

Forced on to The Fore: An Exploration of Creativity through the Tales of Birth and Resurrection of Nati Binodini and Begum Akhtar

Jhinuk Basu

Postgraduate Student,
School of Arts and Aesthetics,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
Email id: jhinukindia@gmail.com

Abstract:

The artistic careers of Nati Binodini and Begum Akhtar are fascinatingly interesting. Both having their roots in the marginal section of society were pushed to enter into a profession they needed to take for financial security. But because life is layered, what they were once forced to take up became a source of light in their cracked lives. The cracks lie in the social structure that result in their unfinished, incomplete and abandoned lives. This paper attempts to look into those cracks that these women have covered up by their exponential creative capabilities. The work would be centrally focussed and developed around three areas that trace their persistent struggles against the patriarchal society, the establishment of their artistic career, their hunger for guidance to refine their craft, and the process they applied as a method to make themselves uniquely stand out from the crowd. The narratives will be recounted and performances would be revisited on a personal account with the autobiography of Binodini and the accounts of people associated with Begum Akhtar as a reference to ensure its readers the memories and moments of grief, sorrow and artistic expression. It is a conscious effort to connect to that domain of inner consciousness of these artists through these accounts and observations which is personal. Because it is personal, it becomes individual. These individual emotions of experiences add to their characters on a broader level thereby making way for these experiences and accounts to fundamentally become intersubjective. With these women situated at junctures of a collective history as well as inner lives, they no longer remain insignificant and irrelevant.

Keywords :

Creativity, performing artists, marginalized women, individuality

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The women in the late 19th century and 20th century who performed on stage were spatially important as now they came out publicly outdoors. I would look closely at two cities —

Calcutta and Lucknow and two personalities — Nati Binodini and Begum Akhtar respectively who were giving regular performances in the public sphere. They presented themselves. The act of presenting involves a display of the materiality of the woman's body on stage which created a lot of commotion in society. Making and marking a bodily being of the woman on stage essentially exposed the several uneasy jittering and complex idiosyncrasies of the spectators, especially the middle-class bourgeoisie *bhadrolok* category of men.

Binodini came from a family where she lived with her mother, brother and grandmother in a house on Cornwallis Street, Calcutta. This area covers Asia's largest operational brothel — *Sonagachi*. The identity of Binodini's father is unknown. What is known is that they lived in utmost poverty. The opening lines of the first chapter of her autobiography, '*My Story*' discloses the condition of Binodini's family — "...there was no prosperity, only want" (Dasi 61). She came in contact with a singer named Ganga baiji in her tender age to learn music and sing to earn some means for the family. Under the advice of a gentleman called Purnachandra Mukhopadhyay, her grandmother decided her fate as a trainee actress in National Theatre and got her to learn and observe the different skills involved in theatre from her seniors. She was most interested in the actresses and how they played their roles. Having looked at their performances closely, she inculcated a knack in becoming an actress on stage and started off with her lessons. When Binodini became a *nati* (actress), she remained mistresses of many wealthy men who exploited her in several ways. They did not marry her even after promising. As she came from the prostitute quarters, it became increasingly important for men in the society to designate and assign her social position and fate. Such a condition of socially stating position and thereafter cornering the woman coming from this section did not happen overnight.

One can trace the conduct of looking-down-upon treatment on prostitutes in the medieval times too. Shadab Bano in her essay '*Women Performers and Prostitutes in Medieval India*' notes how Mughal rulers morally opposed prostitution. Traversing a little back during the reign of Balban of the Mamluk dynasty would help picture a situation that Ziauddin Barani observes in his account of *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi* — "prostitution was regarded as a safeguard against the passions of unruly men" (Barani 1862) (Bano 2011, 44). In the accounts of Badauni from the Mughal court, and I quote Bano —

"...that prostitutes should be kept in separate quarters of the town...the prostitutes' locality was to be called *shaitanpura* and their trade was to be completely within the state's regulation...if any noble wanted to have a virgin, they were to first apply to the emperor and get his permission" (Barani 1862).

Thus, the business of prostitution was allowed to suit their own benefits, to give food

¹ Barani, *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi*, Vol. 1, 51, quoted in Bano, Shadab. "Women performers and prostitutes in Medieval India." *Studies in History* 27, no. 1 (2011): 41-53.

² *Ibid*

to their hungry men (read: nobles from the Mughal court) but the women would be compared to filth and sewage¹. The prostitute woman would be posed against the ideal, domesticated, chaste wife and would be labelled as ‘house-devastating women’². Of course, it is quite natural that the situation did not get better in the next centuries to come but only got worse. Binodini being the ‘kept’ and ‘mistresses’ of her numerous masters is equated of her being the prostitute and thus, would never be let by the society of accepting her marriage with anyone of them. She would be nothing more than an object of pleasure for her master. In Mughal times, “prostitutes were held to be practicing their profession by sinful choice” (Bano 49). And the figure of the begum came in absolute juxtaposition of the prostitute figure showing a critical take on the position of women. The begum or the woman at home is shown to be responsible for maintaining the codes and conduct of the household, the *tehzeeb* (etiquette), while the prostitute figure, is a threatening and alluring one, who happens to attract the men of the very household. Thus, the duality between the woman inside and the woman outside is strongly contradictory from the perspectives of morality and character. In other words, the Begum represented Home and the prostitute represented the *Kotha*. *Kotha*, therefore, is the opposite of the women at home. And the Begum, if she commits any promiscuity, is to spend the rest of her life in the *Kotha*.

Much of the historical trajectory for women remains the same. Thus, Binodini’s life too rests along these lines. She says,

“An intolerable burden of pain has been covered by smiles, as despair fights hopelessness relentlessly, day and nights. How many are the unfulfilled longings, the wounds burning with pain that are alight in her heart has anyone ever seen any of this? They become prostitutes forced by circumstances, lacking shelter, lacking space; but they too, first come into this world with the heart of a woman” (Dasi 104-105).

As such women do not get accepted and get a homely space within the society, they are forced to take up prostitution at the end. Unfortunate is the situation where men who primarily stains the prostitutes as the representation of filth are in reality the very people who would visit the same prostitutes for their amusement. Such masculine hypocrisy disturbed again another personality who left her passion to get the gratification as a stay-at-home ‘Begum’ from the society. She was the *Mallika-e-ghazal* Begum Akhtar.

Begum Akhtar was married to Ishtiaq Ahmed Abbasi in Lucknow who agreed to marry her with the promise that Akhtar would not perform publicly. And uncanny enough, Begum Akhtar gladly accepted and promised never to give a ‘public’ performance. The space of ‘public’ also denotes singing in the presence of a family friend, L.K. Malhotra, who narrates an anecdote in his essay titled ‘*Begum Akhtar: Random Thoughts and Personal Reminiscences*’ (1975), where he witnesses the retired Akhtari Bai as a homemaker turning down the request of singing even one ghazal at a homely get together on an evening. More than her, it was her husband who did not let her sing, saying — ‘she has given up singing’³.

³ Malhotra, L. K. “Begum Akhtar: random thoughts and personal reminiscences.” (1975).

It makes us wonder what could have been this particular loathing for public performance?

The exposed body out in the public sphere becomes vulnerable to a lot of factors. Even today the degree of vulnerability stays on. It will continue to stay on till the body leaves the public domain. On top of it, a woman's body is doubly vulnerable. Firstly, to step out of the *zenana*, which has always been the separate demarcated area for and of the women in the household since the medieval period. And secondly, to be under the continuous public gaze that prominently consists of men. Malhotra being a family friend to Abbasi and Akhtar only tries to partly unearth and partly cover up the persistent patriarchal hegemony that infiltrated the couple's household. Malhotra states that it is Abbasi who thought Begum's tours and performances who take her away from him and it 'would deprive him of her company' (Malhotra). His sentiments as a companion and partner do hold a ground of trying to stay in each other's company as friends and lovers but is the situation really this romantic and simple?

Abbasi's hardening of the moral position of his wife had more to do with restricting her as an object in his possession from getting stolen by the people of his own sex if she is 'exposed' in a domain outside her home. Akhtar, for seven years, refrained from giving public performances. This harnessing of a performer's creativity on the part of Abbasi was to safe zone her image as a wedded wife to a man of worth and not becoming a woman for all men out in the public. The act of safe-zoning actually suffocated Akhtar although she was never heard of stating that either from fear of losing her respectability or to avoid gossip, both of which are basically intertwined. Akhtar's fear of losing her respectability was to such an extent that she kept her own daughter in the guise of her cousin in her husband's house⁴ so that her daughter's identity from an unknown father is tucked away because the complication of an illegitimate offspring could have proven ruinous to Akhtar's image. Having settled as the wife of a respectable man needed her to conceal many secrets that occurred to her prior to her marriage. Attaining motherhood without a wedlock is one such instance.

Also, she perhaps never might have wanted her daughter to endure what she had to experience in her life. Akhtar's father Hakim Natiq's legitimate family never approved of Akhtar and her mother as they had their roots in the legacy of 'disreputable courtesans' (Qureshi 118).

Likewise, Binodini too writes her heart out when she poetically narrates how her child came as a gift in her life in the autobiography — "A pure blossom had, because of a curse, found its way from heaven and brought some peace to my tainted life" (Dasi 106). In some years, her child passed away leaving Binodini with no one. While one was trying to cover up the identity of her child to be able to keep her with herself, one, on the other hand, was deprived of her child's company. Thus, their enjoyment of motherhood was also sealed off by of society which already designed their respective fates.

⁴ Qureshi, Regula Burckhardt. "In search of Begum Akhtar: Patriarchy, poetry, and twentieth-century Indian music." *The world of music* (2001): 97-137.

One of the primary factors that led to this agitation is also the location of these performers. Both Binodini and Akhtari Bai came from extreme poverty-stricken families where they were forced to enter into the profession of display. To professionally work for an artwork is a sign of earning means of livelihood from them. But any situation is never unidirectional. The complexity arises from the point they start taking passionate likeness for their art. It no longer remains bound to the pleasures of financial gain. These women emancipated themselves through their art. They could ultimately voice themselves by the vehicle of their artistry.

Malini Bhattacharya, recently in a seminar on '*Communist Women and Cultural Front*' at the Bangla Academy (Bhattacharya 2022) highlighted these women from the marginal section of the society where she referred to two characters 'Bosundhara' and 'Moyna' from Utpal Dutt's cult play '*Tiner Talowar*'. She said,

"...these two women are doubly marginalised in the society. The playwright reflects on them because he was aware of all those marginal actresses on the Bengal stage who just like 'Bosundhara' and 'Moyna' gave their talents to productions, plays and the stage ...The final scene of '*Tiner Talowar*' is crucial to our understanding. Moyna sings out in full voice seating in a box much above on the stage. Here, she marks her freedom. She is discovering her liberation through her bodily presence on the acting stage. By her action, Moyna does not only sing for her own emancipation but for all those marginal women who take the centrality through their artwork." (Bhattacharya 2022).

An Ingenious Discipleship

The year 1872, in the context of locating women who substantially earned from improper sources, becomes highly crucial as immediately in the following year of 1873, one would notice the embarkment of native women on the proscenium stage through the play "*Sharmistha*" by Michael Madhusudan Dutt. As Sudhir Chakraborty notes, "in 1853 those listed as prostitutes numbered 12,419; by 1867 the number had gone up to 30,000"⁵. The health report of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation from 1867 shows about 30,000 women who earned their livelihood from illicit income. Caste and class of such women were at no point determinants for their occupation. The reason was their migration to escape 'starvation'⁶ and 'domestic oppression'⁷ and the seeking of the city space as a place of refuge and shelter. Even if one goes on to the extent of looking at these statistics till the year 1872, one would find the number has risen to around 37,664 which the Census Report (1872) confirms. This tends to put a final nail on the coffin for the young boys playing female roles as now the women playing female roles were much more convincing, realistic and at some point, desirable

⁵Sudhir Chakraborty, *Bangla Ganer Sandhane*, Calcutta, Aruna 1990, p. 37. Chakraborty, *Condition of Bengali Women*, p. 28.

⁶Bhattacharya, Rimli. "The nautee in 'the second city of the Empire'." *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 40, no. 2 (2003): 191-235.

⁷Ibid

and could be more relatable. Also, acting on stage gave a sort of alternative source of income for such women who were initially drawing their pay only from prostitution.

But from another angle, I would also like to shed light on the part of the creative sense that both Binodini and Akhtar possessed which therefore also adds to the fact that both these personas were not only running after money. They needed money to support themselves, to economically secure themselves but they needed their performing skills to emancipate them from being chained. This particular emotional attachment and passionate urge for performance reflect in both Binodini and Akhtar's life.

The anecdote of Binodini giving the first public performance that she writes in her autobiography is equally liberating as Akhtari Bai giving her first performance at the All India Radio, Lucknow after years of pause. Binodini writes,

“But I simply cannot describe my condition and my extreme nervousness on the day I was actually to perform my part before the public. When I saw before me the rows of shining lights, and the eager excited gaze of a thousand eyes, my entire body became bathed in sweat, my heart began to beat dreadfully, my legs were actually trembling and it seemed to me that the dazzling scene was clouding over before my eyes.” (Dasi 67).

One should not merely see Binodini as a young girl giving her first performance. It is to be remembered that she comes from a poor background and it is not like someone coming to perform from the legitimate and sacred section of the city. Binodini's constant reference to herself as an inferior creature throughout the autobiography is indicative of how she suffered from a complex of having her roots in a stratum of the society that was demeaned and looked down upon. Her under confidence also owed to her continuous thought which ran at the back of her mind — what if she fails to perform well in front of an audience, what if she let down her teachers?

But Akhtar's case was a bit different. She was returning and it could have been the jolt of rediscovering herself. Her worth was already labelled as her popularity prior to her marriage with Abbasi was unimaginably high. When Begum Akhtar performed at All India Radio, Lucknow on 25th September 1948, she wept after her performance. She specifically mentioned L. K. Malhotra to not let anyone enter the recording studio while she would sing. She was afraid of her husband discovering her public performance and breaking her original vows to him. But she became emotional because she was out of touch from a process that requires rigorous training. And certainly, although she gladly gave up singing to become the wife of Abbasi and lead a respectful life, she loved music after all. She inhaled and exhaled it. Therefore, returning to do what she enjoyed the most should be seen as her homecoming. Unlike Binodini, who was fearful of how she would be evaluated in the theatre arena, Begum Akhtar was aware of what her reception would be and how that would fuel her popularity again. To this lies a noteworthy difference between the actress and her body while the singer can be disembodied from her own body through her voice. For Binodini, the faculty of her fright owes a lot to her displayed body that Akhtar, to some extent, might not have had to

worry about. Binodini was seen as well as heard, while Akhtar was only heard in their respective performances. But this parameter was not a watertight compartment every time. Binodini while 'losing' herself in imbibing the character of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was certainly in a way felt herself disembodied from her character that she played. This, I attempt to discuss later in this article.

Nevertheless, what brings them down to the same level was facing the audience for the first time and after many years, respectively, which made them vulnerable. It was thrilling for both but was a challenge to encounter the public. Deep down they craved to display their artistry before a packed audience that will directly come in the way of being the judge of their performance. They wanted to be vulnerable to the public which would unleash their creative process for further progress. Any performance, even if we consider radio as a medium, involves the active participation of both the performer and the audience without whose dynamic interaction, the performance would remain incomplete.

For a theatrical personality like Binodini, who relished being on the stage, the magic in imbibing and going under the skin of a character who would certainly differ from her and sometimes could be absolutely her opposite, intoxicated her. She would often claim her subconscious emoting of the characters, most importantly, of Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu — "I felt that there was someone in my heart who sang these words. I was no one. There was no consciousness of 'I' within me" (Dasi 93). Losing oneself to the art that is being created, generated an electrifying urge in Binodini to learn more in order to render justice to the character she was playing. She indeed felt disembodied from her own state of being when she played one such part. But here I must also mention that when she would become Mahaprabhu on one evening, she would become another character simultaneously on another day as she was a professional. She did not fix herself in playing a character at a time. Thus, to become a skilled and enhanced actor, she from her very initial days had the urge to learn and also to master the art of not just educating herself in acting but also in becoming a professional. We see her saying,

"I did not feel like staying at home; I thought constantly about when the carriage would come to fetch me so I could begin to learn new roles...I had no talent and I was not well educated then, nor could I sing well. But then I was eager to learn." (Dasi 68).

A similar intonation is highlighted in Regula Qureshi's search of Begum Akhtar's impulse in learning music even in her ripe old age. Qureshi writes in her essay, *'In Search of Begum Akhtar: Patriarchy, Poetry, and Twentieth-Century Indian Music'* (2001), "What is striking here is Begum Akhtar's continuing renewal of discipleship, even when she had reached the height of artistic mastery and public acclaim" (Qureshi 120). Taking both the threads of Binodini and Akhtar we can see two different sets of pegs through the discipleship. One is, how both of them wanted to polish and carve their respective artistries and how they considered schooling as an integral method to better themselves, even when they were already established. Secondly,

was their unexpressed and unspoken need of learning their lessons from male performers. Here enters the prioritisation of gender more than expertise. Qureshi illuminates the possibility of this factor but never elucidates. Men, normatively, have always been considered as the repository of knowledge and skills which might have caused a reason for gaining meaningful acclamation for Binodini and Akhtar. The male validation would entail assurance whether or not the artistic expertise for these artists is in the right direction. It is generally a reflection of the bourgeois takeover of the artistic and performance productions of the colonial cultural appropriation.

Nati Binodini's early masters were Mahendranath Basu and Ardhendu Shekhar Mustafi who were already celebrated and prominent actors of that time. Tutelage under them would make Binodini what she became of an actress but her training and guidance under Girish Ghosh during her golden, peak years was undoubtedly to remain confined to attain a sense of approval and recognition. A particular standardised structure needs to be informed here. In the domain of musical production, there has been a visible hegemonic bifurcation between two styles of singing — the classical and the semi or light classical⁸. Apparently, the aforementioned bourgeois framework clearly made a distinction between the two styles and allotted the serious and pure classical music as a genre reserved for male performers and the much lighter genre to be sung by the female performers. The purity of a form was supposed to be maintained by male masters and it was ascertained that the women only perform the not-so-serious forms. The reason could have been the fact that women performers usually used to come from the disreputable section of the society. Therefore, to let them sing the pure form of classical is to actually make it unholy. Nevertheless, this trajectory somehow might have affected personas such as Binodini and Akhtar to get to be independent by moving away from the hold of men. Independence had to do with them realising the unrecognition of women performers devalued or disregarded as an equal to their male counterparts.

This takeaway of the discipleship being an affirmation for women practitioners of the late nineteenth and twentieth century could have been a possibility that Regula Qureshi tries to foreground. But it is again that one artist ventures to be better at their artwork. Binodini and Akhtar did neither formally go to a theatre or music school where they could learn the necessary skills nor did they have the opportunity to avail such training as that was financially impossible for both. Indian art is a witness to the tradition of the trainee being the '*shagird*' of the trainer. The students would continue to accompany the teacher and pick several methods and embellishments for their craft till the retirement of the teacher as a performer. A similar relationship between the teachers and Binodini and Akhtar does substantiate their tutelage.

Begum Akhtar learning the *gayaki* style of instrumentation from Arvind Parikh is undoubtedly a factor that throws a substantial light on some other facets. Parikh belongs to

⁸Qureshi, Regula Burckhardt. "In search of Begum Akhtar: Patriarchy, poetry, and twentieth-century Indian music." *The world of music* (2001): 97-137.

the Imdadkhani Gharana and have been trained under Vilayat Khan. Imdadkhani being the only gharana in the whole of Hindustani classical repertoire that emphasised on emoting and not imitating the vocal aspect of delivering the music. They (artists from the Imdadkhani gharana) were initially trained as singers who channelised the style of vocalisation on their instruments. Their instruments, especially Sitar and Surbahar, would sound as if somebody is speaking or telling a story in a very human essence. They explored each note in a raga and weaved a narrative around that particular note. Akhtar was essentially attracted to this style of presentation. The precise explanation for the phenomenon can be her expertise in singing *ghazal*. *Ghazal* is a theatrically performative form that is related to poetry, more of reciting. The stress is given more on the *labz* (words) of the poetry than on its melody when sung. Along these lines, Begum Akhtar was vocally theatrical as she performed more of *ghazal*. She has narrated elsewhere how her father Hakim Natiq who was a poet in Lucknow said to her, “What is this singing, recite a *ghazal*, sing a *ghazal*, so that your listeners can take delight” (Akhtar 1975). Consequently, Akhtar’s choosing to learn from a practitioner of one particular gharana among many others was because of the gharana’s unique character that would contribute to her form of singing. Moving around and creating a story around one note to emphasize it and paint a raga on an instrument is almost the same as delivering a poetry in melody and painting a narrative with the aid of rich lyrics.

Again, as I mentioned earlier that Binodini’s social position did not avail her formal education, let alone learning her lessons from an institutionalised theatre school. During her initial days, Binodini relied mainly on her observation of other senior actors and actresses to develop her style. In her later years, she became an efficient thinking contributor in imagining her process of developing a character. And because she was quite a celebrated actress of her age and performed in theatre productions professionally, she was naturally cast as the lead and had to perform many characters simultaneously. It was her professionalism that compelled her to compartmentalize each character based on their personalities, to think separately for each one’s execution. She wrote in her autobiography,

“And immediately after playing Kunda in *Bishbriksha* [I played] Kanchan in *Sadhabar Ekadoshi*. What a world of difference — in their temperament and in their actions. I cannot say into how many selves I had divided myself during the time of performance. On the completion of one bhava it was necessary to gather enough resources for another. This had become a part of my nature. Even when I was not on stage, I was constantly engrossed in different bhavas” (Dasi 99).

As a result, it would have been Binodini’s conscious partitioning of her characters that she prepared as a process for herself to play each role. But her discipleship, at this point, is also indicative of her thought process which she expanded by herself. Binodini’s extracted words distinctly states the involvement of her mind in her artistry. She was aware of her rendering of the roles she would play in each production and thereby it is evident that her implementing the characters was never mechanical.

Akhtar and Binodini could have had ample influence of guidance and training under male practitioners and masters and even what Qureshi attempts to attest in her paper is something one can never deny. But to only see such performers and their urge to remain under someone's discipleship can be a bit of an arbitrary takeaway. This one-dimensionality might not brighten the efforts that women of this time gave to their artwork. Vulnerabilities of facing an audience for the very first time, vulnerabilities of facing the audience after taking a considerable pause in life, the constant endeavour to strive and learn, giving themselves the artistic space to cultivate their process and sometimes indoctrinating by themselves, would all be concealed if these performers are judged superficially.

Method or Salvation?

However, the transition from female impersonators to female actresses taking up playing female roles was not a very easy act that happened all of a sudden. There are factual shreds of evidence that show boys, who were yet to hit puberty, played women on stage and were often praised and celebrated and they themselves were proud of their position as artists. The new 'ideal', 'good' Indian woman — ["the conventional image of wife and mother, simply garnished by education and some Victorian womanly ideals borrowed from the West" ("Women and Partition Some Questions" 1999)]⁹(the product of the nationalist project) — were definitely not supposed to perform in front of the public's eyes at this point in time.

It is at this juncture that figures such as Golap, Elokeshi, and Binodini came to the scene. Binodini's autobiography '*My Story*' increasingly unfolds the location of women who did not come from 'respectable' families. The first-hand experience of being 'visible' brought along tension in her process of writing her story. Certain actions were forbidden for her or even if she had to, she would have to achieve it by undergoing a lot of hassle. Binodini's holding a large part of share for the Star Theatre and the journey to it included a range of probabilities that did not pave a smooth way for her. In the chapter, '*On Matters Relating to the Star Theatre*', Binodini explicitly describes how she craved a status of leading an independent life via the craft of theatre moving out from the threshold of her then protector. Her narrative shows her emotional gaps that no one could ever fill up except theatre. She talks of how she was 'deceived'¹⁰ by her protector who gave his word of love that was eternal and would be bound by this truth but got married to some other woman without even informing Binodini. And yet when Binodini wishes to come out of his hold and set up a theatre house, he comes to slash her with a sword. Her commitment in this uneven relationship found a resolution and resort in the theatre space which subsequently culminated in owning it.

She wanted to live by her acting that not only got her finances to support herself but also brought a means of redemption from having the life of a 'fallen' woman. Ingrained into

⁹Ray, Bharati, and Aparna Basu. *From Independence Towards Freedom*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

¹⁰ Dâsî, Binodini. *My Story and My Life as an Actress*. Kali for Women, 1998.

her consciousness, Binodini maintained calling herself ‘fallen’, a ‘sinner’, a ‘characterless woman of little intelligence’, a ‘despicable prostitute’ with an awareness that the hypocrite hypocritical patriarchy had left her with no choice but prostitution. Her voice could find its articulative resonance in the acting space where her creative potential was taken into account and not her social position. And therefore, it became all the more necessary for Binodini to give back to the theatre with all the seriousness what theatre gave to her — doing justice to all that is involved in the overarching umbrella of theatre. But this was a bilateral process. Her justice for the character somewhere opened an avenue for her to achieve a full vindication of her damaged and derogatory life in another way. It thus created an unending cycle: the more she is honest with her character, the more she is close to her ‘*Dharma*’ (righteousness).

The evident reflection of it can be traced in Binodini’s internalising of the character of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Theatre at this point was both an instrument of emancipation as well as a refuge for her. Her writing presents her experience of living with the character of Mahaprabhu and her thoughts on performing him in front of an audience. She states that it was not an encounter but more of giving power to the character to overshadow her and governing her to reach the point of spiritual salvation. For every role, Binodini played, she had to constantly recreate and re-enact them. It is at this point that her consciousness began to take hold. One always consciously recreates and re-enacts that which in life can always be challenged and recreated. That which at the moment is frozen is stagnant and dead. Binodini’s system demanded the actor to open up her/his perceptions and consciously recreate something instead of freezing it into a dead stop. Thus, even though Binodini thought whatever she did was being driven by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu or Mrinalini or Kunda or Kanchan, in reality, Binodini plunged into her psychological experiences to align to that of the character’s psyche to create a framework of impersonation at a deeper sensory level. This has been her essential method because she was a keen observer which she herself vouches in her autobiography. She was observant of other actors and actresses and kept a close check on herself. The reason is quite evident if we notice how she writes her autobiography. She maintained a delicate and detailed narrative of almost all her years keeping certain gaps in between which she quite deliberately avoided. For instance, she never mentions her father or the names of her protectors or even discloses the identity of her child. Her intelligent account proves her calibre of being a wonderful examiner of life. She never missed a detail and even if she did, she chose to overlook them.

Jatileshwar Mukhopadhyay, in his essay, ‘*Begum Akhtar: Ek Bishway*’ (Begum Akhtar: A Wonder) (Mukhopadhyay 30-34) notes how Akhtar knew her limits as a performer and worked on what she had. She did not have a high range but she emphasized mainly on full-throat singing by accentuating the words in the ghazal. In the ghazal by Shakeel Badayuni, “*Ai Mohabbat Tere Anjam Pe*”, the way Akhtar utters the word ‘*Rona*’ (to cry) moves the listener as it feels as if someone is incessantly crying over many years. Akhtar poured the sadness and negligence of her life into her music and that went beyond lingual barriers. I do

not know whether something like method acting exists in music. But if it does, then Begum Akhtar would be a burning example to have used the technique. In her recording of the Bangla *Raagprodhan "Jochona Koreche Ari"*, she repeats the line "*Cheye Cheye Poth Tari, Hiya Mor Hoy Bhari. Ruper Modhur Moho, Bolona Ki Kore Chhari*" to illustrate how much the heart is heavy with an incessant waiting for the beloved. Or when she sings '*Piya Bholo Abhimaan*', it can melt anyone's heart the way she requests her lover to forget the pain of being hurt. Akhtar never over-ornamented her music with a lot of embellishments but her expressions focussing a word made her the legend she is.

Conclusion

It becomes increasingly difficult when personalities such as Nati Binodini and Begum Akhtar need to be explored. The complexities of their lives have added more colour to their palette of disposition. There are steps that both have taken in their respective lives that have engraved bold lines in the history of art. As Charlie Chaplin said, 'Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot', and in the same lines these women are also the owners of shadowy areas which consist of deep scars, ridges and gaps. It was probably why they chose their artwork to fill up those tensions that were so profound inside them. Their fights and struggles exhibit the uncompromising desire to never give up and ignite many like them to write a different history of women which would take a turn away from what the patriarchal structure has designed the destiny of women would be.

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(Footnotes)

- ¹ Barani, *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi*, Vol. 1, 51, quoted in Bano, Shadab. "Women performers and prostitutes in Medieval India." *Studies in History* 27, no. 1 (2011): 41-53.
- ² Ibid
- ³ Malhotra, L. K. "Begum Akhtar: random thoughts and personal reminiscences." (1975).
- ⁴ Qureshi, Regula Burckhardt. "In search of Begum Akhtar: Patriarchy, poetry, and twentieth-century Indian music." *The world of music* (2001): 97-137.
- ⁵ Sudhir Chakraborty, Bangla Ganer Sandhane, Calcutta, Aruna 1990, p. 37. Chakraborty, Condition of Bengali Women, p. 28.
- ⁶ Bhattacharya, Rimli. "The nautee in 'the second city of the Empire'." *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 40, no. 2 (2003): 191-235.
- ⁷ Ibid
- ⁸ Qureshi, Regula Burckhardt. "In search of Begum Akhtar: Patriarchy, poetry, and twentieth-century Indian music." *The world of music* (2001): 97-137.
- ⁹ Ray, Bharati, and Aparna Basu. *From Independence Towards Freedom*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- ¹⁰ Dâsî, Binodinî. *My Story and My Life as an Actress*. Kali for Women, 1998.