

**THEATRE AND SOCIETY:THE RESPONSE OF BENGALI SOCIETY TO THE
ACTRESS IN PUBLIC THEATRE IN THE LATE 19TH TO EARLY 20TH CENTURY**

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With the introduction of actresses in public theatre in the 1870s, a new dimension was added to Bengali society. Theatre had already become the pass-time of the rich and famous of Calcutta, and other important towns of Bengal, since the 1850s. Influenced by English theatre, these Bengali theatre groups performed in the private houses of the elite *bhadraloks* of Bengal, in front of invited guests, while the actors themselves came from middle-class families. But from 1872, public theatre had started, with anyone being allowed entry in the audience on purchase of a ticket. The exclusivity of background was lost, even among the performers. Unlike in England, where it took 84 years after public theatre was established to bring in actresses, in Calcutta, women joined the public stage only after a year. This was immediately perceived as a threat by the *bhadralok* society.

The actresses were recruited from the children of prostitutes, those of whom had some talent in singing and dancing. They were little more than children, between the ages of eight and sixteen when they came into the theatre. While they could not have all been practicing prostitutes, there is, however, no doubt that most of them came from families which lived in areas of Calcutta which had achieved the notoriety as 'prostitute areas'. It is also true that most of these young girls were sent to work at the theatre by their mothers, in order to supplement their incomes. But prostitution was not a new phenomenon, nor was it ever considered in society as a threat. In fact, over the ages, literature has often celebrated the

public woman for her accomplishments, and her presence in the societal fringes was acknowledged (and even revered) for sustaining art and culture. It is true that, by the 19th century, the public women had been transformed from the bearer of culture to a 'dangerous outcast'¹, yet they still had a designated place in the social periphery, and were never considered to be a threat to the 'spiritual domain'² which the inner sanctum of the home was. The *andarmahal*, where tradition and values which were considered sacred had preserved from the marauding influence of the public domain, now faced danger from these public women.

A new sensibility about propriety and morality had been developing since the beginning of the 18th century, with the spread of education which had been influenced by Christian morality and Victorian values. One of the first areas to be regulated by the new normative ideas circulating over the century was the family, household and women. It was believed that women were the protectors and the perpetrators of the newly formulated norms of behaviour, and therefore, there had to be total compliance by them. Any transgression or show of independence in thought and action was considered a threat to the social order. In this article, I will try to explore why the actress was considered a threat to the moral values of society as perceived in the contemporary writings, and also examine the different remedies that were explored.

The Threats:

The greatest danger as perceived by society was the fact that the youth were being corrupted by visits to the 'den of vices'. Not only were the actors who came from a middle-class background coming in close contact with the disreputable actresses, but the young boys were being lured away from the classrooms and homes to the theatres. There was trepidation in the newspapers regarding the new step. Some editorials said that since actresses had not been used for so long, Bengali theatre should step cautiously, since society was not yet ready. They also felt that the managers should not "stoop down to the level of the *jatrawalas*" (*Hindu Patriot*); one said that it was a tragedy that gentlemen were being seen with prostitutes (*Bharat Samskar*). Bipin Chandra Pal wrote in his autobiography that in the Brahma Samaj, the rejection of the use of girls from prostitute families as actresses was very severe. There was even a protest against the presence of some Brahma ladies in the audience, because it was unseemly that they should see the acting of prostitutes (*Sadharani*). Though there was an improvement in the standard of performance, it could not compensate for the loss of moral

uprightness in society. Monomohon Basu, in *Madhyastha*, said that it was a sad time when, instead of concentrating on social reforms for women, society was enjoying the performance of prostitutes on stage. It was especially tragic that the capital city should set such a bad example.

The families were directly threatened, since those who were bitten by the 'acting bug' totally neglected their homes, stayed out late nights in the company of women of questionable character, took money out of the family businesses, and became social pariahs. The case of Amarendranath Datta was a classic one. His biography, written by his nephew Ramapati Datta, is a tale of the life of sin – He left his studies and, after his father's death, squandered away his share of family fortune on the expenses of not only the classic theatre he established, but also on the daily necessities and extravagances of the actors and actresses he patronized in his family garden house. He was also so engrossed in his mistress Tarasundari that he neglected his wife and family. He was gradually excommunicated by his social peers.³

Protests against the actress were articulated in other ways too. Not only were they a threat to society, but to religious worship and to the national movement as well. To illustrate the former, a letter written in *The Statesmen* in 1887 may be quoted: "No doubt religious dramas...are calculated to elevate the human character, but when we consider the vicious and immoral persons who represent these characters, we are overpowered by a feeling of disgust. It has been suggested more than once that women of the town should not be allowed to act in those theatres, but I regret to state that they are still freely engaged and allowed to personate such holy and sublime characters as Prohlad and Chaitanya without evoking any protest. These women are so many pitfalls for our young men, and should be removed from the theatre as speedily as possible."⁴ The frivolity of theatre was lamented by the critics, who spoke of Art being sacrificed for commerce, especially with the introduction of the new style of management and advertising in the wake of the entry of Parsi theatre techniques.⁵ Much later, in the 1930s, there was another criticism leveled against theatre as hampering the national movement. A proposed visit by the Minerva Theatre to Seraganj, organized by the Zamindar Birendra Nath Roy, was opposed by an agitating public. The correspondent of *Advance* wrote that the people believed that, in the view of the grim struggle that the country had thrown itself into, it was not the proper time to be indulging in such amusements as were positively calculated to dissipate national energies. A Boycott notice was signed, despite the passing of the Police Act 30, and the performance was stopped.⁶

In allowing the actress to become independent, there was the fear of a sense of liberalization dawning upon all women, since middle-class women were a part of the audience and efforts were always made by the theatres to lure women by free gifts and safety of separate seats. This fear was never openly articulated, but lay nascent in many of the protests. What was open was the refusal within the theatre to grant any kind of authority to the actress by the manager, director and actor, in the form of position or money. Some actresses, by virtue of their acting and singing prowess, were able to command praise in reviews and adulation from the audience, but any attempts to establish themselves as competitors to their male counterparts were immediately crushed – for example, Binodini’s sacrifices to obtain money for the building of the Star theatre were not rewarded by her mentor Girish Chandra Ghosh, who refused to allow the theatre to be named after her; or the lack of support that Sukumari Datta faced when she launched the Hindoo Female theatre, for which she wrote the play *Apurba Sati*.

The Remedies:

The success of Bengali theatre wherever actresses were introduced was phenomenal when compared to National theatre, where men still performed women’s roles. It gradually dawned on the managements of theatres that the actress had come to stay. But the outraged outbursts in all the leading newspapers and journals regarding the “immoral theatre”⁷ led some theatre lovers to attempt to reform and justify the actress-in-theatre, both from within and without the theatre itself.

The actress was seen as the site of reform. Some men involved with theatre in the late 19th century were driven by the philosophy that theatre could be more than entertainment, and could be more meaningfully the medium of change in the lives of these women. As Bipin Chandra Pal puts in, “Those were the days of social reform and political freedom, and the stage fully represented the intellectual and moral currents flowing over the educated Bengali community.”⁸ Men like Upendranath Das and Girish Ghosh thought that since Bengali public stage could only bring in women from the prostitute quarters as actresses (the theatre was shunned by ‘respectable’ women), it could, in addition to entertaining the public, also “save” the actress from the status of “fallen” women.

The actresses were faced with insurmountable problems – they were not ladies, but they had to act like them. They had to be literate – to be able to read, understand and memorize scores of plays. They had to cope with the audience backstage, even face violence, while financial remuneration was not enough as compensation. As late as 1900, the defensive note is discernible in the writings of Girish Ghosh. He implores the enlightened men of Bengal to offer constructive suggestions rather than simply criticize or express disgust. He pointed out that the theatre owners did not use prostitutes out of any specific motive, but because no ‘respectable’ women would come forward to join the theatre. He argued that this was a universal problem, and that even in Europe at one time, only prostitutes were available for the theatre. In reply to a letter written by the head-master of a school to the Editor of Rangalay, Girish Ghosh wrote that the allegation against actresses, that they were enticing young boys away from their studies by leering at them or making overtures from the stage, was false. For a good performance, it was imperative that the actresses face the audience – and if an impressionable youth was impressed by the beauty and allure of an actress, then the audience was to blame, not the actress. If they had been really impure, how could they have performed the purest characters so realistically, and how could their art have been blessed by Sri Ramkrishna? 9

For Girish, this was not simply a defence of the moral uprightness of the public theatre. It was an indicator that the performance in a theatre was the end product of a process which an actress underwent, which the audience unconsciously appreciated without realizing what a monumental achievement had been made. The end product was so refined that it would be petty, to say the least, to stick to preconceived notions about traditional middle-class morality being at stake, due to contact with fallen women, and not appreciate the total transformation of the rough diamond. Not only Girish, but even among the Brahma leaders, there were some like Sundari Mohon Das who, in the words of Bipin Chandra Pal, “welcomed it as opening an honourable occupation for the class of women from whom our actresses were being drawn.”¹⁰ Kshetra Nath Bhattacharjee wrote in Education Gazette, prior to 1873, “The more such theatres are started, acting will be improved and dramas composed in competition...Some of the prostitutes are trying to receive education. If a few of such educated women are secured, happy consequences will outweigh any mischief done.” If educated actresses could be introduced, the perceived threat to the middle-class morality might be reduced, with the actresses seeking identity not from ‘acquiring a protector *Babu*’, but from perfection of the

art of acting, and the power derived from the adulation of an adoring public. Another reform that the Brahmo Samaj wanted to experiment with was organizing the marriages of the actresses, in order to redeem them from their life of sin. They decided to start with the most famous actress of the time, Sukumari Datta, who was also one of the first five. Sukumari (Golap) was one of the first actresses on stage, and a star when she was married off by Upendranath Das to an aspiring actor. Das wanted to bring an aura of respectability to the theatre, and remove the stigma of an actress. The first step the promising actress had to take was to give up acting, since a respectable married woman could not be associated with the theatre in any way. She started living with her husband Goshtoh Behari Datta in a slum, since he had been excommunicated by his family for marrying an actress. A daughter was born to Sukumari. But tragedy struck when Upendranath Das had to quit theatre due to health reasons, and left for England for treatment. Goshtoh, who had been slowly been falling into depression due to the rejection from his family, now could not face the music alone. He fled to England after Das, leaving Sukumari in deep distress and penury. She had been deprived of her one source of income, in the name of respectability. It is to her credit that she had the presence of mind to form a theatrical group, Hindo Female theatre, and write a play, *Apurba Sati*, to sustain herself and her daughter. However, this was not a success, and she ultimately rejoined the public theatre.

Religious and mythological plays were used to cleanse the image of the public theatre. To remove the stigma on the actresses, the presence of women was encouraged. With the staging of mythological plays – combining sentiments of heroism, devotion, and love – women, who had until then stayed away from the theatre, now started coming in large numbers. Theatre received a new certificate, and became a source of entertainment for the whole family.¹¹ That the “much condemned public theatre, the supposed haunt of all the rejected elements of society, the truant young men and fallen women, could also become a centre for religious teachings and preaching, knowledge and enlightenment, moral and spiritual welfare of common man” was established. The *samkirtan* on stage sent a wave of enthusiasm among the Bengalis, both in the city and outside, and women from respectable families, who were still a little shy of the theatre, began to come to Star.¹² Besides, nobody could deny the important role that patriotic plays played in inspiring the Bengalis to rise from their mental apathy towards the loss of freedom under a colonial rule, and to take an active part in the movement to win back that freedom.

The theatre greatly improved its image when the great reformer Sri Ramkrishna, on his two visits to the Star theatre, was so moved by Binodini's performance that he fell into a trance, and later visited the greenroom to bless her. Not only was theatre and theatrical performances raised from the stigma of derision and neglect, it was a great opportunity for actresses to claim liberation from their 'past' profession and background. Although most of them were overwhelmed by the action and felt it did remove some of the stigma attached to their profession, the lack of acceptance from society at large troubled most of the actresses. Even the greatly successful actress Binodini did not capitalize on the blessings, and soon after left the stage to go into anonymity, giving up the chance to create a new horizon for actresses to embrace retirement as a legend. Even after the passing away of the saint, theatre continued to receive the blessings from his consort, Mother Sarada Devi, who blessed another actress, Niroda Sundari.

Almost all the critics of the public theatre, and all men associated with theatre and writing on it, felt obligated to make some apology for being associated with the actresses – 'fallen women'. While speaking of the excellence of the performances, the intense dedication of these 'despised' women to better their art, the deep appreciation of well-established and respected men for inspiring acting – all articles and books started with a regret that their family and societal associations had to be severed, due to their love for the theatre and their closeness with the actresses. Monmohon Goswami finds it very unfair that a young man, who associates himself with the theatre not to 'mix' with 'fallen women', but to cherish their passion for the art, is considered unacceptable in respectable society.¹³

From within the theatre, attempts were made to shift the blame to the lack of virtue of the audience. As the critics said, the theatre would cater to the public's taste – and since public mind was immoral, it was no use blaming the actress. This is evident when it considered that while good plays do not attract a decent audience number, farces with songs and dances galore always run to full house. Basanta Kumar Ghosh quotes the dramatist Amritalal Bose as having openly announced that the audience is the buyer, and the theatre conducts its business following the taste and demand of the audience. The theatre can provide any kind of entertainment, but the audience has to demand it. Why don't, asks Ghosh, the reformers, who are so censorious about the theatre, look into the task of improving the taste of the audience, and the theatrical production would, as a natural corollary, be improved.¹⁴ Monmohon Goswami wrote in 1910 in *Natya Mandir* that the audience no longer knew how to watch

theatre. It was because of that reason that the quality of theatre had deteriorated. It is true that Bengali theatre used prostitutes as actresses, but that is because it is not possible to get any other type of women to act. However, there is never any lewd gesture or hugging and kissing in the plays. Is there a more 'pure' theatre in the world?¹⁵ Basanta Kumar Ghosh in 1913 feels that those who condemn the art simply because the actress happen to come from not so respectable backgrounds are themselves guilty of poor taste. Why can't actresses be regarded simply as artists? After all, when the management takes over the life of an actress, they simply lose their backgrounds, and the audience should only see them through the prisms of their performance.¹⁶ When she joins the theatre, it is to start a new vocation afresh. Once she becomes an actress to earn her living, and works extremely hard to achieve success in her performance, she gets paid a salary by the management and no longer has the need to pursue her old profession. But society remains unforgiving, and there are instances where some so-called stalwarts of refined society tried their best to lure the established and successful actresses away from their profession. Basanta Kumar laments that, though we ape the West in all matters, we never encourage husband-wife duos to perform on stage as in western theatre, though that would remove the taint from the acting profession forever. It is escapism to simply hate. After all, the theatre is a medium of culture, and if the educated gentlewomen attend the theatre and patronize it like the King of England does, then the actresses will be encouraged and inspired by their presence. After all, even the sage Ramkrishna did not hesitate to shower the stage and its actresses with his blessings after watching a successful performance.

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Sri Ramkrishna provided a social and religious space for these people who were not allowed a place in *bhadralok* society. Social, because not being within the middle-class family through the social sanction of marriage, was given legitimacy by the 'saint' and a new 'religion' which did not forbid anyone on the grounds of being a 'patit or patita' from worship. Also, for the first time, caste limitations did not act as a barrier to closeness with religious worship. If the totally unworldly priest of Dakshineswar could fall into an ecstatic trance at the performance of Binodini, then why should the discerning critic fall prey to age-old myths?¹⁸ To quote Ramkrishna himself, "...Those who played the female parts seemed to me the direct embodiments of the Blissful Mother, and the cowherd boys of Goloka the embodiments of Narayana Himself. It was God Alone who had become all these."

The actress remained a class apart, despite the attitude of societal heads to lump them scornfully with the prostitutes, and thereby neutralize their contribution and position. Their tremendous courage, by which they overcame the disadvantageous background and gained 'proficiency in language and literary forms, and norms of behaviour that made them hardly distinguishable from the *bhadramahilas* or the women of the respectable society'¹⁹ empowered these women in the eyes of men, and remained a threat. It was impossible for men (even those associated closely with theatre) to acknowledge, even to a certain degree, the superiority of these actresses, and continued to humiliate and persecute them in different ways, so that their confidence would be undermined and their independence curbed. Within the theatres, the managers and the mentors/directors/trainers kept the actress under their thumbs – taking advantage of their constant consciousness of their own tainted backgrounds and their economic insecurities by keeping their roles, wages and even employment contracts under their control, through means fair and foul. Outside the theatre, society tried to keep them under control by stripping them of their 'extraordinariness' which their talent, economic solvency and fame brought. They were stigmatized by a constant harping about their erstwhile background from which they were supposed to be delivered by their presence in the new theatre family. So strong was the voice of condemnation that the actresses themselves belittled their achievements, and considered themselves 'patita', who could be saved only by the saintly Sri Ramkrishna. They also had no confidence in their ability to sustain themselves on their own by their profession, and sought the security of being a mistress of a 'fixed paramour (*bandha Babu*)'. They themselves believed that theatre was tainted by their 'polluting touch'²⁰. The title of 'fallen woman' into which society categorized the actresses made it impossible for them to ever stand forth in their own rights. Even limited empowerment would be a threat, since it might become an inspiration to others. Their identification as 'prostitutes' reassured society that they would never come close to the *andarmahal*, never inspire other middle-class women to bring out their cultural qualities before the public by joining the theatre, and never try to merge the *lakshman rekha* that was drawn between society and theatre.

¹Sumanta Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast: the prostitute in nineteenth century Bengal*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 2000

²Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and post Colonial histories*, OUP, New Delhi, 1994

³Ramapati Datta, *Rangalaye Amarendranath*, edited by Debjit Bandopadhyay, Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 2004

⁴Anonymous letter written to the Editor, Statesman, April 12 1887

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- ⁵ Sushil Kumar Mukherjee, *The Story of Calcutta Theatres: 1853-1980*, K.P.Bagchi, Calcutta 1982, p. 522
- ⁶ Advance, June and April 1930
- ⁷ Heading of a letter to the Editor in Statesman, Tuesday April 12 1887
- ⁸ Bipin Chandra Pal, *Memories of My Life and Times*, Bipin Chandra Pal Institute, 2nd Revised Edition, Calcutta, 1973, p. 244
- ⁹ Girish Chandra Ghosh, *Girish Rachanabali*, Edited by RATHindraNath Roy and Devipada Bhattacharya, Calcutta, Sahitya Samsad, 1991, 3rd Ed. Vol I p. 736
- ¹⁰ Bipin Chandra Pal, opcit, p. 242
- ¹¹ Sushil Kumar Mukherjee, opcit, p. 52
- ¹² Ibid. p. 66
- ¹³ Monomohon Goswami. *Rangabumi Bhalobashi keno, Shotabdir Natya Chinta: Girish Chandra theke Utpal Datta*, ed by Debashis Majumdar and Sekhar Samaddar, A Mukherjee & Co. PVT LTD., 2000, p. 115
- ¹⁴ Ibid p. 168
- ¹⁵ Basanta Kumar Ghosh, Ranganaari O Rangabumi, in *Shotabdir Natya Chinta*, opcit, p. 168
- ¹⁶ ibid, pp. 169-171
- ¹⁷ I am grateful to the suggestions of Professor Gautam Bhadra, Dr Rakesh Batabyal, Dr Susmita Dasgupta and Dr R. Mahalakshmi on this point. Also see Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, OUP, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 282-357
- ¹⁸ *The Gospel of Sri Ramkrishna*, Originally recorded in Bengali by M. a disciple of The Master, Translated by Swami Nikhilananda, Sri Ramkrishna Math, Madras, 1964, p. 649
- ¹⁹ Sumanta Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast*, opcit, p. 125
- ²⁰ See Binodini Dasi, *Amar Katha O Ananya Rachana*, ed by Saumitra Chattopadhyay and Nirmalya Acharya, Subarnarekha, Calcutta 1987, Reprint and Binodini Dasi, Amar Abhinetri Jiban & Tinkadi Dasi's Abhinetri Katha in *Shatabdir Natyachinta*, opcit.