janagan o theater' (Theatre and the People) (pp. 80-81) and 'Gananatya' (People's Theatre) (p. 82) in *Theater o Anyanya Prasanga*, Dibyanarayan Bhattacharjee, ed. (Calcutta: Pratikshan Publications Private Ltd., 1987).
2. Brajendranath Bandhopadhyay, *Bangiya Natyashalar Itibas: 1795-1876* (BS 1340) (Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, BS 1398), p. 17.
3. Bhudev Choudhury, *Bangla Sahityer Itikatha: Ditya Parjaye* (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 1984), p. 331.
4. Manomohan Basu had in fact, made this the crux of his cultural manifesto. He announced in the *prastavana* to his first play, *Ram-abhishek* (1867): "There are many among the group of talented newcomers who have been attracted to *sakhya*, *karuna*, and other such *rasas*. And now that their taste in *kavya* and music has been refined, there has been a resurgence of drama (*natyabhinoy*) in this land instead of the disgusting *jatra*. They would want the hero and the heroine of the plays to be of a pure character." (Cited in Bhudev Choudhury, *op. cit.*, p. 332.)
5. Ramakrishna was particularly fond of the songs from *Chaitanya Lila* and *Buddhadeb charit*. See Naliniranjan Chattopadhyay, *Sri Ramakrishna o Banga Rangamanch*, (Calcutta: Deb Sahitya Kutir Pvt. Ltd., 1992), p. 16. He did not distinguish between theatre songs and other devotional songs heard or sung elsewhere—i.e. he was not differentiating between sacred and profane space.
6. Indra Mitra, *Sajghar*, (Calcutta: 1964), pp. 9-10.
7. Shankar Bhattacharya, *Bangla Rangalayer Itibaser Upadan* (Calcutta: Paschim Banga Ragya Pustak Parishad, 1982) p. 49.
8. In an essay entitled 'Bangali jibane bilati sanskritir prabhav' Shantideb Ghosh refers to *Kamini-Kunjo* as the forerunner of Rabindranath's 'geetinatak', *Balmiki Pratibha*. (*Desb*, 21 June 1969) Binodini frequently refers to *Kamini-Kunjo* and *Sati ki Kalankini* as the two most popular 'operas' in their repertoire.
9. There are a few recorded instances of Italian operas touring Calcutta in the earlier decades of the century although by the 1880s they are advertised quite regularly in the English newspapers of the city. *Shatabarshe Natyashala*, *op. cit.*, p. 10. 'Opera' soon became indispensable in the identity of a specific 'genre' of popular, professional companies. The breakaway Great National Opera Company was so titled because of the importance accorded to the musical skills of one of its founder members, Madanmohan Burman. Binoy Ghosh's account in *Kolkatar Culture* of the 'opera companies' which proliferated in the Chitpur area in 1920s-30s, are a reference to *jatra* companies.
10. Sukumar Sen, *Bangla Sahityer Itibas*, Vol. 2, 2nd ed., pp. 128-30;

- Kironmoy Raha, for example uses the two terms interchangeably: 'opera-dharmi nataki' (p. 40) and 'geeti-natya (opera)' in *Bangla Theater* (1978) (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1985), p. 43.
11. *Samkirnan*, generally meaning 'the reciting and praise of Krishna's name' and specifically, 'the new mode of emotional worship by loud singing, music and dancing' in Vaishnavism under Chaitanya in Bengal. Sushil Kumar De, *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta: Firma KL Mukhopadhyay, 1961), pp. 108 & 442.
  12. Manmath Ray, 'Loknatya: Jatragan' in *Shatabarshe Natyashala*, op. cit., pp. 17-68.
  13. 'Rangalaye Nepen: Banga'natyashalaye nrityashiksha o tahar kromobikash', 27 Chaitra, BS 1315, in *GR*, Vol. 5, p. 336.
  14. Michael Kinnear, *The Gramophone Company's First Indian Recordings: 1899-1908* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1994), pp. 1-56.
  15. Kinnear lists the following: 'Miss Binodini (Classic Theatre) Calcutta': Song from *Debi Chaudhurani*; pp. 87; 98; 'Miss Binodini Dassi (Classic Theatre)': p. 101 (songs); 'Binodini Dassi': p. 102, 128-129. For an account of the problems of identification, see Appendix, 'Recorder Binodini' by Shailashekhar Mitra in Chattopadhyay et al, op. cit., pp. 214-19. The names of other prominent actresses whose songs are listed in Kinnear's catalogue include, 'Miss Bhubaneswari'; 'Miss Rani'; 'Nogendra Bala Dassi'; 'Narasundari Dassi' (Norisundari); 'Miss Sushila' or 'Sushila Bala Dassi'; and a group recording of *Alibaba*.
  16. Christopher Kent, op. cit., p. 98.
  17. See Swapan Mazumdar's introduction to Apareshchandra Mukhopadhyay's *Rangalaye Trish Batsar*, p. 16 for a brief discussion of this practice of dictating the play and then giving it final shape during rehearsals. In his early decades, Girish dictated his plays to his colleagues, Amritalal Basu, Kedarnath Choudhury and others, and subsequently, to Abinashchandra Gangopadhyay.
  18. *Panchrangs* were derived from 'the thousand and one nights' staged by the Lewis's Theatre at the Calcutta Maidan: pieces such as the 'Hunchback tailor'; 'The giant and the jinn'; 'Alibaba' comprising many songs and dances were amongst the most popular. See Shankar Bhattacharya, *Bangla Ranglalayer Itibaser Upadan*, p. 29.
  19. The most popular dramatic representation was Bholanath Mukhopadhyay's farce, *Mabanter Chakranto* (1874) which played to packed houses at the Bengal. The India Office Catalogue shows that besides many popular songs, the incident had spawned at least nineteen plays between 1873-1880, not to mention many sets of Kalighat prints as well as illustrated playtexts.
  20. The advertisement for this piece in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* of 23 December 1875 ran:

GREAT NATIONAL THEATRE  
Sensational Attractions!!  
Saturday, 25th December, 1875  
*Hirok Churno Natak*

THE DEPOSED GAEKWAR!!

The subject is of 'National' interest, and the performance will be sustained with zeal and ardour by all the actors and actress of the Theatre.

"Railway train on the Stage"!!!

The author himself has kindly consented to take up a part in the play.

(From Brajendranath Bandhopadhyay, *Bangiya Natyashalar Itibas*, 1795-1876, p. 191.)

The author in question was Amritalal Basu. The play *Hirok Churno Natak* (Ground Diamonds), was based on the murder of the British Resident by the Maharajah of Gaekwad who allegedly had him poisoned with diamonds ground into his food. The contemporary nature of the topic adds a new dimension to the definition of 'national interest' which was usually interpreted to mean the resurrection of figures from the past for the the public theatre. The India Office Library catalogue lists at least four plays on this subject.

21. For an account of the controversy around the farces *Gajadananda o Jubaraj* and the *Police of Sheep and Pigs*, see Brajendranth Bandhopadhyay, op. cit., pp. 192-93.
22. The Act and the events leading upto it was later made into a fairly popular play by Debnarayan Gupta—*Bidrohi Nayak* (1973)—to celebrate the centenary of the public theatre. Upendranath Das, the author of *Surendra-Binodini* figured as the 'rebel hero' of the title.
23. See Ghulam Murshid, *Samaj Sanskar Andolan o Bangla Natak, 1854-1874* (Bangla Akademy, Dhaka: 1984).
24. *Ibid.*, p. 417.
25. For the woman on top as characteristic of the Kaliyuga trope, see Sumit Sarkar, "'Kaliyuga', 'Chakri' and 'Bhakti': Ramakrishna and His Times", *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 18, 1992, pp. 1543-63.
26. See Jayanta Goswami, *Samajchitre Unabingsha Shatabdir Bangla Prabasan* (Calcutta: 1974). For example, Constance Jordan's argument about the 'self-contradictory' nature of misogynist literature: '[D]ramatically misogynist literature can have a feminist dimension; by depicting women as forceful rebels, it can convey their capacity to think and to act.' Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) p. 19.
27. Madhusudan writes about the composition of *Krishnakumari* (1861): 'For two nights, I sat up for hours, poring over the tremendous pages of Tod and at about 1 A.M. last Saturday, the

- Muses Smiled.' Cited in Jogindranath Basu, op. cit., p. 457. Other literary works included Satyendranath Tagore's essay 'Krishnakumari Itihas' in *Bibidhartha Sangrah* (Paush Saka Era 1789); *Padmini Upakhyān* (1858); several novels by Bankimchandra; Jyotirindranath Tagore's *Sarojini ba Chitaur Akraman Natak* (1875); and, Mahendralal Basu's *Chitaur Rajsati Padmini* (1886).
28. Historical plays (with Rajput themes) were staged from the 1860s onwards on the Marathi stage, but the 'golden era' of the Marathi theatre, identified with musical historical plays came later, between 1885 to 1920. Neena Adarkar, *Economic and Political Weekly*, WS 88, October 26, 1991.
  29. According to Nilufer Ibrahim, 'so much so, that even a Hindu-Muslim marriage could not be shown on the public stage.' N. Ibrahim, *Unabingsha Shatabdir Bangali Samaj o Bangla Natak* (Dhaka: Dhaka University, 1968) pp. 169-72.
  30. Brajendranath Bandhopadhyay, op. cit., pp. 113-15.
  31. Muhammad Majiruddin, *Bangla Nataka Muslim Sadhana* (Rajshahi: North Bengal Publishers, 1970).
  32. Bhudev Choudhury, op. cit., p. 445.
  33. *GR*, Vol. 5, p. 22. See also Tanika Sarkar, 'Bankimchandra and the Impossibility of a National Agenda', Occasional Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.
  34. *GR*, Vol. 5, p. 23.
  35. Letter to K. Gangopadhyay, dated 1 September 1860, cited in Jogindranath Basu, op. cit., p. 492.
  36. This play by the famous actress Sukumari Dutta (Golap) offers an unusual reworking of the sati theme. For a brief discussion of this play see my 'Public Women', pp. 156-57.
  37. Badal Sircar, op. cit., p. 15.
  38. On Rammohan and Bankimchandra's 'aversion' for the excesses of Vaishnavism and the difference between Vaishnavism and Bankimchandra's Vishnuism, see Sumit Sarkar's 'Calcutta and the Bengali Renaissance' in *Calcutta: The Living City*, Vol. 2, Sukanta Chaudhuri, ed. (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 101-02.
  39. Pulin Das, op. cit., pp. 115-16.
  40. Ranajit Guha, "Neel-Darpan: The Image of a Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror" *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, London: 1974. See also Tapabijoy Ghosh, 'Neelbidroher charitra o Bangali buddhijibi', *Amushtup*, BS 1388 and 1389.
  41. Subir Raychaudhuri, op. cit., p. 39.
  42. Critics have compared *Bellick Bazar* to Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, *GR*, Vol. 3, p. 43.
  43. Brajendranath Bandhopadhyay, op. cit., pp. 114-15.
  44. Ratnabali Chattopadhyay, 'Nationalism and Form in Indian Painting: A Study of the Bengal School', *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, No. 14-15, (New Delhi) July-December 1987, pp. 6 and 23.
  45. For reasons behind the confusion, see Editors' Note in the 1987 edition of *Amar Katha o Anyanya Rachana*.
  46. On the income and the fluctuating fortunes of the theatre companies, see Brajendranath Bandhopadhyay, p. 180.
  47. Pradip Sinha, *Calcutta in Urban History* (Calcutta: Firma KLM Ltd, 1978), pp. 257-62.
  48. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'Traders and trade in old Calcutta' in *Calcutta: The Living City*, Vol. 1, p. 205.
  49. For accounts of the takeover of the Star Theatre, see Shankar Bhattacharya, *Bangla Nataka Itibaser Upadan, 1901-1909* (Calcutta: Pashchim Banga Natya Akademi, 1994) and Arun Kumar Mitra, *Amritalal Basur Jibani o Sabitya* (Calcutta: Navanna, 1970), pp. 77-78.
  50. Diary entry dtd. 2 October 1879, printed in Arun Mitra, op. cit., p. 521.
  51. Price of tickets at the Hindu National Theatre in 1872, Brajendranath Bandhopadhyay, *Bangiya Natyashalar Itihas*, pp. 134-35.
  52. Girishchandra's protest to the Calcutta Corporation against the Municipality Act, *GR*, Vol. 5, p. 354.
  53. Ahindra Choudhury, *Njere Haraye Khunji*, p. 47.
  54. Brajendranath Bandhopadhyay, p. 137. Advertisements such as the following offers us some idea of the frequency and range of the tours: 'Company going to Mofussil. Performances closed till further notice' or 'Company arrived from Mofussil' in the *India Daily News*, of 31 December 1886. (Cited by Shankar Bhattacharya, op. cit., p. 229).
  55. The Star Theatre company was hired to play on the evening of 23 Jan 1886.
  56. By the turn of the eighteenth century, sets of 'views' were being produced which included 'up-country Mughal monuments' in Delhi, Agra, Fatehpur Sikri. Fanny Parkes, *Wanderings of a pilgrim in search of the picturesque* (1936) (Calcutta, 1974) had been published in 1850.
  57. Krishna Kumar Mitra, *Atmachariti*, p. 104. Cited in Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
  58. A somewhat different view of these wonders is obtained from a member of the Tagore family. Rabindranath's niece, Indira Debi recalls a rare visit to the Star Theatre to see a performance of *Nala-Damayanti* where there were 'paper lotuses stuck on the wings' ... fairies 'wearing pink socks' stood in a 'tribbanga pose' inside these flowers, Indira Debi *Rabindrasmriti*, (BS 1367) (Vishva-Bharati: 1989), p. 34.
  59. Kent, op. cit., p. 98.; see also Antony D. Hippisley Coxe's essay on 'Equestrian drama and the circus' in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama*, Bradby, James and Sharratt, eds. (Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 109-18.
  60. Indira Debi Chaudhurani, op. cit., p. 34.

Afterword

### *Binodini Dasi to Nati Binodini*

The Introduction and the Notes on Theatre marked out the terrain that was both Binodini Dasi's workplace and arguably, her home. The actress-writer's afterlife finds place in this section.

It is not clear exactly when Binodini Dasi began to be referred to as 'Nati Binodini'. In contemporary advertisements of plays, she appeared as 'Binodini'; at the time of her appearances in print, some twenty and thirty odd years after she was last seen on the stage, Binodini Dasi signed herself as and was referred to as 'Srimati Binodini', 'Srijukta Binodini', or simply, 'Binodini', but never 'Nati Binodini'. In the case of her colleagues too, the more frequently used colourful method of 'indexing' in writings on theatre is a prefix characterising the person—*natyasamrat*, *natya-guru*, *natyasamragyi* and so on. It might be argued that the appellation is simply a term of endearment—an indication of her popular appeal, just as the British treat their royalty, or in the way Restoration England referred to Nell Gwynne as 'Nellie'. 'Bini' or 'Binod', as she was in fact called by her colleagues or her admirers would be an equivalent, but to add 'Nati' went beyond acknowledging Binodini Dasi's identity as actress. 'Nati' in nineteenth century writings in Bangla, increasingly becomes a comment on sexuality rather than a primary indicator of occupational identity. The nati, when constructed as a public dancing woman became emblematic of the degraded morals of the metropolis.<sup>1</sup> Inherent within the theatre world lay not merely an acknowledgement of sexual difference between actor and actress but also a difference attributed to the sexuality of the prostitute-actress. Binodini's case offers an entry point into the social history of the theatre, as I have outlined in 'Redemption of the "Nati": Notes on Gender and Spectacle of Faith in the History of the Public Theatre in Bengal'.<sup>2</sup>

Binodini Dasi has been written, scripted and produced so incessantly in Bangla as 'Nati Binodini', that her writings cannot be read in any neutral space today. The readings, legitimised in part by the author herself, fluctuate between the admonitory and the exemplary; usually eulogising Binodini as "a living martyr to the stage", the exceptional and unique talent who was an almost-bhadramahila. Not surprisingly, it is her abrupt departure from the stage that has provided the pre-text to representations of her life. The 'problem' of 'Nati Binodini' is not so much one of marginalisation as it is of institutionalisation. The Afterword begins by examining the production contexts of 'Nati Binodini' as part of that process of celebration. Into our review of the social history

traversed in the story of *dasi-nati-devi* are woven two other concerns: 1. the question of faith; and, 2. Girishchandra Ghosh and Binodini Dasi.

The many disparate and interrelated issues contained in these headings cannot be structured towards any teleological argument, projecting any one aspect or phase of Binodini Dasi/Nati Binodini's life as more real than another. Working against the fragmented and sometimes, flagrantly decontextualised representations that we have had of Binodini Dasi, I can only offer here other vignettes, the patches of sky and space against which she may be seen today.

In the Introduction I had said that it was necessary to view the nineteenth century stage actress 'in terms of the aesthetics and politics' of the aficionados. Except for Utpal Dutt's *Tiner Talwar* (1971) which does precisely that, the productions which go by the name of Nati Binodini tend to be structured around The Men in Her Life. Yet one may also take recourse to this phrase commonly found in the blurbs of biographies and autobiographies, for stories not yet staged.

Binodini outlived by many decades almost all the men who had been connected to her or with whom she had strong ties: her mentors and co-actors and lovers. The child husband she remembers so faintly,—babu and Gurmukh Rai—all died at an exceptionally young age. (This translation retains the insistent prefixing of the names of her contemporaries with 'the late. . .')

Being desired as another comes early in Binodini's life: during the Great National's tour of the west, Golap/Gopal Singh of Lahore falls in love with her as Radha of the geetinata *Sati ki Kalankini*; she is the girl-actress all 'fitted up' to appear as the nayika. Subsequently,—babu's fits of possessive passion pit her against a jealous rival—the theatre. The intensity of desire on both sides inspires a climactic visitation, and makes for high drama in Binodini's own script. Ironically, it is the Gurmukh Rai episode which appears in her writing as being the least oppressive. Despite the explicit conditions by which Binodini is bound to Gurmukh, he is in fact supportive of her aspirations: his business background allows him to see exactly where she is being used by her theatre friends.

Binodini dedicates her story to her hridoydebata—the lord of her life—who was 'like a life-giving tree' to her for twenty-five years after she quit the stage. Much like the iconic mother-sister in Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's early short story, 'Bar-didi', the god-like tree (*deb-taru*) was also *kalpataru* or the wish-fulfilling tree. In her writing he is conceived of as a feminised nurturing

protector—a life-affirming being. Divinity, companionship, and erotic feelings merge in her remembrances of him. It is significant that Binodini attributes much of his exemplary qualities to his class and his lineage. He had loved and respected her, and most importantly, had been a companion to her, sharing her fears and desires. When she lost that companion and protector she was distraught.

The other man who is both teacher and advisor (shiksha-guru and dharma-guru) as well as co-actor from the age of twelve, is Girishchandra Ghosh. Certainly the more complex of the dialogues in her autobiography and the strain of resistance within which the dialogue is enacted, emerges as a consequence of Binodini Dasi's vulnerable relationship with her mentor and co-actor.

The third man in Binodini's life (for a *mahapurush* is also a man) is Ramakrishna. Binodini does not explicitly address Ramakrishna; when she does refer to him, it is as *Patitpaban* or Redeemer of the fallen, and then too in the third person. She refers more frequently to 'Hari' than she does to Patitpaban. (It may be remembered that Binodini actually encountered Ramakrishna in person only when the latter came to the theatre and once when she went to visit him in disguise when he lay stricken with cancer.)<sup>3</sup> It has come to pass that Binodini cannot be invoked without Ramakrishna, and once the invocation is done, to suggest that she was saved through the blessing conferred on her when she played the part of Chaitanya. Popular representations of Binodini show how the condensed interaction between saint and sinner is used to erase, in one frozen gesture of blessing and in one utterance, a century of the public theatre's ambiguous location in Bengali cultural life.

Almost all the readings we have of Binodini Dasi's life, sympathetic or otherwise, tend to posit strongly a cause and effect relationship between Ramakrishna's 'appearance' in the public theatre and the abrupt termination by Binodini of her career as an actress.<sup>4</sup> However diverse the purpose of the arguments under consideration, they ultimately concur in the formation of a remarkably homogeneous narrative in their focalisation and condensation of Binodini's decision.

### *Production and publication*

The story of Ramakrishna's establishment as the patron saint of the public theatre through the mediation of Girishchandra, and his subsequent representations on stage and in films has been narrated in Naliniranjan Chattopadhyay's account of Ramakrishna

and the Bengali stage. Purnendu Bandhopadhyay who played the title role in the most popular of the 'Ramakrishna films' is quoted as observing, "so many jattras, so many plays, so many films (on Ramkrishna); as far as I understand, the Thakur as a subject has meant business worth two crores."<sup>5</sup> Naliniranjan himself draws our attention to the connection between these success stories ('hits') and the subsequent filming of several other 'lives', of contemporaries of Ramakrishna: Girishchandra, Vidyasagar, Rani Rashmoni, Bamakhepa among others.

'Nati Binodini' was launched in the wave of Ramakrishna's success at the box office. Bidhayak Bhattacharya, whose script for *Nati Binodini* was the first to be staged (1969) had earlier written a script for a Ramakrishna film. In his words: "Everyone blessed by Thakur has been mentioned in the *Kathamrita* and in Achintya Kumar Sengupta's works—everyone but Binodini. Hence the decision to make a play about her . . . but Binodini, she too received grace. Thinking of this I thought of making a play about Binodini."<sup>6</sup>

But the plays featuring Binodini in the title role could only be realised after the reprint of her autobiography, *Amar Katha* or *My Story* after a gap of over fifty years. This was initially serialised in three issues in the literary journal *Ekshan* in 1962–64, then published as a book along with her other writings in 1964 and subsequently revised through 1987.<sup>7</sup> (See Appendix II) But while the reprints marked a pioneering and successful effort to retrieve the writings of Binodini Dasi from decades of shameful neglect, they also set the stage, as it were, for a flood of Binodini productions, in which there was little or no attempt at a critical or sympathetic evaluation of her place in cultural history.

The three *Nati Binodinis*—by Nandikar, Shilpithra and Natto Company respectively, ran more or less around the same time (1972–73) although the script for the Nandikar production was the first to be written (initially as a novel by Chittaranjan Ghosh) in 1965; but even in the case of this early version, the reprint of *Amar Katha* proved crucial. Of the three, the Natto Company's production had the longest run—almost uninterruptedly for ten years. Its author-director Brajendra Kumar Dey was awarded the annual prize for the best *pala*-writer in 1973. Bina Dasgupta, who played the title role, was given the West Bengal 'Best Actress' award for her performance in 1973. More recently in 1991, Bina Dasgupta directed her own *Nati Binodini* (based on *Nati o Nati*). This version was produced in the proscenium theatre, in a dramatic mode often referred flippantly by its practitioners as the 'jatratical'. In addition to actual performances, Dey's *pala* was

broadcast regularly in a special radio programme and made into a record with the songs.

It is worth noting that the 1964 reprint of Binodini Dasi's writings was in commemoration of the actress's birth centenary, while Nandikar chose to produce *Nati Binodini* to mark the centenary of the founding of the public theatre in Calcutta (1972). Undoubtedly, a very genuine desire to honour the actress for her contribution to Bengali (Calcutta) theatre was one of the reasons behind the revival. Once *Nati Binodini* proved successful in the professional theatres and in the theatre-group Nandikar's production, it became part of the repertoire of the jatra companies along with palas such as *Karunasindhu Bidyasagar* and *Ramakrishna-Saradamoni*.<sup>8</sup> The preface to the fifth edition of Brajendra Kumar Dey's pala announces the immediate sensation it had created with its box-office returns:

The first edition of Nati Binodini [the playtext] sold out immediately . . . Nati Binodini [the performance of the pala] has broken the 100 year-old record of jatra and raised the rate [sic] of the Natto Company proprietor to Rs 8000 per pala. Not only Bengalis but the world of the non-Bengalis have been drawn to this performance. . .<sup>9</sup>

And so, in contrast to the earlier 'conspiracy of silence',<sup>10</sup> the last few decades have witnessed a virtual flood of 'Nati Binodinis' in Bengal.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the jatras and plays mentioned earlier as well as several film scripts prepared from the seventies onwards, there has been a TV serial and a film on Nati Binodini. *Nati Binodini* is also a popular play among amateur theatre groups ranging from the more middle-brow office-club groups to the more upper-class configuration of the members of the Calcutta Club.<sup>12</sup>

Most productions appear to favour Brajendra Kumar Dey's script, rather than Chittaranjan Ghosh's. Although Chittaranjan Ghosh's script strives to inform the spectator as well as bring up issues other than the Ramakrishna connection; the focus is still on Girish in the role of a defendant. Despite its interrogatory note, Ghosh's play also moves inexorably towards a denouement characteristic of melodrama with a heavy emphasis on redemption.<sup>13</sup> The melodrama has been reinforced with special effects in a recent production of Chittaranjan Ghosh's *Nati Binodini* (translated into Hindi) by the National School of Drama.

Brajendra Kumar Dey's pala is derived from Ghosh's play of the same name (as Dey himself disarmingly announces in the dedication) but the entire weight of the drama is now on the deliverance of the public theatre by Ramakrishna. Dey actually

replicates the original betrayal of the Star Theatre by making it just another sensational element in the plot. It was the pala which proved pivotal in ensuring the commercial viability as also the upward mobility of the neo-jatra in present day cultural life of Bengal. It is almost entirely within this frame, that Nati Binodini now circulates as a public referent.

What makes for this extraordinary appeal: how does the fallen woman illumine the saint, and the saint the theatre, and the theatre the Cultural Heritage [of Bengal] reclaimed in theatre and in theatre history?

The focal point of the entire narrative that has gained ascendancy since Girish, and has actually obscured the nuances of his own ambivalence and contradictions about the practice of theatrecraft, is concentrated in that classic scene of blessing (through actual physical touch) which is both benediction and transformation.

What we witness in these productions and representations is in fact the actual process by which the female subject, Binodini, (as also that of the male subject, Ramakrishna) is substituted for iconised figures, the former as the recipient and the latter as giver. In terms of a purely formal comparison, the movement towards iconisation is quite the reverse of the magic touch (usually the wand—*sonarkathi/ ruparkathi* in Bangla folklore and the kiss in European folktales or *märchen*) whereby the princess is aroused to sexual awareness.<sup>14</sup> The comparison is useful from another point of view: in illustrating how the magic gesture or touch may release from bondage the whole theatre of action. Thus the inhabitants of an entire kingdom or forest may be brought to life or animated, released from the curse of being stone statues, as in *The Sleeping Beauty*. Alternatively, to take the more remarkable example of Ahalya, who is released from her stony guise by the touch of Ram, the benediction becomes part of a much larger narrative, where Ahalya becomes one of the many beings who await deliverance for yugas and who may only be saved at the appointed time and place. Whether in the puranic story functioning within the many strata of epic time and its elaborate network of boons and curses or in the more linear folk tale, the single gesture or touch, transferred from man to woman, is made to represent power over a larger world.

On transposing the trope to a less fantastic world, we find the magic touch—of Ramakrishna blessing Binodini—is staged so that its efficacy may extend to the entire theatre world (the professional stage) in order that the latter may be accorded a



morally justifiable place in bourgeois cultural life. The actual extension and the reenactment of that moment takes place many decades *after* the incident, thereby introducing a certain 'historical' authenticity into the representation. The incident—of benediction given utterance in the linguistically reverberating one line: 'May you be granted consciousness (*chaitanya*), ma'—takes on the contours of a frieze. Once made into a tableau, both players—saint and sinner—can only, perpetually, enact their parts (like the 'happier' figures in Keats's vase and verse) removed from any agential position in time. It is then easy to insert the 'scene' into a larger drama of the redemption of the public theatre.

The range, at the end of the twentieth century of the discursive field elaborated around this century-old scene, should not be underestimated. Consider a recent editorial in *Desb* on the fire at the Star Theatre (Hathibagan) which reduced it to ashes:<sup>15</sup> "The Star was the pilgrimage place (*manchapeeth*) of a remarkable history. Thakur Sri Ramakrishna had come to the Star to see *Chaitanya-Lila* being enacted. And on that day, by placing his hand on her head and blessing Nati Binodini, he brought about a renaissance of the entire Bengali stage."<sup>16</sup> An individual's (here designated as *patita*) salvation becomes a metaphor for the regeneration of the public theatre and for an entire *jati*—the Bengali people. The person of the actress is transformed into the familiar persona of the *patita* and ultimately into a *synecdoche*, or a literary trope. The same incident is used in Apareshchandra Mukhopadhyay's invaluable memoirs of thirty years of his life as an actor, to delineate the extraordinary 'mediating role' played by the dramaturge-devotee Girishchandra Ghosh.<sup>17</sup> An additional factor in Mukhopadhyay's thesis is the 'poison of English education' and its corrosive influence on the Bengali mind. He commends the priest-like function of Girishchandra in ushering in a renaissance of the 'Bengali heart/mind' by bringing *bhakti* into the theatre; the *chaitanya* incident allows for a dissolving of barriers between indigenous material and adaptations derived from the West.

I have argued elsewhere<sup>18</sup> that the discourse of redemption in which Binodini and many other actresses participated and which they internalised for purposes of self-worth, could loosely be called the 'dharma of the manch'—a code or way of the theatre world. I would like to elaborate on the notion of acting as a means of redemption, to suggest that in the movement by which redemption is reallocated from the individual to the spectacle (as in the staging of the individual), the definition of dharma as a

way of life or profession and self-worth arising from the former, is narrowed down to primarily mean morality.

In the case of the actress and sometimes of the actor, the conflation of work/activity and dharma allows for a means of according value to their labour and to their talents. It makes possible a successful carving out of a balance between the individual and her social/human role. It grants a place to both the pleasure and the pride of individual talent and its economic value, while it restricts individualism within the folds of dharma, so that the acting profession may be pursued as an alternative 'way of life'.<sup>19</sup> But once it is the theatre itself which is redeemed, the spectacle of the morality play blinds the audience to the worth of work that the actress herself experiences or the power exercised by her in the manifestation of dharma, i.e. if performance itself is a form of worship (*sadbhava*), presumably, the desire to excel would not be categorised as vainglorious ambition since every minute spent in this exercise takes one nearer to god.<sup>20</sup> The redemption plot subsumes completely the carving out of self-worth from this definition of dharma.

There is yet another aspect to the project for redemption as it is redefined to include the individual woman and the theatre industry: it suppresses all references to the politics of labour. For one, it eliminates any possible element of protest inherent in Binodini's decision to quit the stage.

The rich text of the actress's dharma, by which she lives and works, comprises pleasure and pride in performance; the morality play overwrites this text, so that at the individual level, it is only the sense of sin(fulness) which remains, foregrounded through redemption. It is not surprising that in the interests of the project of redemption, Binodini can only be cast as either *patita* or *bhadramahila* or both, but little or no space can be accorded to her sense of identity as a *worker who is a woman*. Even if the actress's commitment to theatre is acknowledged, the incidents around the naming of the Star can be read, at best, as a sensational case of an individual betrayal in a plot of conflicting personal passions, in which case, the main accused is Binodini's *abhimana*, that ubiquitous feminine sentiment.<sup>21</sup> The project may not grant to the actress the pleasure she derives from and is able to give to others in her profession, despite the hard work, and the economic and physical hardships it entails. The morality play actually obliterates all traces of steps painfully taken by the actress towards gaining worth in/through work.

The result has been to deny any agency to Binodini herself. She is never the central figure, whether as actress or narrator of

her life. The many layers of mediations, of the saint-reformer-nationalist *littérateur* (Ramakrishna-Vivekananda-Girishchandra) inevitably occupy centre-stage in these readings or performances.

In an alternative reading which almost completely decontextualises Binodini from the politics of her workplace and the many layers of her social strata, Binodini is represented as a unique individual, a brilliant woman who has been wronged; it certainly does not attempt to problematise her decision by situating it within the overlapping discourses of reform, nationalism or education.<sup>22</sup> Although, this is clearly the more sympathetic and humane of the two genres of reading, it is also unfortunately, the more moribund, since it does not allow for any reversal or radical re-construction of theatre history.

In her many stage representations as Nati Binodini, Bindodini Dasi is still made to carry the entire burden of redemption of the performance industry. She occupies a similarly facilitating role in the almost mandatory invocations of Nati Binodini in theatre studies. The chaitanya incident/event is situated at the cross-roads of the history of Bengali theatre. It has been staked as such by the players themselves, and by later critics, playwrights and producers.

The reworking of *charit sabitya* into the medium of film and the history of Bengali theatre in the second half of this century offer possible avenues of further exploration in the cult of Nati Binodini. The *gana-natya* movement had given an edge to the cultural agenda of Bengal in the post-war years which certainly cut through the professional theatre's repertoire and whose excitement spread beyond the borders of the state. The public theatre had been affected in the war years and even later, it was confined to the revivals of the classics of earlier generations. After an era of individual brilliance epitomised in Sisir Bhadhuri (1889–1959) and Prabha Debi (1903–1952), but which could not leave behind a legacy of strong theatre tradition, the public stage went into a decline. In any case, most of its talented performers invariably moved on to films and were better known as film stars. From the original nucleus of the *gana-natya* movement came into existence various experimental theatre groups, usually with clear political affiliations, who soon began to be regarded as the alternative to 'the professional stage' or the commercial theatre, as the latter had begun to be called. It was probably this latter opprobrium, i.e. of prostituting art to business, and the not entirely

unjustified charges of vulgarity that made the public theatre feel the urge to defend itself as a consumer industry.

The defense is what gives impetus to the re-presentation of its glorious past in the form of a conflict—between how the theatre had been perceived by the disbelievers of this world (such as Ramakrishna's nephew Hriday) and how in fact, it was truly a means to inspire belief by its success in dissolving distinctions between the real and the unreal, exemplified in Ramakrishna's exclamation after learning that the 'boy' who had played Chaitanya was actually a woman. Re-enacting the bhakti wave and Girish's own existential dilemma allowed the public theatre to both claim historic authenticity and establish its 'misunderstood' moral lineage. At the same time, it would not do in any way to disturb the audience by problematising Binodini's life or by allowing her own writings to raise fundamental questions about the double standards of the theatre in its employment of women as actresses. Even the originally unresolved attitudes to Binodini Dasi, notably in Girish Ghosh's interaction with her, had perforce to be obliterated and a domestic closure provided for the play.

Binodini as *patita-nati* in the play is constantly juxtaposed against Girishchandra's wife, whose death marks the climax of the play. Cast as the type of the good wife, she emerges as the angel in the house, the *grihalakshmi* behind the genius. Plays such as *Nati Binodini* allowed the public theatre to set up an equally respectable identity vis-a-vis the challenge or threat presented by the group theatres. Meanwhile, jatra which had completely reoriented itself and had appropriated many of the features of the public theatre also found in a piece like *Nati Binodini* a means of combining some of the conventions of the traditional jatra (e.g. the focus on Chaitanya, the songs) with what was represented as a historical play. Used selectively, Binodini Dasi's life offered a ready-made plot: if the moment of benediction meant the conversion of the patita, she could only continue to live either as a sanyasini or bhadramahila. Casting her with 'Ranga-babu' (the stage name of her *bridaydebata*) meant that the play concluded on an appropriately happy note of conjugality. In this version, for the woman, redemption is conjugality.

### *Manch-dharma-sansar*

There are two aspects to the iconisation of Binodini Dasi: the first and the predominant one, evident in her own lifetime, is to cast her (along with her fellow actresses) in the discourse of redemption; and the second, which derives largely from the first,

is a process of reification that makes her a respectable cultural icon. The cultural appropriation then confers on her an ambiguous bhadrā status as well. Before elaborating on the factors which activated and shaped the actual process of iconisation, we might consider the sets of attributes that are common to both these discourses: one of the patita redeemed by bhakti, the other of the *nati* who is an honorary bhadrāmahilā.

The life of the actress in this interactive construction is played out in the successive locales of *manch-dharma-sansar*. Of these three spaces, *manch*, or the more popularly used expression—*rangmanch*, is the outcast world of the public theatre which is both attractive and deceptive. The other is *sansar*—epitomised in the respectable bourgeois family where women carry the name of the father or the husband and do not perform in public. *Dharma*—in this context—is suspended in between, occupying a transcendental moment of revelation and understanding, which negates the otherwise illusionary weave or the *maya* of the theatre world. In this instance, the movement from one material context to another and from one moral epicentre to another, occurs through this suspended moment of transfiguration, where Binodini is blessed by Ramakrishna.

Most biographies and plays based on Binodini's life mark out an isolated phase in her life—her entry into *sansardharma* as an almost-bhadrāmahilā. In Debnarayan Gupta's recreation of Binodini's life the title explicitly foregrounds the division: *Nati Binodini-Manche: Sansare*.<sup>23</sup> Ajit Kumar Ghosh refers to the 'patita-abhinetri' who opted for the hidden or private joys of the home as opposed to the illusionary joys of the stage and the unhappy denouements in each case.<sup>24</sup> *Nati Binodini* by Chittaranjan Ghosh and the *jatra* by Brajendra Kumar Dey end with Binodini's exit from the stage. In the *jatra*, the newly weds make a joint appearance to bid farewell to a dying Girish Ghosh, cast here explicitly as a father figure.<sup>25</sup>

Binodini's life was considered worthy of representation because she could be shown eventually as experiencing both *dharma* and *sansar*: as the *patita* or the fallen woman redeemed (spiritually) by Ramakrishna and (socially) by 'Ranga-babu'. In her life, however, the move from the status of a single woman with a career to the barely acceptable one of being the co-wife of an upperclass/royal personage could not have been simple. Binodini's new position was in effect, a surrender of some of the independence of her former life, as she points out in a 'conversation' with her *hridaydebata* (*My Story*, p. 109). Nor did the relationship give her in return the absolute social status or

the property rights of a wife. She was housed separately but within the same premises; presumably, she was also given a retinue of servants and the various other comforts commensurate with the social status of her protector. But it did not ensure that her daughter could gain admission to a school. The comforting presence of the man who appears to have loved her sincerely, and the delight of watching her girl grow up were possibly her chief solace within the walls of her almost-bhadrāmahilā status. Her writing is founded in this space, haunted always by her former actress self. The death of her daughter sealed off a part of her life, and with the death of her protector, even the material comforts of this existence was denied to her.

Women's writings/songs have often been explicitly addressed to Hari or Krishna in the Bhakti tradition; at any rate, women frequently write about calling upon Hari or Dayamadhab. And sometimes, an entire autobiographical narrative may be structured around the writer's experience of divine *lila*, as in Rassundari Dasi's *Amar Jiban*. In *My Story*, the reader is struck by the need for and the absence of Hari in the writer's life, at a time when her losses have left her only with questions.

As to repentance! My entire life has been wasted in repentance. I have been repentant at every step; had there been the means to correct my life I would have realised the fruits of repentance. But has repentance borne anything? Even now I'm swept along like a bit of grass overwhelmed by the current. However, I do not know what you mean by repentance. Why do I not receive mercy when I lie at the door of the Eternal, my heart burdened with pain? I decide never again to call or cry out for Him but still I cry out Krishna Krishna from the hidden depths of my heart. But where indeed is Hari? (*My Story*, pp. 57-58)

Binodini, like many other actresses, was a Jat Vaishnav.<sup>26</sup> Calling upon Hari is part of the childhood instruction she received from her mother. As a little girl suffering from stage fright, she remembers this and calls on Hari. Given the importance attached to 'namjapa' (chanting the name of Krishna/Hari) or 'namkirtan' (singing the name of Krishna/Hari) in Gaudiya Vaishnavism, and the five-rasa based *rasa-upasana*,<sup>27</sup> much was invested in playing the roles of exemplars or avatars of bhakti.

Ramakrishna's blessings to Binodini in the role of Chaitanya, and the 'benediction scene' as it subsequently figures in theatre history are both crucial in our understanding of Binodini Dasi today, but both have to be located within yet another context. To

summarise the main argument of a larger study: the Chaitanya role in her career should be contextualised against the Bhakti-wave then sweeping through Bengal.<sup>28</sup> In speaking of her experience in playing Chaitanya 'as if in a trance', Binodini documents an extended period of preparation which involved physical austerity as well as opening herself up to the 'religious discourse' of those (men) acknowledged as enlightened Vaishnavites. Other actors are also on record as having gone through many such physical austerities—turning vegetarian for a month, bathing in the Ganga every morning and so on, when they played the roles of such saintly figures or gods.<sup>29</sup>

It is the second aspect of the preparation which appears significant: Binodini must first be receptive to the men who mediate between her as recipient and their own privileged space in received Vaishnavism. Only then can she draw on her talent to become Chaitanya on stage. This excess of sympathetic identification is reason enough for her to faint during performance without having the added stimulation of an audience equally affected by devotional fervour. Chaitanya, as Bengal's own Bhakti saint, occupies a unique emotional space in popular consciousness. The 'replay' of such a scene would evoke an existing core of religious sentiment that had profoundly influenced all poetry, lyric forms, songs and theatrical representations in the Bengali language. Gaudiya Vaishnavism or the Vaishnav movement in Bengal, had as its premise the erasure of social differences, the possibility of salvation for all.

### *Bhava and the actress*

In traditional aesthetic theory, the actor or actress is expected to be a vehicle for feelings—a *patra* (literally, a vessel), for the translation of *bhava* into expression, gesture and movement. Bhava is a concept central to Vaishnav theory and praxis: the devotee is expected to adopt the appropriate bhava in which she may encounter the divine. The advantage of bhava as an approach to the divine is that it is effectively trans-sexual, i.e. the devotee may take on the bhava of a male or female devotee irrespective of his/her own sex. (The phases of Ramakrishna's sadhana are often cited as an illustration of the extreme fluidity and variety of this form of worship.)

An important component of Girishchandra's re-visioning of Bhakti in the practice of theatre was linking the Vaishnav concept of *bladini shakti* through *Radha-bhava* with the sadhana or dedication of the superior actress. Thus *madhur-rasa*, which the igno-

rant or the bigoted would read as immorality, could legitimately be portrayed by fallen women, if it was with the objective of arousing *bladini shakti*. In his essay on 'Abhinetri Samalochona'<sup>30</sup> Girishchandra adds this dimension to the technical definition of bhava: "Those who come to the theatre wishing to see Ram, Sita, Buddha, Chaitanya and others, will do so. But he whose intent is on mean minded (*kutil*) criticism, will also have a heart like an evil person (*kutila*). It is all the world of bhava." The essay is premised on the inclinations and the aspirations of the spectator—the eye of the beholder. The attack on the immoral acting woman is redirected to the attacker and his lack of the appropriate bhava. There is praise for those who can (by their skill and dedication) manifest this bhava and bring it about in the spectators. Therefore, for the actress, her acting is a *sadhana*—a rigorous striving of heart/mind and body so that she might embody the appropriate bhava on stage. This allows Girish to link the question of larger social awareness with personal devotion and faith.

Binodini believed in both these aspects of bhava. And she reworks the aesthetic concept of bhava into an extremely personal mode of response on stage *as well as off*. When Binodini analyses her role as Manorama in Bankimchandra's *Mrinalini*, she makes use of the concept of bhava: Manorama's *balika bhava* made one of the spectators think that Manorama was being played by a *balika*—a little girl. But while she is confident about her powers to have affected the audience with her bhava, she questions the corresponding lack of faith within herself. *My Story* begins and ends with a frank avowal of her crisis of faith.

Mahashoy says that I have pleased the audience. But did the members of the audience ever see my inner self? When I had the opportunity to pronounce Krishna's name, with what yearning had I called out to him; was the viewer ever able to perceive this? Then why did my only lamp of hope flicker away?

Binodini has been betrayed by her theatre companions; and in the death of her daughter she has been betrayed by god; she constructs a third force or agent (between the human and the divine) which she calls her 'Fate'. Although she shifts the responsibility for her sorrows and her pain to Fate, Binodini comes as close as she possibly can, to a denial of god and all the cherished beliefs of Hinduism.

The story of 'Yavan Haridas' which occupies a major place in the history of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, as it does in Girishchandra's *Chaitanya-Lila* (Act III; scene i), is a leitmotif in Binodini's writings. Unlike other exemplars of faith such as Prahlad and

Dhruba, also invoked by Binodini in *My Story*, Yavan Haridas is the other who became symbolic of the Faith itself. In the last chapter, 'A Few Last Words to Part I', in addition to Haridas, Binodini invokes other such marginal and outcast figures who in fact were gifted with superior vision compared to those who occupied more socially sanctioned or legitimised positions. They include Guhak the Chandal (who won the friendship of Ram) and Vidur the Wise (who was also the son of a dasi). In her attack on social structures, Binodini invokes also the rights of 'the orphan'—all who are dispossessed according to the terms of a casteist and patriarchal society. In *My Story*, the story of Yavan-Haridas is all that Binodini cannot herself be. She may represent bhakti to perfection and thereby function as a symbol of it. But she may not be integrated into any religious or social order herself.

### *Family life and the female household*

Binodini does not gloss over the stark material deprivation that haunted her childhood, that quite literally pushed her onto the stage; but she also returns constantly in her writings to the atmosphere of warmth and protection provided by her mother and grandmother and many of their neighbours. It nurtured her during her theatre years and even gave her a brief period of cherished freedom when she supported the family totally on her earnings from the theatre and shook off the support of a protector. In this, she was perhaps luckier than most of her fellow actresses who were often under immense pressure from their home environment to sever ties with the theatre which offered at best an uncertain financial future and settle instead for the more tangible gains from a liaison with a rich patron.<sup>31</sup> Contemporary productions of *Nati Binodini* make her mother a scheming aggressive woman who fits into this mould, to contribute to the black and white characterisation of melodrama. The dedicatory poem in *Basana*, Binodini's first book of poems, is addressed to her mother:

Mother dear, my mother I touch your feet.  
Whatever I've written, you will understand, mother.  
You are the god of my life on earth.  
Dearest one, accept with your love a daughter's worship.

Yet another area remains ignored if we stage Binodini's life in a tripartite biography culminating in the sphere of sansar: the repeated references in her writings (as well as in the writings of other male theatre personalities) to a certain family spirit that

bound the theatre people of both sexes.<sup>32</sup> The indulgence and appreciation that she craved and received from her own mother, grandmother, and the other immediate neighbours and visitors to the family tenement, extended naturally into the theatre world. It marked her relationship with all the guru or mentor figures who trained her for her various roles, and to a great extent, it informs the tone of intimate opposition with which she addresses Girishchandra Ghosh in the preface to her autobiography. The *family* of theatre people, albeit with their factions and frictions, have to be acknowledged, in order to fathom something of the betrayal experienced by Binodini over the founding and naming of the Star Theatre and the events thereafter. The manch-dharma-sansar sequence effectively dismisses alternative kinds of family life, any other than one sanctioned in a bhadrakok construction of conjugality.

Her decision to leave the theatre is accordingly read as an entry into grace (granted by Patitpaban) and the rest of her life as some sort of a domestic haven after the storminess of her theatre (patitanati) days. The closures in these very popular dramatised versions eliminate other endings—that Binodini could not stay on in her patron's home after his death, after having lived there for almost three decades; that she never could or did cut herself off from her theatre days or even from the theatre; and finally, that her autobiography reveals a mind tormented by its perceived lack of any healing grace.

### *Child of the stage*

In *My Life*, where Binodini can remember only the 'honeyed delights' of the theatre, she attributes nothing to her talents and all to 'the hard work' of her teachers. Binodini's extensive commentary on the play *Prakrita Bandhu* appears somewhat puzzling given the banal story-line and its weak imitation of Kalidasa's *Shakuntalam* and even Bankimchandra's *Kapalkundala*.

... just as Bonobasini was simple and innocent and quite wild, so too was I; even if not completely wild, quite simple, even a little stupid. No wonder the role suited me so perfectly. . . .

My acting was not a result of my talents but due to the teaching skills of my instructors, their hard work and care. It was with great labour indeed that they caught a wild thing like me and turned me into a 'HEROINE' to be presented before the audience. (*My Life*, p. 135)

In such repeated identification with the heroine, Bonobasini/Bonobala (meaning the forest maid)—Binodini the writer, traces an evolutionary plot of her actress psyche. And unlike Bankim-

chandra's creature of the forest, Kapalkundala, we are offered here a narrative of successful domestication of disciplined art. Girls who were recruited to be actresses were 'like' wild things from the city's slums. Binodini's account of her early years captures an exceptionally impressionable mind, longing to remove itself from its immediate environment to a world of role playing:

I cannot quite explain why, but as for myself, I thought only of when the carriage would come to fetch me and when I would find myself in the theatre. I wanted to see how the others conducted themselves on the stage. I forgot almost to sleep or eat in my excitement. I could only practice in secret how Kadu had walked at a particular point, or how Lakhhi had said something on another occasion. I was rather young and I did not have a room of my own; it was inevitable that the others would catch me at my activities and laugh at me. I would run off whenever that happened. (*My Life*, pp. 138-39)

How then are we to trace the connections between Binodini, the precocious child of the theatre company, and Binodini, the star who chooses to leave the theatre in the prime of her life? As a child, emotionally and mentally she has outstripped her body, for she is playing the part of the heroine even before her teens: "But the dresser had no end of a trouble trying to dress me for the play. I was quite little but had to play the part of a young maid". (*My Life*, p. 135) 'Dressing up' is always exciting for children, more so for a girl who has few clothes and little or no material possessions. And for Binodini, as it must have been for many other actresses of the time, dressing up to play the part of a princess had special appeal. When she joins the theatre, the senior actress Raja takes her under her wing and has clothes stitched for her. Binodini uses a particularly apt word to describe this relationship: I had become the *neuta* (pet or little darling) of a famous actress, she says. It is this word,<sup>33</sup> rather than the more familiar trope of the temperamental prima donna which characterises Binodini's relationship with her theatre people. It continues to inform her role with the others, men and women, but particularly the men.

Her 'excessive' high spirits earn her the wrath of the concert people, the proud Kadambini (Kadu) when they are in Delhi, and of her mother on several occasions:

Dedicated to acting at an early age, I had from the early years of understanding, become so enthusiastic and high spirited under the tutelage of Girish-babu, that I would be very upset by the slightest harsh word from anyone. I always craved for love and affection. And my theatre friends too gave me immense love. At any rate, from this

time onwards I had begun to sense within me self confidence. (*My Story*, p. 81)

After every misadventure, natural and technical, she is *handed* both physically and emotionally by the theatre people in order to induce her to 'get on' with the performance. Her stiff frozen body is chafed and warmed by Choto-babu after the ill-conceived elephant ride; she is bandaged up by him after she falls from the horse with the collapse of the earthen embankment; and in one of the more curious accounts of her 'condition' during the sustained trance-like performances of *Chaitanya-Lila*, she is massaged back to 'normalcy' by Father Lafont in the dressing room of the Star Theatre, as Girishchandra—and presumably other theatre people—look on. Colonel Olcott's account of this performance adds a doctor to this group of men who stand-by as it were, to ensure the continuity of performance:

The poor girl who played Chaitanya may belong to the class of unfortunates (alas: how unfortunate these victims of man's brutishness) but while on the scene she throws herself into her role so ardently that one only sees the Vaisnava saint before him . . . So thoroughly does the Star actress feel the emotions of the saint she personates, so intensely arouses in her bosom the religious ecstasy of Bhakti Yoga, she fainted dead away between the acts the evening I was there, and a medical man who shared my box had to go behind the scenes each time to administer restoratives. . . (emphasis added)<sup>34</sup>

Against her wilfulness, her stubbornness, her high spiritedness—her excesses, with constant soothing and assuaging (part of which inheres in the 'handling'), her mentors get her to do what is required by appealing to her vanity, and her excellence—'only you can do it.' Binodini appears not to have perceived this or at least she does not represent this as manipulation or coercion. In her writings it is a confession of their dependence on her, i.e. of her professional excellence.

Besides the actual physical display that was the actress's job, there were the exigencies of the work and the class and gender hierarchies in the workplace: a co-sexual workplace; a spectrum of teachers cum co-actors and possibly lovers, all much older in age and from a very different class; rigorous instruction in dance; as well as the actual physical ardour of rehearsals and the mechanics of production—ranging from funeral pyre scenes to the dances in giant lotuses on stage. . . The actress related to her body in a way that was distinct from others of her sex.

For Binodini, the theatre was the closest she could conceive of as a literary salon:

Numerous other men, educated, respected gentlemen, would also come—they were all so excited about the theatre. The theatre in those days was a place for literary discussions. There was so much discussion on so many varied topics—I understood very little of it then, but I did realize that the theatre was in those days a meeting ground for a distinguished group of bhadrak. (*My Life*, p. 149)

She cherished aspirations for being a part, however peripherally, of this group.

But if the theatre unfolded new frontiers that had to be made real; it was also, in the logistics of a company working and travelling and performing together, like a home.<sup>35</sup> An oft-quoted couplet by Amritalal Basu suggests the many ramifications of this 'comradely' relationship as it operated between the sexes:

Gurudeb and I, such pals we were:  
At Bini's home, drinking beer.

Amritalal himself had access to the homes of most upper-class people (his advice was sought in the Jorasanko Tagore family's theatrical ventures), and he moved from one world to another without any sense of guilt. Like the home of many an other woman, 'Bini's' was evidently the place where one could drink and relax.

### *The dialogic strain*

*My Story* is a dialogic text, as is her guru, Girish Ghosh's writings about his actress-pupil. The need to situate these essays by Girishchandra in the same textual space as Binodini Dasi's writings was recognised early by the editors Chattopadhyay and Acharya, who included them as appendices in *Amar Katha* from the 1964 edition onwards.

The desire to write about her life, her career, her years as a professional stage actress, was certainly stimulated by Girishchandra Ghosh. Yet, the parameters of the frame that Girishchandra had envisaged and within which he expected Binodini to abide are constantly violated as the pupil-writer moves through a range of narrative modes—castigating and surrendering, challenging and interrogating. The various modes of address that we find in Binodini's writings are not simply a literary ruse calculated to excite curiosity about the identity of the writer. In *My Story*, Girishchandra is both confidante as well as a kind of oppositional figure who enables her to enunciate the betrayal that she experienced from the theatre world, although I would argue

she does not make him *personify* that betrayal. The other 'characters' in her life story do not measure up to his stature, even if many of them are remembered with fondness, love and respect.

The personal tone in the first set of letters with which *My Story* begins, expresses internal conflicts as well as an ongoing struggle against the very person she wants answers from. The properly respectful, but impersonal 'Mahashoy' (Sir), used as a form of address in the letters, strikes a deliberate note of contrast to the questions in the letter that slash through all accepted beliefs of heaven and hell, talent and self-worth. Ultimately, they disturb some of the beliefs that are being constructed as the core of Hindu dharma as it is being presented to Binodini and in her own struggles to internalise and live by them. The epistolary form allows for the possibility of role creation and projection of self for the 'third party'. The invisible specator-reader is made party to the crossing of swords in this duel of belief—between an old and ailing theatre genius and an aging and bitter ex-star who has endured in one lifetime, at least as much as the most dramatic character she has portrayed on stage.

Girishchandra's introductory note to his protégé's autobiography and the longer preface to her book, reveal clearly his own sense of unease about the issues raised in this not entirely asymmetrical dialogue. His position is revealing in its contradictions and ironies. The essay on 'How to Become a Great Actress' begins with an unqualified acknowledgement of his debts to the actress:

I must acknowledge quite openly that I am totally indebted to her multi-faceted talents: plays such as my *Chaitanya-Lila*, *Buddhadeb*, *Bilwamangal* and *Nala-Damayanti* earned the respect of the audience, partly because Srimati Binodini has played the main role in each of these plays and has achieved the supreme conceptualisation possible for each of these characters.

It would be unfair to indict Girishchandra in the case for Binodini solely on the basis of these essays, just as it would be difficult to ignore his unresolved prejudices against her and her 'kind'.

One very significant difference lies in the framing of the two prefaces: in the first, Girish states that he need not write 'how one may become a great actress': the extracts from Binodini's story will tell it all. In the second and later piece for the published book, the autobiography is to be read as a moral tract—cast, in what I have identified in the preceding section, as the discourse of redemption.



## How to Become a Great Actress

by

GIRISHCHANDRA GHOSH

My dearest pupil, the well-known actress Srimati Binodini's name is familiar to all those who love me and who enjoy reading the plays I have written. I feel it is necessary to narrate some of the incidents from Binodini's life if I am to explain in a simple and comprehensible manner, how one may become a great actress. I must acknowledge quite openly that I am totally indebted to her multi-faceted talents: plays such as my *Chaitanya-Lila*, *Buddhadeb*, *Bihvamangal* and *Nala-Damayanti* earned the respect of the audience, partly because Srimati Binodini has played the main role in each of these plays and has achieved the supreme conceptualisation possible for each of these characters. She would be completely lost in her role while acting and, oblivious of her own existence, would be illumined with such purity that it did not seem as if she were acting: her performance appeared to be a real event. Truly, those scenes are still present before my eyes.

It is worth knowing how she rose from the low(er) class to an extremely high position and with what dedication and untiring industry did she gain the respect and love of all Bengalis. Although she has not been connected with any theatre [company] for a long time now, her name and fame and the praise, love and respect she had received in profusion from all was not inconsiderable. She, whose name is still uttered as the epitome of an ideal actress, whose letters on the theatre were published serially in the prestigious *Bharatbashi*,<sup>36</sup> was a pillar of the Bengali stage and it need be hardly mentioned that the loss of that pillar has been a great loss for the national stage.

In recent times, this unfortunate person had been forced to take to her bed for reasons of ill health. Having recovered somewhat by the grace of God, she wrote me a letter where she said, "The time is fast approaching where I shall depart from the rest-house that is this world. Sick and despairing,

This introductory piece was written by Girishchandra Ghosh for the serialised account of Binodini's life published for two consecutive issues in *Natya-mandir*, edited by Amarendranath Dutta (1st Year, No. 2, BS 1317). Binodini's account was published as *Abhinetrir Katha* (An Actress's Story) which later formed part of *Amar Katha* (My Story).

my days and nights pass somehow. I have no enthusiasm of any sort and, gripped by hopelessness, I am swept along by an irresistible current that paralyses me. You have often told me that the Lord does not create us without a purpose; all of us come to this world to do the Lord's work, and once that work is done, we leave our bodies and depart from this world. How often have I thought over these words of yours, but I have not been able to understand from my life, what work of the Lord has in fact been accomplished through me. What work have I ever done and what is it I am now doing? What I have done all my life—is that the Lord's work? Will there be no rest to this work?"

I had replied, "You have accomplished much in your life. From the stage you have brought joy to hundreds of people. The way in which you have brought alive characters from many plays with your remarkable acting powers, is no mean achievement. In the guise of Chaitanya in my *Chaitanya-Lila*, you have aroused bhakti in many and earned the blessings of many a Vaishnav. No one who has an ordinary destiny could be empowered to do as much. The many characters that you have made manifest—they are characters who cannot be understood other than by intense meditation. It is not your fault if you have not been able to see the fruits as yet; it is the circumstances into which you have fallen. But your lament makes it clear that you will soon receive the fruits of your labour." Finally, in order to keep her unruly heart occupied in work, I requested her to write about her 'life on stage'. Binodini has accomplished that work. Some sections which are believed to be irrelevant have been deleted. Following are the necessary excerpts from her own account of her theatre life; I do not have to write how one may become a great actress: Binodini's life in the theatre will fulfil the objectives of this essay.

## Srimati Binodini and the Bengali Stage

by

GIRISHCHANDRA GHOSH

In the event of the untimely death of an outstanding actor of the Bengali stage, we touch upon his achievements while we express our heartfelt grief in condolence meetings and in newspapers, and sometimes from the stage. I had occasion to read a paper at the meeting held to commemorate the death of the famous actor, the late Ardhendushekhar Mustafi.<sup>37</sup> Amritlal Basu, the worthy manager of the Star Theatre, also expressed his sincere sentiments of grief, and, at the conclusion of the meeting, requested me to write a book and so record the achievements of every actor and actress of the Bengali stage.

Amrit-babu felt that if I wrote an account of the actors and actresses and recorded the dates and the specific circumstances of their work, it would mean recording in some manner, the history of Bengali theatre. Amrit-babu's request was that the book should contain detailed accounts of the actors and actresses, both living and dead. But I have not dared to take up a work of this nature. Even if I were to write about those who are my students and those with whom I have worked, it is possible that in praising one, another will be hurt; perhaps, because of a lapse of memory, the events of long ago may not be recounted as they had taken place in reality. And then, the present situation of actors and actresses is not so respectable in the eyes of society, that the average person, other than those readers who love the theatre, will find it of any value. Yet another obstacle is that my acting life is so intimately connected with theirs, that in many places I will be obliged to speak of my own life. This is no ordinary obstacle: of all the difficult things in this world, the most difficult task is to speak about oneself. Often, genuine modesty is considered to be an affectation, an exact description thought to be an exaggeration, and the whole an attempt to propagate the self; it is possible that the reader may be left with such an

This essay was written by Girishchandra Ghosh as a preface to Binodini's book *My Story*. It was not included in the first edition by Binodini for reasons stated in her preface. However, after Girishchandra's death Binodini included it in the second edition (or reprint) of her book, in 1913 (BS 1320).

impression. There are various reasons for such a possibility: sometimes, one cannot see one's faults and sometimes one may speak of one's faults as though pleading in a legal case, like a lawyer admitting the faults of his client before the judge.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, what purpose do the inconsequential effects of an insignificant life serve? I have been absorbed so far in such thoughts, but Amrit-babu does not hesitate to repeat his request from time to time.

Around this time, Srimati Binodini Dasi, the famous actress of earlier times, wrote an account of her own life and requested me to write a foreword to her book. All those who have heard of the play *Chaitanya-Lila* will be aware of Binodini's name. It is not the theatre-lover alone who knows of *Chaitanya-Lila*; there is a very special reason why *Chaitanya-Lila* is known to many sadhus and holy men. It was in order to redeem the fallen ones of the theatre world, that Patitpaban Bhagwan Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansadeb in the guise of witnessing a performance sanctified the theatre with his presence. It was Binodini who played the role of Chaitanya in *Chaitanya-Lila*.

A long time ago I had told Binodini, it will be most fruitful for you if you put down in writing the story of your life; and if, on the basis of these events, you were to redefine the course of your future life. Reminding me of these very words, Binodini quite demanded of me that I write a preface to the story of her life. I was hesitant for several reasons. I explained to Binodini: It is true that you are asking me to write a preface in order to have it printed in your book; but of what use will that be? You have said that your purpose has been to express the anguish of your heart: but have you found any one who, hurt by the ways of world, is anxious to make known the anguish of the heart? 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. The world-famous novelist, Dickens, concealed his name and wrote about his own life in the form of fiction.<sup>39</sup> Many have been obliged to write their autobiographies in the form of conversations with their friends, and others as letters to their sons, because even the most superior person will be afraid to write his autobiography for fear of ridicule. If I am to write a preface to Binodini's autobiography, what sort of excuse can I offer the

common reader? As much as I did not want to write a preface fearing the reasons I would have to give for doing so, Binodini would not leave me alone.

But suddenly, I realised that there were great lessons to be learnt from the humble life of this ordinary woman! People remark to each other—this one is lowly, that one is despicable, but Patitpaban does not despise them; he grants the fallen a place at his blessed feet. Binodini's life offers a living proof. After a lifetime of austerity and *sadhana*, where many fail to obtain the grace of SriSriParamhansadeb, Binodini was successful. Whosoever's heart has been touched even partially by this Mahapurush has been overwhelmed and has felt that God always stays even with the lowliest of the low, ready to grant refuge at the least opportunity. There is not a sinner in this world whom God has abandoned. If Binodini's lifestory can impart this construction to society, then Binodini's life has not been in vain. Reading this autobiography will destroy the pride of the zealous devotee, the righteous will embrace humility and the sinner will be given new hope.

Those who are unfortunate like Binodini and having no option take up a disgusting path for their livelihood, those who have been seduced by the honeyed words of the licentious, they too, will be hopeful that if, like Binodini, they too can commit themselves to the theatre with body and soul, they can expend their despicable birth into the service of society. Those who are actresses will understand the kind of dedication to one's roles that is necessary to earn the praise of the masses. Thinking thus, I have agreed to write this preface. If that be a fault, then I hope that like many other faults of mine, this too will be forgiven.

It would have been wonderful if this little autobiography of Binodini's had been written as an unbroken composition; instead of which, as it is apparent on a reading, it has been written under different circumstances and at different times. Inspired by her desire to write about her innermost feelings, Binodini has sought our sympathy; but it may be observed that at times there is a bitter critique of society. There were many different roles that Binodini had played—each one of those performances was splendid. She has described how she had prepared for these roles, but the description is somewhat poetic. The kind of effort required for such work, the rigorous practice, the necessary control over voice and

gestures—all these points have not been described adequately as part of a training; rather, it has been the story of one's self. The conventions according to which such conditions are kept concealed in an autobiography have been violated. I will try and give the reader, as best as I can remember, an impression of her major roles and performances.

Binodini has quite rightly said that she had special skills in dressing up in a guise most suitable to her role. An example will suffice to give some proof of this. Binodini played the role of Gopa in the play *Buddhadeb*.<sup>40</sup> One day, the great devotee, the late Balam Basu, went to see the play.<sup>41</sup> After witnessing the first act, he suddenly expressed a desire to go to the greenroom. I did not enquire why, and at a time when the concert was playing, I took him backstage. He looked around and came away while the concert was still playing. He said later that when he first saw Gopa on stage he wondered, from where the theatre-wallahs had got such a remarkable beauty. And he had gone backstage to see the beauty. When he saw her in the greenroom, he had felt that she was not such a beauty as she had appeared on stage, but she was beautiful nevertheless. Then later, one day, when he happened to see her without her make-up, he found it difficult to believe at first that this was the very woman who had played Gopa. He was quite in ecstasies about the costume and the make-up. Dressing up is a major component of acting and Binodini was specially talented in this sphere. In her numerous roles, Binodini was capable of transforming herself to the extent that having seen her in one role, the audience would never realise that it was she who appeared in another.

Actors and actresses should take special care with their make-up and costumes.<sup>42</sup> Sometimes, on viewing one's made-up face before the mirror, the bhava particular to that role manifests itself in the mind of the performer. The mirror is no mean teacher to an actor. The actor or actress who makes up and practices before a mirror the gestures relevant to the part earns the praise of many. However, practice of this kind is very laborious. To practice trained gestures as if they were natural and to reproduce them at will, requires both intelligence and labour. Binodini never begrudged this labour and intellection. Binodini does not quite remember, that it was at the National Theatre and not the Bengal, that she played seven roles in *Meghnad {Badh}*.<sup>43</sup> However that

may be, all seven roles were played beautifully. It is very difficult for one person to play seven roles, and, to be able to play two opposing roles in the same play is not for those with average powers of acting.<sup>44</sup> But above and beyond all this, is the special acting prowess required to achieve excellence in a particular role. Excellence is not achieved easily. After first scrutinising one part in minute detail, one has to imagine what form that role might take and to conceptualise in the manner of an artist, what sort of changes in costume might help one acquire that imagined form.

Special attention has to be paid to the kind of gestures and movements that will take place during the flow of action at the time of performance and to ensure that these movements and gestures are continued in synchrony upto the very end. A break in concentration, whether it be while delivering one's own lines or while one is listening to a co-actor, inevitably means a break in the spirit of the performance. A great many of the spectators who came to the theatre in Binodini's time were capable of noting these particularities, and this was also the time when there was sharp criticism of the plays staged. For example, the criticism of *Palashir Juddho* (Battle of Palashi) in the *Sadbaroni* went as follows: "The actors of the National Theatre are all good readers. The person who played Clive also knows stage movements." This little bit may be taken as some kind of appreciation. Then followed such a strong attack on *Sirajuddaullah*, that just as the real Sirajuddaullah had abandoned the battlefields of Palashi, so too had the actor playing Sirajuddaullah been eager to abandon his own role in the wake of such severe criticism. Greatly hurt, he had said, "There's no point in my playing a Nawab anymore!"

However, the critics of those days were as generous in showering the highest praise as they were adept in severe criticism. These critics were the leading figures in contemporary Bangla literature and Binodini received their warm praise in the many roles she played. The role of Sati played by Binodini in *Daksha yajna*, was, from the start to the finish, an indication of her capabilities. There's a line in the play which requires special acting skills: when Sati asks, "Mother, what is marriage?" the very same actress will go on to discuss matters of yoga with Mahadev in the following act. It seems like such an affectation to have an adult, a woman as old as she is, ask, "Mother, what does marriage

mean?" If the actress cannot present the appearance of a young girl through her apparel and her bearing, then she will appear ridiculous in the eyes of the audience. But when Binodini performed, it seemed as if a girl innocent in the ways of the world, absorbed in contemplation and enraptured by Digambar was asking her mother, "Mother, what is marriage?"<sup>45</sup>

In the following act, she who is the compassionate mother of the universe, the source of all life, enquires most anxiously:

Tell me Lord,  
Why did you say  
'Blessed is Kaliyug?  
The wretched beings whose life  
Depends on food  
Are all prone to sin.  
The earth is stricken  
By disease and sorrow;  
Lost is humanity  
In this terrible sea.  
Vishwanath, Why did you say,  
'Blessed is Kaliyug?'

Binodini's performance reflected that this was the mother of the universe in her guise as a *yogini* asking her husband, the Supreme Yogi . . . Then this spirited and powerful being takes leave of Mahadev and counsels her mother:

I have heard that the fruits of the yajna  
Lie in the prosperity of our subjects.  
But Prajapati, my father,  
How may the subjects be protected?  
If the woman is to endure insults to her husband,  
Why should the man want a home?  
Prajapati's daughter am I,  
Why should I bear, dear mother  
The slandering of my husband?

When these lines were sung, it seemed as if the fire of *sattitva* was being manifested.<sup>46</sup> The initial respect for the father at the place of the *yajna*, and at the same time, the determined speech expressing Sati's unswerving support for her respected husband, the subsequent anguish of her heart

at the censure of her husband and finally, the giving up of her own life—all these different stages were portrayed with superb control.

In *Buddhadeb*, she is the maddened Gopa, bereft of her husband, addressing Chandak thus:<sup>47</sup>

Give me, Chandak, as my right,  
My husband's garments.  
On the throne shall I place them,  
In solitude shall I worship them  
Every day.

The manner in which she begged for her husband's clothing as she says these lines was quite incomparable. Her half-mad appearance as she eagerly draws her husband's clothes to her heart, is still alive before my eyes. She who would appear as beautiful as an *apsara* in the earlier act, appeared in this scene as wan as a shrivelled lotus. Edwin Arnold Saheb (author of *Light of Asia*) had praised this rendering of Gopa and had spoken highly of the Bengali stage in his book entitled *Travels in the East*.<sup>48</sup> He had realised in his observations of the theatre that the Hindu was spiritually advanced; otherwise, the Hindu audience would not have watched with attention the performance of a philosophical play such as *Buddha charitra*. It is a matter of some pride that the stage could provide to foreign eyes such an insight into the Hindu heart and mind. Even the greatest detractor of the stage will have to acknowledge this.

It has been said that in all her roles, Binodini earned the praise of the public, but her life was fulfilled as Chaitanya in *Chaitanya-Lila*. In this role, Binodini's performance was throughout one that would fill with bliss the mind of the devotee. Her performance of the boy Gourango, excitable and lively, would inspire *vatsalya rasa* in the devotee. In the scene featuring Dandi Darshan, the spectators would be astounded at [the performance of] the youth maddened with love of Radha. The manifestation of Gourango: 'Krishna within and Radha without', the male (*prakriti*) was intertwined in the same being and the bhava specific to male nature (*purusha prakriti*) used to be manifested in Binodini. When Binodini lost consciousness, crying, "Where is Krishna, O where is he?" one glimpsed a woman in the throes of separation. And when she was Lord Chaitanya gratifying his devotees, Binodini could bring into her role the bhava of

*Purushottam*. Watching her perform many of the believers in the audience were so enraptured that they desired to take the dust of Binodini's feet. The Paramhansadeb went to see this performance. The presence of Paramhansadeb was proof enough that Hari himself appears wherever His name is chanted. None was deprived of his blessings. We are all fallen, but the group of the fallen began to believe that Patitpaban, the Redeemer of the fallen, is merciful towards the fallen. No doubts crossed their mind, and therefore their sinful existence was blessed indeed. Binodini was extremely blessed: Paramhansadeb touched her with his lotus hands and had said in his blessed words, 'May your *chaitanya*, your consciousness, be awakened!' Many ascetics residing in caves and in the mountains are desirous of such a blessing. The sadhana that made Binodini's fate take on such a favourable turn, is precisely the kind of dedication that the actor has to exhibit if he wishes to prepare himself for acting. Binodini succeeded by keeping herself completely immersed, body and soul, in thoughts of Mahapurush.<sup>49</sup> Any person, whatsoever be his situation, if he but contemplate this grand scene will gradually move towards the path of salvation and will eventually gain liberation. Binodini's contemplation of Gourango, day and night, from morning to evening, yielded fruit.

Binodini revealed the same kind of expertise as Fati in a farce like *Buro Shaliker Gharey Ro*, as Bilasini Karforma in *Bibah Bibhrat*, the housewife in *Chorer Upor Bantpari* and in a light role such as that of Kanchan in *Sadhabar Ekadoshi*, as she did in a SERIOUS PART. Binodini was the heroine of plays both with happy and sad endings, farces, *panchbrangs*, *nakshas* and so on. All the heroines she enacted were unique, independent of each other and worthy of praise. Those who go to see *Kapalkundala* these days believe that it is Motibibi who is the heroine; but those who have seen Binodini perform, have surely felt that the heroine of *Kapalkundala* is in fact Kapalkundala and not Motibibi. Not having been raised amidst love and affection, Kapalkundala is of a nature where despite Nabakumar's efforts she cannot respond to his love. Of course, like any other woman she did her housework, but as soon as she entered the forest to get medicinal herbs for her sister-in-law's husband—like a caged bird which turns into a creature of the wild the moment it is out of the cage—so too Binodini playing Kapalkundala, remembers her earlier existence the

moment she enters the forest and becomes the Kapalkundala of the woods. This transformation was effected most beautifully by Binodini. There is a similar transformation in *Hirar Phool* (The Diamond Flower). Contemporary performances would make the spectator feel that Rati is the heroine of this geetnatya, but to someone who has seen Binodini in this piece, it would appear that the author himself made 'Hirar Phool' and not Rati the heroine.<sup>50</sup>

I have often been Binodini's co-actor. I used to play Pashupati in *Mrinalini* and Binod played Manorama. There were many other plays where we played opposite each other as the main characters, but if I were to narrate all, this essay would be inordinately long, so I shall speak only of Manorama. I mention only Manorama, because in every performance [of Binodini's] I have seen the very soul of the girl and the mature woman of the heroine created by that prince among littérateurs, Bankim-babu. It was the very same person who, in a moment, had turned herself from the powerful and wise counselling wife into the love-lorn young girl as she asked, "Pashupati, why do you cry?" When she is conversing with Hemchandra, she is the affectionate sister, sympathising with a brother's sorrows. The next moment she's run off 'to watch the ducks in the pond!' Such superb acting in these sudden transitions! I do not know exactly what Bankim-babu said when he came to the Bengal Theatre,<sup>51</sup> but whoever saw Manorama on stage, had to acknowledge that here indeed was the Manorama of *Mrinalini*. Witnessing her *balika bhava*, a member of the audience felt that it was really a little girl who was playing that role. This transformation from one bhava to another, reflecting Binodini's excellence in acting, calls forth the highest praise even for a first-rate actress. Binodini unanimously received such supreme praise from the audience. Binodini's build was also appropriate for all kinds of roles: whether a young man or woman, a little girl or boy, a queen or a character such as Fati, she was worthy of them all. If the Bengali stage had been in a more favourable situation, then Binodini's account of her acting life would have undoubtedly been held in high regard. Yet, one may dare to say this much: that if Bengali theatre is to endure, this little lifestory of Binodini's will be eagerly sought after and read.

Binodini has spoken of her childhood: I do not know anything about that part of her life. I first met her at Bhubanmohan Neogi's, by the Ganga. Binodini was then a girl. Binodini has spoken truly: at that time the dresser had to use the same methods that one uses to 'dress up' a boy as a heroine in a jatra; but observing her eagerness to learn and her extreme intelligence, I had realised that Binod would become the most important actress of the stage. However, I had left theatre for a while after that initial meeting and Binodini had in the meantime joined the Bengal Theatre. I had no connections with theatre when, following Binodini's appearance at the Bengal, the Great National was also obliged to recruit women as actresses and became famous with the staging, with much fanfare, of *Sati ki Kalankini* by Madanmohan Burman.

I do not personally know about the travels to many places that Binodini has described in her book. I know a good bit about Binodini's life after I rejoined the theatre with the late Kedarnath Choudhury. From that time onwards upto her retirement, there is much about Binodini that I am personally familiar with. Binodini may have heard from Sarat-babu or Kedar-babu or someone else that I had begged her from Sarat-babu.<sup>52</sup> This incident may have been invented to add to Binodini's fame; but after Binodini came to our theatre, her mother was unable to get, despite repeated reminders, the month's pay that was due to her from the Bengal Theatre. In fact, the proprietors were angry at Binodini's leaving their theatre. Thereafter things went none too smoothly at our theatre and we performed only intermittently. It was after the late Pratapchand Johuree took over the proprietorship of the theatre that I first joined the stage as a salaried employee, and it was only then that Binodini specifically came under my tutelage. In her lifestory, Binodini has expressed profound gratitude to the late Saratchandra Ghosh as her teacher and has also spoken of my teaching with the greatest of respect, but I have no hesitation in saying that in the theatre world, Binodini's excellence owes more to her own talent than to my teaching.

I have already said that Binodini has written a bitter critique of society in her book. I have heard from Binodini that she had a daughter and that she, Binodini, greatly desired that the girl receive an education. However, because her daughter was considered to be from an inferior lineage,

no school would admit her.<sup>53</sup> Binodini had requested those who she had thought of as her friends to help her; but I am told that not only did they not help her, they even created obstacles in the way of her daughter's admission. This is the reason behind Binodini's bitter critique. Still, it would have been better if she had not brought this up in her own lifestory in such a harsh manner. Because of this bitterness, the reader who goes through this lifestory will forget to give it the sympathy that has been requested of him at the beginning of the book.

There are many instances of compositional skill and a wealth of expression in this little lifestory. As to how it will be received by the public, I cannot say; but [as I read it] many incidents interwoven with joy and sorrow awakened in my memory, as if in a lost dream.

In conclusion, it is my submission to the public, that if anyone would wish to know the inner history of the Bengali stage, he or she will learn much about the subject from this book. And they will also realise, if they so desire, that the lives of actors and actresses, filled with joys and sorrows, are spent seeking the grace of the public, and it is for the pleasure of the public that their lives are dedicated. With such stipulations may these few words of a humble lifestory be placed before the public. The sympathetic reader who acknowledges this demand will look upon with mercy at these first efforts by a supplicant actress in narrating her career on stage.

\* \* \*

### *Binodini Dasi and the masculine generativity myth*

In the introduction to *My Life as an Actress* Binodini makes use of a particularly significant metaphor to express why she felt obliged to write about the past, about the theatre of her times:

My feeble memories seem to drag me to the dream world of another age in the past. I would like to recount properly all that had taken place in that age. . . They are simple truths, knowing which the readers and spectators of today, will realize what kind of mud lying in the bottom of the ponds they used—they who found the theatre in this land—to fashion living, speaking dolls. And how these creations, fashioned by their hands, moved about on the stage, how they spoke and gave pleasure to the spectators.

The lotus in the mud (*pankaj-pank*) is perhaps the most con-

sistently used metaphor for talented or outstanding women from a socially devalued environment. Binodini herself was familiar with the story of Pygmalion, having played in adaptations of the theme in plays such as *Mohini Protima*. It is finally in the metaphor of the 'protima' that the emblematic lotus fuses into the archetypes of the statue-turned-woman.

'Protima' is the image of the deity, moulded of clay, into which life is breathed by the image maker himself. Where it is distinct from the animated statue or automata in nineteenth-century Europe,<sup>54</sup> is in the continuum of an interflow between maker-deity-worshipper. The subtext of the public theatre, particularly in its founding years of coming to terms with the spectacling of women, inheres in this continuum. It informs the more explicit debate of instruction versus entertainment, acquiring almost a formulaic content in Binodini's relentless questioning of 'giving pleasure to the spectators' or 'imprinting devbhava in their minds', and yet, finding her own self denied of grace.

Most histories of the theatre and biographies of Girishchandra or other theatre personalities, situate Binodini (and other fellow actresses) solely in the role of a pupil who is moulded by the guru to have become the star she did. But the relationship between them, as in the case of a host of other actor/ director/ playwright, continuing in not very dissimilar ways upto the present time, was more complex than that of mentor and student. There was Girish's own struggle with dharma and the question of faith;<sup>55</sup> the demands of his own managerial role; his sense of guilt regarding his family life and finally, his undoubted commitment to theatre. This last meant that he was exposed and vulnerable both to the incessant social pressures on the newly found theatre world as well as the internal politicking within that world.

On the stage, Binodini was cast most frequently opposite Girishchandra and other older men like Amrital Basu. During this period of co-starring, Binodini was in her late teens and early twenties while Girish, who was at least nineteen years her senior, was in his forties and fifties. The awkwardness of having the guru play the stage lover was noted by her contemporaries: as in Amrital's admission to Binodini about his initial embarrassment in doing the love scenes with her (*My Story*, p. 98); but ultimately it was 'superior acting' which ruled out such embarrassments.

The professional theatres set in motion a new equation of social relationships: between father/husband-less young girls and women; their male protectors and businessmen; the male and female spectator; and the multiple levels of interaction between dharma-guru/shiksha-guru, stage-lovers, often real-life lovers, and



the girls-in-training. If we do not take into account the ramifications of these relationships, we may not begin to understand the subsequent and, to many later historians, curious, affinity between the muth, the swamijis and the outcast woman.

The 'fashioning' of these 'living, speaking dolls' is best considered by referring to some of Girishchandra's essays, selected from the considerable body of writing he has left behind. Specifically, to relate the Professor Higgins/flower-girl trope and its practice in the theatre world to the debate around women's education (*streesbiksha*) in nineteenth-century colonial Bengal. The essays emerge from the contradictions in Girishchandra's own position: his belief in the artist's (ungendered) role in society; his acknowledgement of the artist's skill; and at the same time, his inability to translate the nati's artistic worth or talent into self-worth without taking recourse to dharma and a discourse of redemption.

In the explicitly polemical 'Abhinetrir Samalochona' (Criticising the Actress) (1900)<sup>56</sup> cited earlier, Girishchandra formulates his defence of the public theatre as a 'pure' institution by attacking instead, the jaundiced eye of the beholder. The essay was written in response to a headmaster who had condemned the 'wicked [seductive] glances' of actresses. Charging the 'headmaster' (quotes in the original) with sexism, Girish holds that one has to be truly educated in order to appreciate the sweetness and beauty (*madhuri*) of the performance of the 'superior actresses', i.e. those who excel in their roles. An essay on 'Nritya' (Dance) (1900)<sup>57</sup> offers a similar argument, collapsing in the process, the usual distinction between the respectable housewife (*kulastree*) and the prostitute-actress (*barangana*). In both these essays the emphasis is equally on the talent of the actress (who thus transcends her immoral status as prostitute), as it is on the expectations of the spectator and *his* male gaze which mistakenly reads the exigencies of performance as her 'wicked glance'. In the chapter called 'The Last Border', Binodini falls back on a similar argument:

Let me add one thing more: We are not all the same: there's a sort of life which engulfs one in darkness and in ignorance, that sort of life moves on in an inanimate kind of fashion, like a bit of inanimate matter. And, there is a kind of life which illuminates [others] from the distance; but being fallen, one is deprived of society, relations, friends and companions. None but a fellow sufferer will understand how painful and tortured this life is. (*My Story*, p. 105)

However, a later essay by Girishchandra on 'Streesbiksha' or Women's Education (1911), published under the rubric of 'social essay' in the theatre magazine *Natya-mandir* offers a very different perspective.<sup>58</sup> The essay is marked by the ambivalence that characterises Girishchandra's response to Binodini and to the other actresses he trained for his theatre. In advocating a judiciously selected acceptance of western concepts of the 'independent woman', the essay moves out to some extent, from the familiar discourse of the educated male seeking to preserve the 'sanctity' of the Hindu woman as she is 'naturally' formed by the shastric traditions of *sanatan dharma*, in contrast to the corrupting influences of Western education to which the educated man has succumbed.<sup>59</sup> The essay celebrates Bengali womanhood as an intelligent, caring and competent grihalakshmi. Girish has an additional point: shastric learning, which is superior to western education, not only makes the woman a better wife but also a suitable mother, since the burden of real education actually rests on the mother. This is closer to a liberal version of the relevance of women's education whose aim is to produce better citizens. Clearly, the actress—whose motherhood has no social sanction—has no place in this category of womanhood. This 'natural shastric learning' is somewhat at odds with the ideological force of the educational objective of the national theatre or the latter's own perceived affiliations with dharma.

The informal but apparently sustained and serious reading and discussion sessions that Binodini refers to (*My Story*, p. 78) have therefore to be juxtaposed against the sentiments expressed in these essays and their ideological contracts with the interpretations of roles for performance. Firstly, the informal sessions within the enclave of the theatre even with an intelligent and sensitive actress, could never really serve as a model for similar exchanges, however unequal, outside the theatre world. Secondly, the discerning core among the bhadrakok who founded the theatre realised that Binodini (and other talented girls/women) who came to the theatre *needed* to understand her role and something of its socio-cultural context if she were to perform well. Whereas, *streejati* in general, had to perform their repertoire of roles defined by the shastras, essentially for an 'audience' bound by kinship ties, interacting within the household. The actress would bring alive, for other similarly educated men, the reality of another place and time, or altogether another culture—she was the medium, the conduit, for representations of some otherwise inaccessible worlds. Thus, aesthetic ideals and business returns were both vested in her acting skills. Thirdly, the actress was allowed, even

encouraged to express herself, provided it was within the parameters laid out by her spokesmen. In the case of Girishchandra, he encouraged the publication of Binodini's poems as well as those of Tarasundari Dasi, and the musical notations of the singer-actresses Jadumoni and Narayani; this at a time when women from the theatre world would have had no public forum of expression other than through their stage performances. Binodini's own professional excellence could therefore only be channelled towards the expression of dharma on the stage and she could be allowed to draw consolation from her affective powers as a performer. As a person, she was still a fallen woman who had to repent before she could redeem her self-worth.

From the point of view of these various constrictions, Binodini's 'transgressions' in *My Story* were many. The most serious one was to 'lapse' into expressing her sense of despair stemming from her lack of faith, her personal losses, and exposing the story of the intrigue and pettiness that lay behind the glamour of the stage. Girishchandra's critique of Binodini's *My Story* as a text which has shifted from the 'professional to the personal' underscores more than anything else, the impossible nature of the Pygmalion role that he, along with a few other committed colleagues, had undertaken.

Educating the *nati* within the locus of the theatre world was altogether a very different project from the debates on *street-shiksha*. An appraisal of this education, which was based more on oral instruction and listening than book-learning, requires that we do away with rigid categories of formal and informal, indigenous and western (colonial). The 'Notes on the Bengali Public Theatre' suggest the mix-and-match mode of functioning that the public theatre was obliged to *practise* in order to survive. Therefore, any project aimed at representing Binodini has to be constructed within the frame of her proscenium theatre as much as it has to take into account the mediating person of the guru and *his* education trajectories.

Despite the impressive number of sabhas and samajes organised around the cause of female education<sup>60</sup> most efforts at 'home education' were confined to the homes of the middle and upper classes. Consider the anomaly of the actress who has perhaps only exposure to the puranic themes (possibly through other traditional performance forms), then acting in plays written by some of the most outstanding littérateurs and scholars of the time. The list could start with Pandit Ramnarayan Tarkaratna who wrote the first commissioned play for the liberal elite, through Michael Madhusudan, Dinabandhu Mitra and Bankimchandra

(Dinabandhu was an inspecting postmaster and Bankimchandra a deputy magistrate) and Jyotirindranath Tagore, the first dramatist from the house of Tagore.

Some years of schooling at a free school in the neighbourhood was more or less all the formal education that Binodini had received. Part of the challenge lay precisely in translating text into performance. Binodini speaks of the difficult language of *Chaitanya-Lila*, Part II and of the dramatised version of Madhusudan's *Meghnad Badh Kavya*:

At the Bengal Theatre, the great poet Michael Madhusudan's immortal poem, *Meghnad Badh*, was then being adapted into a play and preparations were on for staging it. . . 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. You will easily comprehend how extremely difficult it was for uneducated or half-educated women like us to master this play. (*My Life*, p. 151)

It is significant that both the male theatre people as well as the women playing assorted parts (male and female) relied primarily on speech, listening, memorising, speaking and singing. From Girishchandra to Apareshchandra Mukhopadhyay was followed the tradition of dictating their plays and adaptations to their respective scribes. Written scripts were used for performances, but plays would often be published many years after they were produced for fear of a rival company taking over a successful play. The public theatre's dependence on the prompter is also part of this practice of 'listening': Girishchandra held that it had been possible to stage such a variety of plays in the early years of the 'public theatre' only because of the presence of the prompter.<sup>61</sup> Educating the actress meant in effect that 'literature' had first to be made suitable for the stage: the *Gairish-chhanda* or the Girish-metre was apparently created by the playwright to make it easier for the actresses to deliver their lines.<sup>62</sup>

The dichotomy between male theatre people and actresses such as Binodini operates at two levels: lack of a shared educational background between the two on the one hand, and on the other, a shared class background amongst the former. Therefore, the wonder of the little girl who finds herself acting in a play (*Prakrita Bandhu*) where the hero is named after the playwright's friend, who is also starring in the same piece. (*My Life*, p. 134) The blurring of lines between script and play on the one hand, and the actual interpersonal relationships between writer, actors

and invented 'characters' created, in part, the magic of Binodini's theatre world.

The most sympathetic of her biographers have always discerned in Binodini besides her obvious talent, a 'refined sensibility' that marks her out from her less celebrated contemporaries. That refinement has often been represented as gentility ('natural' bhadramahila qualities in one of a-bhadra origins) reinforced by the posed sepia prints of the actress reproduced at the slightest pretext in any printed reference to theatre, Calcutta or the nineteenth-century demi-monde. In a much needed corrective to this construction, Gayatri Spivak examines Binodini's sense of self in her writing as it was constructed through the pastiche of a western education that came to her via Girishchandra's own extensive and largely self-taught interaction with English literature.<sup>63</sup> However, Spivak's use of selected passages from Binodini's writings (including some lines of her poetry) in an essay which is about the 'burden of English' in colonial and post-colonial India, shifts the whole problematic. It presents to the reader a Binodini almost entirely constructed out of this twice-removed-from-reality English. To take one instance, a particular kind of romantic sensibility in Binodini's relationship with nature or her representation of that relationship is ultimately traced to English literature; her poems mentioned for their auto-eroticism. Deconstructing Binodini, the 'inherently refined bhadramahila' leads Spivak to situate Binodini's subjectivity completely within a derived colonial discourse. If 'Elenter' ('Ellentarry' in Spivak) was reproduced in Binodini's autobiography as evidence of her knowledge of the English stage,<sup>64</sup> the many more numerous references to and internalisations of the heroic and the puranic plays, the bhakti plays and the adaptations of Bankimchandra's novels suggest that they have equally informed her consciousness and have therefore to be ranged alongside, not against, the 'Elenter' bit.

It appears therefore that the education of the actress comprised several strands and Binodini's painstaking description of her tutorials with her mentors must be read as *one* of these strands. The 'education' entailed in her preparation for Chaitanya's role is of a wholly different kind, as is the more pervasive belief shared by many actresses, that the opportunity to act the part of 'superior characters' (*unnata charitra*) is theatre's offering of redemption offered to sinful women.<sup>65</sup> In all such modes and models of instruction, the desired feeling was that of elevation, of moving out from one's immediate (sinful) self into a creature either capable of communing with god, or through the power of their acting, actually sharing the sentiments of a Bankimchandra nayika.

In her various accounts of playing Manorama in *Mrinalini*, or Tilottama and Ayesha in *Durgeshnandini*, Binodini shifts the matter of 'education' to the subjectivity of the actress herself. It is bhava which will allow her to be temperamentally true to the fluctuations in the character/s she is playing. Binodini's use of bhava flows equally from the personal (response to inanimate objects) to the professional (i.e. when she is using it for performance), as much as bhava is initiated by the pedagogical discourse of her mentors—Girishchandra or Ardhendushekhar Mustafi or Sisirkumar Ghosh and Balaram Basu.

Binodini and other actresses both internalised the *instruction* that was offered to them in order to improve their performance and valorised (in juxtaposition) the *formal education* they felt would afford a way of erasing their socially outcast situation. In this, as in many other distinctions between the possible and the probable, she was to be bitterly disappointed. The desire for formal education with the hope that it would make up for the deprivations of childhood or allow for social mobility is often transferred to the children, usually without success. Binodini's semi-respectable status after she left the stage could not ensure her daughter's admission.<sup>66</sup> Another actress, Sukumari Dutta's (Golapsundari) preface to her play *Apurba Sati* (written and produced in 1875) explicitly addressed women readers who are superior to her in education.<sup>67</sup> The play reveals the pressures both from her own class as well as from the *bhadra* class which foils all attempts at using formal education for the purposes of social mobility or even acceptance.

It is perhaps in the weave of the then and now that memories narrate; but the incomplete *My Life as an Actress* is illumined, not shadowed by nostalgia. The bitterness, the despair and the grief of *My Story* has given way in *My Life* to a golden flood of memories. Binodini chooses to recall only the excitement of performance, the adventures of touring and the perils of special effects on stage. Above all, the sense of belonging to a pioneering group of people participating in a historic cultural enterprise. "The world of gaslights and curtain, of people and of applause" continued to draw Binodini to the theatre, despite the many changes she perceived in that world which was once hers.

According to an account left behind by an actor of the next generation, Ahindra Choudhury (1895–1974), Binodini was a regular theatre-goer at the time she wrote for *Roop o Rang*. She was then in her early sixties.

She was quite old, but she had not lost her interest in coming to the theatre. If it was a new play, she'd certainly come. . . *Karnarjun* [Karna-Arjun] alone she must have seen countless times. She had leucoderma then; she'd wear a chaddar. She'd come and sit by the wings, and immediately, all our girls, wherever they happened to be, would come running to her. They'd place a stool for her to sit on and would surround her, calling her 'Didima'. She would speak very little. Everyone in the theatre respected her greatly. . . she had grandchildren at home. I've heard that there was always some puja or the other in her home; but she just had to come to the theatre.<sup>68</sup>

Old age can be the most terrifying experience of all, especially for someone who had been as famous and beautiful and sought after as Binodini had been before her retirement. For a profession which depended greatly on physical charms and which always sought youthful nayikas, retiring from the stage (enforced or otherwise) was a fall to obscurity and wretchedness. Many other actresses of the public stage faced a poverty-stricken and lonely existence: Sukumari, Kusumkumari—the list is unending. The old actress haunting the theatre, seated by the wings, the recipient of a little sympathy from those who remember her days of glory and otherwise eliciting only curiosity, figures in many biographical sketches and in fictional representations.<sup>69</sup> In other instances, there was an exit from the metropolis: Elokeshi spent her last years in Benaras, Niharbala went away to the Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry, and Tarasundari founded her own retreat in Bhubaneswar.

From the various accounts we can piece together of her later years, we know that Binodini continued to maintain some contact with the theatre world even during her long years of seclusion as a co-wife. After the death of her hridayebata, Binodini lived a fairly lonely though not isolated life. (According to Prativa Devi, Binodini chose to come away from her Paikpara home after the death of Saratchandra Sinha; she was not thrown out of hia home.) She had adopted a daughter (called Sarojini), whose descendants<sup>70</sup> continued to live in the house on Rajabagan Street.

Tarasundari Dasi, whom Binodini had introduced to the stage and who also became a famous actress, was a neighbour and a friend of hers. The actor Haridhon Mukherjee recalls a meeting with Tarasundari in the 1920s:

Tarasundari lived in the Rajabagan area, between the Star Theatre and Rupbani Cinema Hall. Two houses away from her, lived Binodini. Binodini had then long retired from her acting life. She was engaged in religious activities. She went to bathe in the Ganga, very early in the morning. I've seen her at those times. Her skin had turned white

with leucoderma. There was a heavenly radiance on her face. She had a *raib*, which she took out on the occasion of the Rath festival. The rath was drawn through the Star Lane. She herself distributed sweets and fried tidbits to the little boys.<sup>71</sup>

In addition, there are accounts of ritual puja and other religious activities as part of Binodini's later life. There are other records of companionable visits to the Ramakrishna muth with Tarasundari, who had become a disciple of Swami Brahmananda. In Binodini's and other theatre people's attraction to the muth, spiritual yearnings cannot be separated from a desire for social acceptance. In the early decades, the muth comprised men who had renounced sansar and were themselves living under some social pressure on account of their newly formed organised religion. The monks were to act as father figures to many actresses, as well as actors.

There are still some who remember seeing an old Binodini, bare-bodied and in a white sari, carrying a little vessel, on her daily trip to fetch milk from a nearby cowshed.<sup>72</sup> Tarasundari's daughter remembers an affectionate woman who would seat her in her lap and teach her songs of Rajanikanta. Her tenants recall her singing and playing the organ.<sup>73</sup> That Binodini never became a complete recluse is suggested by the rather amusing appellation given her by the boys of the locality: she was called '*Dadamoni*' (used in Bangla to refer to a male) in recognition of her organisational skills.<sup>74</sup>

### *An actress's legacy*

Binodini was a Calcuttan and thought of herself as belonging to the city's cultural life, even if her contribution was acknowledged only in the space of the auditorium and in newspaper reviews. Her project for a 'B Theatre' remains unrealised—in a city which prides itself on its theatre history and whose tercentenary was celebrated in 1992 with never-ending references to 'Nati Binodini'.

The city has memorialised its debt to theatre all through this century: in Girish Manch (after Girishchandra Ghosh); Sisir Manch (after Sisir Kumar Bhaduri); Ahindra Manch (after Ahindra Choudhury); most recently, Madhusudan Manch (after Michael Madhusudan Dutt), and even Uttam Manch (after the late cinema idol, Uttam Kumar).<sup>75</sup> For Binodini Dasi, there is now a memorial slab in Bangla which confuses, rather than commemorates her will, the Passion of her life:

In this house lived Binodini Debi (1863–1942), the most outstanding amongst those who in the first phase of the Bengali theatre raised the status of Bengali drama. Her life was an illustrious example of sacrifice for an ideal.

This marble slab is being laid on the tenth anniversary of Chetana Gana Sanskriti.

2 January 1994.

The slab stands out starkly on the walls of a self-contained two-storeyed house in Rajabagan Street, off present day Bidhan Sarani. My enquiries provoked a new two-part split in Binodini's life: I was told that in her 'singing and dancing days' she lived in No. 145; after her retirement she lived in the quieter, eminently more respectable side street where the marble slab has now been put up by a local cultural club.

On Bidhan Sarani, erstwhile Cornwallis Street, is a cluster of tiny partitioned alcoves functioning as shops, and a broken-down staircase, dank and smelly. The number—145—is barely visible at the entrance to the cluster. These premises on Cornwallis Street where Binodini says she grew up are now quite vacant of her.

Unlike another famous actress—Sushilabala Dasi—no elegiac *shokgatha* was composed to mourn Binodini.<sup>76</sup> There was no flood of obituaries nor the release of a special issue, as was the case after Amarendranath Dutta's untimely death.<sup>77</sup> We have no records of a public meeting held in her honour as was organised after the singer-actress Jadumoni's death in 1918. Or, the huge affair organised at the Town Hall after Girishchandra's death, to which no actress was allowed entry. Certainly, there is no record of a benefit night for Binodini, unlike her older colleagues Narayani or Sukumari Dutta. Yet, at the end of the century, Binodini is the most legendary of all actresses.

Binodini Dasi's many talents have been duly celebrated to render her unique; and a selective reading of her life has resulted in her isolation from her actress contemporaries who shared a similar background and many of whom were also stars in their time. Binodini's own accounts have been far more generous to her fellow actors and actresses than most representations of her or of her theatre world would allow. Plots to explain her 'mysterious exit' take recourse to stories of professional jealousy, of other actresses upstaging and even displacing her. Binodini is alleged to have been upset with Girishchandra for the songs he had written for Gangamoni in *Sribatsa-Chinta*. Although Binodini's was the heroine's role in Girishchandra's play, it was Gangamoni's singing part which drew the audience to the play. According to another account, a younger actress, Kironbala (1868–90) was being

groomed by Girishchandra to fill Binodini's place and in all likelihood would have surpassed the latter were it not for her untimely death. Kironbala played Rangini (originally played by Binodini) in *Bellick Bazar* after the latter quit the stage and went on to excel in the title role of Sarala.<sup>78</sup> In the latter phase of her acting career, Binodini played the first Prahlad in *Prahlad charitra* at the Star. The same role was played by Kusumkumari in Rajkrishna Roy's *Prahlad charitra* for the rival Bengal Theatre. Kusumkumari is said to have so eclipsed Binodini's performance by virtue of her superior singing skills that she subsequently became known as 'Prahlad-Kushi'. Productions of *Nati Binodini* foreground this event to suggest a Binodini rapidly losing her exceptional position in the theatre. Given the inevitability of competition and even bitter rivalry between actors or actresses at all times, one may only juxtapose these accounts with the references to her colleagues we gather from her book and from accounts of her life. For, in the case of a cultural icon (such as Nati Binodini) it is necessary to acknowledge both the privileged position occupied by the star as well as the affiliations of social location that she shares with many of her colleagues, many of whom have left behind for us only their names, but many others who we learn had equally illustrious careers. Two very different works have already highlighted the nomenclature of 'Binodini's': Himani Banerji's essay, 'One Woman, Two Women, Without Woman'<sup>79</sup> traces the trajectory of the Bengali stage actress as an anonymous counter in contemporary Bengali theatre alongside Binodini's place in history, while the more conventional fictional-biographical narrative by Sachindranath Bandhopadhyay is called *Natyadeuler Binodini*. The title of the latter suggests the 'generic' function of Binodini's name (and life) and indicates the book's inclusion of all those contemporaries of Binodini/actresses who entertained and amused or provided *'binodon'*.

There is not quite another account by an actress in Bengali which captures the range of Binodini's writing, even to the point of probing the construction of one's own actress self in a socially stigmatised role. Film actresses such as Kananbala have sought, in a carefully excised manner to indicate her struggles in establishing herself in the film industry, while a very slight account by Chandrabati Debi (1909–91) has altogether elided the complex interaction between home and career. Chandrabati's sister, Kankabati Sahu (1899–1939), the first graduate stage actress, (she was billed as 'Kankabati, B.A.') has left behind no record.<sup>80</sup>

A hint of this complex of interpenetrative attributes is present in the actress Keya Chakroberty's (1942–77) title to her unfinished

introduction to Binodini's *Amar Katha*, 'Protima-Kankal-Manush' (literally, Image-Skeleton-Human Being).<sup>81</sup> Perhaps it was Keya Chakroberty's own repertoire of roles (she had briefly played Binodini in Nandikar's *Nati Binodini*) and her passionate involvement with group theatre, that made her aware more than other actresses before her—of the need to excavate Binodini and her co-actresses from obscurity on the one hand and the designs of misrepresentation on the other.

Another actress of our times, one who had truly opened up the stage for women's roles—Tripti Mitra (1925–89)—had felt the need, late in her life, to engage in a dialogue with Binodini, however unresolved the outcome of that dialogue may have been. Tripti Mitra had been working on a play which opens with Binodini appearing in the mirror before a contemporary actress who is making up before a performance.<sup>82</sup>

The exchange of mirrored female gaze is a powerful invocation, suggesting a generational professional solidarity and a critical interrogation of that inheritance. Both these ventures by two of the most powerful actresses of our times could have provided much needed interventions into the provenance of 'Nati Binodini'.

I have read Binodini Dasi's texts as a bitter-sweet remembering of her acting prowess, her ability to be others. And a questioning of the possibility and validity of repentance—of undercutting what she has been on stage and has internalised.

By 'her world' I have meant, the relationship of love and need and the social structures within which it flourished. The theatre company and the *bhadralok* who ran it needed her services—her performance skills; the love and affection and concern shared within the families she made—in childhood, on stage, with her little girl and the man who was like a god-like tree; finally her writing as being shaped and produced out of the destruction of all three.

To what extent is Binodini mired in the narrative of theatre, to the exclusion of the social forces operative in cultural production or in the agenda around the women's question? Although it is generally agreed that by the 1870s the women's question had in fact largely been displaced from the public sphere, the controversy surrounding the Brahmo Marriage Bill (1868–72) or the Age of Consent Bill (1890–92) and, more surprisingly, the Swadeshi movement of 1905–06, which must have been in the recent memory of her readers, appear to have left no trace on her writing. Even the 1857 Uprisings are never

mentioned although much is made of the apparently seditious content of *Neeldarpan* which resulted in the Great National Theatre's inglorious exit from Lucknow. Is this a result of the generally apolitical character of the public theatre—her informal school and home and her formal workplace—or is the absence to be read as the 'typically personal', characteristic of women's writing?

Binodini's life and her story of her life allows us to address and recontextualise *abhiman*. For women in Binodini Dasi's position, *abhiman* should be read not merely as wounded pride, not as whim or feminine pique, but as being intimately bound up with aspirations; in this particular instance, with the professional worth of a star pupil and her response to thwarted ambition. 'Abhiman' encapsulates what have been called 'outlaw emotions' such as rage, obstinacy and protest. (In the twice-narrated childish incident of giving away food to the monkeys may be read subconscious revenge at not being permitted to go to the temple.)

Binodini saw in the new media, the theatre, the possibility of a collaborative art. It was a practice, a path of *sadhana* that would legitimise her talent and labour. She believed it would culminate in artistic control and financial security. In retrospect, none of these aspirations seems to us to be at odds with a modern or a 'nationalist' programme for the theatre. Binodini's own story may strike us as ironic at the end of the century because these make up the missing sequences in the continuous dramatisations of her life and times.

It needs to be reiterated that there is never any reference in Binodini's writings to guilt experienced during her acting years: even the fact of having patron-protectors is accepted, however reluctantly, as part of earning a livelihood. It is 'managed' so that she might continue with her profession. When it is agonised over, it is not because of the perceptions of society, but because of the very tangible restrictions such a relationship imposes on her work as an actress and the possibility of an independent life—of money and fame. But the incidents leading to the creation of the Star Theatre and its aftermath come as a major shock. It is finally made clear to Binodini that she is dispensable in every way; that she can neither move out of the shadow of the fallen woman nor repudiate her own professional honour as the member of a theatre company.

And immediately afterwards, to play women who are torn apart by the passion of their sentiments for husband versus father: literalised most violently in the fragmentation of Sati, the

daughter of Daksha and the wife of Shiv in Girish Ghosh's *Daksha-yajna*. She has consented to being the visible object of patriarchal control. Yet, the internalisation of *sattitva* had to be extreme for its successful manifestation in performance. In the words of a contemporary: "... when Binodini acted as Sati the radiance of her *sattitva* was reincarnated."<sup>83</sup>

My argument is that the Bhakti revival in the 1880s and its representation on stage actually tears Binodini apart. In order to prepare herself for the part of Chaitanya she had first to internalise her 'fallen' status so that she might then be prepared by socially admired devotees (such as Sisirkumar Ghosh) to play the role of the saint. Her trances during performance and the passion of her representation was not for the audience alone—not just to imprint *devbhava* in their minds, but with the hope of doing so in her own.

The Bhakti revival was also crucial in extending the public theatre's audience which now included household women along with their children. As Samik Bandhopadhyay notes, this was good for the box-office; it also created a genre for officially sanctioned theatre that allowed middle-class and lower middle-class women to enter the public theatres as members of the audience. The blessing by Ramakrishna offers hope, in this context of destroyed hopes, but the actual politics of her colleagues and the practice of her life's craft undercuts her belief.

Binodini does not hope to redeem herself by renouncing the stage; she simply cannot continue to perform in a world that practices deception on her, one that she realises is truly make-believe. The 'maya of the theatre' refers as much to the illusion-making nature of theatrical performance, as it does to Binodini's ambivalence about the practice of theatre.

Being able to act the 'superior parts' convincingly or being able to garner the blessings of the worthy is not the same as being accepted as a worthy woman herself, a woman with self-worth. But, finally, when she writes, she has to renounce even the possibility of repentance. Binodini's various responses to Girishchandra's preface and her decision to print the book on her own after the death of her guru, her *hridoydebata* and Ramakrishna, encode a statement: to make public (and explore in print, perhaps for posterity) her cast out status:

Now I am alone on this earth, I have no one. There is only myself, alone. Now my life is empty, bereft of all delights. I have no kith, no kin, no religion, no work, no rationale, no reason for living! I sit looking deathwards in these last years of my life, broken-hearted and

wracked by suffering, bearing the burden of an intolerable pain. (*My Story*, p. 107)

In the Introduction and Afterword to this translation of her texts I have attempted to underline Binodini Dasi's own involvement with theatre and with acting, and, the exigencies of her gender and class in so far as they allowed her to play out to the fullest, the extent of her involvement. The crisis of faith is as true a record as the one we may piece together of the peace of old age, when Binodini donned the plain white sari of the widow, casting off in its visible manifestation the *vanitas* of the theatre world.

Only if we grant to Binodini the worth she granted to her work, may we read the story of the Star Theatre as being double-edged: Binodini is not only the victim of duplicitous behaviour or as she calls it, deception; in her case, she also chose to become Gurmukh Rai's mistress so that the Company as a whole, but she too as an individual actress, would have control over their profession/art. Binodini did see herself as moving out of an employee's role (treated most scurvily, as in the incident of the wages for the time she was sick) to the position of a co-owner of the theatre. In this desire and what seemed to her a possible avenue for more power, control and stability in her professional life, I see an unusual career move, the implications of which are often lost in making Binodini entirely a victim figure. It is not wholly the case that she is totally induced to sacrifice herself; she sees her own interests as being tied up to the theatre project and the plan for owning a theatre as a means of realising her ambitions. It is crucial that in order to 'protect' Binodini, we do not deny her ambitions.

As a writer, Binodini succeeds far too often in making us believe in the artlessness of the "mad black scrawls" and of equating "the pain that runs wild within" her with an apparently spontaneous or equally "wild" expression of that pain. In presenting a *bedonagatha*, Binodini really scripts her own play, privileging her pain in that representation. It would be naive on our part to suppose that the actress who discusses at some length her mastery of *bhava*, is incapable, when it comes to writing about her life to exhibit the same self-conscious craftsmanship.

*Bhava* as it has been traditionally explicated is a highly skilled rendering intended to create a desired aesthetic pleasure in the audience, i.e. even the *vibhatsa* or the horrifying would arouse its proper *rasa* or emotional affect. This changing and even splitting of selves calls for a remarkable degree of training and is not to



be entirely conflated with a mysterious or mystical possession that suddenly overtakes the actress, or something that can happen without preparation. When Binodini has been stripped of everything that she considered precious—the theatre, her last protector, her daughter—she can only live in her writing. Through a transformation of her performance skills into writing. The transformation made possible on stage or effected through acting was unfortunately not a metamorphosis: Binodini could not metamorphose into the roles she played so convincingly.<sup>84</sup>

The innumerable references to her sinfulness and her fallen state appear alongside the insistent refrain of casting herself as an unfortunate woman. A woman who been afflicted and oppressed (by individuals as well as by 'Fate') and whose repentance has not found any response other than in being made more wretched. While acceding therefore, to the discourse of the fallen woman and the repentant mode required of her, Binodini questions throughout *My Story*, by the practice of laying bare a rhetoric of pain, the enormity of the punishment that is visited on her. This is done both through long narrative passages where pain becomes a character—one of many selves, as well as by the stark narration of specific incidents in her life which pinpoint the conditions of her working life and the ideological structures that inform them. As a document this appears closer to an indictment than pleading guilty.

We are left with the suggestion that finally, alongside the tawdriness and the tinsel world of the public theatre—its vulgarity, its song and dance, its pantomimes and choruses of ballet-girls, there existed also the luminous world captured in Binodini's writings. A magic world of possibilities, only partially realised, of changed gender roles; a world not totally exploitative, where the recruited women were not only being recast or moulded to approximate a literary text or an entertaining type. Where both Pykmalion [sic] and Protima grappled, to the strains of an alien culture in a rapidly changing metropolitan context, with questions of cultural and social identity.

Although, in her physical and emotional world, she did participate in that process of constant make-believing that made up the nineteenth-century Bengali stage, it is in these luminous flashes that Binodini Dasi resists objectification. Even such objectification as is inherent in the very words and categories with which we seek to understand her today.

## NOTES

1. See for example 'Unish shataker nagarir nati' by Swapan Ghosh in *Unish Shataker Jaj-mani Prathaye Kaliprasanna Sinha* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1984).
2. Occasional Papers, Institute on Culture & Consciousness in South Asia, University of Chicago, 1993.
3. Swami Prabhananda speaks of "Nati Binodini, dressed as a saheb, wearing a hat and coat", *Sri Ramkrishner Antalila* (Calcutta: Udbodhan Karyalay, 1989), Vol. 1, p. 36. Swami Saradananda says that she was 'specially blessed by Ramakrishna', *Leela Prasange* (10th ed.) (Calcutta: Udbodhan, 1953), Vol. 5, pp. 322-24, 352-53, while in the *Kathamrita* Binodini appears as 'the stage actress, famous by virtue of her own talent and her work, labour'. *Complete Works* (3rd ed.) (Calcutta: 1972), pp. 1330-31. Binodini's autobiography is not mentioned in any of these references.
4. A fairly critical reading offered by the editors of the Bangla reprint of *My Story* has the observation: 'Ramkrishna left this world on . . . 1886; Binodini left the theatre that same year. The connection is merely hinted at and not as the starting point for a teleological reading of Binodini's life, as in other text. *AK*, Introduction, p. 47.
5. Brajendra Kumar Dey, director and pala-writer of Natto Company, for long a leading jatra company in Bengal, unselfconsciously echoes the sentiment: "It's really quite astonishing" he says, "whatever anybody has written about Ramakrishna has proved to be extremely successful". He goes on to cite the different 'Nati Binodinis' staged by various companies and concludes that they were all successes because of Ramakrishna's presence in the productions: "Such is His blessing. It's just enough to get Him there." Conversation between Brajendra Kumar Dey and the author cited in Naliniranjan Chattopadhyay, *Sri Ramakrishna o Banga Rangamanch*, p. 194.
6. Cited in Naliniranjan Chattopadhyay, op. cit.
7. See Introduction to *Amar Katha: Binodini Dasi*, Soumitra Chattopadhyay and Nirmalya Acharya, eds. (Calcutta: Kathashilpa Prakash, 1964). See Appendix II for further publication details of *AK* in Binodini's lifetime and later.
8. The celebration of non-puranic (historical) model couples is also the celebration of conjugality. This is significant in view of my later argument for the ways in which Binodini may be staged.
9. Brajendra Kumar Dey's prefaces to the first and second edition of the published versions of his *Nati Binodini*. (The edition of Dey's *Nati Binodini* used here is the 5th edition (not dated), but certainly published before 1988. It may be noted that the published script of Dey's pala is used as much for reading as it is for performance.) Bina Dasgupta, who made Nati Binodini famous in the jatra

- version, is known as 'Jatralakshmi Bina Dasgupta'; the reference to the goddess of fortune is not gratuitous.
10. *AK*, Introduction, p. 8.
  11. In the preface to his play, Chittaranjan Ghosh also remarks on the 'sudden discovery' of Binodini but does not offer any explanations for the phenomenon of Nati Binodini. Chittaranjan Ghosh, *Nati Binodini* (Calcutta: Auto Print, 1973).
  12. Produced on the occasion of the Bengali new year, April 13, 1991; directed by Dr. Basudev. Personal communication by Rekha Sen, New Delhi, 1994.
  13. The last scene in particular, between Binodini and Girish ends with the word *chaitanya* repeated several times, both in their conversation as well as in the snatches of songs and actual echoes of Ramakrishna's words heard offstage. (Ghosh, *Nati Binodini*, p. 91) See also for instance, the arguments advanced by Naliniranjan Chattopadhyay: 'Even a progressive theatre group such as Nandikar, has accepted in their play this connection [i.e. Ramakrishna's death and Binodini's exit]... they have not been able to dismiss the possibility.' Naliniranjan Chattopadhyay, op. cit., p. 143 (emphasis mine).
  14. A classic tale in this genre is Dakshinaranjan Mitra's 'Lal Kamal and Neel Kamal' in *Thakurmar Jhuli*.
  15. This was not the original Star that Binodini had helped build; see 'Notes on the Bengali Public Theatre'.
  16. *Desb*, 25 April 1992.
  17. *Rangalaye Trish Batsar*, Apareshchandra Mukhopadhyay, op. cit., p. 71.
  18. 'Public Woman', op. cit.; 'Art and Artfulness: Actresses of the 19th Century Calcutta Stage', Paper presented at Gender Studies Forum in Jawaharlal Nehru University, April 1991.
  19. See for example, that remarkable testament of the actresses' self-worth as expressed in the public meeting held at the Star Theatre after the death of Girishchandra Ghosh. 'Star Theaterey Smriti-Sabha', *Natya-mandir*, Aswin-Kartik, BS 1219. Cf. Rimli Bhattacharya, 'Ek bichitra sabhar kahini,' in *Baromas*, 1995, pp. 71-79.
  20. It needs to be emphasised that Ramakrishna's own practice and attitude to *bhava* and *abhinoy* included the notion of dharma as dedication to one's field of work. His words to the boy who played the role of Bidya in a performance of *Bidya-Sundar* at Dakhineswar in 1884 may be quoted: "You acted very well. If any one has a particular skill (vidya) and is good at it—in singing music, dancing, then if s/he tries, s/he will soon gain god". (Cited in Naliniranjan Chattopadhyay, op. cit., p. 8) Although this particular performance took place within the precincts of Dakhineswar, i.e. Ramakrishna was not speaking to an actress in the public theatre, his benediction to Binodini has to be placed in the context of such incidents.
  21. For a brief discussion of this keyword, see Appendix 1.

22. See for example, the texts edited by Chattopadhyay et al and Ashutosh Bhattacharya.
23. Debnarayan Gupta, *Nati Binodini—Manche: Sansare* (Calcutta: MC Sarkar & Sons, 1984).
24. Ajit Kumar Ghosh, 'Vidyasagar', *Natya Akademi Patrika*, p. 70.
25. Dey, *Nati Binodini*, Parva 3, scene iii, p. 188.
26. See Hitesranjan Sanyal on the 'Jat Vaisnava' as a sect which had evolved into a caste in *Social Mobility in Bengal* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1981), p. 30.
27. Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee, *Banglaye Dharmasabitya (Laukik)*, (Calcutta: DM Library, Aswin BS 1388), p. 89.
28. Sumit Sarkar, 'Chakri' op. cit., see also *Charit*, op. cit., p. 249, on "the excess of Chaitanya-bhakti."
29. See for example, Purnenda Bandhopadhyay for his role as Ramakrishna in Naliniranjan Chattopadhyay, op. cit., p. 137; Girishchandra's son, Dani-babu, for his role as Shankaracharya in his father's production; and Apareshchandra Mukhopadhyay for Chaitanya's role in *Sri Gourango* in *Rangalaye Trish Batsar*, Introduction, p. 13.
30. 'Abhinetri Samalochona', *Kangalay*, I Chaitra BS 1307, *GR*, Vol. 3, p. 826.
31. Teenkori Dasi's life as told to Upendranath Vidyabhusan in *Teenkori, Binodini o Tarasundari* (Calcutta: Roma Prakashani, 1985), pp. 104-18. Also the subject of the play, *Apurba Sati*, by the famous actress Sukumari Dutta (Golap), written and produced by her in 1875 where the heroine eventually commits suicide in a similar situation.
32. *Amritalal Basur Smriti o Atmasmriti*, Arun Kumar Mitra, ed. (Calcutta: Sahityalok, 1985), p. 21.
33. 'Natua', which might be etymologically related, is derived from Prakrit 'natuo' from Sanskrit 'nat'. Sukumar Sen, *Nat, Natya, Natah* (1972) (Calcutta: 1991). All this may be homophonic speculation!
34. Colonel H.S. Olcott of the Theosophical Society, in an open letter (from Adyar, Madras) to the *Reis and Rayyet*. 7 November 1885, pp. 512-13. Debipada Bhattacharya attributes the tremendous popularity of the play to 'Hindu Revivalism, the Theosophical movement, the Neo-Vaishnava movement' and Ramakrishna's own role in praising the play.
35. 'Public Women', op. cit., p. 159. The interchangeable use of 'home' and the 'stage' may also be noted in a petition submitted to Amarendranath Dutta by the actresses requesting permission for a forum to express their sentiments for their guru following Girishchandra's death. 'Star Theaterey Smriti Sabha', p. 69.
36. These issues have not been found.
37. A seminal essay by Girishchandra on his equally famous contemporary Ardhendushekar Mustafi (See Appendix IV) entitled 'Nat-churamoni swargiya Ardhendushekar Mustafi' delivered at a memorial meeting for the actor on 3 Aswin, BS 1315. (*GR*, Vol. 5,

- pp. 340-56) In addition to discussing the constraints of actual production and the unfairness of the newly promulgated Municipality Act which limited performance time to one at night, Girishchandra explicitly uses the occasion to present his account of the beginnings of the public theatre, since Ardhendushekhar and he were both founders and the two were perceived as rivals by their contemporaries.
38. Evidently a favourite image of Girishchandra's. His biographer, Abinashchandra Gangopadhyay, tells us that on being asked to write an autobiography, Girishchandra said, "That is not a very easy thing to do. One may begin to speak of writing an autobiography when one acquires the kind of courage to express one's own faults that Ved Vyas [the composer of the *Mahabharat*] had in order to speak frankly about the story of his own birth. Otherwise, in trying to write an autobiography one ends up being a lawyer pleading his own case, attempting only to sanctify his own faults and expressing his pride." Abinashchandra Gangopadhyay, op. cit., p. 417.
39. Possibly a reference to *David Copperfield*.
40. Girish Ghosh's *Buddhadeb charit* was based on Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia or, The Great Renunciation*. (Boston: Robert Brothers, 1880). Arnold said in the preface: "In the following Poem I have sought...to depict the life and character and indicate the philosophy of that noble hero and reformer, Prince Gautama of India, the founder of Buddhism." Arnold's text was adapted in 1925 for a film also called *Light of Asia* (or *Prem Sanyas*), as Indo-German collaborative venture.
41. The original uses the epithet 'Bhaktachuramani' to refer to Balaram Basu.
42. Girishchandra's essay on 'Bohuruppee Vidya', *Natya-mandir*, 1st year, Aswin, BS 1317 (*GR*, Vol. 3, pp. 844-46).
43. The seven roles are an oft-debated number: accounts vary on whether it was six or seven roles that Binodini played in *Meghnad Badh*.
44. The oppositional roles are those of Tilottama and Ayesha in *Durgeshnandini* (*My Story*, p. 72) It may be remembered that Girishchandra himself played the oppositional roles of Ram and Meghnad/Ravan in *Meghnad Badh*.
45. See note 57 in *My Story* on Girishchandra Ghosh's *Daksha-yajna*, with which the Star Theatre was inaugurated. Act I, scene iv: a series of impetuously asked but searching questions by the girl-woman Sati before she is married to Digambar or Shiv. The questions are addressed to her mother and to her companion, the Tapaswini.
46. *Daksha-yajna*, Act III, scene i, Sati questions her husband on kaliyuga; he explicates her role as the mother of all, the real saviour who can bestow grace on sinful mankind. Without her (Shakti) he is incomplete.

47. See note 40 in this section. Interestingly, the play is not discussed at all in Binodini's texts.
48. Girishchandra appears to be quoting from Edwin Arnold's section on Calcutta, entitled 'City of Palaces', in his *India Revisited*. Arnold's observations are worth quoting in full:
- Another singular pleasure was to witness a performance of 'Light of Asia' played by a native company to an audience of Calcutta citizens, whose close attention to the long soliloquies and quick appreciation of all the chief incidents of the story gave a high idea of their intelligence and proved how metaphysical by nature. . . these Hindu people are. The stage appliances were deficient to a point incredible for a London Manager, and the mise-en-scène sometimes almost laughable in simplicity. Nevertheless there was a refinement and imaginativeness in the acting as well as an artistic sense entirely remarkable, and the female performers proved quite as good as the male. (pp. 250-51)
- In the preface to his poem, Arnold had said: ". . . the mark of Gautama's sublime teaching is stamped ineffaceably upon modern Brahmanism." (*Light of Asia*, pp. 5-6) Arnold appears in many of Girish's essays on the Bengali theatre as a representative of the discerning foreigner who has grasped the essence of Indian /Hindu culture unlike many Bengalis who wrote disparagingly of the public theatre. See 'Nater Abedan' (BS 1307) and 'Bartaman Rangabhumi' (BS 1308) (*GR*, Vol. 1, pp. 735-38 and 742-45).
49. Here, Mahapurush refers to Chaitanya.
50. Girish's comparison is interesting because the plays in question are otherwise very different. On *Kapalkundala*, see p. 120, note 36. *Hirar Phool* (The Diamond Flower), a geetinatya, has a slight plot of love and visual splendour in five scenes announced as 'a fairy romance'. Rati and Madan, shown to be separated by a curse have to devise a meeting of 'non-lovers' in an enchanted garden, in order to be freed of the curse. Binodini played the part of the princess Shashikala, the 'diamond flower' of the title, who is more interested in adventure and travel than in matters of the heart. After being lured to the garden (by a giant disguised as a lotus!) she falls in love in with the prince Arun who has also been brought into the garden by Rati. Whereas *Kapalkundala* has never been 'domesticated' and longs to be a child of the woods, Shashi in *Hirar Phool* learns to savour love in the enchanted forest.
- First performed on 26 April 1884 at the Star Theatre along with a play and a farce. The songs and dances were much appreciated: Kashinath Chattopadhyay was the dance instructor and Benimadhab Adhikary the music director.
51. Binodini maintains this to be the case in both *My Story* and *My Life*.
52. For Binodini's account see *My Story*, p. 76.
53. See *My Story*, pp. 106-07.

54. Rimli Bhattacharya, 'Narrative Patterns in the Nineteenth Century Short Story' (unpublished dissertation, Brown University, 1986).
55. Girish's crisis of faith and deliverance, recorded in many essays such as 'Guru Srisri Ramakrishna Paramhansa: Gurur Prayojan', *Udbodhan*, 15 Bhadra BS 1309; 'Bhagwan Srisri Ramakrishnadeb' not dtd.; and 'Paramhansadeber shishya sneha', *Udbodhan*, Baisakh, BS 1312. Reprinted in *GR*, Vol. 5, pp. 253-55 and pp. 260-66.
56. *GR*, Vol. 3, pp. 823-27. The headmaster's article had appeared in the weekly theatre journal *Rangalay*, 9 Chaitra BS 1307.
57. *GR*, Vol. 2, pp. 846-50.
58. *GR*, Vol. 3, pp. 813-18, originally published in the monthly *Natya-mandir*, Sraban BS 1318. The generic social essay on 'Streeshiksha' appeared in almost every journal, almost as a mandatory topic, discussed for the most part by men.
59. See Tanika Sarkar 'The Hindu Wife and the Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal', *Studies in History*, Vol. 8, No. 1, n.s. (New Delhi: 1993).
60. Keshubchandra Sen's Antahpur Strishiksha (1863); Brahmika Samaj (1865); the Barisal Female Improvement Society (1871-72); Vikrampur Sanmilani Sabha (1879) — to name a few.
61. Brajendranath Bandhopadhyay, *Bangiya Natyashalar Itibas*, p. 115.
62. Essay on 'Gairish Chhanda' by Debipada Bhattacharya, in Introduction, *GR*, Vol. 2, (1986), p. 13.
63. Gayatri C. Spivak, 'The Burden of English' in *The Lie of the Land: Essays on English Literary Studies in India*, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 275-99.
64. Spivak, *Ibid*, p. 289. See note 46 in chapter on 'National Theatre', *My Story*.
65. See 'Star-Theaterey Smriti Sabha', op. cit.
66. There is the well-known instance of another prostitute's child, Heera-bulbul's son, who was expelled from school. Sumanta Banerjee, op. cit, p. 41, note 76.
67. The play is dedicated to Maharani Swarnamoyee, a contemporary benefactress of women's education. *Sukumari Dutta: Ek Apurbasati Natak*, Bijit Kumar Dutta, ed. (Calcutta: Paschim Banga Natya Akademi, 1992), p. 23. See also Keya Chakroberty, 'Protima-kankalmanush', *Keyar Boi*, Chittaranjan Ghosh, ed. (Calcutta: 1984), p. 57.
68. Ahindra Choudhury, *Nijere Harae Khunji* (Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing Company, Saka 1884), Vol. 1, pp. 443-44. Manoj Basu's novel, *Theater* (1978) has a similar scene about the an old actress called Taramoni, obviously modelled after Binodini. (Calcutta: Granthaprakash, 1989), p. 59.
69. Debnarayan Gupta about the actress, Apama Debi in *Banglar Nat-Nati*, Vol. 2, p. 269.
70. Binodini's adopted daughter had three children: Tuti, Motu and Keshto. Binodini left behind three houses: on Rajabagan Street there was a 'double-house' nos. 4 & 5. Her house was next to 54 Naren Basu, adjacent to the Vivekananda Society, near the Rupabani

- Cinema. Personal communication by Tarasundari Dasi's daughter, Prativa Khanna, Bhubaneswar, December 1991. Other accounts mention four children; as also a partitioned house, one part of which was rented out. *AK*, Preface, p. 27.
71. Haridhon Mukherjee, *Anandalok*, Puja Issue, 1991, p. 263.
72. Personal communication by Jyotika Chatterjee; she recalls her mother pointing out Binodini on some evenings: 'Look there goes Bini to fetch milk.' Calcutta, June 1989. More recently, Kalyani Dutta in *Thor, Bori, Kbara* (Calcutta: Thema Publication, 1995).
73. *AK*, Preface, p. 27.
74. Personal communication Prativa Khanna, December 1991.
75. Sarah Bernhardt was possibly the only other actress who had a theatre named after her; but then, it was she who had bought the Theatre des Nations and named it the Theatre Sarah Bernhardt. Comelia Otis-Skinner, op. cit., p. 262.
76. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (4 January 1915) reported her death and noted that 'she was carried to the burning ghat by 'bhadrolog' class of men. . .'. Cited by Shampa Bhattacharya in her article on Sushilabala, 'Sarger pakhi phire gelo', *Boburupee*, No. 75, 1991, pp. 76-88.
77. 'Star Theaterey Smriti Sabha', op. cit.
78. Hemendranath Dasgupta, cited by Chattopadhyay and Acharya, *AK*, Introduction, p. 17. See also section on 'Natyasamragyi Binodini Bidaye Grahan', pp. 368-69 by Kalish Mukhopadhyay in his *Bangla Natyashalar Itibas* (Calcutta: Star Theater Publication, 1973) and Ahindra Choudhury, *Nijere Harae Khunji*, Vol. 1, p. 443.
79. Himani Banerjee, *The Writing on the Wall: Essays on Culture and Politics* (Toronto: Tsar, 1993); Sachindranath Bandhopadhyay, *Natyadeuler Binodini* (Calcutta: Sahitya Vihar, 1986).
80. *Sabare Ami Nami* (1972) (BS 1380) by Kanan Debi and *Ami Chandrabati Bolchi* by Chandrabati Debi (Calcutta: Eshana Prakashani, 1984).
81. The essay was originally published in *Amrita* in 1977 and subsequently reprinted in a commemorative volume comprising writings by and on Keya Chakroberty. *Keyar Boi*, op. cit., pp. 55-62.
82. I am indebted to Samik Bandhopadhyay for this information.
83. Abinashchandra Gangopadhyay, op. cit., p. 189.
84. See Helga Druex, *The Feminization of Dr. Faustus*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

## APPENDIX I

### A Note on the Translation

*Byatha, bedona, jantrana, jatana, jala*: pain—physical hurt, emotional scar, anguish, torment. These are the words that recur most frequently in *My Story*. In retrospect, the long passages of looking back with bitterness and with longing, steeped in despair and sometimes self-pity, offered the most resistance to an English version. Binodini's anguish appears at times to be too much angst, and arguably, it slows down or disjuncts the flow of her otherwise cadenced prose. It has nevertheless been my aim to convey as much as possible the tensions of the particular (and changing nature) of the writer's own bonds with language: the nuances of social etiquette, gendered inflections, the tussle between a factual account and the immediacy of the writing context.

Of particular concern to the translator is the remarkable change in language from *My Story* to that in *My Life as an Actress*. The shift has been noted by earlier editors as well and has been discussed in the Introduction to this book. The sprightly tone of the later piece is reflected in the writer's preference for *chalit bhasa*, colloquial Bangla, rather than *sadhu bhasa*, the formal language earlier considered mandatory for all literary writing.

Forms of address are really terms of reference, important for the tension between Binodini Dasi's place as an actress in the theatre world and the representation of that world in the less circumscribed one of print.

Binodini usually refers to the *bhadralok* in formal terms, such as, Srijukto, Babu, Mahashoy, along with the full name, in keeping with contemporary modes of formal address; although, she often uses the less formal, intermediate, Girish-babu or Madhu-babu as well. At other times, honorific prefixes like *pujoniyo* (respected) are used. In general, they mean distinguished, well-known, excellent, worthy and so on. Some epithets, standard in Vaishnav circles, such as 'Bhaktachuramani' which Girishchandra uses to refer to Baram Basu, have been translated here as the 'great devotee'; Binodini refers to Sisirkumar Ghosh as 'Vaishnavchuramani Srijukto Sisir-babu mahashoy'—somewhat excessive even in comparison to a formal dedication, as in the dedication to his play *Lakshman-barjan* which reads: 'To Srijukta Babu Sisirkumar Ghosh'.

I have retained in the English the invariable prefixing of 'the late' (*swargiaya; ishwar*) to the names of male theatre colleagues (interestingly, only before male colleagues) since it indicates the writer's adherence to conventions of formal writing. It is also a constant reminder to the reader that, by the time Binodini wrote her memoirs, most of the people she had worked with, or the men she had been involved with, were dead.

These honorifics are not used for the women who appear in Binodini's text. Excepting for Sukumari Dutta (Golapsundari), who gained her surname with marriage to the Brahma bhadrakok, Goshtobihari Dutta, not one of the women who figure in Binodini's narrative have a surname. Instead, a fairly intimate form of reference, such as Khetu-didi or Kadu-didi, suggests the sisterly relationship. The use of nicknames is common to both men and women, excepting that, for the men, the nickname is followed by 'babu': Bhuni-babu; Choto-babu and so on. Dhamma-dada (for Dharmadas Sur) is an exception.

The translations closely follow the punctuation of the original texts in order to convey the weight of sentences. Para breaks, section breaks and punctuation have been altered in some places, but such changes have been kept to a minimum. Exclamation marks have generally been edited; where retained, they nearly always follow the original text, as in the profusion of semi-colons and exclamation marks. (The title of the BS 1319 edition of the autobiography even has an exclamation mark after the title: 'Amar Katha!')

It may also be noted that in the original book some lines appear in bigger font size: a startling example being the dramatic lines attributed by Binodini to her hridaydebata: You shall not die . . . I shall not let you die (*Amar Katha*, BS 1319, p. 112) Whether these typographical variations were introduced by the writer herself or were part of the printer/publisher's regular repertoire remains a matter of conjecture for the modern reader.

In the original Bangla, characters played by Binodini Dasi (as well as other characters from plays) invariably appear within single quotes ('Nala') to indicate perhaps their fictional or unreal status and to differentiate between the character and the person playing the role. Again, this appears to be a fairly common convention of her times. This practice has been followed only in the Index to this book. Names of plays and other literary works appear in double quotes in the original Bangla as do the names of the various theatres (companies and houses) that Binodini was associated with.

Dates in the Bangiya Shatabdi, the Bengali era, used by Binodini Dasi have all been retained without the indicative BS.

Except for very common names I have followed the ordinary transliteration system used for Bengali names, omitting the vowel *a* when it is not pronounced, when pronounced, *b* rather than the more familiar *v*; *j* rather than *y* have been used. In bibliographic citations the form used in the source has been followed.

Proper names have been generally standardised and/or translated into a modern English equivalent, partly because of variations in the original printed sources: thus, Girishchandra Ghosh, rather than Girish Chunder Ghose. Occasionally, the English spelling reflects the orthography of the Bengali original: as in Kattik Pal (for the dresser Kartik Pal) or Dhamma-dada (for Dharmadas Sur, the set-designer) or Lakkhi (for the actress Lakshminoni) to indicate the colloquial or familiar form used by Binodini. Interestingly, many English proper names appear as one unit: for example, Ellen Terry as 'Elenteri' and Edwin Arnold as 'EdwinArnoldsahab'. This is glossed in the endnote. Since this is true of both Girishchandra's as well as Binodini's writings, it quite possibly reflects a contemporary writing convention, rather than arising out of the actress's lack of formal education.

Italics have been used for keywords (*moh, maya, patita*) or in the case of Bangla words related to food (eg. *sandesh, dal* and *ghanta*). Italics have also been used selectively for theatre terminology comprising new genres (*panchrang tamasha* and so on). In some cases, after the first appearance, a frequently used Bangla word (eg. *geetnatya*) has been used throughout without italics. Similarly, *jatra* appears without italics. Small capitals have been used in the translated texts wherever Binodini Dasi used an English word (usually transcribed into Bangla) in her writings. These include: PLAY, HEROINE, FEMALE PART, SPEECH, DROP SCENE, SCENE-SET, REHEARSAL, and CURLING (the number of words increasing in *My Life*); Girishchandra uses 'SERIOUS PART' alongside the Bangla equivalent. As is evident, almost all these words are from theatre terminology. In the original text, the excerpt from a contemporary review cited by Binodini was followed by her translation in Bangla of the same. The review appears on p. 100 of this volume.

Individual glosses have been kept to a minimum in the hope that a composite of contexted references will be more useful to the reader: key concepts (*maya, moh, chhalana, basana, dharna, bhakti*) have been foregrounded whenever possible in translation practice. An example would be *abbiman*.

The narrative around *abbiman*: *man-abbiman* is crucial in the cultural history of Radha-Krishna lila; while *Manbbhanjan pala* occupies a privileged position in the *kirtaniya*'s repertory. But *abbi-*

*man* is traditionally a 'feminine' attribute and therefore crucial when Binodini herself has recourse to this word to analyse her failings. It is because she is an *abbimanini*, a *garbini*—too proud, too spoilt and wishing always to be indulged, that her exit from the theatre may be read as a punishment. Translated as 'wounded hurt or wounded pride', *abhiman* suggests that the person (woman) is indulging in excessive emotion and manifesting it in an unreasonable way—the effect is not in proportion to the original cause. She is also accused of being hyper-sensitive. (*Manyumati* in Sanskrit refers to a woman who is quick to take offence). The problematic may then be easily shifted from the professional to the personal—as being typically feminine. Therefore, as I have emphasised in the Afterword, the need for recontextualisation, vis-a-vis the conditions of the workplace and the actress's social location.

Bangla, like some other Indian languages affords more ambiguity with tenses and the possibility of a virtually subject-less sentence without drawing attention to itself. This I have attempted to convey. In few exceptional instances the subject has been inserted in square brackets in the English version. The shift in subject in passages of indictment: 'they become prostitutes'—'we too'—'you. . .' is particularly significant in Binodini's case.

## APPENDIX II

## Publication and Production Details

Binodini Dasi	1863–1941
Career as a Professional Actress	1874–1886

*Binodini Dasi: Publications*

- 1885 Letters on theatre published in the *Bharatbasbi*, BS 1292 (these have not been found).
- 1895 Three poems in three issues of *Saurabh*, Girishchandra Ghosh and Amarendranath Dutta, eds., BS 1302 (subsequently included in *Basana*).
- 1896 *Basana* (collection of 40 poems), Calcutta: BS 1303, Bharat-bandhu Press, 84 pp.
- 1905 *Kanak o Natini* (narrative poems), Calcutta: BS 1312, Kalika Press, 45 pp.
- 1910 'Abhinetrir Atmakatha' (serialised autobiographical account) in two issues of *Natya-mandir*, Amarendranath Dutta, ed., Bhadra and Aswin-Kartik BS 1317 (first version of the present text of *My Story* to 'The National Theatre').
- 1912 *Amar Katha*, Part I (book, privately published), Calcutta: Great Eden Press, BS 1319, 124 pp. (a second volume was planned).
- 1913 *Binodini Katha ba Amar Katha*, Part I (book) Calcutta: Bengal Medical Library, BS 1320, 124 pp. (reprint, with four art plates and preface by Girishchandra).
- 1924–25 'Amar Abhinetri Jiban', sometimes called 'Abhinetrir Atmakatha' (incomplete serialised autobiographical account) in eleven issues of *Roop o Rang*, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay and Nirmalchandra Chandra, eds., BS 1331–1332.  
(4 Magh BS 1331, No. 12; 11 Magh, No. 13; 18 Magh, No. 14; 25 Magh, No. 15; 2 Falgun, No. 20; 14 Chaitra, No. 22; 21 Chaitra, No. 23; ? Baisakh 1332; 26 Baisakh BS 1332)
- Later reprints of 'Abhinetrir Katha' / 'Amar Katha'*
- 1956 'Natyasmaragyi Swargata Binodini Atmakatha' (reprint of original *Abhinetrir Katha*) in three issues of *Roopmancha*, Nitaicharan Sen, ed., BS 1363.
- 1962–64 *Amar Katha* in three issues of *Ekshan*, Soumitra Chattopadhyay and Nirmalaya Acharya, eds., BS 1369–1371.
- 1964 *Amar Katha*, Chattopadhyay and Acharya, eds. (Calcutta: Kathashilpa Prakashan).



- 1969 *Amar Katha o Anyanya Rachana*, Chattopadhyay and Acharya, eds. (revised edition including *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* and a selection of Binodini's poems) (Calcutta: Subarnarekha).
- 1987 *Amar Katha o Anyanya Rachana*, Chattopadhyay, Acharya and Shankar Bhattacharya, eds. (revised edition including *Amar Abhinetri Jiban*, a selection of Binodini's poems and eleven photographs) (Calcutta: Subarnarekha).
- 1987 *Nati Binodini Samagra Rachana*, Ashutosh Bhattacharya, ed. (including a selection of Binodini's poems) (Calcutta: Sahitya Sanstha).

*Representations of Binodini Dasi by Chittaranjan Ghosh*

- 1965 *Nati Binodini* Novel, *Bingsha Shatabdi* (annual number).
- 1965 *Nati Binodini* Incomplete script for a proposed film by an (anonymous) actress-producer.
- 1972 *Nati Binodini* Script for play, *Boburupee*, No. 39.
- 1973 *Nati Binodini* Playscript, Dey Book Store, Calcutta.

*Select Productions of 'Nati Binodini'*

- 1969 *Nati Binodini* (play)  
Binodini: Ketaki Dutta  
Script: Bidhayak Bhattacharya  
Director: Kanu Bandhopadhyay  
Production: Nandik
- 1971 *Nati Binodini* (jatra)  
Binodini: Bina Dasgupta  
Script: Brajendra Kumar Dey  
Director: Brajendra Kumar Dey  
Production: Natto Company
- 1972 *Nati Binodini* (play)  
Binodini: Manju Bhattacharji/ Keya Chakroberty  
Script: Chittaranjan Ghosh  
Director: Ajitesh Bandhopadhyay  
Production: Nandikar
- 1991 *Nati Binodini* (jatra in the proscenium theatre)  
Binodini: Bina Dasgupta  
Script: based on *Nat o Nati*  
Director: Bina Dasgupta; Chief Consultant: Ganesh Mukherjee  
Production: Surangana
- 1993 *Nati Binodini* (play in Hindi)  
Binodini: Seema Biswas  
Script: Chittaranjan Ghosh  
Translated by Ram Gopal Bajaj  
Director: Bapi Bose  
Production: National School of Drama, Delhi

APPENDIX III

Roles Played by Binodini Dasi

Role	Play	Theatre	Year
Draupadi's sakhi	<i>Shatru-Sanbar</i>	Great National	2/12 Dec. 1874
Hemlata	<i>Hemlata</i>	Great National	1875
Kamini	<i>Nabeen Tapaswini</i>	Great National (Lahore)	1875
Kanchan	<i>Sadbabar Ekadoshi</i>	Great National (Lahore)	1875
*	<i>Biye Pagla Buro</i>	Great National (Lahore)	1875
Radhika	<i>Sati ki Kalankini</i>	Great National (Lahore)	1875
Lilabati	<i>Lilabati</i>	Great National (Lucknow)	1875
Saralata	<i>Neeldarpan</i>	Great National (Lucknow)	1875
Bonbala	<i>Prakrita Bandhu</i>	Great National	1876
Sarojini	<i>Sarojini</i>	Great National	1876
Ayesha; Tilottama; Ashmani	<i>Durgeshnandini</i>	Bengal	1876
Manorama	<i>Mrinalini</i>	Bengal	1877
Kapalkundala; Motibibi	<i>Kapalkundala</i>	Bengal	1877
Pramila	<i>Meghnad Badh</i>	Bengal	1877
Uma	<i>Agomoni</i>	(Great) National	1877
*	<i>Krishnakumari</i>	National	1878
Britannia	<i>Palashir Juddho</i>	National	1878
Manorama	<i>Mrinalini</i>	National	1878
Daughter-in-law	<i>Mustafi Saheb ka Pukka Tamasha</i>	National	1878
Kundanandini	<i>Bishbriksha</i>	National	1878
*the heroine	<i>Dol-Lila</i>	National	1878
Fati	<i>Buro Sbaliker Ghare Ro</i>	National	1878
Leela	<i>Hamir</i>	National	1878
Phulhashi	<i>Maya Taru</i>	National	1879

\* Lists only first performances excluding the plays in which Binodini's role cannot be definitely ascertained. Binodini Dasi is said to have played about 90 roles in over 80 plays. (AK, p. 145)

Role	Play	Theatre	Year
Princess; fairy	<i>Alladin</i>	National	1878
Sarojini	<i>Sarat-Sarojini</i>	National	1879
Pramila; Chitrangada; Rati; Baruni; Maya; Sita; Mahamaya	<i>Meghnad Badh</i>	National	1881
Lab	<i>Sitar Bonobas</i>	National	1881
Uttara	<i>Abhimanyu Badh</i>	National	1881
Sahana	<i>Mobini Protima</i>	National	1881
Sarojini	<i>Sarojini</i>	National	1881
Lahona	<i>Anando Rabo</i>	National	1881
Lab	<i>Lakkhan Barjan</i>	National	1881
Sita	<i>Ravan Badh</i>	National	1882
Sita	<i>Sitaharan</i>	National	1882
Kaikeyi	<i>Ramer Bonobas</i>	National	1882
Draupadi	<i>Pandaber Agyatobas</i>	National	1883
Sati	<i>Daksha Yajna</i>	Star	1883
Suruchi	<i>Dhruba charitra</i>	Star	1883
Damayanti	<i>Nala-Damayanti</i>	Star	1883
Chandi; Khullana	<i>Kamale Kamini</i>	Star	1884
Padmabati	<i>Brishketu</i>	Star	1884
Shashikala	<i>Hivar Pbool</i>	Star	1884
Chinta	<i>Sribatsa-Chinta</i>	Star	1884
Chaitanya	<i>Chaitanya Lila, Part I</i>	Star	1884
Prahlad	<i>Prabhad charitra</i>	Star	1884
Bilasini Karforma	<i>Bibab Bibhrat</i>	Star	1884
Nimai	<i>Nimai Sannyas or Chaitanya Lila, Part II</i>	Star	1885
Satyabhama	<i>Prabhas Yajna</i>	Star	1885
Gopa	<i>Buddhadeb Charit</i>	Star	1885
Chintamoni	<i>Bilwamangal Thakur</i>	Star	1886
Rangini	<i>Bellick Bazar</i>	Star	1886
<i>Last performance:</i> Damayanti; Rangini	<i>Nala-Damayanti; Bellick Bazar</i>	Star	1 Jan. 1887

## APPENDIX IV

Persons Figuring in Binodini's Writings  
(listed in order of first names)

AMRITALAL BASU (1853–1929), amongst the most renowned theatre personalities of the time. Known as Rasaraj for his wit and humour on stage and off. Educated at the Kambuliatala Banga Vidyalaya. Began writing from his early twenties, took up topical issues, aiming at the laughable excesses of the newly educated. For the most part, a conservative neo-Hindu position against most of the reformist agenda of the time, particularly women's education, the Age of Consent Bill. Wrote a few puranic plays, but his fame rests on farces and comedies such as *Hirakchurna Natak* (1875) and *Byapi-ka Bidaye* (1926). Other writings include stories, poems, novels and essays. Manager of the Great National and the Star Theatres, the latter for 25 years.

ABINASHCHANDRA KAR, remembered by his contemporaries for his unparalleled performance as Rogue Saheb in Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neeldarpan*, the very first play of the Bengali public theatre. The first manager of Girishchandra's National Theatre in 1877.

AMRITALAL MITRA (died 1908), called Mejo-babu in theatre circles. Girishchandra's friend's son. Made an impact on his debut as Ravan in the National Theatre's production of *Meghnad Badh* in December 1877. Played the tragic hero in almost all of Girish Ghosh's early plays. Did not marry. Continued to be with the Star Theatre until his death. Among his notable performances, Mahadev in *Daksha Yajna*; Nala in *Nala-Damayanti*; Buddha in *Buddhadeb Charit*. Died of cancer a year after his last performance in the title role of *Pratapaditya*.

AMRITALAL MUKHOPADHYAY (1854–1890), better known as Bel-babu or Kaptien Bell was born into a well-known family of landowners in Baghbazar. An outstanding pantomime actor and singer-dancer. Considered to be one of the finest female impersonators, remembered particularly for his role of Khetrmoni in *Neeldarpan*, Mallika in *Nabeen Tapaswini*, Motibibi in *Kapalkundala*. Other roles include the Sadhak in *Bilwamangal* and Chaitanya in *RoopSanatan*. Committed suicide on 14 March 1890. The then manager of the Star Theatre, Girish Ghosh, cancelled the Wednesday show in memory of the 'late lamented Baboo Amrito Lal Mookherjee/ (Bell Baboo), a leading comedian of the Company' (*The Statesman*, 19 March 1890).

ARDHENDUSHEKHAR MUSTAFI (1850–1908), called Saheb in acting circles. Related to the Pathuriaghata Thakurs. Studied with Amritalal Basu at the Kambuliatala Banga Vidyalaya. Considered by many to be as great a theatre person as Girish Ghosh. Specialised in comic roles and improvisation and was an excellent teacher. Wrote a few panchrangs. Worked at the National, Great National, Emerald, Bina, Minerva Theatres among others. Last performance, a month before his death, in 1908. Ardhendushekhar's son, Bomkesh Mustafi (1868–1916), was also a famous actor and a distinguished member of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad.

ASHUTOSH DEB (1805–1856), variously known as Chhatu-babu or Satu-babu, the eldest son of Ramdulal Deb. One of the foremost businessmen in Calcutta, also a member of the British India Association. Among the wealthy enthusiasts who founded and patronised private theatres, himself a composer of *tappas*.

BANKIMCHANDRA CHATTOPADHYAY (1838–1894), the reigning novelist and considered to be the foremost intellectual of nineteenth-century Bengal. Although almost all his novels were adapted and successfully staged, Bankim disassociated himself from the stage and was not often pleased with the stage versions. He was an admirer and close friend of Dinabandhu Mitra, another great contemporary dramatist. Bankim's heroines, Mrinalini, Manorama, Kapalkundala, Durgeshnandini, Ayesha and Tillotoma, to name some of the best known ones, ushered into the public theatre the era of the romantic and daring heroine, doomed to a tragic end.

BHUBANMOHAN NEOGI (1857–1927), grandson of the wealthy Rasik Neogi, founder and financier of the Great National Theatre in 1873, the fourth public theatre in Bengal, along with Ardhendushekhar Mustafi and Dharmadas Sur. In 1877, Girishchandra leased out the hall and renamed it the National Theatre. Bhubhanmohan died a pauper after suffering tremendous losses in the theatre.

BONOBHARINI, also known as Bhuni, amongst the first group of actresses in the public theatre. Heroine of the *geetinatya*, *Kamini Kunjo*, 1879. She played many of Bankimchandra's heroines during her stint at the Bengal Theatre. In the course of her work at the Star she played the male roles in bhakti-based and puranic plays, such as that of Nitai (Nityananda) in *Chaitanya Lila* and *Nimai San-nyas*, primarily because of her exceptional singing abilities. She spent her last years in Benares after a long and eventful career.

BIHARILAL CHATTOPADHYAY (1840–1901), born in Calcutta, studied at the Duff School. Friend and classmate of Keshubchandra Sen, he was noted for his

playing of women's roles in such pioneering dramatic pieces as *Kulinkulasarbasya* and *Bidbaba Bibah Natak*. Correspondence Clerk at Gladstone Willy's; Assistant Cashier; and finally Assistant Inspector of Goods at the East Indian Railway Company. Initially active in the amateur theatres such as the Shovabazar Natyashala and the Beigachia Natyashala, joined the Bengal Theatre as playwright, actor and instructor. The Bengal Theatre closed down on his death. Adapted many of Bankim-chandra's plays. Biharilal's farce *Mui Hadu*—an attack on the neo-Hindu bhakta created a stir when it was staged.

BIJOYKRISHNA GOSWAMI (1841–1899), a prominent Brahma preacher and social reformer. Gradually detached himself from Brahmoism and became a Vaishnav guru, although of a very atypical kind. His religious and social affiliations continued to be very eclectic to the end of his life.

CHAITANYA (1486–1533), or Krishna-Chaitanya, the sannyas name of Vishvambhar, known variously as Gaur, Gaurango, Nimai; usually called Mahaprabhu in Binodini's writings. Born into a Brahmin family in Nabadwip an established seat of scholastic learning in Bengal. Initiated by Iswara Puri into Vaisnavism in the course of a visit to Gaya. Spent the last fourteen years of his life in Puri. Chaitanyism was formalised into doctrinal theology by the six Goswamins or 'Church Fathers' who revitalised Vrindavan with the faith.

DASUCHARAN NEOGI (died 1925), nephew of the pioneer stage designer and manager Dharmadas Sur. He later became the assistant stage manager and one of the four shareholders of the Star Theatre. Contemporary plays about Binodini usually make him the villain, in his contempt for Binodini's status and his strong business instincts which made him vehemently oppose naming the new theatre after the actress.

DHARMADAS SUR (1852–1910), began his career as a stage manager as early as 1867 with the farce *Kicchu Kicchu Bujhi* (I Understand Enough!) staged for a private theatre at Jorasanko. He also played a woman's role in this play. A schoolmaster in a preparatory school by profession, he was the chief designer of theatre halls such as the National, the Great National, the Beadon Street Star, Emerald, Minerva, Kohinoor. His *Atmajiban*, was published posthumously in two instalments of the *Natya-mandir*,

DINABANDHU MITRA (1830–1873), an Inspecting Postmaster whose recognition as a dramatist came after his *Neeldarpan* (*The Indigo Mirror*) (1860) produced in 1872, to inaugurate the first public theatre. Among his other equally popular plays were *Sadbabar Eka-doshi* (1866), *Nabeen Tapaswini*

(18), *Jamai Barik* (1872), *Kamale Kamini*. After his death, Bankimchandra, a close friend, wrote a monograph on him.

EDWIN ARNOLD, SIR (1832–1904), an Englishman who served in India. Wrote *Light of Asia or The Great Renunciation* (1880), narratives from the Mahabharat in his *Indian Idyls* (London: 1883); as well as prefaces to translations of Bankimchandra's novels, *Buddhadeb Charit* and others.

ELOKESHI (died 1898), considered to be amongst the first four actresses of the public theatre. Began her career in the Bengal Theatre as Debjani in Madhusudan's *Shornushitba*. At the time of her death, she was working with the Star.

GANGA BAIJI, also known as Gangamoni, worked as the singer-actress for the National Theatre (1881–82), the Beadon Street Star Theatre (1883–87) and subsequently at Hathibagan when the Star shifted there. She invariably played female roles which required large sections of singing. Amongst her most memorable performances were that of Murala in Girish Ghosh's *Kalapabar* (1896) where she excelled in classical (*dhruvpad*) singing, and the mad woman (Pagalini) in *Bilwamangal* (1886). She often played the mother's roles.

GOLAPSUNDARI (Sukumari Dutta) (died 1890), referred to as Golap, Golap-Kamini, Golapi in theatre history. Became Sukumari after the success of the play *Sarat-Sarajini* where she played the role of Sukumari. Her marriage to the bhadralok, Goshtobihari Dutta, made her something of a cause célèbre. One of the first professional actresses of the public theatre; sometimes thought to be a more versatile actress than Binodini. Retired briefly from the stage after her marriage, but came back to support herself and her daughter after her husband died in England in straitened circumstances. She wrote the play *Apurba Sati* (1875), was among the founder members of the Hindoo Female Theatre, and later tried unsuccessfully to start an acting school. Among her famous roles: Bimala in *Durgeshnandini*, 1873; Motibibi in *Kapalkundala*; Girijaya in *Mrinalini* (1877); Sarajini in *Sarajini* (1875); Shanti in *Anandamatb* (1898).

GIRISHCHANDRA GHOSH (1844–1912), the Mahashoy of Binodini's narratives, began as an amateur actor, but eventually gave up his regular job as a cashier and bookkeeper and from 1880 onwards became a full-time playwright, director, instructor and theatre manager par excellence. His collected works (*Girish Rachanabali*) comprise original plays (approximately 90 plays) adaptations, short stories, and numerous essays on the theatre and on religious and social issues. He was also the editor,

sometimes the co-ordinator, of several theatre magazines, including *Saurabh* and *Natya-mandir*. He became a devotee of Ramakrishna from 1884 onwards. Last performance as Karunamoy in *Balidan* in July 1911. His son, Surendranath, known as Dani-babu (1868–1932), was also a famous actor in the second phase of the public theatre.

GIRISHCHANDRA GHOSH, a contemporary actor, usually referred to as N/Ladaru Girish to distinguish him from his more famous namesake. Known for his huge frame, among his other plays was *Dhruba Tapasya* (1873) which was one of Girish Ghosh's models for his *Dhruba Charitra*.

GURMUKH RAI MUSADDI (1864–1886), was the son of Ganeshdas Musaddi, the chief agent of H. Miller Company. Of Rajasthani origin, the family had come from Mandawa and then settled in Calcutta for business purposes. Gurmukh's involvement with Binodini Dasi and subsequently, the business of theatre, was strongly resented by the family who finally made him give up his mistress and the theatre. He died in Varanasi at the age of 22.

HARIDAS DAS, also known as Hari Vaishnab, usually played the lead roles or the second hero at the Bengal Theatre. Remembered for his Osman in Bankimchandra's *Durgeshnandini*, Alexander in *Purubikram*, 1874; Amarnath in *Rajani*, 1895.

HARIDASI, or Bara-Hari, one of the first five women at the Great National Theatre.

JADUMONI (died 1918), known as Gayika Jadumoni, and later, Jadubai the famous court singer, ended her life as a beggar after her distinguished career at court. Her mother was employed in the family of the Pathuriaghata Rajas. She was trained in the Betia *gharana* by Guruprasad Misra amongst other teachers. Talented dancer in addition to her skills in dhruvpad, thumri, kheyal and tappa. Made her debut as Radhika in *Sati ki Kalankini* at the Great National Theatre in 1874. Concentrated only on her singing in her later years in the theatre. She was helped by Nagendranath Bandopadhyay who gave her a singer/teacher's position in 1914.

JAGATTARINI, one of the first four of the public theatre's actresses, at the Bengal Theatre.

JAIARLAL DHAR, known as 'Professor Jaharlal Dhar, a famous stage manager. Designed the original Star on Beadon Street and the spectacular sets of *Daksha-Yajna* with which the Star was inaugurated in 1883.

JYOTIRINDRANATH THAKUR (Tagore) (1849–1925), the fifth son of Debendranath Tagore, and elder brother and mentor of Rabindranath. Dramatist, composer, lyricist, translator and painter, also a talented actor. Founder of *Bharati* magazine and the Bharatiya Sangeet Samaj (1870). First play *Kinchi Jalajog* was a farce (1872) followed by the heroic *Purubikram Natak* (1874); *Sarajini ba Chitaur Akramon* (1875) and *Swapnamoyi* (1883). Published seventeen translations (in Bangla) of Sanskrit plays including *Abhijnan Shakuntalam* (1899), *Mricchakatikam* and *Mudraraksasa* (1901) and several of Molière's plays from the original French.

KADAMBINI DAS, sometimes called Kadu by Bindodini, made her debut in *Sati ki Kalankini* at the Great National in September 1874. Joined the Great National Opera Company in November 1874 but returned to the Great National just before the tour of the west in March 1875. Among her memorable roles were those of Mandodari in *Meghnad Badh* at the National (1877); Rani Bhabani in *Palasbir Juddho* (1878); Prosuti in *Daksha Yajna* at the Star (1883) and Suniti in *Dhruba charitra* at the Star (1883).

KASHINATH CHATTOPADHYAY, a talented comedian, singer and dancer. Played Lakshman in *Sitar Bibah* (1882); Mukund and Matsarya in *Chaitanya Lila* (1884); Lalit in *Bellick Bazar* (1886); Majnu in *Laila-Majnu* (1891).

KEDARNATH CHOUDHURY, actor, dramatist and theatre manager, also the zamindar of Ghateswar. Helped Girishchandra with the leasing of the Great National in 1877. Played Mahadev in *Agomoni*, Krishna and Drona in *Abhimanyu Badh*. Wrote *Durjadhon Badh* in 1883.

KHETRAMONI (died 1903), who Binodini refers to affectionately as her Khetudidi, is considered to be an outstanding but largely ignored talent of the first phase of the public theatre. One of the first five women performers at the Great National Theatre. Played mostly in bit roles and character roles, probably because she lacked the conventional beauty of the nayika. Began as Brinda in *Sati ki Kalan-kini* at the Great National (1874); played the part of Moh in *Chaitanya-Lila* at the Star (1884) and continued upto 1896 at the Minerva. Worked for over two decades in the theatre.

KIRONCHANDRA BANDHOPADYAY, younger brother of Nagendranath Bandhoadhyay. Played Bindumadhab in *Neeldarpan* (1872); the title role in *Meghnad Badh* (1875). Wrote *Bharatmata* and *Bharate Yavan*, both staged at the public theatre.

FATHER LAFONT ((26 March 1837–10 May 1908) born in Mons in Belgium, joined the Society of Jesus in 1854. Studied philosophy and natural science

and later experimental physics before he came to Calcutta in 1865. Joined St Xavier's College which had been established in 1860 on the ruins of the Sans Souci Theatre. Taught Natural Sciences at the College and from 1865 onwards gave a long series of public exhibitions, and lectures from 1868, which continued until his death. Inspired talents such as Dr. Mahendralal Sircar, Jagadish Chandra Bose, Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, the Pathuriaghata Thakurs, Moulavi Abdul Latif Khan and Rajendra Lal Mitra among others, many of whom were among his close friends. The first to set up a science museum in India and the first memorial museum in St. Xavier's College. Lafont contributed greatly towards the foundation of the Science Association.

LAKKHMIONI OR LAKKHI, cited by Binodini as one of the first five actresses, she was probably hired by the Great National when some of the original members left the company. According to Ardhendushekhar, one of the first six actresses recruited by the Great National. Played the roles of Khetramoni in *Neeldarpan* in 1875; Lakshmbai in *Hirak Churno Natak* in 1875 among others.

MADANMOHAN BURMAN, a famous opera-director of musical hits such as *Sati ki Kalankini*.

MAHENDRANATH BASU (1853–1901), also known as Mahendralal and nicknamed 'The Tragedian', was a famous actor and teacher. Started acting as a member of the amateur Shyambazar Natya Samaj. His father, Brajalal Basu, had also been an amateur actor known for his performances of Shakespeare. Famous for female roles such as that of Padi in *Neeldarpan*; Sarat in *Sarat-Sarajini*; Kumarsen in *Raja o Rani*. Died of the plague in 1901.

MANOMOHAN BASU (1831–1912), was associated with the Hindu Mela from its inception. Founder-editor of the magazine *Madhyastha*, wrote regularly for the *Prabashi*. His first play was the hugely successful *Sati*. Manomohan insisted on the predominance of songs in order to ensure the continuity of the '*deshtya*' in theatre.

MICHAEL MADHUSUDAN DUTT (1824–1873), versatile poet and dramatist, lived an eventful life. Studied at Hindu College and converted to Christianity in 1865. Obtained his barrister's degree from England in 1865 after which he returned to India. Inspired into playwriting after an 1858 performance of *Ratnabali Natak* at the Belgachia Natyashala. With his satiric plays *Buro Shaliker Ghare Ro*, *Ekai ki Bole Sabbhyata* on the one hand and epic poems, *Meghnadbadh Kabya*, *Birangana Kabya* on the other, Madhusudan cut through the great divide of the extremely colloquial and the highly literary.

MOTILAL SUR, member of the Shyambazar Natya Samaj's production of *Lilabati* in May 1872. Played a brilliant Torap in the first performance of the National Theatre's *Neeldarpan*. Secretary of the original National Theatre. Performed in a range of roles—at the National, Emerald and other theatres well until the 1890s.

NAGENDRANATH BANDHOPADYAY (1850–1882), one of the founder members of the Bengal Theatre, organiser, manager and actor. Elder brother Debendranath, director of the first National Theatre; younger, Kironchandra, actor and playwright. First performance 1867. Broke away from the National Theatre with Kadambini Dasī and Madanmohan Burman and founded the short-lived Great National Opera Company. Amongst his plays, *Malatimadhab* (1870); *Parijat Haran ba Debdurgati* (1874). Died after an accidental fall.

NARAYANI, recruited at the same time as Lakkhimoni, when a group broke away from the Great National. Aduri in *Neeldarpan* (1875); Hira in *Bishbriksha* (1878) were among her famous roles during her years at the National Theatre. On her retirement, a benefit performance was arranged by the National Theatre.

NEELMADHAB CHAKROBORTY, actor, director and founder of various theatre companies. His roles included that of Vashishta in *Sitar Bonobas* at the National, (1881), Bramha in *Daksha Yajna* (1883) Advaita in *Chaitanya-Lila* 1884. Active with various theatres—such as the National, City and the Minerva in the 1890s and the early years of the twentieth century.

RADHAGOBINDA KAR (1852–1918), affectionately called Gobi by Amritalal Basu and others, was the eldest son of Durgadas Kar, a well-known doctor in the service of the British government. Durgadas's play *Swarna Srinkhal* was performed in 1855 at Barisal. Radhagobinda was among the three brothers in the family who were connected to the public theatre. Studied medicine abroad for three years and later wrote a large number of books on medicine. The present-day R. G. Kar Medical College and Hospital in Calcutta is named after him. Played the part of Saurindhri in a performance of *Neeldarpan* in the Town Hall in 1873.

RADHAMADHAB KAR (born 1853), known to his peers as Madhu and Madhukar and called Madhu-babu by Binodini, was a younger brother of Radhagobinda Kar. He was skilled in singing, music and acting. Started acting from 1868, specialised in female roles until women were recruited in the theatre. When the original National Theatre split, he joined the Emerald Theatre with a few others, while the rest followed Girish Ghosh

to the Star. He was a Postmaster stationed out of Bengal for many years, but continued to be involved with the theatre upto 1910. Spent his last years with his wife in Benares. Has left behind a fascinating account of the early decades of the theatre, recorded by Bipinbehari Gupta in *Puraton Prasanga*.

RAJKUMARI, known familiarly as Raja, amongst the first group of five women to be employed by the Great National for their play *Sati ki Kalankini* on 19 September 1874. (The Great National had earlier used only male actors for their shows.) In this theatre, Rajkumari's best performance is considered to be that of Kobita in *Ansdo kanon* (1874).

RAMAKRISHNA (1836–1886), also referred to as Thakur, Paramhansadeb, Patitpaban and Mahapurush. Born as Gadadhar Chattopadhyay in Kamarpukur, became the temple priest at Dakhineswar in 1855. His chief disciple, Narendranath, later Swami Vivekananda, founded the Ramkrishna Mission Association in May 1897. The Mission, inspired by him, was a combination of Hindu devotion and social service. The Belur Muth was established in 1898. Girish Ghosh counted amongst his close devotees. Besides *Chaitanya Lila 2*, Sep-tember, 1884, Ramakrishna also went to see *Prabhad charitra* on 14 December 1884; *Brishketu* and *Bibah Bibhrat* on 25 February 1885.

SARATCHANDRA GHOSH (1834–1880), grandson of Ashutosh Deb, figures prominently in Binodini's narratives and in other contemporary accounts as Sarat-babu. Founder of the Bengal Theatre (the third public theatre of Bengal), and the first owner to employ women to perform on stage. Helped by his brother Charuchandra Ghosh, referred to as Charu-babu in Binodini's writing. A skilled *pakhawaj* player, known also for his exceptional horsemanship. Played one of the first Shakuntalas in 1867. Other notable roles: Yayati in *Sbarmishtha* (1873); Jagat Singh in *Durgeshnandini* (1873).

SATYABRATA SAMASRAMI CHATTOPADHYAY (1846–1911), of Patna; studied the Vedas in Benaras. Received the title of Samasrami from the Maharaja of Bundi. Taught at the University of Calcutta.

SISIR KUMAR GHOSH (1840–1911), originally from Jessore. Studied at the Cooltollah Branch school in Calcutta. Started the *Amrita Prababini* in his native village and then moved back to Calcutta where he was founder-editor of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (1868), first in Bangla and later in English. He was regarded as a devout Vaishnav; among his publications were *SriAmiyo Nimai* (Vols 1–3) and *Lord Gourango* (in English). He was

associated with the Bengali theatre from its amateur days. His plays *Naisbo Rupaiya* (1873) and *Bazarer Larai* (1874) were performed at the National.

UPENDRANATH MITRA (died 1933), actor, Binodini's contemporary. Played Yudhistir in *Pandaber Agyatobas* (1883); Vishnu in *Daksha Yajna* (1883); and Suddhwadhana in *Buddhadeb charit*.

Compiled from *Amar Katha*, Soumitra Chattopadhyay, Nirmalya Acharya & Shankar Bhattacharya, eds. (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1987); Ajit Kumar Ghosh, *Bangla Natyabhinayer Itibhas* (Calcutta: Pashchim Banga Rajya Pustak Parshad, 1985); *Amritalal Basur Smriti o Atmasmriti*, Arun Kumar Mitra, ed. (Calcutta: 1985); and, *Bipinbihari Gupta, Puraton Prasanga*, Bishu Mukhopadhyay, ed. (Calcutta: 1966).

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#### BINODINI DASİ (1863–1941)

Bengali public theatre was inaugurated in 1872. In 1873 it began recruiting women from the prostitute quarters of the city to play female roles. Binodini Dasi was one of the first generation of actresses; she joined the theatre at the age of eleven and was very soon recognised as one of its most accomplished performers. Yet she quit the stage at the height of her fame, while still in her early twenties. Her last performance was on 1 January 1887. Like many of her female colleagues, Binodini Dasi was obliged, for most of her life, to depend on patrons or protectors alongside her profession as an actress. In 1883 a young Marwari businessman, smitten by Binodini, offered to build a theatre for the company (the group then working in the National Theatre) if she became his mistress. After considerable internal conflict Binodini agreed, partly in response to the pressures of her colleagues, but primarily because of her commitment to a theatre of their own. In recognition of her decision, the new theatre was to be called B. Theatre. However, when the time came, her colleagues registered it as the Star Theatre, since it was felt that naming a theatre after a 'fallen woman' (*patita*) would not be good for business. Binodini refused several lucrative offers from the businessman and continued on the stage. She became a sensation in the title roles in a spate of Bhakti plays written and produced by Girishchandra Ghosh (1844–1912) in the eighties. After she left the theatre she lived as a co-wife with a scion of one of the raja-families of Calcutta. She lived with him for twenty-five years until his death, when she had to leave his house. Binodini Dasi's writings began to appear from 1885 onwards under the auspices of Girishchandra, and continued (to be published) until 1925.