

## **Life and contribution of Binodini Dasi to Indian Theatre:**

Binodini Dasi (1863-1941) was also known as Noti Binodini. She was an Indian Bengali actress. She started acting at the age of 12. She ended her acting career at the age of 23. At the age of twelve she played her first serious drama role in Calcutta's National Theatre in 1874. Her mentor was Girish Chandra Ghosh.

She enacted over eighty roles which included Pramila, Sita, Draupadi, Radha, Ayesha, Kaikeyi, Motibibi, Kapalkundala etc. She was one of the first South Asian actresses of the theatre to write her own autobiography 'Amar Katha' (The Story of My Life) published in 1913. Ramkrishna, the great saint of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, came to see her play in 1884. She was a pioneering entrepreneur of the Bengali stage. She introduced modern techniques of stage make-up through blending European and indigenous styles.

She played notable roles in countless plays like Shatrusanhar, Hemlata, Sati or Kalankini, Neeldarpan, Durgeshnandini, Mrinalini, Kapalkundala, Meghnad Badh, Vishvriksha, Sita-Banvas, Daksh-Yaksh, Chakshudan, Nal-Damayanti, Manorama, Chaitanya-Leela, Vijaya etc. . 'Chaitanya-Leela' was in the peak at the last stage of her acting. She remained associated with acting for a total of 12 years. She played 90 roles in about 80 plays. In 'Meghnad Vadh' she simultaneously played six roles - Pramila, Varuni, Rati, Maya, Mahamaya and Sita. Forget about the ordinary audience, Bankimchandra himself, Thakur Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Father Laughon, Edwin Arnold etc. prominent Indian and foreign thinkers had praised her acting greatly. When Binodini was at the peak of fame, on the invitation of drama guru Girish Chandra Ghosh, she joined the National Theatre. As she took training from Girish Ghosh, she transformed into a wonder in the eyes of the audience. Binodini became 'Manoharini'.

It is said that during her long theatrical career, she took a total of 15 days leave and went to visit Kashi. When she returned, she fell very ill. The theatre's owner, Pratap Chand, refused to pay salary of that month. He told her- 'Since you did not work last month, you will not be paid last month's salary'. Binodini got hurt. She thought of giving up theatre. But on the advice of Girish Chandra and Amritlal Basu, she remained silent. Everyone felt that they should set up their own private theatre.

Like other women, Nati Binodini had also dreamed of having a world full of children and a husband. She herself has also written - "Women like us also have the desire of husband, a family and love, but, where did I get such a life? Who is there, who gives his heart in return?" She was married at the age of five. She wore the bride's chunari, filled his forehead with vermillion, and wore a 'shankha' on her wrist, but she had to wipe her vermillion and break the 'shankha' very soon.

She writes: "I have heard that I had a cousin mother-in-law. She dragged my husband away, and never allowed him to come again. After that, I never even saw him, nor heard anything from people." Binodini never forgot her child husband. The fire of desire inside her has never been extinguished. The second man came into her life when she was an actress in Pratap Chand Johri's National Theatre. The person she loved was a landlord. It is said that the man promised to marry her, but when the time came, he married someone else. According to

Binodini, 'While leaving, he made an excuse that he was going to his village to take care of the parental property.' Binodini was greatly shocked. However, when Binodini and her friends were trying to build a private theatre, another man entered into her life. He was Gurmukh Rai from Marwari community! The man was ready to give money to build a theatre, but his condition was that he wanted Binodini. He first wanted to give fifty thousand rupees to Binodini but she refused to take the money for herself. She asked for a theatre. It showed her right to have self respect and self worth.

Binodini purchased a plot of land in Widen Street, Calcutta for the construction of a theatre. The construction work of a new theater started at a rapid pace. Another house was taken on rent in Biden Street also. Rehearsals for the drama also started. Gurmukh and Binodini's colleagues assured Binodini that the theater would be named 'B-Theatre' after Binodini. But the theater was registered in the name of 'Star' Theatre. And this was no small shock for Binodini. Gradually, the atmosphere at Star Theatre began to change. Binodini stopped coming to rehearsals. Amritlal Mitra, Dashucharan Niyogi, Hariprasad Basu and Amritlal Basu became the owners of Star Theatre.

Binodini was highly acclaimed for her unprecedented in the play Chaitanya Leela. Thakur Sri Ramakrishna himself came to see 'Chaitanya-Leela' and he said - 'Today I saw the real and the fake becoming one.' By receiving the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna, she overcame her innate inferiority complex, because in those days people did not look upon theater artists and actresses with respect. People used to make harsh remarks against them. People thought that actors and actresses were of bad character and people considered actresses to be prostitutes. Binodini, touched by Thakur Sri Ramakrishna, was filled with the desire to be free from impurities. Besides, after seeing her performance in the play 'Manorama', Bankim Chandra said, "I had only written the story of Manorama. I had never expected that I would ever see her with my own eyes."

It is said that Binodini was pregnant at the time of accepting Gurmukh. Meanwhile Binodini's ex-boyfriend returned. Lover Hazrat first lured her with money. When he failed, he even threatened to kill her. By the way, Binodini also had love for that lover in her heart. But now, it was too late. Binodini had come a long distance with Gurmukh. To escape from that landlord-lover, Binodini was sent out of Calcutta. Perhaps, there, she gave birth to a daughter. Here, under the pressure of society, Gurmukh sold 'Star' theater for Rs. eleven thousand. He bid farewell to Vinodini. But Vinodini continued to spread her acting skills in 'Star' theatre. After acting in many other plays, on January 1, 1887, when her drama troupe was going on a 20-day journey, Binodini did not go on that journey. When Star's drama troupe returned, Binodini did not go back to Star Theatre.

The landlord Tanay, whom Binodini mentions as her last lover, is speculated by many critics and common people to be Jyotirindranath Tagore. But contrary to this opinion, many historians and critics have argued and proved that it is probably not so, that is, it is not true. Three arguments have been given in this regard-

a. The married life of Gurmukh Rai and Vinodini started in 1882 and Jyotirindranath married Kadambari in 1868.

b. The allegation of going to the country and marrying somewhere else 'under the pretext of taking care of the property' also proves to be wrong, because Jyotirindranath's marriage took place with great pomp at Jorasako, Thakurbari in Calcutta. This news was also published in newspapers.

c. According to Binodini, her lover died in 1889, whereas the truth is that Jyotirindranath died in 1925.

'Amar Katha' is not a history, it is a work of self-forgetfulness. During a total of 12 years as a theater artiste, she played 90 roles in almost 80 plays. After reaching the pinnacle of fame and progress and renouncing the temptation of all future possibilities, why Binodini retired from the life of an actress is hidden in a veil of mystery. The reason she herself has given for leaving the world of drama shows that her various disillusionments about theatre, harassment by people associated with her and conflict of abilities seem to be the main factors in the formation of Star Theatre. However, there is no doubt that Binodini had developed a special sense of affection and responsibility towards the theatre, which was largely neglected in those times. She had given up her selfish interests and dedicated herself to the service of theater. Expressing her sorrow, not getting proper respect for all this, Binodini left the theater filled with hurt pride. After that, she did go to the theater occasionally, but only as a spectator!

However, it is a fact that some of the contemporary maharathis had deliberately hatched a conspiracy of silence against Binodini. That is why there is no mention of her in the theater magazines and books of that time or she got away with writing a few lines in an evasive manner. Therefore, the serial publication of the second volume of his 'Amar Katha' remained incomplete. Binodini also did not make any compromise with her opponents to return to the theatre, nor did she bow down. It was publicized that she was arrogant and full of possessiveness - having someone like her in the theater would be disastrous. No one tried to bring her back. As a result, the whole incident became a huge tragedy for her and for Bengali theatre.

While narrating her actress life in 'Amar Katha' in the end Binodini shows abundance of spiritual curiosity, introspection and repentance. It is also clear from this that a huge change had taken place in her mental world. Thakur Sri Ramakrishna left his body in 1886. In the same year Binodini left theatre. It is not strange that during these days there was some Yogasutra, that is, due to a lot of mental stress and real reasons, she left the theater and on 12 February 1941, away from the eyes of the people, covered with a blanket of silence, she left the world.

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