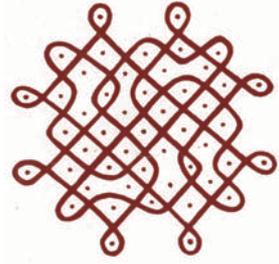


## Notes on 'A Strange Meeting' (Bichitra Sabha): Calcutta, 1912

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Expressions of grief as utterance, taking on forms of wailing and keening, are gendered in more visible and audible ways than more explicitly religious forms of ritual. In diverse cultures, professional mourners (called *rudalis* in north India) have often been employed by the family of the deceased to perform this role in public. More frequently, genres such as the epic or the Greek tragedy have demarcated space within the text for representations of grief by women. This space permitted more than a re-play of women—as mothers, daughters and wives—grieving over their dead or wounded men folk. The critical and even polemical functions which underwrite descriptive passages as well as dialogue in speech, permit a critique of the most 'heroic' events of the war or conquest. One immediately thinks of the *Stri Parva* in *Mahabharata* after the carnage at Kurukshetra is over, or of Hecuba at the beginning of the *Trojan Women* remembering the slaughter and addressing a different audience in time.

But the notion of 'community' in the examples I have given above is quite different from the accoutrements of a bourgeois society that emerged under colonial auspices in India. I turn to a new definition of public in the construction of civic space in Bengal (specifically, though not exclusively in the metropolis of Calcutta) in which the public theatre occupied an ambivalent but visible location. The primary reason for the ambivalence was the presence of the professional actress, without whom the theatres did not run, and who was marked in her hyphenated identity of the prostitute-actress or *beshya abhinetri*. The stage actress in Bengal was one of the first modern working woman but she was denied many of the rights granted to a citizen subject, one being the right to be present at a public meeting in the Town Hall. The 'ban' on *addressing a public* was of course extended to all women who were or aspired to be *bhadramahila*.<sup>1</sup> Yet, by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, public meetings to mark the death of 'public figures' was a well established convention, as were the speeches by other 'notable' individuals in such *shok sabhas*. Many of these speeches subsequently found their way to a larger audience in print through newspapers, journals, newsletters and so on. *Sabhas* and *samitis* emerged as new modes of community formation for reformists and conservatives alike in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, often not bound (at least as

an agenda) by the more traditional links of caste and religion, but by commitment to specific 'social' causes (e.g. education). As Benoy Ghosh points out in his study of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, 'these sabhas and samitis became the most crucial nerve centres for larger social transformations.'<sup>2</sup>

I focus on the speech and the space articulated and negotiated by professional stage actresses—speaking as a collective in Bengal of 1912. These speeches (later published) were made by four actresses prior to the performance of a 'regular show' in the theatre, and were ostensibly, in commemoration of their recently deceased guru, Girishchandra Ghosh. Rather than simply 'looking back' this exercise presents us with a framework to explore the construction, slippage and negotiations by the dispossessed seeking a voice in the participatory process of democracy. I suggest that the formal 'speech' on such occasions as the *smriti/shok sabha* constitutes a modern genre, almost exclusively linked to male, upper-caste subjects, but in this instance, was briefly taken over by the 'prostitute-actress'. Finally, given the proliferation of media and its globalization, the event opens up questions on the relationship between reportage and entertainment in these fluid and extending communities of theatre practitioners, theatre goers and others.

### Preamble to 'A Strange Meeting'

Soon after Girishchandra's Ghosh death on 8th February 1912, a special performance in which 'almost all actors and actresses of the Bengali Theatre took part' was arranged at the Kohinoor Theatre in Calcutta (11 Bhadra, BS 1319). Amarendranath Dutt chaired the programme and the proceeds went towards a memorial fund for Ghosh. A report of this group enterprise—an early instance of a practice later known as the 'combination night'—was published in the influential *Natya-mandir*.<sup>3</sup> The magazine was then running a series of articles under the general heading *Girish Pratibha* or The Genius of Girish, listing the various activities undertaken by admirers of Girishchandra Ghosh in Bengal and elsewhere to commemorate his death.

Some ten days later (21 Bhadra BS 1319), a special condolence meeting for the 'nat-guru' was convened at the Town Hall, presided over by a retired judge of the

High Court, Saradacharan Mitra. (See SP Mukherjee's article on the connection between Mitra and Ghosh.) This meeting was also reported at length in a subsequent issue of the *Natya-mandir*. And, within a fortnight (2 Aswin BS 1319), a *smriti sabha* or memorial meeting was held at the Star Theatre prior to the regular evening show—fairly regular practice. But what was irregular was that the chief speakers at this meeting were four actresses of the Star Theatre who read out prepared speeches in honour of their late teacher. The meeting was chaired by Amarendranath Dutt, the then lessee of the Star. This event becomes 'the story of a strange meeting' (*ek bichitra sabhar kahini*) in the Aswin-Kartik issue of the *Natya-mandir*. Coding it as 'bichitra' which means strange but also variegated directs a particular kind of reading. The report comes with a pre-text: it 'explains' that the actresses had been granted this opportunity in response to their entreaties, since they had been denied admittance to 'the Town Hall or any other open meeting' held in honour of Girish Ghosh.

The three events as well as the manner in which they were subsequently reported in the *Natya-mandir* comprise a coda to what is called the 'golden era' of the public theatre in Bengal. They also provide us with a perspective on the negotiation of public space along lines of gender, class, and less visibly, but no less explicitly, of religion. A tradition of honouring theatre people on stage and in print already existed: Girishchandra had composed essays commemorating his male colleagues<sup>4</sup>. These essays, originally read out in the theatre hall and subsequently published in the *Natya-mandir*, often provided Girishchandra with the pre-text for commenting on the contemporary theatrical scene. But the 'strange meeting' has quite eluded or perhaps, has simply been elided by scholars and commentators.<sup>5</sup> It is a story of a representation (as in legal parlance) made by the actresses petitioning on their own behalf to a 'moral community' which has set itself to judge the speakers. In fact, the speakers as a *jati* or collective have already judged, and are therefore speaking as the accused.

It may be recalled that the *Natya-mandir*, the theatre magazine in which all of the above items appeared was founded by Amarendranath Dutt and co-edited by him and Girishchandra from 1910 (BS 1317) onwards. It sought to bridge the perceived gap between the more established, literary, theological and other magazines dealing with 'serious' matters, and the usual columns reserved for matters 'theatrical' in newspapers and periodicals. The very first editorial by Girishchandra Ghosh had promised the readers that it would publish the writings of 'actresses skilled in composition' but with the exception of the autobiographical narrative

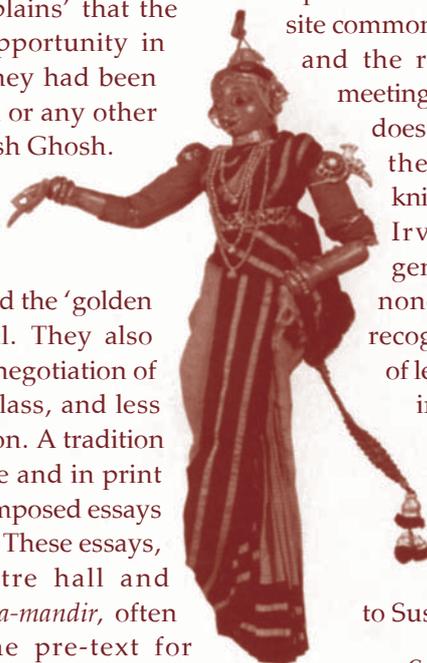
('atmakatha') of Binodini Dasi who had long since retired, much more was said *about* the actress, and *purportedly* by the 'actress-narrator' than by contemporary actresses themselves. The speeches at the Star Theatre by four actresses—Srimatis Sushilabala, Ranisundari, Norisundari and Basantakumari—therefore, lie between the excess of fictive 'actress stories' (*abhinetri kahini*) on the one hand, and the absence of first person narratives by contemporary actresses on the other. It was also the first and (in recorded history) the only event where the actresses were addressing the audience rather than being the object of attacks in many such public meetings against them.

The Town Hall was the most public and yet, respectable of all meeting places, marking it, as the chief site commonly accessed by large sections of the rulers and the ruled. While the Town Hall memorial meeting after Girishchandra Ghosh's death in 1912 does not approach the legitimacy conferred on the Victorian stage by the granting of knighthood to another actor-manager—Henry Irving—in 1895 and the subsequent gentrification of the East End in London<sup>6</sup>; nonetheless, it stands out for the 'public recognition' of 'Bengal's Garrick.' But the act of legitimization required a clear demarcation: in order for the male theatre folk to have access to the portals of the Town Hall, the actress had to be kept out. Sushilabala's speech makes an emphatic reference to this parting of ways. For reasons of space I shall only be referring to Sushilabala's speech here.

Sushilabala begins with an apology. However, in the rhetorical question, 'How have we dared to speak today?' she marks out a difference between the socially unacceptable selves of the actresses and the respectable mothers/ housewives of her address:

It is true we are fallen, it is true we are social rejects, but we are human beings. You may not think so, but we too, have a *right* to express and articulate our grief. Perhaps none of you will object to this *slight* claim to a common humanity...(emphasis mine)

She moves on to an elaborate construction which underlines the relationships between players involved rather than their social status: 'If we have any right to be grieved at the death of a loved one, how is our mourning in any way reprehensible?' Sushilabala anticipates possible objections, as Amarendranath had done in his introduction: 'Some of you may think, why the need to grieve in public? ...[T]he desire for sympathy and to share our grief is not unique to us, but it is a rule of nature,



the way of this world.’ The common denominators are therefore nature and humanity and not the social divides of *bhadramahila* and *patita*, with which the speech began.

The speaker then underlines the exigencies of this particular performance: ‘Why have we thus dared? [Because]...it is you—through your compassion and grief—who have given us the courage to do so’. And, in a swift turn of the argument, the speaker points to the act of legitimization that attended Girishchandra’s death and made of him a ‘Bengali national hero;’ and then asks, ‘Is this not a matter of pride *to us*?’ This is a very thinly veiled charge of usurpation: *Our* guru has overnight become *your* hero. Then follows a direct reference to the hugely attended and much publicised Town Hall meeting where ‘[w]e had fondly wished to pay our respects’. The speaker lauds the ‘acceptability’ of the actor made visible in the Town Hall meeting: ‘For long we had felt regretful that our fellow actors should be despised and shunned on our account; but the respect that has been lavished on an actor has erased our regret....’ This allows Sushilabala to return to the crucial question of the actress *and* her profession: ‘It was Girishchandra who instilled in us unhappy creatures the desire to live off the fruits of our hard labour on stage’. Once the point is made—the difference *within* the theatre world between the tainted actor and the contaminating actress—Sushilabala returns to the subject of the memorial meeting of Girish-babu with a disclaimer appropriately modest for a pupil, and a woman at that: ‘We do not know of the genius of Guru Girishchandra, nor do we know...we only know....’ The speaker thus establishes the difference between those who will mourn Girish as a public figure—as a dramatist, litterateur, devotee, and those who regarded him as a father, a teacher—those whom he had inspired to labour in their profession. It is for this last gift of self-worth that Sushilabala chooses to pay her homage to her guru, as does the actress Norisundari in her speech.

There is then a formal return to the beginning of her text. When Sushilabala charges the audience to remember Girishchandra ‘for ever’, it is a double-edged statement, for she adds: ‘We shall cherish his memory in our hearts till the moment of our death.’ Given the starting point and the necessity of a formal or a public representation of grief, this is indeed an ironic conclusion: ‘It is the remembrance *within* that we shall cherish.’ It is this space then, that is carved out—outside of the Town Hall, from which they are barred; and, outside too, of the theatre which is their home, their place of employment and source of sustenance, where they have been permitted to speak. The privileged and private place of their hearts is also an inner sanctum to which the collective of actresses has entry. We may recall that barely ten days before she read out her speech at the Star Theatre, Sushilabala had sung and performed at the

Kohinoor Theatre ‘combination night’ mentioned at the earlier in this section. On that occasion she had played the difficult part of Jobi in *Balidan* and Subhadra in *Pandav-Gaurav*. That evening’s programme had drawn a full house and the sale of tickets alone raised a memorial fund of Rs 3636. (A considerable sum for the time, although the prices of tickets had been raised for the occasion.) The oblique thrust of the speech is also to differentiate between the fund-raising activities in public in which actresses such as she have an assigned role and the moment of articulation when she may express her private self. The reference is to the lived experience of her association with Girish Ghosh and how it will continue to live within her and others like her.

By the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century women were practising and often publishing genres such as shok-gatha and other forms of commemorative verse; and ironically enough, actresses often performed in *shok-natikas* (e.g. to pay tribute to Vidyasagar). But the commemorative speech by socially outcast actresses as an occasion, if not platform, for questioning the very premises on which her subjecthood and identity was constructed is unique. It was unfortunate therefore, that the magazine which published these speeches also framed them, with introductions and epilogues, that served to contain the radical critique in the former.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A woman who *spoke in public*, particularly so if she sought to mobilize or represent others through public speeches, was regarded as unnatural. The public theatre for its own part generated enough farces where the butt of the attack was the ‘modern’ ‘educated woman’, as for example, *Meye Monshter Miting* (c.1874).

<sup>2</sup> Benoy Ghosh, *Vidyasagar o Bangali Samaj*. Calcutta: Orient Longman Ltd., 1984, pp. 109, 145-47.

<sup>3</sup> *Natya-mandir*, Aswin-Kartik, BS 1319, pp. 139-44.

<sup>4</sup> Amritalal Mitra, Ardhendhushekhar Mustafi, Nripendranath Bose, and Dharmadas Sur among others.

<sup>5</sup> The usual exception is Sankar Bhattacharya in his *Bangla Rangalayer Itihaser Upadan, 1910-1919* (Sources for the History of Bengali Theatre), Abhijit Bhattacharya ed., (Calcutta: Paschim Banga Natya Akademi, 1996), pp. 67-69. Bhattacharya reproduces the advertisement of 18 September 1912 in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* announcing the meeting.

<sup>6</sup> See Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), pp. 160-74. The advertisement of 18 September 1912 in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* announcing the meeting: The coming wednesday—is a Red-letter/Day in the Dramatic world! please read carefully! STAR THEATRE/ Hony. Dramatic Director—Sj. A. L. Bose / Wednesday, the 18<sup>th</sup> September at 8-30p.m. / 1. A meeting in memory of the Divine / Dramatist Girish Chundra Ghose—will be held by all the actors and actresses, of the / Star Theatre—Under the presidency [sic] of Amarendra Nath Dutt, The principal Actors / and Actresses will speak on the occasion. □