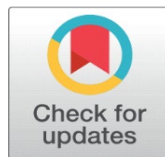
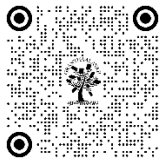


BINODINI DEVI'S 'AMAR KATHA': AN ACTRESS LIFE THROUGH HER AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Arundhuti Bhattacharjee  

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of History, Yogoda Satsanga Palpara Mahavidyalaya, East Medinipur West Bengal, India



Corresponding Author

Arundhuti Bhattacharjee,
bhattacharjeearundhuti@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Binodini Debi became one of the first professional actresses when she began working in theaters in 1874, she was part of the first generation of female recruits who were paid to work in theaters. Binodini Debi was brought to the world in 1863 in Kolkata. She was the main acclaimed entertainer of Bengali theatre and one of the incomparable greats who walked the path of Bengali theatre. She was introduced to the bleeding world in cash light locales in Kolkata and was a prostitute until Girish Chandra Ghosh took her to mainstream Bengali theatre. Binodini is by no means a feminist. She brings a feminist perspective to her portrayal of women and their experiences and to her works. It describes Binodini's writing process and about the exploitations of Bengali theatre.

Keywords: Bengali Theatre, Educated Bengali, Bhadrolok, Mancha, Realism, Neel Darpan, Jatra

1. INTRODUCTION

Binodini Debi, a tawaif, debuted at twelve in 1874 at Calcutta's Public Performance Centre, guided by Girish Chandra Ghosh. Her career coincided with the rise of proscenium-style venues in Bengal. Over twelve years, she portrayed eighty roles, from Pramila to Kapalkundala. She authored one of South Asia's first theater biographies, emphasizing betrayal's recurrent theme. Her sudden retirement remains unexplained. Notably, she attracted the attention of Ramakrishna in 1884. Binodini revolutionized Bengali stage makeup, blending European and local techniques (Murshid 2012). Her legacy marks her as a pioneering figure in Bengali theater, shaping its evolution and blending cultural influences.

1) Life of Binodini Dasi

Binodini Dasi, also known as Nati Binodini, was a renowned theatrical figure mentored by Ganga Baiji in music. Her debut on December 2, 1874, marked a groundbreaking moment in public stage performances, captivating audiences with roles like 'Killing the Adversary' at a young age. Over twelve years, she portrayed over ninety roles in eighty plays across major stages like National, Great National, Bengal, and Star. Despite her significant contributions, she faced setbacks, including the loss of her theater, the Star Theatre, to colleagues who rebranded it. Binodini excelled in portraying both Puranic and fictional characters with equal skill in serious and comedic dramas. Her versatility was evident in roles like Pramila and Ayesha, showcasing her adaptability and virtuosity. Scholars of her time, including Chatterjee and Edwin Arnold, lauded her performances, while Sri Ramakrishna's visit to her backstage in 1884 left a lasting impact on devotees. Binodini's influence extended beyond her performances; she introduced sophisticated stage makeup techniques blending European and local styles, setting a new standard in the industry. She remains a celebrated figure in theatrical history, known as the 'moon of Star Theater' and the 'flower of the original stage' leaving an indelible mark on Bengali theater.

Binodini Dasi's later life saw the publication of her autobiography *Amar Katha* in 1913, a significant landmark in Bengali theater literature. The memoir delves into the history of early Bengali theater, Binodini's theatrical sensibilities, and her relationships with mentors and colleagues. Despite facing exploitation, she maintained respect for her patron. She spent her final days quietly in Kolkata, passing away peacefully in 1941 [1].

2) The early English actresses and the emergence of the native women artists

The emergence of native actresses on the Bengali stage marked a significant shift in the theatrical landscape. Prior to the late 18th century, male actors often portrayed female characters. However, the rise of realism in Bengali theater coincided with the inclusion of actresses, challenging traditional gender roles. Initially recruited from marginalized backgrounds, these actresses played a pivotal role in shaping the theater economy and challenging patriarchal norms. Their presence not only diversified narratives but also transformed the theater into a space of social production. Figures like Binodini Dasi symbolized this transition, performing in the new proscenium-style theaters and challenging Western ideals of sensuality by portraying idealized women. Their narratives, as depicted in Binodini's autobiography *Amar Katha* shed light on the complexities of their lives, highlighting struggles with exploitation and societal expectations. These actresses became central to the burgeoning theater scene, attracting audiences from the newly educated middle class and contributing to the cultural fabric of Bengal. Their stories reflect the broader socio-cultural shifts of the time, where theater served as a platform for redefining gender norms and asserting cultural identity in the face of colonial influence.

3) The newly built nation and the actresses

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the emergence of a new theater in colonial India absorbed vernacular traditions, incorporating elements of music, pageantry, and folklore. This theatrical form departed from Victorian spectacle, embracing narratives that depicted a dualistic view of harlot-entertainers. Patriotic efforts aimed to reframe the social roles of fallen women, promoting marriage and fictional character portrayals. Actresses began embodying idealized roles of

sacrifice and submission, reflecting nationalist ideals of the Indian woman. Through characters like Sita and Kapalkundala, they exemplified melodious sacrifice, aligning with nationalist narratives. Despite their prominence, actresses were relegated to second-class status, viewed primarily as entertainers until the 1940s and the rise of new IPTA actresses.

4) Binodini: A Woman Artist in 19th Century Bengali Theatre

Born in 1862 in Calcutta, Binodini Dasi embarked on her theatrical journey at twelve, training under Ganga Baiji before gracing the colonial public stage from 1874 to 1886 [3]. Her autobiography, *Amar Katha* vividly portrays her impoverished upbringing on Cornwallis Street and her early exposure to music and theater. Despite familial struggles, Binodini's talent blossomed, with her notable performances in iconic plays like *Chaitanya*. This era witnessed a burgeoning nationalist sentiment, with theater becoming a platform for Hindu revivalism under figures like Girish Chandra Ghosh. Binodini's involvement in significant productions, such as *Neel Darpan* contributed to political discourse and social change. The staging of *Neel Darpan* in Lucknow in 1875 marked a pivotal moment, sparking widespread debate and British censorship. Binodini's legacy lies not only in her theatrical prowess but also in her role as a catalyst for social and political change during a transformative period in Indian history. Through her autobiography and theatrical contributions, she immortalized her journey as a pioneering woman artist in 19th-century Bengali theater.

5) A critical turn in the theater history of India: The staging of Neel Darpan

The staging of *Neel Darpan* marked a pivotal moment in Indian theater history. Written by Deenbandhu Mitra in 1859, the play shed light on the oppression of indigo farmers in Bengal. Binodini Dasi's performance of the play in 1875 at Lucknow's Chhatramandi garnered significant attention. The play's portrayal of social injustice resonated deeply with audiences, sparking discussions and igniting nationalist sentiments among the Bhadrak community. However, the British government's response was swift, passing the Sensational Exhibition Act in 1876 to censor such provocative plays. This led to a shift in focus towards Hindu mythological texts in theater, reflecting the evolving socio-political landscape of colonial India.

Neel Darpan became a symbol of resistance against colonial oppression, inspiring the burgeoning nationalist movement. Its impact reverberated across the country, contributing to the cultural awakening of the Indian populace. Through the medium of theater, issues of social justice and national identity were brought to the forefront, shaping the discourse of the time [2]. As Indian theater transitioned from rural to metropolitan settings, it became a powerful tool for social change, reflecting the aspirations and struggles of the Indian people. *Neel Darpan* remains a landmark in Indian theater history, symbolizing the intersection of art, activism, and national identity during a transformative period in Indian history.

6) Binodini's form of acting

Binodini Dasi's impact on Bengal's professional theater was profound, challenging the male-dominated theatrical landscape. Starting her career early, she honed her skills through self-study and later formal training under Girish Chandra Ghosh. In the diverse theatrical milieu of Calcutta, she synthesized traditional and Western acting techniques. Binodini's innovations extended beyond acting, revolutionizing makeup and costumes. Her autobiography highlights the influence

of English actors on local theater, underscoring her pivotal role in shaping the evolving theatrical traditions of Bengal.

7) Actors as laborers: Binodini and Star Theatre

In her autobiography, Binodini highlights the laborious conditions faced by actors, advocating for fair compensation. She played a pivotal role in establishing the Star Theater in Calcutta in 1883, breaking away from Minerva and partnering with industrialist Gurmukh Ray. Though initially named B Theatre, it became the Star Theatre. Binodini's departure from the stage at 23 is detailed in her 1913 autobiography, expressing disillusionment with mentors and peers. Through her writings, she offers insights into nineteenth-century Bengal's diverse cultural landscape and the struggles of women in the performing arts, contributing significantly to the understanding of Calcutta's pioneering theater history.

8) Understanding History: A Reading of Binodini Dasi's Autobiography

Binodini Dasi's autobiographical works, *Amar Katha (My Story, 1912)* and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban (My Life as an Entertainer, 1924-25)*, provide a poignant narrative of her life as one of the earliest professional actresses in nineteenth-century Calcutta. Despite being marginalized in her time, these texts offer valuable insights into the socio-cultural landscape of colonial Bengal. Binodini's portrayal of her struggles against patriarchal and colonial oppression, as well as her complex identity as both actress and woman, challenges dominant narratives. Despite facing betrayal and exploitation, Binodini's dedication to her art and her attempts to gain social respectability through the establishment of the Star Theater reflect her resilience and commitment to her craft. However, she ultimately faced disillusionment and abandonment, highlighting the precarious position of actresses in society. Binodini's biography serves as a powerful testament to the exploitation and betrayal endured by actresses like her, both by society at large and by those within the theater community who claimed to support them.

Binodini's narrative illuminates the intersectionality of gender, class, and colonialism in Bengali society. Her self-portrayals shed light on the challenges faced by women, particularly those in the performing arts, in asserting their agency and navigating societal expectations. Despite her talents and contributions to Bengali theater, she was often relegated to the margins of society, viewed through the lens of patriarchal and nationalist discourses that limited her autonomy and agency. Her experiences reflect the broader struggles of women in colonial Bengal, who grappled with restrictive gender norms and societal expectations. Her biography underscores the need to critically examine historical narratives and challenge dominant discourses to uncover the voices and experiences of marginalized individuals, offering valuable insights into the complexities of identity, power, and resistance in colonial Bengal.

Binodini Dasi's journey epitomizes a relentless battle against societal stigma and patriarchal norms. Despite her efforts to elevate her social standing by abandoning her career and embracing domesticity, Binodini found herself confined within the boundaries of a patriarchal nationalist discourse that denied her rightful place as a respected woman. Trained in the language of the burgeoning middle class culture, she yearned to embody the emancipatory ideals associated with the new women of colonial Bengal. However, even after living for decades with her patron, she never attained the status of a respectable wife, facing expulsion from his household upon his death. Forced to return to the marginalized existence of a fallen woman Binodini's attempts to transcend her circumstances through marriage and domesticity were thwarted by societal rejection, revealing the entrenched inequalities perpetuated by patriarchal structures.

Her spiritual awakening, catalyzed by the blessings of the Bengali saint Ramakrishna, provided her with a newfound path to redemption from her life of stigma. Embracing the teachings of bhakti, she sought solace and liberation from the hardships of her past, eventually renouncing her theatrical career. Despite societal skepticism, Binodini's spiritual journey offered her a means of reclaiming her dignity and challenging the societal norms that had marginalized her. Her autobiography, characterized by bold self-expression and feminist resistance, serves as a poignant critique of patriarchal constructions of femininity and offers an alternative perspective on the historical narrative. In reevaluating Binodini's life and writings, contemporary readers are urged to recognize her as a trailblazer who defied societal expectations and paved the way for the recognition of female public performers. As *Nati Binodini* she transcended her label as a fallen woman, leaving a legacy that continues to inspire and empower female performers today (Romesh 2006).

2. CONCLUSION

Binodini's multifaceted body of work reflects a remarkable convergence of creativity, intellect, and lived experience. Spanning genres from novels to radio plays, her oeuvre bears the imprint of her unique thematic concerns and stylistic innovations. As a feminist writer, Binodini's keen insight into women's struggles and her empathetic portrayal of their experiences distinguish her as a literary luminary. Beyond her literary contributions, Binodini's enduring legacy extends to her role as a pioneering figure in Manipuri literature and art, inspiring future generations of writers and artists to chart new frontiers of creativity and social change. In essence, Binodini's influence transcends her time, leaving an indelible mark on the literary landscape of Manipur.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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