

Binodini Dasi: An actress in the drama of public modernity in India

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It is hard to accept (though, I suppose, not surprising) that the non-Bengali reader has actually had to wait for close to a century for a full translation of these two quite stunning autobiographical texts by one of the first professional actresses in modern Indian theatre. Histories of literature and indeed of the arts more generally, are focused on the work of upper-caste male (and occasionally female) artists; canonical criticism has engaged primarily with the world as it took shape around them and their kind; scholarly and critical mindsets have been tuned to recognise and value the drama of those subjects. Little surprise, therefore, that a text by a non-Brahmin working woman from the 'prostitute quarters' of late 19th century Calcutta should lie forgotten, or that when it surfaces, it does so in hazardous waters.

Translations like these are among the many everyday reminders of the impoverishment of our elitist scholarship. Binodini herself is aware of the problem when she writes in 1912: 'let them not read it who will despise or ridicule this insignificant piece of writing. Let them refrain from sprinkling salt to further irritate the deepest wound in a woman's life' (p.104). And later: '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' (p.107). This is a text aware that it must await a reader who will recognise its value and bring it to life.

No small part of the achievement of Rimli Bhattacharya's thoughtful and erudite translation and editorial framing (the introduction, notes, history of the public theatre, photographs, appendices) is the alertness to the challenge posed by this extraordinary text. In a serious sense therefore, there are three books under review here: two by the 19th century writer and one by a contemporary of ours. All three, I suggest, are of critical importance to a renewal of our understanding of Indian modernity.

Binodini Dasi was 11 when she began work in the public theatre in Calcutta in 1873 and 'retired' when she was only in her mid-20s. Yet, during those few years, she played over eighty major roles, worked in close association with the leading playwrights and directors of the time, and was instrumental in the setting up of the legendary Star Theatre. Indeed, by the 1880s, she had already become something of a celebrity. People thronged to see her on stage. Theatre directors spoke of her work as a rare and happy combination of talent, intelligence and diligent professionalism, often adding that her talent quite belied her humble origins. Men offered fabulous sums to have her move into their 'protection'. Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the late 19th century spiritual figure, not only visited the theatre to see Binodini at work, but also blessed her after the performance. (It was a blessing-cum-promise-of-purification that would haunt her for the rest of her life). *My Story* was written in 1912-13 at the request of Girishchandra Ghosh, Binodini's mentor, 'father of the modern Bengali theatre', and a leading intellectual of the time. He hoped that the process would help bring under control her unruly heart and contain her

pain. The text she produced did not live up to his expectations. *My Life as an Actress* (1925) would perhaps have better fitted them.

Binodini Dasi died in 1941 at the age of 79. Much of the significance of Binodini's life, and indeed that of her career as an actress, arises from the fact that it coincides with the consolidation of the public theatre in Bengal. The term 'public' here combines the sense of a theatre that was open to the public at large (as against private performances that took place in temples or zamindari households) as well as that of the theatre -- and indeed literature and the arts generally -- as a key institution in the shaping of a new civil-societal public sphere in Bengal. Its charge was the envisioning, and indeed the making, of this sphere and a cognate public. It was a theatre, therefore, that was concerned as much with the pleasure that would draw and persuade its audience, as with the intellectual, moral and aesthetic improvement of national character. The best known figures of the time were involved in the process, and clearly regarded themselves as part of a cultural vanguard. For example, Girishchandra Ghosh, not only wrote plays and adapted the novels of contemporaries such as Bankimchandra Chatterjee for the stage, but also wrote on women's education, *bhakti*, the relationship between religion and physics and so on. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, who had been on the committee of the Bengal Theatre, had resigned in protest in 1873 when it was decided to get women from the prostitute quarters to act female roles, but continued to be closely associated with it through his friend Michael Madhusudhan Dutt. Binodini reports that Vivekananda himself frequently graced her performances.

Binodini's role in this larger project was critical. 'I must acknowledge quite openly,' Girishchandra Ghosh wrote, 'that *I am totally indebted to her multi-faceted talents: plays such as my *Chaitanya Lila*, *Buddhadeb*, *Bilawamangal* and *Nala-Damyanti* 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...[the performance was] illuminated with such purity that it did not seem as if she were acting; her performance appeared to be *a real event*' (p. 208; emphases added). 'Her Chaitanya,' the critic Shambhunath Mukhopadhyay observed, 'showed a wonderful mastery of the 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'. As for her depiction of Bilasini Karforma, 'the woman graduate', it 'exhibited so as to say an iron grip on the queer phenomenon, the Girl of the period as she appears in Bengali society' (p.100). Binodini is repeatedly described as bringing these characters 'to life'. It is as if her acting was the alchemy whereby the disparate dimensions of the new ideological configuration were transformed into an image of such sterling quality that it not only carried conviction, but also compelled belief. As an aesthetic achievement, this is similar in scope, it seems to me, to the Renaissance invention of the vanishing point in perspectival art, the invisible yet controlling narrative of the 19th century realist fiction, the modern subject-agent or indeed the rational, consenting, citizen of the liberal polity.*

The tribunes cited, however, open out onto two further issues. First, the persistent sense of amazement that despite her lowly origins, despite her lack of breeding as it were, Binodini is able to enter these 'lofty' roles and recreate them in a manner that is not simply realistic, but uplifting. Shambhunath Mukhopadhyay calls it a miracle; Girishchandra Ghosh attributes it to her completely forgetting herself. The more interesting issue, however, is that of Binodini's inspired feel for the pulse of the audience.

She is praised, we should note, not simply for acting well in some abstract way, but for *bringing alive* a Chaitanya that the people ‘adored’, the queer figure of the woman graduate ‘as she appears in Bengali society’, and so on. Both these astute critics draw our attention to what is in fact happening: the *event*, the *miracle*, is the fine-tuned; indeed sublime (in the full Kantian sense of the term) recreation of figure and world for a historical audience. *My Story* is in part an elaboration of what went into this feat. We find there, a textured sense of the dedication, the untiring industry, the erasure of her unworthy self, the rigorous disciplines of body and intellect that were necessary to ‘bring alive’, to give bodily form as it were, to the dramatic conflicts, the personae, the sentiment, the devotional fervour, that would be the very soul of the new public sphere. As Walter Benjamin points out in his famous essay on translation, and as Binodini demonstrates, the creation of life is not a question of biology but of history. To create life (or to translate/modulate modernity in such a manner as to compel belief from an Indian audience?) is also to be finely attuned to the visible and invisible specificities of the historical moment of the Bengal Renaissance.

However, there is another side to Binodini’s autobiography. If the theatre was able to conjure a ‘life’ for an Indian people, it was also an institution that consistently, and in many different modes, debarred the outcast(e) ‘prostitute’ binodini from that very ‘life’. A multitude of questions arise. Let us ask but one: what are the implications of a life-story written by one who is debarred from life? Well, for one thing it creates dissonances that put into jeopardy the very genre of autobiography. We might sense this in Girishchandra Ghosh’s unease with *My Story*. It was, he felt, too personal, too bitter a social critique, not concerned enough with acting as profession/skill/technique. Binodini’s text -- as indeed her person -- is at once excessive and inadequate; the authority of the norm against which it is measured beyond question. This unease may also be found in the continued critical observation that the narrative does not flow well, that it is a patchwork, that her angst is altogether too ontological and so on. Ghosh, we remember, attributes the problem to Binodini’s ‘unruly heart’. Indeed, Binodini herself is sometimes haunted by the fear that something may be wrong with *her* (though what is remarkable is her confidence in her position and the repeated protest against being pathologised). Indeed, if, as Gramsci suggested, the task of the cultural historian is to make an ‘inventory of the self’, then the genius of the autobiographical mode -- which in some sense it shares with history -- is that it makes this inventory, yet presents it not as list but as event. As something that *happens* [to me]. And it is in the recounting of exactly what happened, that we have access to hope, expectation, and disappointment -- in other words, to the dimensions of meaning and significance that constitute the historical subject.

The irony is that while the ‘event’ in Binodini’s famous performances is something that *happened* (and this would hold true also in the dutiful accounting of canonical autobiographies and elite histories), the event in *My Story* is the opposite: a *not-happening*. What she hoped for, the expected, did not happen. It is, in other words, an event in which several strands in the history of modern India -- genealogies of sexuality, the aesthetic, the public sphere, as also of class, caste and gender -- are condensed into an autobiographical moment that stages them as deception, and further, as betrayal. ‘The talented, the wise and the learned write in order to educate people, to do good to others. I have written for my own consolidation, perhaps for some unfortunate woman who taken

in by deception has stumbled on to the path to hell' (p.107). Such an event, far from being a testimony to the contract of modernity, is that very contract staged as breach of promise. The betrayal is at once personal: 'I wondered afterwards, was all their love and affection only a show of words in order to get some work out of me?' (Pp.89-90); it is social: 'utterly despicable and degraded in our status in society' (p.104); it is ontological: 'My restless heart asks time and again, "what is my work in this world?...in which part of the Lord's scheme have I ever been of any use?"' (p.56). Her scepticism grows out of reflection on her experience and involves a loss of faith in both man and god: '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 to you from beginning to end. If you listen you would understand how unbelief has only deepened and how impossible it would be to uproot it' (p.60). Her worn-out body now lies abandoned 'in some corner of the world in a state of torpor' (p.59).

There is much to say for Rimli Bhattacharya's admirable translation -- it really warrants a separate review. Of course, not knowing Bangla, I am in no position to conduct the acid tests of how close it is to the original, where Rimli has made a mistake, where I could have done better and so on. But frankly, I am of the school that feels that the test of a translation is not merely the pleasure of one who can read the original in any case. I am enthusiastic about this translation because of the intellectual seriousness with which it addresses the task of making this historical text available to a contemporary reader. I have enjoyed the care that has been lavished on detail: the obvious attention to tropes, to diction, to the logic of sentences, to the mechanics of editing and, beyond that, to all the subtleties that combine to make the agile and historically grounded English into which she has translated this text. As for the outwork: though there is much in Rimli's editorial presentation (the obscuring of the caste issue, the constraining of these autobiographies into the frame of theatre history, the recounting of theatre history as the activities of the *bhadralok*) that I would take issue with, I also hope that she has set the standard now for serious translation. I hope that we will see more texts presented with the documentary and critical framing that enables an informed reading of a text from another language.

References

Rimli Bhattacharya, ed. & trans., *Binodini Dasi: My Story and My Life as an Actress*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998