Actress Stories: Binodini and Amal Allana

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In Calcutta, the actress made her entrance on the stage 50 years before she did in any other presidency in colonial India. For the last 30 years, a by-product of the colonialist imagination has been the popular performance genre the ‘actress story’, performed in numerous versions in Calcutta and in the jatra (repertory theatre), which tours the surrounding countryside of Bengal. The ‘actress stories’ present a moralistic and didactic treatment of the actresses who appeared on the Calcutta stage in the nineteenth century. The performances actually serve to sanctify both the moral role of the actress and that of the nineteenth-century colonial theatre model which grew up under the aegis of an intelligentsia trained in the English colonial system. The genre, which once performed the roles of several actresses, finally came to focus on the central actress figure of the nineteenth century: Binodini Dasi (1863–1941). Though not the first actress on the colonial stage, she belonged to the first generation of actresses and in that sense became the first female star and a cult figure in Indian theatre.

Binodini Dasi joined the public theatre in 1873 when she was eleven years old, one year after they started recruiting actresses. She was very soon recognised as one of its most accomplished performers. She became a sensation in the title roles in a run of plays written and produced by Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844–1913). Ghosh, dramatist, director, actor and manager, was one of the most influential theatre figures of his time, almost single-handedly setting up the Calcutta Public Theatre. In Binodini’s ‘story’ he plays a patriarchal role: as a benefactor and father figure at the centre of her life in the theatre.

Despite her success, at the height of her fame, Binodini quit the stage in 1887. Like many of her female colleagues, for most of her life she depended 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 if she became his mistress. Binodini agreed, partly in response to the pressure of her colleagues and partly because of her commitment to a theatre of her own. In recognition of her decision, the new theatre was to be called ‘B’. 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’ would not be good for business.

Binodini’s writings were published from 1885 onwards and continued to be published until 1925. Her ‘story’ as it is played on the stage, however, while it has appeared in many different versions – including the jatra performance Nati Binodini, which, first performed in 1973, has more than 5,000 performances to its credit – is reduced to one kind of overarching narrative of ‘saintly sinner’. Despite claiming to speak in Binodini’s own voice and to use her autobiographical writings as their main point of reference, her ‘actress story’ is presented as her rejection of the theatre on moral grounds. This is not the story of a consummate actress, but of a woman who is a martyr to the stage. If she assumes a ‘genteel’ or ‘lady-like’ persona, it is not because of her skill and exceptional acting talent, but because of her apologetic and confessional voice and her final penance and atonement, which lead to spiritual redemption. The moral message for the actress is to leave her acting career and do penance for her life in the theatre. The ‘story’ thus constructs a pattern between the admonitory and the exemplary: Bindoini remains at the centre of the discourse as an idealised model, at the same time as she displaces other actress stories. Actual acting achievements by Bindoini, or by any of her contemporaries, are deliberately erased or trivialised.

‘How [not] to act’

What were Binodini’s achievements on the stage which are trivialised and generalised through the ‘proxy’ actress who performs her story? Binodini Dasi was the first actress who could command a pivotal role in the middle-class colonial theatre. Generally, actresses were taken on without having any influence over the theatres in which they played. By contrast, Binodini emerged as a powerful woman determined to negotiate her own professional identity. She began a long and protracted struggle for space and identity – socially, culturally and professionally. Her audience appeal empowered her to insist on top billing and she fought for the right to a theatre in her own name. She could