

# Women Saints in Gaudiya Vaishnavism

- Jagadananda Das -



There are few traditional societies in which women have played a dominant historical role. In this respect, Gaudiya Vaishnavism is no different. The egalitarianism of bhakti movements, which stress the universality of devotion and deny any disqualifications based on birth, sex, or caste, seems to have had limited real effects on the actual social circumstances of any of these classes of people. There are some, including the eminent Bengali historian, Ramakanta Chakravarti, who feel that the status of women was improved in Chaitanya Vaishnavism, mainly due to the singular example of Jahnava Devi. (1) Indeed, it does appear that literacy rates among women (and men) in Vaishnava castes in Bengal were somewhat higher than in other, comparable groups, but this evidence is far from overwhelming.

Today, some women may be found playing the role of guru, especially ministering to other women, and there are some Chaitanya Vaishnava women who sing padavali kirtan or give discourses on Vaishnava texts. On the whole, however, despite their dominant numbers at most religious events, the role of women continues to be a supporting one and subordinate to that of men.

One question that needs analysis is whether the importance of Radha in the Vaishnava pantheon and the general weight given to the female principle and feminine virtues in the Gaudiya Vaishnava culture has had any influence on the status of women. Many feminist analysts have pointed out that the worship of goddesses has no proven relation to any such amelioration in societies where such worship is conducted. On the contrary, in a cross-cultural study of women in religion, it has been observed that, "Quite frequently, **the very aspects of women glorified in a religious system are used as justification for the social and political denigration of women. Different ideological definitions and perceptions of men and women further the separation and isolation of women. Seldom does this work to women's advantage. Even when women are seen as spiritual, as in the nineteenth-century cult of true womanhood, the expression of such spirituality was believed best confined to the privacy of the domestic world.**"(2)

In its origins, it might be said that the Chaitanyaite Gaudiya tradition is no exception to this rule. In spite of the exalted place that it gives to a female deity, Radha, and to the feminine virtues, the Chaitanyaite sect, at least in the vision of it presented by the Vrindavan Goswamis and their

followers, with its strong emphasis on asceticism, appears to have followed the Puranic traditions regarding women as found in the Bhagavatam, with its many clearly misogynistic statements.

Despite this, a closer examination of the *Chaitanya Charitamrita* shows that though women are clearly cast in traditional feminine roles as wives and mothers, there is little or no overt misogyny. The heavy emphasis on the renunciation of sexuality and the dangers of involvement with women when engaged in the exercise of spiritual practices do not necessarily enjoin the explicit or willful hatred or denigration of women, though it cannot have been particularly helpful.

The case of Junior Haridas, described by Krishna Das Kaviraj in the *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, is perhaps the most outstanding example of the strict standard of sexual segregation Chaitanya expected of his renunciate disciples. The young renunciate Haridas was ostracized by Chaitanya for having begged rice from an old woman, Madhavi Devi, the sister of one of his most intimate associates, Sikhi Mahiti. Chaitanya's adherence to a principle, to an ascetic standard irrespective of all extenuating circumstance, is highlighted by Kaviraj when he glorifies Madhavi Devi for her own devotional achievements; he states that she is a member of Chaitanya's most exclusive inner circle: the half of the three and a half most worthy recipients of his mercy in the universe.<sup>(3)</sup> Even so, of the various Bhagavata verses that might have been chosen as authorities for such a strict standard, Kaviraj envisions Chaitanya as quoting BhP 9.19.17, which places emphasis on the strength of the senses and the weakness of man rather than on the insidious sexuality of women:

One should not sit alone with one's mother, sister or daughter. The senses are so strong that they can distract even a wise man.

On the other hand, that Madhavi Devi is known as only "half a worthy" indicates rather clearly the sexual-political position taken by Kaviraj and the Vrindavan school of Chaitanya Vaishnavism. It should be noted, however, that Madhavi Devi is unique in the biographies of Chaitanya as a woman who is given credit for personal spiritual achievement--even though neither her devotion nor her age could rid her of the curse of being a danger to men who wished to free themselves of sexual desire.<sup>(4)</sup>

Another comparable incident is found in the same biography: Chaitanya is described as being overwhelmed emotionally upon hearing verses from the Gita Govinda being sung by a woman. He runs to embrace the singer, oblivious to her sex. Only when he is tackled by his servant Govinda Das does he come to his senses and realize the magnitude of what he had been about to do. <sup>(5)</sup>

The exception that proves the rule is also given by Kaviraj. On one occasion in his later life, while Chaitanya was taking darshan of Jagannath in the midst of a crowd, an Orissan woman placed her feet on his back as she strained to get a look at the deity, entirely unaware of the impropriety of her action. Rather than condemning the woman, as his own disciples wished, Chaitanya told them to leave her alone and let her drink in the vision of the Lord to her heart's content. He furthermore expressed a wish for a similar intensity of desire, saying, "Oh that fortunate woman! I worship her feet. By her grace may I also have such eagerness [to see

Jagannath]." It is significant, though, that Chaitanya does not speak to her directly. (6)

In principle, however, it would be a mistake to judge the Chaitanyaite attitude to women on the basis of the strict standards of behavior shown by the ascetics who modeled themselves on his example. The medieval bhakti movements in general showed a more democratic attitude to the practices of religion, giving equal rights to low castes, untouchables and women. Thus Balaram Das could sing that women of respectable lineage (to whom such a public display would have been anathema) danced publicly in the sankirtan procession. (6) Quite in contrast to the findings of Sinclair cited above, Donna Wulff, based on her experience of modern feminist singers of kirtan like Radharani, has concluded that women in Bengal have always enjoyed a comparatively higher status than elsewhere in India and that this fact is both reflected in and supported by the existence of cults of feminine deities. (8) Nevertheless, the women whose biographies (or legends) are described briefly in this article are exceptional: women have only rarely exercised leadership roles for large numbers of Gaudiya devotees of both sexes.

It is no doubt true that women of Sahajiya sects have higher status within their groupings (the above-mentioned Radharani belongs to such a sampradaya), while the orthodoxy preserves a more conservative attitude to sexual relations. It would be a worthwhile subject for research whether the Sahajiya belief in the inherent divinity of both male and females as sexual beings translates into higher status for women than in the orthodox. Whatever findings came out of such research, however, I believe it would be a mistake to attribute the elevated position and reputation achieved by some of the women in orthodox Gaudiya Vaishnavism to the widespread influence of Sahajiya doctrines on the orthodoxy. Indeed, orthodox Gaudiya Vaishnava women whose lives are covered in this article have excelled on their own, by remaining true to the core beliefs of the sampradaya rather than through reform or revolt.

I have divided this brief overview into three periods that for convenience's sake I shall call the early, middle and modern periods. The early period covers those women who were contemporary with Chaitanya and whose stories are found in his biographies; the middle, predominantly those whose lives were described in the histories of the early post-Chaitanya period, such as *Bhakti-ratnakara*, *Prema-vilasa*, *Anuraga-valli*, *Murali-vilasa*, etc. Finally, by the modern period I refer to the 19th and 20th centuries. Despite the limited amount of information available, it is tentatively concluded that the status of women reached a high point in the middle period, when Jahnava Devi and a few other powerful individuals exercised considerable leadership.

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## NOTES

1. Ramakanta Chakravarti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1985), p. 174. "One of the positive results of the Chaitanya movement was the elevation of the social and religious status of women in Bengal. This remarkable development was first seen in the assumption of ecclesiastical leadership by Jahnava Devi, second daughter of Suryadas Sarkhel and second wife of Nityananda." [RETURN](#)

2. Cf. Sinclair, Karen, "Women and Religion" in *The Cross-Cultural Study of Women*, (ed.) Margot I. Duley and Mary I. Edwards (New York: The Feminine Press, 1986), 107-124. Particularly, pp. 110-12. [RETURN](#)

3. *mahitIra bhaginI sei nAma mAdhavI devI | vRddha tapasvinI Ara paramA vaiSNavI || prabhu lekha kare jAre rAdhikAra gaNa | jagatera madhye pAtra sADe tin jana || svarUpa gosAi Ara rAya rAmAnanda | zikhi mahiti tina tAra bhaginI Ardha jana ||* CC 3.2.104-6. [RETURN](#)

4. According to Haridas Das, Madhavi Devi composed a Sanskrit play about Lord Jagannath, *PuruSottama-deva-nATakam*. If this is true, she is a signal exception as the only female author of a Sanskrit text in the Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition. (Cf. *Gaudiya Vaishnava Abhidhana* (ed. Haridas Das (Nabadwip: Haribol Kutir, 471 Chaitanyabda [1964]), 1311, 1624.) [RETURN](#)

5. *Chaitanya Charitamrita* 3.13.77~7. See also 3.3.75. [RETURN](#)

6. *Chaitanya Charitamrita* 3.14.24-31. [RETURN](#)

7. Cited in Sankar Sen Gupta, *A Study of Women in Bengal*. Calcutta: Indian Publications, 1970, 179. *saGkIrtana mAjhe nAce kulera bauhAri*. Chaitanya's early kirtans in the house of Srivas Pandit, however, were not open to women. Vrindavan Das tells that Srivas's mother-in-law tried to hide in order to witness Chaitanya's dancing, but that her presence, even though not visible, interfered with his experiencing the usual ecstasy. *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, 2.16.1-18. [RETURN](#)

8. "Images and Roles of Women in Bengali Vaishnava Padavali Kirtan," in (ed.) Joseph O'Connell, *Bengal Vaishnavism, Orientalism, Society and the Arts* (East Lansing, Michigan: Asian Studies Centre, 1985), 11-27. [RETURN](#)

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## I. Women in Chaitanya's life

Few of the women who figure in the Chaitanya biographies are there as Vaishnavas in the sense of practitioners of the formal practices of devotion. They are devotees of Chaitanya rather than Krishna and their high status in the hierarchy of Chaitanya's associates is due primarily to the relation which they had to him. They are considered to be *nitya-siddha*, eternal associates who descended with him to participate in his lila. In the later recasting of Chaitanya's life as myth or literature, these women have taken on archetypal female roles that in some respects overshadows the historical facts of their lives. Thus, the analysis of the descriptions found in the biographies must be informed by the categories of Indian poetics and literary theory; especially in the way understood by Rupa Goswami, who was so influential on the entire Gaudiya Vaishnava way of thinking.

In the hierarchy of love described in Rupa Goswami's divine aesthetic, the category of love felt by the women in Chaitanya's life is that of *sambandhAnugA*; they possess a love, which though not without glory, is of a somewhat inferior quality because no mundane relationships have had to be sacrificed in order to achieve it. Chaitanya's wives or mother are not renunciates of their

social roles; it is rather through their relationship to Chaitanya, their natural, human love for him, and indeed, their adherence to the ideal role as mother or wife, that they have come to be revered by Chaitanya's devotees. In orthodox Gaudiya Vaishnavism, which is dominated by the Vrindavan spirit of erotic devotion for Krishna, there is little or no devotion to Chaitanya modeled on the love of Sachi, Lakshmipriya or Vishnupriya.[\(9\)](#)

In contrast to this relative lack of interest in the lives of Chaitanya's wives and mother on the part of the Vrindavan-oriented Vaishnava community, the Bengali people as a whole show an enduring attachment to them as the main ashrayas or "vessels" of emotion in dramatizations of his life, which traditionally end with his renunciation, "Nimai-sannyas." The telling of this story in the *Chaitanya Bhagavata* of Vrindavan Das, and even more so in the influential Gaura-nagara tradition of Vasu Ghosh, Lochan Das and others, in many ways self-consciously parallels the tale of Krishna's abandonment of his family and the gopis in Vrindavan: Chaitanya's departure is final; though he is alive, he is lost forever as a son and lover. Thus, as with Mathura lila, the dominant sentiment is that of separation and pity for those wounded by the departure of the object of love.

The primary difference, then, between these women and those who follow in the later periods, is in their emphasis on the human person of Chaitanya himself rather than the god Krishna and their human experience of love rather than the practice of asceticism and ritual devotion.

## **1. Sachi Devi**

The stage for Chaitanya's dramatic departure is set by describing Sachi Devi as an ideal mother, the worthy bearer of the incarnation. She is everywhere recognized to be identical to both Yashoda and Devaki, the foster-mother and mother of Krishna respectively. Her glories are extensively described in the *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, where she is said to be devotion incarnate, the mother of the universe, etc.[\(10\)](#)

Sachi was an educated woman, the daughter, wife and mother of scholars and she demonstrated her learning in the metaphysical arguments she had with her precocious son. According to the biographers, she was privileged on several occasions to experience evidence of Chaitanya's divine status. Vrindavan Das describes her hearing the sound of the flute coming from the child Nimai's mouth and then having a vision of his divine power.[\(11\)](#) In true Bhagavata fashion, Sachi is not swayed from her purely maternal affection by any display of divinity on the part of her son. As he grew older, however, she was prepared to take instruction from him in the matter of religious practice, particularly when he told her to take up the Ekadasi fast[\(12\)](#) and to accept his metaphysical explanations when he consoled her after his first wife Lakshmipriya's death by snakebite. [\(13\)](#)

A rather significant incident is described in *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, when Chaitanya, sitting on the seat of Vishnu as he was wont to do during his early ecstatic moments of identification with the god, states bluntly that Sachi has not achieved prema bhakti, the ultimate goal of devotional practice and that which he had descended to earth for the express purpose of distributing freely. Sachi had apparently committed an offense to Advaita Acharya and was admonished by her son,

who used the occasion to show the gravity of offenses to the Vaishnavas. She again accepted her son's admonitions with good grace and, according to Vrindavan Das, was given prema after having followed his instruction and having asked forgiveness of Advaita. (14)

After Chaitanya's departure for Puri, Sachi is described in the *Chaitanya Charitamrita* making offerings to her deity. Rather than meditating on her Gopal deity, she thought of how she used to feed her own son, Nimai. She would then have most realistic visions of him eating the offering. When she arose from her meditation, she would observe that the plates on which the food had been offered were empty and would become confused thinking that she had fallen asleep and simply dreamt of her son's coming and that she had not made any offering at all. Her sense of reality completely distorted by the overwhelming absorption in love in separation, she would return to the kitchen to start her offering all over again. Chaitanya sent messages on several occasions through associates of his travelling to Nabadwip to assure her that she was not going mad, but that he had indeed been going to Nabadwip to accept her offerings. (15) Kaviraj Goswami follows Jiva in his use of the term *Avirbhava* to refer to these objective manifestations of the Lord in his physical absence. Sachi's home was one of four places where such manifestations took place. (16)

## 2. Chaitanya's wives

Chaitanya's first wife Lakshmipriya died young, while he was travelling in East Bengal. Not much more is said about her other than that she was a devoted wife who fulfilled her household duties on one occasion by herself cooking for a large group of monks who had been invited to eat at their house. (17) She is identified with Rukmini in the *Gaura Ganoddeshā Dipikā* (verse 45).

Chaitanya's second wife Vishnupriya is given a more important place in the biographies as she was the wife who witnessed his transformation into an ecstatic. She is described as a devastated woman who had been helplessly losing her husband to a progressive obsession with his devotional commitment to Krishna. Prior to her marriage, she led an exemplary life, bathing three times daily in the Ganges, but overall her character is not particularly well-developed in any of the Chaitanya biographies, understandable in that she was probably not much more than twelve or thirteen years old at the time of her marriage and her separation from him took place not long thereafter. The wedding itself is described in stereotypical fashion, with the usual hyperbole surrounding the opulence, etc., of the ritual. The pivotal event in her life was of course Chaitanya's departure for the life of renunciation. Of Chaitanya's biographers, only Lochan Das in the *Chaitanya Mangala* describes the couple as having spent the last night of their life together in the same bed. (18)

Several descriptions have been given of Vishnupriya in the years that followed Chaitanya's departure. The primary image is that of an ideal widow, carefully leading the pious life that was and still is generally expected of Bengali widows. (19) Though it does not seem as though she took an active leadership role in the devotional movement inaugurated by her husband, she nevertheless remained an icon and living place of pilgrimage during that time. Continuing to live and serve her mother-in-law Sachi, she adhered to a high standard of austerity which impressed the devotees of the movement. In the *Advaita-prakasha* (Chapter 21), Chaitanya's disciple

Jagadananda describes to him the daily activities of Vishnupriya: She would rise early each morning before daybreak with Sachi to bathe in the Ganges, but then remained indoors the entire day, never letting either the sun nor the moon shine upon her. The devotees would never see her face except when she came to eat, and no one ever heard her speak. She would only eat Sachi's remnants and spent all her time absorbed in the repetition of the Holy Names while meditating on a picture of Chaitanya as he looked before taking the renounced order of life.

Vishnupriya Devi seems to have taken the bhajan path promulgated by Chaitanya seriously. One of the most often repeated descriptions of her recounts that she counted each completion of the sixteen names of Krishna by placing a grain of rice in a clay pot. When she had completed her daily meditation sometime in the early afternoon, she would cook the rice, offer it, and then eat only those grains.[\(20\)](#) In the later histories of the movement, these descriptions show that her prestige among the followers of Chaitanya had expanded beyond merely that of being his wife. She seems to have had a close friendship with Jahnava and was complicit in the adoption of Ramachandra described below.

Moreover, Vishnupriya inaugurated the worship of a Chaitanya image around which numerous legends arose. It is said in the 17th century *Vamshi-siksha*, a history of the Baghnapada Goswamis, that after Chaitanya's renunciation, Vishnupriya had abandoned food and drink until he appeared to her (and Vamsivadananda Thakur) in a dream, telling her to have an image of himself carved in the margosa tree under which Sachi had sat to suckle him. When the murti had been finished, Vishnupriya sang the verse of Chandi Das: "Here is the lord of my life. I am finally able to see him for whom the arrows of desire have caused me to burn and come to the point of dying."[\(21\)](#)

This same deity, known as Mahaprabhu, is still worshiped by the descendants of Vishnupriya's cousin, Madhava Acharya, in Nabadwip where it remains the central focus of pilgrimage. Whatever worship of Chaitanya in the mood of Vishnupriya exists, such as that of Chaitanya Das Babaji in the early part of this century, centers around the Mahaprabhu deity.

### **3. Sita Thakurani**[\(22\)](#)

The wife of Advaita, Sita Thakurani, was a woman who, like her husband, lived a long life. It appears that after marrying Sita, Advaita moved to Shantipur. Nevertheless, most biographies of Chaitanya tell that she was present at his birth ceremonies, and was even responsible for giving him the nickname, "Nimai." It is said that she took some leadership responsibility after the death of her husband, but not much detail can be given about how she conducted herself in such a role.

According to the *Prema-vilāsa*, Sita had a woman disciple, Jangali, about whom it recounts an interesting legend. It seems that she was fearless and engaged in solitary devotional practice in a jungle that was filled with wild animals like bears and tigers (hence her name). On one occasion the Shah of Bengal was hunting in that area and saw her and was attracted by her beauty. When he attempted to rape her,[\(23\)](#) he was surprised to find that she had transformed into a man. The astonished king asked her whether she was a man or a woman. She answered cryptically, "Women see a woman, men see a man. But at no time ever have I been a man."

The king remained understandably confused. He sent a woman to examine Jangali and was told that she was indeed a woman, but when he sent a man, he was told she was a man. The astonished king realized that Jangali possessed some extraordinary powers and he fell at her feet and asked for forgiveness. After she forgave and blessed him, he built a large residence for her there in the woods which was known as Jangali Tota.[\(24\)](#)

#### 4. Other women contemporary to Chaitanya

Only a few other women contemporary to Chaitanya can be considered as having hagiological status in their own right: Malati Devi was the wife of Chaitanya's associate Srivas Pandit. She had an extraordinary relationship with Nityananda, who treated her like his mother. Though she was past child-bearing age, her dried up breasts brought forth milk when the full-grown Nityananda sat on her lap.[\(25\)](#)

Another woman worthy of mention is Narayani, the mother of Vrindavan Das (author of *Chaitanya Bhagavata*). She was Srivas Thakur's niece, only a little girl at the time of Chaitanya's *mahA-prakAza*, or great epiphany (CBh 2.10.229-35), at which she was present and given special attention by him. Another of Srivas' servants, Duhkhi ("unhappy"), was privileged to observe Chaitanya's nightly kirtan; she would bring Ganges water for the Vaishnavas to drink. She thus earned blessings from Chaitanya and was given the name Sukhi ("happy") in place of her original name (CBh 11.25.11-23).

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#### NOTES

9. Haridas Goswami of Nabadwip is an exception to the rule. A prolific and able writer, he produced a number of works in the early second half of the 20th century glorifying Chaitanya through the eyes of Vishnupriya, and established deities of Chaitanya with Vishnupriya throughout Bengal. This model of Chaitanya devotion is, however, of relatively recent date and of relatively limited following. The Gauranga-nagaras who followed Narahari did not follow in the footsteps of Vishnupriya but rather an imaginary extramarital relation with Chaitanya. They did not thus model their devotion on that of Vishnupriya, nor did they conceive of themselves as handmaids of Vishnupriya on the pattern of manjari bhava in the way that Haridas Goswami did. Even so, there is a deity of Vishnupriya worshipped at Srikhanda, the home of Narahari and centre of the Gauranga-nagara sect, which was installed by Kanai Khutiya, an Orissan contemporary of Chaitanya. [RETURN](#)

10. *viSNu-bhakti-svarUpiNI*, *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, 2.22.40; *mUrtimatI bhakti*, *ibid.*, 2.22.45. [RETURN](#)

11. *Chaitanya Bhagavata* 1.10.225-31. This, as many of the other stories of Chaitanya's childhood, is a pastiche of the original Bhāgavata stories of Krishna's childhood. [RETURN](#)

12. *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, 1.15.10-11. [RETURN](#)

13. *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, 1.16.22-23; *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, i.12.183-8. [RETURN](#)

14. Exactly what Vrindavan Das means by prema bhakti in this context appears to be the ecstatic symptoms which Chaitanya himself and his associates manifested in their singing of the holy names. Vrindavan Das makes no reference to the devotional sentiments which later were made current in the thought of Rupa Goswami. Nothing would indicate that Sachi was ever expected to "rise above" her parental relationship with Chaitanya. [RETURN](#)

15. Jiva Goswami tells a similar story about Krishna's mother Yashoda having such experience during her son's absence in Mathura. Krishna similarly sends her assurances that it is he who is in fact coming in a divine form to receive her offerings. The writing of the *Gopala-champu* precedes that of the *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, so it is likely that Krishna Das Kaviraj took his inspiration from Jiva. Cf. *Gopala-champu* 2.12. [RETURN](#)

16. *zazIra mandire Ara nityAnanda-nartane | zrIvAsa-kIrtane Ara rAghava-bhavane || ei cAri thAi prabhura satata AvirbhAva || premAkRSTa hoye prabhur sahaja svabhAva || Chaitanya Charitamrita* 3.2.3~6. The more detailed account of Chaitanya's appearance in Sachi's house is found in CC 3.12.8f-94. [RETURN](#)

17. *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, 1.14. [RETURN](#)

18. *Chaitanya Mangala*, 2.12.1-40. Vrindavan Das envisions Chaitanya spending the last night with his friend Gadadhar Pandit. [RETURN](#)

19. A sannyasi's wife would be expected to act as though her husband were legally dead. [RETURN](#)

20. This can be found in *Prema-vilAsa*, chapter 5, *Bhakti-ratnAkara*, 4.48-52, *VaMzI-zikSA*, p. 161. [RETURN](#)

21. Prem Das, *VaMzI-zikSA* (Nabadwip: Nimai Chand Goswami, n.d.), 161-2. [RETURN](#)

22. There is a work named *Sita-caritra*, by Lokanath Das. [RETURN](#)

23. The words used are *dharm-aNz karA*. [RETURN](#)

24. *Gaudiya Vaishnava Abhidhana*, 1243. Apparently, other sources say that Jangalipriya was the name of a male disciple of Sita's who took the feminine name after initiation. Transvestism in the Vaishnava tradition is not unknown, though it is not considered to be orthodox. Those following this aberrant tradition are given the name Sakhi bhekhi. Lalita Sakhi, a disciple of Charan Das Babaji, is a fairly recent example of a male who considered it an essential part of his devotional life to dress like a gopi. The unambiguous statement of Jangali that "at no time have I ever been a man," could have been nothing more than the firm conviction of the possession of an eternal feminine identity in relation to the eternal male, Krishna. [RETURN](#)

25. *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, 2.11.8-10. [RETURN](#)

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## II. Second generation women

Though some of these women are junior contemporaries to the women associates of Chaitanya, they are distinguishable from them by their personal charisma, their knowledge and practice of the religion founded by Chaitanya and his inner circle, and the leadership roles they took in the proselytization of that religion.

### 1. Sri Jahnava Ishwari (16th century)

Karen Sinclair has observed that though women have attained great prominence in Hindu sects, it is generally as "Holy Mothers" or the consorts of male religious adepts, and she gives Sarada Devi, the consort of Ramakrishna, and Aurobindo's "The Mother" as modern examples. In her view, in such circumstances women are normally venerated, but their role is circumscribed, as is the case with the Virgin Mary in Christianity. [\(26\)](#)

In many places in Asia, widows, daughters and sisters of martyred political leaders have risen to political prominence. Nowhere is this truer than in South Asia, where such women have risen to the highest political posts in four countries. Mary Katzenstein, in her analysis of the factors leading to the political prominence of women in India, has concluded that in societies where kinship plays an important role, in the absence of a regularized, stable system whereby succession of political leaders is assured, daughters, widows, or sisters are often called upon to lead. [\(27\)](#) Nevertheless, for any woman to succeed in a role of leadership in such circumstances, it would be necessary that she show qualifications of a more practical sort; simple relationship could only play a temporary role. Indira Gandhi in India and Sirimavo Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka, are particularly salient examples.

Most of the early generations of Gaudiya Vaishnava women leaders were similarly related to earlier charismatic male leaders of the movement. Of all these women, who are yet few in number, Jahnava, the wife of Chaitanya's chief associate Nityananda, stands out. A number of reasons might be conjectured for her rise to prominence. She was widowed, it would seem, when still fairly young. She had no children herself, but her nephew and stepson, Nityananda's son Virabhadra (born of Jahnava's younger sister and co-wife Vasudha), was not yet of an age where he could exercise leadership in the dynastic system that had apparently been envisioned as appropriate for the continuation of the movement. In the absence of another appropriate leader; Jahnava stepped into fill the leadership void.

It is quite clear that Jahnava won respect throughout the Vaishnava community as well as constituting a strong influence on her two principle disciples, Virabhadra and Ramachandra. She was known as Ishwari (*IzvarI*), the feminine form of the commonly used word for God, *Izvara*. At the very least, the term implies a great mastery over others. Narahari recounts in his *Bhakti-ratnakara* that Yadunandan Das and the other devotees gathered in Katwa as Jahnava made her way to Kheturi out of respect ate only after she had finished her repast.

Jahnava and Vasudha were sisters, daughters of a Brahmin scholar, Suryadas Sarkhel, and nieces of Gauridas Pandit, both of which brothers were significant devotees of Nityananda and Chaitanya in their own right. The two girls were given in marriage to Nityananda, but Jahnava remained without issue while Vasudha gave birth to two children: a girl, Gahga, and a boy, Virabhadra. Though Jahnava was Virabhadra's stepmother, she played a more significant role in his spiritual development than did his natural mother. One legend is recounted in the *Nityananda-vamsa-vistara* in which it is said that Virabhadra was seeking a spiritual master (having been orphaned before receiving initiation from his own father). In the course of his search, he approached Sita Thakurani, the wife of Advaita, the third member of the Gaudiya Vaishnava divine triumvirate. She told him that he should seek closer to home, but Virabhadra was not convinced that Jahnava was sufficiently qualified to be his guru. On his return home, however, he saw his stepmother as she was completing her bath. While drying her hair, her wet sari slipped and in order to conceal her nakedness, she sprouted two extra arms to hold up the falling cloth. Virabhadra was impressed by this show of divinity and asked Jahnava to initiate him. [\(29\)](#)

Though some comparable epiphanies are related in legends about Nityananda, there is a proliferation of such simplistic attempts at legitimizing the divine character of personalities in the later hagiographical histories of Chaitanya Vaishnavism. The *Nityananda-vamsa-vistara* also recounts that Virabhadra (who is also identified as *Izvara* by Krishnadas [CC 1.11.8] and as Kshirodakashayi Vishnu in the *Gaura-ganoddasha-dipika* manifested divine forms of this nature on various occasions during his preaching career.

Jahnava is not the only woman to have manifested such a four-armed form. Stories similar to the one recounted above are also told about two other women in Gaudiya Vaishnava history. Nityananda's powerful disciple Abhiram Thakur married a Muslim girl, Rami, an act that met with considerable criticism. Though some devotees were prepared to accept her presence in the Vaishnava community, they were certainly not ready to take food, not even prasada, from her hand. They were quieted when Rami sprouted extra arms to hold up the cloth covering her head when it slipped as she was serving. Again, a similar story is told by Haridas Das (*Gaudiya-Vaishnava Abhidhana*, 1422) about Hemalata Thakurani, the daughter of the important third generation Gaudiya Vaishnava leader Srinivasa Acharya. The legend about Hemalata is particularly significant, not so much in its details, but rather in that, as with Jahnava, it confirms her personal authority as guru.

Virabhadra was not Jahnava's only important disciple. Other disciples of distinction begin with Ramachandra Goswami. Grandson of Vamsivadananda Thakur (mentioned above in connection with Vishnupriya Devi), Ramachandra was adopted by Jahnava after she gave the benediction to his father that he would have two sons. When the second son was born, when Ramachandra was 11 or 12 years old (ca. 1545), Jahnava took him to live with her.

Ramachandra was given special treatment by his stepmother and guru, and to some extent became a rival to Virabhadra for her favors, accompanying her on her last trip to Braj. He later founded the Baghnapada branch of Goswamis through his nephew Rajavallabh's family; he himself never married.

It would appear that Jahnava had imbibed some of the scholarship of her father and uncle, and it stood her in good stead when she began to take on the role of Nityananda's successor. In *Murali-vilasa*, Jahnava is described as giving instructions to Ramachandra Goswami in the details of the path of worship (*manjarI-bhAva-sAdhana*) outlined by Rupa Goswami. Nevertheless, despite her personal scholarship, she does not seem to have given public discourses on scripture and was even self-effacing when in the association of male devotees. For instance, in Kheturi, she did not ascend to the podium with the associates of Chaitanya and Nityananda who were present there. [\(31\)](#)

Nor did she do anything more than act as an audience for kirtan. On the other hand, she appears to have liked to cook for large numbers of devotees, herself serving them, and participated directly in deity worship, at least by offering foodstuffs. At Kheturi, she orchestrated many of the activities, such as the greeting (*satkAra*) of the guests (BRK 10.511), the playing of *phAgu-kheLA*, etc. [\(32\)](#)

Perhaps Jahnava's most significant contribution was to the organization and character of Bengali Vaishnavism as it endeavored to deal with the theological sophistication of the Vrindavan Goswamis. The event at which this took place was the famous Kheturi festival already mentioned above, the date of which is still a matter of conjecture, but likely took place in the 1570s. Her role there was to lend approval to the innovations in the practice of kirtan as well as the theological formulations on the nature of Chaitanya and his incarnation that Narottam and Srinivas Acharya had brought with them from Vrindavan. [\(33\)](#)

Jahnava, doubtless impressed by the culture of the new leaders of the movement and the learning they had received at the hands of Jiva Goswami, decided to go herself to Braj and witness firsthand the developments that had taken place there. Traveling with a large group of Vaishnavas and being carried in a palanquin that protected her modesty, she led the undoubtedly rather impressive group that made the lengthy pilgrimage, taking between five and six months to make the trip.

Narahari describes an incident that took place in a village en route. The residents of the village were Chandi worshippers who mocked the group of Vaishnavas when they saw them bowing to Jahnava and touching her feet. Considering that by offering respect to Jahnava rather than to their local deity of Chandi, the Vaishnavas had committed a great offense, they vowed to slaughter the whole group of travelers. Chandi, however, found this proposal unacceptable and appeared in an angry form to her worshippers in a dream and revealed to them the glories of Jahnava, saying,

You rascals! You do not know the truth about her whom you look down upon and whom you have called a mere Brahmin woman. She is the wife of Nityananda-Balaram, object of respect even to me and worshipable by all. Her name, Jahnava Ishwari, is exceedingly sweet. Simply by uttering this name, one can be freed from life's worries. She is the beloved of Nityananda, the incarnation of compassion; she voluntarily distributes loving devotion to Krishna to the living beings. Whoever worships her lotus feet and sings her glories will be delivered from the threefold sufferings. [\(34\)](#)

Chandi concludes by telling the villagers to beg Jahnava for forgiveness, which they did. Jahnava converted them all to Vaishnavism and stayed for several days in the village before moving on. Another similar miraculous event took place at another village where robbers thought to attack the group. They were unable to find Jahnava and her party of travelers despite knowing clearly their location. They too converted to Vaishnavism when they realized that Jahnava was divinely protected.

On her way back home from Braj, Jahnava stopped with her entourage at the birthplace of Nityananda in Birbhum. She made a second and perhaps even a third trip to Braj before the end of her life, ultimately dying there. It is said that while still alive, she had an image of Radha made and placed on the right-hand side of Gopinath in Vrindavan, where an image of Radha already stood on the left. When she died, she is said to have entered into that deity, thenceforth known as Ananga Manjari.

Jahnava's apotheosis as Ananga Manjari, the sister of Radha, is perhaps what sets her apart from most other woman saints in Gaudiya Vaishnavism. The *Gaura-ganoddesh-dipika* of Kavi Karnapur identifies her first with Revati (the wife of Balaram in Krishna lila) by virtue of her being the wife of Nityananda (who is identified with Balaram), but also recognizes the Ananga Manjari identification as well. By way of contrast, though Vishnupriya is identified with Satyabhama, the wife of Krishna in Dvaraka, (35) this identification is far less prestigious in the heavily Vrindavan-influenced Gaudiya Vaishnavism of later days than that of Jahnava with Ananga Manjari.

It was Jahnava's adopted son and disciple Ramachandra Goswami who developed the theology of Ananga Manjari in his short work *Ananga-manjari-samputka*. (36) Ananga Manjari has an ontologically special status in that she is both a manjari, or maidservant to Radha, and sakhi, who enjoys dalliances with Krishna in her own right. Furthermore, she is the consort of Balaram on the one hand, and identical with him in that metaphysical slight of hand known to Vaishnava theologians, which states that a power and its possessor are not distinguishable. Thus, Balarama (= Nityananda), who enjoys his own rasa-lila with gopis attached erotically to him, also enjoys access to the superior rasa-lila enjoyed by Krishna through his presence there in the form of Ananga Manjari. This bit of theological contortionism arises directly out of Jahnava's "conversion" to the higher standards of devotion established by the Vrindavan goswamis. In order to give legitimacy to his line, it was now necessary to show that Nityananda, who had always been understood to possess the friendly mood (*sakhya-bhava*), was also privy to the erotic mood as well (*madhura-bhava*). If Chaitanya had come to distribute this type of love to all humans who had never before had access to it, then how could his most intimate associate and primary distributory agent be deprived of it?

Virabhadra's wife, Subhadra Devi, wrote a Sanskrit hymn called *Ananga-kadambavali*, which consisted of one hundred verses in glorification of Jahnava. This work has been lost, but a single verse of it has been preserved in the *Murali-vilasa* (and is cited in Haridas Das, *Gaudiya Vaishnava Abhidhana* 5). It is not unlikely that Jahnava encouraged female learning, for literacy amongst Vaishnava women was maintained at a higher level than amongst other women of Bengal society. Donna Wulff points out that Vaishnava women ascetics in the 19th and 20th

centuries were leaders of female literacy, much more so than those who belonged to other Hindu sects. (37)

Jahnava's exceptional status no doubt led to the common occurrence of maternal initiation in many Nityananda-dynasty families. In some cases, such as the family of Pran Gopal Gosvami of Nabadwip, the tradition is that the sons are always initiated by their mother. Pran Gopal would say that when the power of the mercy of the guru was coupled with maternal love, an extremely powerful spiritual force was created. (38) The Gaudiya Math movement directed by Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati fought strongly against the principle of inherited disciplic succession and was even more vehement in such criticism where female members were involved. Even so, they too accepted Jahnava's legitimacy as a spiritual master in the line. (39)

Whatever the attitude of neo-orthodoxy to Jahnava, there is little to support Edward Dimock's contention that she was a sahajiya, or in any way influenced by sahajiyas, nor that her adopted son was one. Nor is it necessarily true that the increased influence of women in Gaudiya Vaishnavism is a result of increased sahajiya influence. It shows rather the potential power of women that was given the opportunity to develop when Chaitanya instructed his chief lieutenant Nityananda to return to Bengal and get married, thus giving increased legitimacy to the householder life. The Gaudiya movement has always held that the renunciates and householders operate in separate spheres with different rules.

## 2. Ganga Devi

Nityananda's daughter. It is said that when she was born, Abhiram Thakur came to prostrate himself before her. This, rather than being a sign of respect, was a test. Abhiram's prostrations were dangerous, and had nefarious results. Indeed, several of Vasudha's other babies had died after Abhiram had made such shows of devotion. Ganga, however, survived the test and was thus Abhiram predicted that she would be a greatly powerful woman and even pronounced her to be the incarnation of the Ganges, writing a twenty-verse poem in her honor. According to *Gaura-ganoddasha-dipika*, her husband Madhava Chattopadhyaya was Santanu (who married the goddess Ganga) in his previous incarnation. Their family took up residence in the village of Jirat on the western bank of the Bhagirathi and their descendents continue to function as initiating gurus of Vaishnavism. (40)

## 3. Hemalata Thakurani

There is unfortunately an insufficient amount of information about Hemalata Thakurani, the daughter of Srinivas Acharya, one of the principal leaders of the second generation of Gaudiya Vaishnavism and contemporary of Jahnava. Hemalata initiated many disciples, most important of whom is Yadunandan, a prolific poet and author, and she is best known for her role in ostracizing the leader of the early 18th century sahajiya challenge to Gaudiya orthodoxy, Rupa Kaviraj. It is said that she tore his beads from his neck to indicate that he was no longer eligible for commensality. Yadunandan writes about this incident and other exercise of authority in *Karnananda*, which is primarily a life of Srinivas Acharya that he wrote on her order. (41) Srinivas Acharya's second wife Gaurangapriya also took a number of disciples. (42)

#### 4. Krishnapriya and Vishnupriya

These two sisters represent a new type of woman in Gaudiya Vaishnava history: they were renunciates who practiced a life of intense asceticism and devotion comparable to those of the male monks in whose contact they themselves lived. Daughters of Narottama Das's chief disciple Ganganarayan Chakravarti, they were told by Narottam himself to take initiation from their father. They lived for some time at Radha Kund in Braj. Their reputation was sufficient that Raghunath Das's Govardhan shila, which had been given to him personally by Chaitanya, was entrusted to their care by Mukunda, the disciple of Krishnadas Kaviraj (who had received it from Raghunath). This in itself was a highly unorthodox act that resulted in a certain amount of dissent in the conservative community.

According to the *Narottama-vilasa* of Narahari, Krishnapriya took a number of disciples, but ultimately had to disown one of them, Rupa Kaviraj, who, for whatever motive, took the side of those who felt that her sex restricted her role in certain public religious acts. In particular, he objected to her presence in the assembly of men at the reading of Bhagavata. The Vaishnavas present all offered obeisance to her in the assembly with the exception of Rupa Kaviraj who asked her how she, being a woman, could listen to the Bhagavata reading, to which she answered, "It is the wagging of tongues that makes listening to the reading difficult, not my presence." This made Rupa Kaviraj furious, but the result of his offensive behavior was that *he* was forced to leave Vrindavan and return to Orissa, where legend has it he ultimately died a leper. (43)

#### 5. Ganga Mata Goswamini

Unfortunately little information can be found regarding this extraordinary 17th century figure, who is not mentioned in any of the Gaudiya Vaishnava histories. Ganga Mata Goswamini was probably the first woman in Chaitanya Vaishnavism who built a reputation as a devotee purely on the basis of her own learning and spiritual achievements and who founded her own spiritual "family."

Her original name was Sachi. She was the daughter of a rich landowner in Puntia in Orissa, who left home to go to Vrindavan where she took initiation from Haridas Goswami of Vrindavan. (44) On the orders of her spiritual master she went to Radha Kund, where she lived for several years with her godsister Lakshmi priya. Afterward, she was again instructed by her spiritual master to establish herself in Jagannath Puri, taking the so-called *kshetra sannyas*. She took up residence at the home of Sarvabhauma Bhattacarya, an important disciple of Chaitanya during his years in Puri. When she came there, only a shalagrama shila named Radha Damodar was being served at this house. She gradually expanded the service, installing other deities.

Sachi gave discourses on the Bhagavata Purana that attracted large audiences. The king of Orissa, Mukundadeva, had a dream of Jagannath who told him to make a donation of land for the service of the deity. Prior to this, Sachi had begged in order to maintain this service. Near the home of Sarvabhauma is a tank that is known as the white Ganges (Svetaganga) into which the

water from the Jagannath temple, including the water which is used for bathing Jagannath, is drained. Once, on the auspicious occasion for bathing of Mahavaruni, which takes place in the middle of the night, she was washed by the currents of the Ganges inside the gates of the Jagannath temple. The temple guards thought that she was a thief and had her arrested, but King Mukundadeva once again had a dream of Jagannath who told him that he should set her free. He and many of the other sevayats of Jagannath eventually took initiation from her. Because she had been washed by the Ganges water which springs from the feet of Lord Jagannath, Sachi became known by the name of Ganga Mata Goswamini.

The house of Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya is now more commonly known as Ganga Mata's Math and is one of the major houses of Vaishnavism in Puri. Several siddha-babajis were initiated in her line, which traces back to Gadadhar Pandit and wears the distinctive nupur-style tilak. (45)

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## NOTES

26. op. cit, 112. Of course, in the latter case, Aurobindo's consort was a European woman who exercised a great deal of leadership and power in Auroville, Pondicherry for many years.[RETURN](#)

27. "Towards equality? Cause and consequence of the political prominence of women in India," in *Asian Survey* xviii, 5 (May, 1978) 480. [RETURN](#)

28. The same story is told in a somewhat different fashion in the 24th chapter of some editions of the *Prema-vilasa*.[RETURN](#)

29. Four-armed forms are the prerogative of the denizens of the planets of Vishnu, though they have no particular theological relevance for followers of Radha and Krishna, who disdain them as an irrelevant manifestation of divine power. Even so, Chaitanya himself is said to have displayed a number of unusual forms in the *Chaitanya Bhagavata* and *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, particularly in the early part of his career when perhaps it was felt that some concrete evidence of his divinity was needed. [RETURN](#)

30. Other important disciples of Jahnava were Jnana Das, one of the greatest writers of Vaishnava padavali kirtan, and Nityananda Das, the author of the *Prema-vilasa*.[RETURN](#)

31. *Bhakti-ratnakara* 10.477. *manera ullAse sabe baise divyAsane | zrI-jAhnava IzvarI baisaye sangopane* ||[RETURN](#)

32. Brk 10.633-5. *phAgu-kheLA* is the Bengali term for the throwing of colored and scented powders on one another during the Holi festival, the full-moon day of Phalgun month. The Kheturi festival took place to commemorate the birth of Chaitanya, which took place on Holi.[RETURN](#)

33. Brk 10.628.[RETURN](#)

34. Brk 11.45-51.[RETURN](#)

35. Ggd 48.[RETURN](#)

36. ed. Sundarananda Vidyavinoda. (Calcutta: Sripat Parag, 1964).[RETURN](#)

37. Op. cit, p. 21.[RETURN](#)

38. Personal communication from Madan Gopal Goswami, current guru in the line. There is, of course, another reason for this practice: this family is not directly descended from Nityananda by a line of males succession.[RETURN](#)

39. Viz. Bhakti Rakshak Sridhar Maharaj's statement in connection with the disciplic succession accepted by Bhaktivinoda Thakur "We have to follow the spirit; otherwise after Jahnava Devi, the wife of Lord Nityananda, up to Bipin Goswami, so many unknown lady gurus. Through them, the mantra came to Bipin Goswami, and from him Bhaktivinoda Thakura received the mantra. We accept Bhaktivinoda Thakur, but should we count all those ladies in our disciplic succession? What was their realization?" Sri Guru and His Grace, (San Jose, CA.: Guardian of Devotion Press, 1983), 23. Further, when A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami was asked if a woman can become a guru in disciplic succession, he responded, "Yes. Jahnava Devi was Nityananda's wife. She became. If she's able to go to the highest perfection of life, why it is not possible [for other women] to become guru?" in *Conversations with Srila Prabhupada* (Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1990), Volume 22, Toronto, 6.18.76, pp.19-20. [RETURN](#)

40. *Gaudiya Vaishnava Abhidhana*, 1196.[RETURN](#)

41. *Karnananda*, (ed.) Ram Narayan Vidyaratna (Berhampore: Radha Raman Press, 1929), 122.[RETURN](#)

42. According to Sukumar Sen in *Bangla Sahityer Itihas* (Calcutta: Modern Book Agency, 1940), Gurucharan Das wrote his *Premamrita* on the order of Gaurangapriya (p.409).[RETURN](#)

43. *Narottam Vilas*, 204. Cited in Edward C. Dimock, *Place of the Hidden Moon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 100-1. See also *Gaudiya Vaishnava Abhidhana*, 1191. [RETURN](#)

44. This Haridas Goswami was the sevayat of the Govinda temple and is mentioned in the *Chaitanya Charitamrita* as the leader of the Vrindavan Vaishnava community after the death of Jiva Goswami (d.1610). [RETURN](#)

45. *Gaudiya Vaishnava Abhidhana*, 1197-8. [RETURN](#)

### III. Women saints in the modern era

The primary source of information for women saints of the modern period is O.B.L. Kapoor's Hindi *Braj ke bhakta*(46) Altogether, there are only twelve woman saints described in *Braj ke bhakta*, of which only five can be considered Gaudiyas. Though these women are respected for their saintliness, only one (Sadhu Ma) is a leader in the sense of being an initiating guru. It is no coincidence that she was born into one of the great Gaudiya initiating families, that of Advaita Acharya. Otherwise, they were all also born in well-to-do families. Of the three who were Bengali, all were Brahmins.

All twelve women whose biographies appear in Kapoor's book are renunciates, showing perhaps more the bias of what that author expected a "saint" to be like, and thus are not necessarily representative of true saintliness. Taken as a whole, the women of *Braj ke bhakta* show, as might be expected, a decided tendency to the *vatsalya* or parental type of devotion. One outstanding exception to this is, of course, that of Srimati Devi, whose taste leaned to the *sakhya* or "the friendly mood," as will be described below.

#### 1. Pishima Goswamini

Chandrashashi Mukhopadhyay, later known as Pishima Goswamini, is the only woman mentioned in Haridas Das's *Gaudiya Vaishnava Jivani*.(47) Her story centers around the Gaur-Nitai deities who are found today in Vrindavan in Banakhandi near Loy Bazaar. These deities at one time belonged to Chaitanya's childhood companion Murari Gupta, whose name is carved on the base of one of the statues. They were apparently lost at one time and later rediscovered in Siuri in Birbhum district in northwestern Bengal. A wandering Orissan monk, Balaram Das Babaji, while passing through Siuri had a dream in which he was instructed to take over the service of the deities. Not long thereafter, the daughter of a wealthy landowner in Nadia district, Chandrashashi, at the time only twenty years old, came to Siuri for business reasons. She became attracted to the deities and attended services regularly in the temple while there. One night she had a dream in which Gaur-Nitai came to her in the form of young boys and said that they were very hungry and wanted her to feed them khir. Because she had not been initiated, Balaram Das was not prepared to give food prepared by her to the deities, so she took initiation from him so that she could comply with Gaur-Nitai's request

A few days later, when she was about to leave Siuri for home, she had another dream in which Gaur-Nitai begged her not to leave, for otherwise who would give them such good things to eat. Like children, they tugged on her skirts and even tore off a piece of her cloth. Chandrashashi awoke with a start and saw that her cloth was indeed torn. She went to Balaram Das who found the missing bit of cloth in the hands of the deity of Gaur. From that day on, she abandoned any intention of returning home to her village and decided to stay on in the service of Gaur-Nitai.

Not long thereafter, however, speculations about the nature of her relation with the monk Balaram Das started in the town. Balaram Das and Chandrashashi decided, again on the basis of instructions given to them in a dream, to take Gaur-Nitai with them to live in Vrindavan. They placed the deities on a boat and made the 1600 km. trip along the Ganges and Jamuna to Braj.

Chandrashashi, known in Braj as Pishima ("aunt") managed to build a new temple in Barathandi for the deities who became known locally as Pishima's Gaur-Nitai.

One of the interesting legends concerning Pishima Goswamini is the following. One day, while preparing a meal for Gaur-Nitai, whom she treated as her own children, her menses started, rendering her ritually impure for service to the deities. This interruption greatly distressed her. When she nodded off to sleep, Gaur-Nitai came to her and told her that just as an ordinary mother does not interrupt her service to her own children while menstruating, neither should she. Furthermore, they assured her, she would be liberated from this discomfort from that day on. She bathed and made the food offering to the deities and never again experienced the female cycle.

Pishima Goswamini led a strict life according to the Vaishnava regulations, bathing in the Jumna three times a day, chanting on her rosary daily, etc., but her real focus was on archana deity worship. She was engaged in a quasi-constant conversation with Gaur-Nitai, who also appeared occasionally to other people to demand various types of service, etc. Later, when she was old and no longer personally bathed the deities or rendered other types of service, she still was able to know whether things were going in the desired manner by this personal communication. In a typical account, when on one cold winter morning Pishima's successor, Gopishwar Goswami, bathed Gaur-Nitai with cold water, she divined the blunder when she saw that the deities had running noses. To Gopishwar Goswami's amazement, she ran a handkerchief over their noses to show him the proof that they had caught colds due to his carelessness.

Haridas Das recounts that Gopishwar Goswami personally told him that when Pishima Goswamini first asked him to take over the service of Gaur Nitai, he complained that he felt no pleasure in serving such small deities as he did not have the same type of parental affection as she, but was rather moved by the sentiment of friendship. He said that Pishima then went to the deities, pulled on their chins and they changed size to take on their present form.[\(48\)](#)

## **2. Ma Yashoda (d. 1944)[\(49\)](#)**

Ma Yashoda is known more through her relationship with her disciple, Krishna Prem, than for her own achievements. Sri Krishna Prem, or Ronald Nixon (b.1898), was a British pilot in the First World War who felt that he had been miraculously saved in the course of a mission in Germany. After the war, Nixon undertook a spiritual search that led him to India. A degree holder from Cambridge, he taught English at Lucknow University while staying in the home of the Vice-chancellor, Jnanendranath Chakravarty, a leader of the Theosophist movement. Manika Devi, the wife of the Vice-chancellor, was also a highly educated woman and had maternal feelings for Nixon, calling him Gopal, as many Bengali mothers call their sons. As Nixon recounted to the Bengali singer and bhakta Dilip Ray, Mrs. Chakravarty was heavily involved in her husband's rather busy Western-style social life. As he himself took an increasing interest in Buddhism and Hinduism, studying Sanskrit and Pali, Nixon observed that even within her superficially mundane life, she exuded a spiritual peace. He noticed that she disappeared from the scene during parties and returned rejuvenated. Curious, he followed her on one such occasion and saw her absorbed in a deep meditation. Upon being questioned, she explained to him that she and her husband had developed an interest in Vaishnavism and had been initiated by Balakrishna

Goswami of the Radharaman family in Vrindavan. Impressed, Nixon then asked to be initiated by her. Eventually he asked to take sannyas from her, and in order to be able to do so, she herself went to Vrindavan and there took sannyas so that she could give him this initiation too. The name Yasoda Ma was given to her on this occasion, while Krishna Prem was the sannyas name given to Nixon.

Abandoning academic life, the two of them went to Mirtola, near Almora in the Himalayan foothills, where they founded an ashram which they called "Uttara Vrindavan." They installed a Radha-Krishna murtis. She taught local children to read and write and opened a dispensary, while Krishna Prem wrote several books and attracted a number of Englishmen as well as Indians to become his disciples.

In her childhood, while living at Ghazipur, Yasoda Ma had had several formative experiences with holy men. As a girl of twelve or thirteen, she was chosen as a representative of the goddess at a Kumari-puja in which Swami Vivekananda himself offered flowers to her feet. On another occasion she had heard that a local yogi, Pawhari Baba was giving a free cloth and kamandalu to all monks who came to his cave. Curious about how he could fit the large amounts of cloth, etc., that would be required to make this gift, she disguised herself as a boy and stood in line as the goods were handed out. When it came her turn, she jumped into the small space of his grotto and saw that it was empty. Through this act, she showed a great deal of daring; her discovery produced in her a lifelong belief in miracles.

Yashoda Ma had a deep emotional attachment to her deities in the parental mood and had a number of extraordinary experiences with her Gopal deity that she recounted to Dilip Ray.

### **3. Siddheshvari Devi, Sadhu Ma (d. 1944)(50)**

The daughter of Govinda Chandra Goswami in Pabna district of Bangla Desh, she was a descendant of Chaitanya's associate Advaita Acharya. Born during the annual Durga Puja festival, her father considered her to be an incarnation of Yogamaya. From her childhood, she showed a devotional propensity and studied the scriptures under her father who also initiated her. She took sannyas after the death of her father (wearing saffron cloth like Prabodhananda Saraswati). Although still a young girl, she wandered throughout India visiting all the major places of pilgrimage, depending on God alone for her protection. She met the famous Shakta Bama Khepa at Tarapith, who told her to spend some time at Belur and then to go to Vrindavan. It is said that Bama Khepa also recognized her as an incarnation of Yogamaya.

When she finally came and settled in Vrindavan, she eventually built a large ashram dedicated to Radha Kunjakishori near the Ranganathji temple gardens. She had hundreds of Punjabi and Bengali disciples, including many who were prominent and wealthy citizens, and eventually built other temples and ashrams in Belur, Govardhan, Bhubaneswar, Chakratirtha (Puri), etc.

In the tradition of the Advaita family, she strictly followed the *Hari-bhakti-vilasa*, even instituting regular performances of fire sacrifices in all her temples except in Braj where she supposedly had a vision of Radha who prohibited such rituals as unnecessary. She loved rasa-lila

performances, but is said to have fainted once on hearing Mahaprabhu's sannyas being sung. Like many of the other powerful women devotees of Braj, she placed a lot of emphasis on service to the devotees who all called her mother. She had dealings with some of Braj's stranger characters like Gwariya Baba.

#### **4. Srimati Devi(51)**

Interesting in view of the accepted wisdom that women saints in Indian religions are comfortable in their sexual identity in contrast with men who often, and particularly in Radha-Krishna worship, seek a female identification,(52) is the story of Srimati Devi. O.B.L. Kapoor recounts her legend in connection with Krishnananda Swami, a Punjabi disciple of the Nityananda family descendant Pran Gopal Goswami (d. 1955). Though initiated in the Gaudiya tradition by a staunch promoter of the manjari mood of devotion, Krishnananda worshiped Krishna in the friendly mood (*sakhya*). Though his guru wanted him to take disciples and preach devotion to Krishna, Krishnananda Swami was reluctant to do so because he wished to avoid the association of women. For years he had kept the vow that he would never look upon the face of a woman and this continued to keep this vow until he came in contact with the eleven-year old girl named Srimati Devi.

Srimati Devi lived in the village of Nagla Lakshmanpur within the Braj area. Widowed at the age of eleven, she devoted herself fully to the worship of her Krishna deity. She herself had a tendency to the friendly mood of devotion and had heard of Krishnananda Swami and had become attached to the idea of becoming his disciple. Eventually, at the insistence of some of her relatives, Krishnananda Swami wrote the maha mantra on a piece of paper and some instructions in how to worship Krishna.

Srimati Devi still wished to see her guru and vowed that until she saw him, she would not go outside in the light of day. She would rise at four in the morning and bathe, then sit indoors, chanting the holy names until sunset. She kept this up for three years, but still she was not given the opportunity to see her guru. Finally, she stopped all food and drink and had thus been fasting for nine days when Krishnananda had a vision in which Balaram told him that he could break his vow for her sake.

After making this breakthrough and receiving personal contact with her guru, Srimati Devi quickly attained perfection in the friendly mood. She began to dress like a boy; her behavior, her language, etc., all took on the characteristics of a cowherd boyfriend of Krishna and people even began to call her bhैया ("brother"). She became progressively absorbed in a total consciousness of Krishna's presence.

Her health was poor and she did not live much longer after this. One day, when her guru came to visit her, he took her head in his lap and she said, "Buddy, let's go. Look, Balaram and Krishna are calling their friends to come." Krishnananda Swami replied, overcome with emotion, "Go ahead, buddy. I'll be right along." Having received this permission from her guru, she entered the eternal world of Braj.

## 5. Grijja Devi(53)

Girija Devi was the wife of a rich landowner in Jamira in the state of Bihar, and was thus habituated to a life of great luxury. She started to lose her interest in family life, however, when her oldest son died at the age of eighteen, followed shortly thereafter by the death of her second son. In her grief she became indifferent to food and drink. Her husband asked his family guru for advice, and the guru began to read Bhagavata Purana to her with to calm her. The result of these readings was that she began to develop an interest in devotion to Krishna and then a desire to move to Braj. Despite the family tradition that kept strict purdah on its women, her husband eventually gave her permission to go.

In Vrindavan Girija Devi rented a room in the Radharamana Ghera and quickly began to experience visions of the deity, Radharaman. Radharani would appear to her to complain about imperfections in the service that would have been impossible for an outsider to know about. On occasion, Radharaman spoke to her by possessing one of the temple priests and speaking through him.

Girija Devi smoked tobacco from a hookah and maintained other habits from her days in Bihar, as a result of which she was not always looked upon with faith, but eventually such inexplicable events caused the sevayats of Radharaman to revere her. Even so, Nilamani Goswami, her landlord, once decided to evict her in order to rent out the house at a higher rent. On that very day he made this decision, but before he could carry out his plan, on returning to his own home, he found that neither he nor any of his companions was able to open the locked door, even though he had the key. Another neighbor, a woman devotee, suggested to him that he had perhaps offended Girija Devi and that if she gave permission he would be able to open the door. Nilamani went to her and asked her to open the door. Much to her own astonishment, she was able to unlock the padlock and the door opened. They attributed the mysterious event to the workings of Radharaman himself.

After the death of her husband, Girija Devi spent the remainder of her days in Jamira, maintaining her devotional practices while running the family estate through agents.

## Conclusions

June McDaniel notes in a recent study of Bengali religion that during her fieldwork it was virtually impossible for her to find a Vaishnava holy woman. (54) This suggests that a certain disdain of women continues to exist in orthodox Vaishnava circles today, despite the achievements of a few exceptional women at various points in Gaudiya Vaishnava history. The fear of sahajiyaism may have something to do with this. The ascetic community endeavors to maintain its purity by following the principles of sexual segregation standardized by Chaitanya as far as possible. Vaishnavas who allow women of any age or marital status to stay in their ashrams at night are called *kunja-vasis* and have the lowest status. Those who speak to women in daytime are called *thora-vasis*, while those who refuse to have anything at all to do with women

are known as *vana-vasis*. These latter Vaishnavas are given the highest status in the renunciate community. *Kunja-vasis* are routinely suspected of sahajiya practice. The problems faced by Pishima Goswamini in the early part of her relationship with Balaram Das are typical of those that face any women who wish to practice a life of asceticism. Outside the realm of the ascetics, in the entirely different world of the goswamis and householder Vaishnavas, the wives of the Prabhasantans have always been strong leaders amongst the women of their communities, occasionally stepping in, like Jahnava, to exercise greater influence.

It should be stated that here, as elsewhere, history is generally written by men about men. How many thousands of women in every religious tradition have led quiet lives of simple sanctity and asceticism, and been passed over by the few historians who have written about these matters only by virtue of their sex? Nevertheless, despite the limited numbers of examples that we have been able to find of women whose accomplishments as gurus, saints and devotees have penetrated into the consciousness of the males around them, their examples should be sufficient to continue to inspire devotee women. Besides these, there is ample basis in the Gaudiya Vaishnava symbols, theology and spiritual ideals to give room for women to assert themselves, if the inner call should come.

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## NOTES

46. 5 volumes, Mathura: Sri Krishnajanmasthan Seva Samsthan, 1981-2. This book has now been translated and published in English. [RETURN](#)

47. pp. 163-171. Haridas Das credits Haridas Goswami's *Nitai-Gaura-vingraha-lila-kahini* for most of the data used in his account. O.B.L. Kapoor (op. cit., Vol. 1, 193-212) has based his story primarily on that of Haridas Das. [RETURN](#)

48. *Gaudiya Vaishnava Jivani*, 169. [RETURN](#)

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49. The main source for the information given here is *Yogi Sri Knshna Prem*, by Dilip Kumar Ray (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1968). Also, O.B.L. Kapoor, (op. cit., Vol. 2, 124-169. [RETURN](#)

50. *Braj ke bhakta*, Vol. 4, 133-140. [RETURN](#)

51. *Braj ke bhakta*, Vol. 3, 132-3. [RETURN](#)

52. Cf. A. K. Ramanujan, "On Women Saints" in (ed.) J.S. Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff, *The Divine Consort* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984 [1982]), 316. [RETURN](#)

53. *Braj ke bhakta*, 210-221. [RETURN](#)

54. *The Madness of the Saints* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 192. In a footnote to this comment, she writes, “The general response of Vaishnava practitioners was a look of amazement, followed by, ‘A holy woman (sadhika)? Why would you want to speak to one of them? Look at all the holy men who are here. They are much better to speak with.’ None could or would suggest specific women to interview.” [RETURN](#)