Rishikas & Vaishnavis

Women as Gurus

tasmād guruṁ prapadyeta
jijñāsuḥ śreya uttamam
śābde pare ca niṣṇātam
brahmany upaśamāśrayam

◆

kibā vipra, kibā nyāsi,
śūdra kene naya
yei kṛṣṇa-tattva-vettā,
sei 'guru' haya

◆

rādhikāra prema—guru,
āmi—siṣya nata
sadā āmā nānā nṛtye
nācaya udbhata

Compiled by
Pranada Devi Dasi

RISHIKAS & VAISHNAVIS

Women as *Gurus*

Compiled by
Pranada devi dasi

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Rishikas & Vaishnavis: Women as Gurus is also available on Amazon as a print and Kindle book.

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Contents

Introduction **7**

Women Can Study the Vedas and Receive Gayatri **19**

Evidence of Female Gurus in the Vedic Period 19

Women in the Bhagavatam Received Diksha & Gave Diksha 24

Rishikas: Female Seers in the Vedantic Tradition **29**

Gargi Vachaknavi 29

Maitreyi 30

Vak Ambhrini 30

Sulabha 31

Ghosha 31

Lopamudra 31

Apala Atreyi 32

Vishvavara 32

Ratri 32

Surya 32

From Epic & Puranic Literature **35**

Srimati Kunti Devi 35

Srimati Devahuti Devi 35

Srimati Draupadi Devi 35

Srimati Gandhari Devi 36

Srimati Vindyavali 37

Vaishnavis in Mahaprabhu's Era 39

Srimati Lakshahira 39

Srimati Sita Thakurani 40

Srimatis Nandini Devi & Jangali Devi 40

Srimati Narayani Devi 40

Srimati Jahnava Thakurani 41

Srimati Ishwari-Draupadi Devi 43

Srimati Gauranga Priya Devi 44

Srimati Hemalata Thakurani 45

Srimatis Krishnapriya & Vishnupriya 46

Srimati Sucharita Devi 47

Srimati Gangamata Goswamini 48

Srimati Iccha Devi 50

Gaudiya Transmission Lines 51

Diksha-parampara of Srila Gadadhara Pandita 53

Vesha-parampara of Srila Gadadhara Pandita 53

Diksha Lineage of Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura 54

Another Diksha Lineage from Nityananda Prabhu 56

Other Gaudiya Vaishnava Lineages 57

Vaishnavi Saints in the Modern Era 59

Srimati Pishima Goswamini 59

Srimati Sadhu Ma/ Siddheshvari Devi 63
Srimati Ma Yashoda 65
Srimati Devi 67
Srimati Girija Devi 69
Srimati Urmila devi dasi 70
Srimati Vinode Vani devi dasi 71
Srimati Ram Dashi devi dasi 74
Srimati Maitri devi dasi 74
Srimati Krishnamayi didi 74
Srimati Jayasri Goswamini 76
Srimati Shyamarani/Jadurani devi dasi 77
Srimati Narayani devi dasi 79
The Unnamed 80
Srimati Jahnava devi dasi 81
Srimati Upasana Goswamini 84
Srimati Premadhara devi dasi 84
Srimati Chitralekha devi dasi 85
Srimati Uma Didi 86
Srimati Bhakti Lalita devi dasi 88
Srimati Charu Chandrika devi dasi 88
Srimati Gaurachandrika devi dasi 89
Srimati Mallika-mala devi dasi 89

Introduction

Within the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) founded by Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (Srila Prabhupada), there has been a debate for the past twenty-seven years about whether Vaishnavis can give *diksha*.[1]

The Governing Body Commission (GBC) of ISKCON, after having ISKCON scholars study the matter, voted twice to allow Vaishnavis to give initiation within the institution. However, due to threats from some leaders in India stating that they would secede from ISKCON if Vaishnavis were allowed to offer diksha, the GBC placed a moratorium on Vaishnavi's initiating in 2023 and again in February 2026.[2]

During the years this institutional argument has been going, most devotees have lacked historical information about the Vaishnavis *gurus* in the line of Srila Bhaktivinoda

[1] Recently a couple of devotees informed me that the culture of disrespect of women in ISKCON is not found in Satyanarayana dasa Babaji's *sangha* or Srila Bhaktivedanta Narayana Maharaja's *sangha*, two prominent *sanghas* in current Gaudiya Vaishnavism that are rooted in *shastra* and allow Vaishnavi *gurus*. This leads me to question the basis of the institutional argument in ISKCON.

[2] I gave details of the situation in this YouTube video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xuwl-rUKeSA and some information on the source of the objection here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnULrn_aetQ

Thakura and in other *parivaras*/branches of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. In fact, I've heard that many devotees think that Jahnava Thakurani, Nityananda Mahajana's wife, is the only example of a woman *guru* in Gaudiya Vaishnavism.

I offer this book to the broader Gaudiya Vaishnava community, not just ISKCON, with the intention that Vaishnavi *gurus* won't be written out of our Gaudiya history going forward. Though I will offer some shastric statements about women and *guru-tattva*, the main goal of this book is to acknowledge, remember, and pay homage to these saints.

I am not using diacritics in this book except when quoting verses. You'll find both diacritics and romanized Sanskrit terms.

I bring attention to female *shiksha-* and *diksha-gurus* in the Vedic period, the time of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, and the modern era. As we'll see that women have functioned as *gurus* in all time periods.

Let's begin by remembering the qualifications of a *guru* and so we can appreciate the qualifications of the Vaishnavis we'll be hearing about. Please note that the key verses we have do not specify anything about the type of body for a *guru*. They address the consciousness and qualifications of the *guru*.

tasmād guruṁ prapadyeta

jijñāsuḥ śreya uttamam

śābde pare ca niṣṇātaṁ

brahmaṇy upaśamāśrayam

"Therefore, any person who seriously desires real happiness must seek a bona fide spiritual master and take shelter of him[3] by initiation. The qualification of the bona fide guru is that he has realized the conclusions of the scriptures by deliberation and is able to convince others of these conclusions. Such great personalities, who have taken shelter of the Supreme Godhead, leaving aside all material considerations, should be understood to be bona fide spiritual masters."

~*Srimad Bhagavatam* 11.3.21

kibā vipra, kibā nyāsī, śūdra kene naya

yei kṛṣṇa-tattva-vettā, sei 'guru' haya

[3] The English phrase "take shelter of him" comes from the translator's choice, not from an explicit Sanskrit pronoun in the verse. There is no Sanskrit equivalent of "him" here. The verse simply says, "one should approach a guru" possessing these qualifications. The same holds for the next verse quoted.

> "Whether one is a *brahmana*, a *sannyasi* or a *shudra*—regardless of what he is—he can become a spiritual master if he knows the science of Krishna."
>
> ~Cc. *Madhya* 8.128

In *Hari-bhakti-vilasa* in the section where Sri Sanatana Goswami is speaking about the *gopala-mantra* he writes (1.193), "For initiation into Tantric mantras, even saintly women and pure-minded Śūdras are eligible. *Pure-minded* means those that are very intelligent, devoted to serving the twiceborn and so on."

Later he indicates that a woman *can* be guru. In 1.210 we have this:

> *svapnalabdhe striyā datte mālāmantre ca tryakṣare |*
>
> *ekākṣare tathā mantre siddhādīn naiva śodhayet || iti*
>
> "One should also not determine *siddha* and so on if it was attained in a dream, given by a woman, if it is a *mālā-mantra,* or has one or three syllables."[4]

[4] In this section of *Hari-bhakti-vilasa*, Srila Gopala Bhatta and Sanatana Goswamis give the general method of determining suitability of *mantras* or not for particular persons and explain exceptions as for Krishna mantras and others. However, this method is not used by Gaudiya Vaishnavas today.

The term *striya datte* ("given by a woman"), indicates that a woman can be a *mantra* guru. This was acceptable to Srila Sanatana Goswami.

In the same vein, Sri Jiva Goswami discusses both the qualified and unqualified guru in *Bhakti Sandarbha* (*Anuccheda* 203–213). But he makes no statement prohibiting a woman from becoming a guru.

There are no statements in *Bhagavata Purana* itself that prohibit women from becoming guru.

However, we have this statement by Srila Prabhupada in his purport to *Bhagavatam* 4.12.32: "Suniti, however, being a woman, and specifically his mother, could not become Dhruva Maharaja's *diksha-guru*."

The *purva-pakshis* (those who oppose an argument, in this case that women can be *gurus*) have chosen this sentence as their *maha-pramana* – the ultimate argument against women as *gurus*.

These devotees equate this statement with Srila Prabhupada saying, "Therefore, no woman can become a *diksha-guru*." However, this isn't what he said though they try to put words into Srila Prabhupada's mouth. And short of this direct statement we don't have enough to support the case against any woman at all times not offering *diksha*. Women

have initiated and do initiate, and Srila Prabhupada said so himself. Therefore, this *pramana* of the *purva-pakshis* fails.

In a conversation on 25 August 1981, Srila Bhakti Rakshak (B.R.) Sridar Maharaja says,

"(…) So ladies may not be left, excluded from getting the benefit of Krishna consciousness and they also may have [a] chance. But whether the lady *acharya* should be appointed or not, that may come in future. Whether a lady devotee for the facility to propagate amongst the ladies, whether such qualified lady *acharya* should be accepted or not, that may be a question of controversy. But I think that, for the sincere thinking person wherever there is Krishna consciousness, there is purity. And wherever the sincere urge for propagation, the sanction must be there. That should be the fair field. Here also previously Jahnava Devi Thakurani and others they did that sort of function of the *acharya*."

In other words, Srila B. R. Sridhar Maharaja allows for women *gurus*.

Visvanatha Chakravarti Thakura explains that the yajnic *brahmanas* considered their wives, the Yajnapatnis, their guru. How would knowledgeable, righteous *brahmanas* do this unless it was acceptable?

When the masculine word "*guru*" is used, it is inclusive of a female guru. When the characteristics of a class are de-

scribed, the description is given for a single gender, but it similarly applies to the other gender as well. This is the standard principle used in Sanskrit grammar.

Amarakośa refers to the wife of an *ācārya* as *ācāryānī*, whereas a female *ācārya* is called an *ācāryā*. Similarly, the text calls a female teacher of a part of Veda an *upādhyāyā* or *upādhyāyī*. In Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary: ({ā}, or {ī}), f. a female teacher Kāty. on Pāṇ. 3-13, 21. And we have Rishika (a female seer) and Rishi (a male seer).

Separate words would not exist in the Sanskrit lexicon and grammar if female *gurus* and Rishikas did not exist in the past.

But the *Bhagavad Gita* 9.32 says that women are of lower birth. Right?

māṁ hi pārtha vyapāśritya
ye 'pi syuḥ pāpa-yonayaḥ
striyo vaiśyās tathā śūdrās
te 'pi yānti parāṁ gatim

Translation by Srila Prabhupada

"O son of Pritha, those who take shelter in Me,
though they be of lower birth—women, *vaishyas*

> [merchants] and *shudras* [workers]—can attain the supreme destination."

Translation by Srila Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakura[5]

> "Women, *vaishyas* and *shudras*, and even the outcastes, if they surrender to me, attain the supreme goal."

In Srila Prabhupada's translation, he takes *papa-yonayah* (low born) as an adjective that modifies women, *vaishyas*, and *shudras*. Srila Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakura takes *papa-yonayah* as a noun, making it a fourth category. Sanskritists tell me it can be either, though we need to take into account the context.

Is *papa-yonayah* an adjective or a noun? If it's a noun that creates a fourth category – a low born person. If it's an adjective, then we have to ask, "Why is it modifying *vaishyas*, who are *dvijyas* by birth?" Being *dvijas* they go to *gurukula*, learn the Vedas, and can perform some *yajnas*. Therefore they cannot be lumped in as "those of lower birth." And given this then neither can *shudras* nor women be lumped in the category of low born.

Women were always valued. For instance, in his commentary to *Srimad Bhagavatam* 10.86.20, Sanatana Goswami says,

---

[5] Translation by Bhanu Swami.

"Women are mentioned last [in this verse] to indicate their special position."

I have included both *shiksha-* and *diksha-gurus* in this book because there is no difference between them as Srila Prabhupada stated several times. The following quote is from his *Nectar of Devotion* class in Vrindavan on October 29, 1972:

> **Prabhupada:** *Guru-kṛṣṇa-kṛpāya pāya bhakti-latā-bīja* [Cc *Madhya* 19.151]. We have to acquire this energy through the mercy of guru and Krishna. So Krishna is within as *caitya-guru,* and when we are serious, He comes out as the spiritual master. *Shiksha-guru, diksha-guru.* So there is no difference between *shiksha-guru* and *diksha-guru* and Krishna. Krishna manifests Himself externally as *shiksha-guru* and *diksha-guru.*

And from *Chaitanya-charitamrita, Adi* 1.47, purport: "There is no difference between the shelter-giving Supreme Lord and the initiating and instructing spiritual masters. If one foolishly discriminates between them, he commits an offense in the discharge of devotional service."

Those who are interested in reading more about *guru-tattva* and the philosophical basis of Vaishnavis serving as *diksha-gurus* can look at these books:

Guru, The Principle, Not the Body by Madana Mohana dasa https://tinyurl.com/5e74a4j8

Did Srila Prabhupada Want Women Diksha Gurus? by Kaunteya dasa https://tinyurl.com/52n6hfby

I have drawn from many sources. The section on women of the Vedic period came from talks by Hridayananda Goswami, Internet research, and the book *Women Seers in the Rgveda* by Mau das Gupta. When I had access to written material, I indicated that in footnotes. Other information I obtained by interviewing Vaishnavis or their followers.

I have included some Vaishnavis whose devotional life stood out in a unique way even though they did not or have not offered *diksha.*

I offer thanks to the many devotees who introduced me to various devotees and also to those who also supplied information.

This isn't a complete listing of all Rishikas or Vaishnavis. If you know of anyone else, or you have a correction to anything here, please write so I can update this document. Hare Krsna.

Desiring to serve Sri Sacinandana, Nityananda Rama and Their devotees,

Pranada devi dasi
2026
Appearance day of Srimati Gangamata Goswamini
Disappearance day of Srila Baladeva Vidyabhushana

Chapter One

Women Can Study the Vedas and Receive Gayatri

Evidence of Female Gurus in the Vedic Period

Some say that before Srila Prabhupada gave Brahma Gayatri to his female disciples no women received Brahma Gayatri because they were unqualified to study the Vedas or receive the Gayatri mantra. Two ancient texts, *Yama-smriti* and *Harita-smriti*, and the existence of Rishikas in the ancient Vedas indicate otherwise.

The following quotes are from the book "Some Evidence Regarding Education and Guruship for Vaishnavis"[6]

The *Yama-smriti* specifies the right of women to study the Vedas and receive the sacred thread.

purā-kalpe tu nārīṇāṁ mauñjī-bandhanam-iṣyate

adhyāpanaṁ ca vedānāṁ sāvitrī vacanaṁ tathā

[6] "Some Evidence Regarding Education and Guruship for Vaishnavis" by Bhaktarupa Das and Madhavananda Das, 2013. You can download this here https://tinyurl.com/537hp3fc

> "Previously women were initiated with brahmana threads and would teach the Vedas and acquire knowledge of the Gayatri."

The *Vasishtha Smriti* 21.7 shows that women chanted the Gayatri mantra:

> *manasā bhartur-aticāre tri-rātraṁ yāvakaṁ kṣīraudanaṁ vā bhuñjānāghaḥ śayītordhvaṁ tri-rātrādapsu nimagnāyāḥ sāvitry-aṣṭa-śatena śirobhirjuhuyāt-pūtā bhavatīti vijñāyate*

> "If a woman thinks ill of her husband, then she should keep barley grains for three nights in water and offer them along with flowers in sacrifice while chanting Gayatri a hundred and eight times. Thus she becomes purified."

The *Harita-smriti* (one of the oldest Dharmasutras, associated with the Maitrayaniya school of Yajurveda) speaks about two types of women:

> *dvividhāḥ striyaḥ. brahma-vādinyaḥ sadyo-vadhvaś ca. tatra brahma-vādinīnām upanayanam agnīndhanaṁ vedādhyayanaṁ sva-gṛhe-ca bhikṣācaryā iti. sadyo-vadhūnāṁ tūpasthite vivāhe*

kathañcid-upanayana-mātraṁ kṛtvā vivāhaḥ kāryaḥ (21.23)

"There are two types of women — the *brahmavadini*, who doesn't desire to marry, and the *sadyovadhu,* who wishes to marry. For the *brahmavadini* there is provision for receiving the sacred thread, conducting the fire sacrifice, studying the Vedas, and begging alms at her own home. The *sadyovadhu* at the time of marriage should only be invested with the sacred thread and then married."

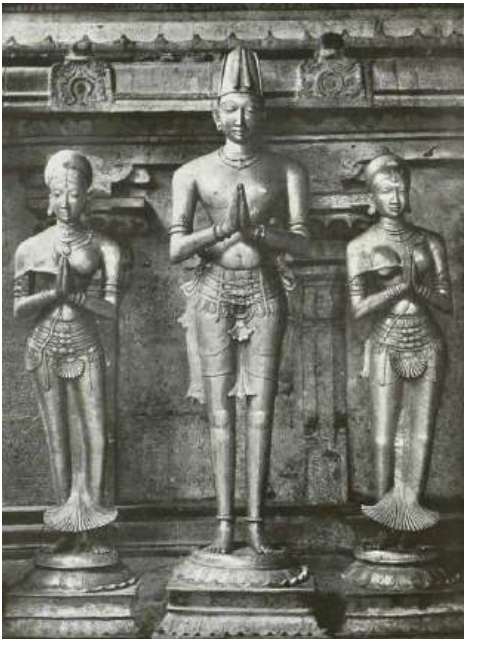
The time depicted in the *Ramayana* is considered to be when the Vedic Age was at its highest point. In the *Valmiki Ramayana*, we find the following evidence regarding women:

sā kṣauma-vasanā hṛṣṭā nityaṁ vrata-parāyaṇā

agniṁ juhoti sma tadā mantravat kṛta-maṅgalā (2.17.10)

"And cheerful Kaushalya, who was dressed in fine silk and was dedicated to her vows, offered a fire sacrifice by uttering mantras to make everything very auspicious."

[End of quotes from "Some Evidence Regarding Education and Guruship for Vaishnavis"]



These are bronze statues of King Krishnadevaraya and his queen consorts, Chinna Devi and Tirumala Devi, all wearing *upavitas.* This is prominently displayed in Tirupati temple, the most visited temple in the world. There are many statues of kings and queens in South India wearing *upavitas,* proof that women received the sacred thread.

Throughout the Vedic and Vedantic tradition, some women speak front and center. Their voices have contrib-

uted to revelation, so let's remember some of them with respect and gratitude.

We have Gargi, who publicly challenged the great Yajnavalkya. Maitreyi turned away from wealth and comfort because she wanted immortality, not inheritance. We have Vak Ambhrini, declaring her own divine sovereignty in hymn.

As we'll see below, multiple Rishikas composed Rig Veda hymns and engaged in philosophical discourse at the highest levels. This establishes the historical precedent that women in Vedic times studied and learned sacred Vedic knowledge and received *diksha*, *upavita,* and the Gayatri mantra.

In the Puranas, we know of the lived devotion of Kunti, Draupadi, Devahuti, and others—women whose insight and surrender didn't just participate in the tradition but deepened its philosophical heart and devotional pulse. They are *shiksha-gurus* for all Vaishnavas.

These women moved fluidly between the metaphysical and the deeply personal—between hymn and dialogue, inquiry and offering, question and surrender. Spiritual realization was never confined by gender.

Women in the Bhagavatam Received Diksha & Gave Diksha

In Chapter 53 of the Tenth Canto, verses 42-49, Rukmini Devi received a mantra for worshiping Goddess Bhavani, or Durga, from elderly wives of *brahmanas,* who also taught and guided Rukmini in the ritual of worship.

Srimad Bhagavatam 10.53.49 states: "The married *brahmana* women each performed worship simultaneously with the same items, also offering savories and cakes, prepared betel nut, sacred threads, fruit and sugarcane juice."

They worshipped Durga by also offering her sacred threads. The Sanskrit for sacred thread is *kantha-sutra* which literally means a thread around the neck.

In his commentary to verse 45, Srila Jiva Goswami writes, "The elderly women also taught her the mantra in the next verse. They had also realized the mantra."

In this way, Rukmini was initiated into a Vaishnava mantra since the stated purpose of the mantra was to obtain Krishna.

And the *brahmanas*' wives, by themselves and independently of their husbands, performed all the brahminical functions, including instructions, worship, blessings and, yes, initiation into worship for Lord Krishna's eternal con-

sort, Rukmini, which is contrary to the notion that in Krishna's Vedic culture the *brahmanis* (wives of *brahmanas*), never took the position of *diksha-guru.*

And in *Mukta-carita,* Raghunatha dasa Goswami writes of Lord Krishna's conversation with Satyabhama in Dvaraka, when Lord Krishna tells her about His earlier pearl pastime with the *gopis* in Vraja. During that pastime the *gopis* seek initiation from Nandimukhi, who is "a disciple into the *siddha-mantra* at the lotus feet of Paurnamasi. Hoping to receive the same *siddha-mantra,* the *gopis* approach Nandimukhi with their request. In this way, Raghunatha dasa Goswami indicates that women initiating was an accepted social norm in Vraja.

Let's meditate on Krishna's statement found in *Chaitanya-charitamrita Adi* 4.124:

> *rādhikāra prema—guru, āmi—śiṣya naṭa*
>
> *sadā āmā nānā nṛtye nācāya udbhaṭa*

> "My guru is Radharani," Krishna says. "In loving affairs My *guru* is Radharani, so She always makes Me dance according to Her tune."

Within some Gaudiya institutions the notion that women are "less intelligent" is prominent and therefore this disqualifies them from being *gurus*. Not all women are less intelligent. When Prabhupada describes the feminine psychology as "less intelligent," he's referring to a propensity for material attachment and emotional absorption, which can make the state of being undisturbed by the body's demands more difficult to reach.

He used this same metric to critique modern men, noting that most men are "less intelligent" because they don't inquire into spirituality and prefer to spend their lives absorbed in material subjects.

In the *Brihad-devata* (2.82) of Shaunaka Rishi, the names of no fewer than twenty-six women who have contributed hymns to the Vedas are listed. This means that they composed, practiced, taught, and initiated others in these hymns, for only the creator of a hymn or those coming in the creator's disciplic succession can initiate others. Many of these hymns can still be found in the Vedas.

This also shows that earlier women studied the Vedas. The list of women is as follows,

ghoṣā godhā viśvavārā apālopaniṣannisat
brahma-jāyā juhūr-nāma agastyasya svasāditiḥ indrāṇī cendramātā ca saramā romaśorvaśī
lopāmudrā ca nadyaś-ca yamī nārī ca śaśvatī

śrīr-lākṣā sārparājñī vāk-śraddhā medhā ca dakṣiṇā
rātrī sūryā ca sāvitrī brahma-vādinya ītāḥ

"Ghosha, Godha, Vishvavara, Apala, Upanishat, Nishat, Brahmajaya (also known as Juhu), Aditi, Indrani, Sarama, Romasha, Urvashi, Lopamudra, the river Yami, the river Nari and the river Shashvati, Sri, Laksha, Sarparajni, Vak, Shraddha, Medha, Dakshina, Ratri and Surya – also known as Savitri – are famous as knowers of Brahman and are [the contributors of Vedic hymns]."

In summary, the Vedic tradition recognized women's spiritual capacity and provided pathways for them to receive the highest knowledge and the Gayatri mantra.

Let's look at a continuity of feminine wisdom woven into the very foundation of Vedic thought. It's been there all along.

Chapter Two

Rishikas: Female Seers in the Vedantic Tradition[7]

Gargi Vachaknavi

Gargi appears in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* as an Upanishadic philosopher. She was a formidable *brahmavadini* and a life-long celibate. During a massive philosophical congress (*Brahma-yajna*) convened at the court of King Janaka of Videha, she stood unafraid to question the greatest sage of her time, Yajnavalkya, on the nature of reality. It's said she defeated him after he had defeated all the male *rishis* in the assembly. Her inquiry into what underlies existence is one of the boldest philosophical moments in the Upanishads.

In his *Govinda Bhasya*, Baladeva Vidyabhusana presents Gargi as exemplifying the highest level of eligibility for knowledge of Brahman, above even Yajnavalkya.[8]

[7] The information on all these *rsihikas* is from a class by Hridayananada Goswami, internet sources, and *Women Seers of the Rigveda* by Mau das Gupta.

[8] "Gargi Vachaknavi as an Honorary Male: An Eighteenth-Century Reception of an Upanishadic Female Sage" by David Buchta published in "The Journal of Hindu Studies" 2010; 3:354–370.

Maitreyi

Maitreyi was the wife of Yajnavalkya and a highly educated *brahmavadini*. We find her also in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. She engaged her husband in a profound dialogue regarding the nature of the Self (*atman*) and immortality. When offered material wealth upon Yajnavalkya's retirement, she categorically rejected it, asking the famous question, "What should I do with that by which I do not become immortal?" Their dialogue remains a foundational text of Vedanta philosophy.

The unquestioned inclusion of Gargi and Maitreyi in the Shruti canon confirms that women, fully adorned with the sacred thread and possessing mastery over the scriptures, were recognized as ultimate preceptors of truth, capable of instructing and judging.

Vak Ambhrini

Vak Ambhrini is the Rishika of *Rig Veda* 10.125, known as the *Devi Sukta* or *Vak Sukta*—stated by some to be one of the most extraordinary hymns in the entire Vedic corpus. In the hymn itself, she speaks as Vak—the goddess of speech, the Divine Feminine principle. She's a human woman—a Rishika—who receives a vision. In other words, Vak becomes the vessel through whom the goddess of speech reveals herself. We ought not be surprised that one of the Rig Veda's most powerful hymns is spoken by the Goddess of Speech herself!

Bhakti tradition knows deeply what's happening here: when souls become transparent to the Divine, the Divine speaks through them. Vak Ambhrini offers an early and powerful articulation of divine feminine sovereignty in the Vedas.

Sulabha

We find Sulabha in the *Mahabharata, Shanti Parva,* as a wandering renunciate who engages King Janaka in a deep philosophical exchange on selfhood, detachment, and liberation.

Ghosha

Ghosha was known for her devotion and scholarship and is the composer of *Rig Veda* hymn 10.39-40 to the Ashvins. Her prayers reflect healing, restoration, and the longing for wholeness. She was the daughter of the sage Kakshivan.

Lopamudra

Lopamudra engaged her husband, the sage Agastya, in a dialogue balancing asceticism and household life, asserting the sacred place of relational *dharma*. The *Rig Veda* hymn 1.179 is attributed to her.

Apala Atreyi

Apala, the daughter of the sage Atreyi, who wrote the *Rig Veda* hymn 8.91. Through her devotion to Indra she was cured of a skin disease.

Vishvavara

Vishvavara is mentioned in lists of *Rig Vedic* Rsihikas, but there's not much information about her. She comes in the Atri lineage and composed hymns to Agni in the *Rig Veda* 5.28.

Ratri

She is associated with a hymn to the goddess of night in *Rig Veda* 10.127, which is deeply poetic, invoking protection, stillness, and mystery.

Surya

She is the bride of the famous wedding hymn (*Rig Veda* 10.85, Vivaha Sukta) still recited today and thus a central feminine presence in one of the most enduring Vedic rituals.

Additional Rishikas (attested but less detailed)

- Romasha
- Shashvati
- Aditi
- Sikata

- Nivavari
- Shraddha Kamya
- Urvashi (dialogue hymn, Rig Veda 10.95)
- Indrani (Rig Veda 10.86)
- Anasuya
- Bharadvaji

Chapter Three

From Epic & Puranic Literature

Srimati Kunti Devi

(*Bhagavata Purana*)

Her prayers express profound surrender and insight into suffering, grace, and dependence on Krishna. She is most intelligent because she realizes that when calamities come to her they bring her the *darshana* of Krishna.

Srimati Devahuti Devi

(*Bhagavata Purana*)

She received complex teachings from Kapila on consciousness, matter, and liberation—an important voice in early Sankhya-Vedanta synthesis, she was a princess, but she served her austere husband with utmost humility. Her character is described as being free from any material desires, hypocrisy, greed, pride, inattention, and hatred.

Srimati Draupadi Devi

(*Mahabharata*)

Draupadi embodies full self surrender; her call to Krishna becomes one of the most powerful lived expressions of dependence on Sri Krishna.

One can read about the great characteristics of Draupadi in the Mahabharata and see how she managed the kingdom of Yudhisthira Maharaja.

She is the one who asked a very technical question on *dharma* when she was dragged into the assembly of the Kauravas by Duhshasana. No one was able to answer her, including Bhishma. Her question was, "Does Yudhisthira, after losing himself in gambling, have the right to wager me?" Such a question cannot be asked by anyone of petty intelligence.

When Arjuna captured Ashvathama, who had killed Draupadi's five sons, and brought him before Draupadi as a slave, Draupadi, although very aggrieved by the cruel murder of her five young sleeping sons, immediately told Arjuna, "Release him! He is a *brahmana* and son of your guru." Such a statement can be only made by a person who is very balanced in her mind, *stitha prajna*, and not by someone who is full of envy, jealousy, duplicity, and craftiness.

Srimati Gandhari Devi

(*Mahabharata*)

Gandhari Devi offers sharp reflections on dharma, fate, and moral blindness in the aftermath of the Mahabharata war.

Srimati Vindyavali

(*Bhagavata Purana*)
She had theological insight and steadfast devotion, During Lord Vamanadeva's pastimes, she admonishes her husband when he hesitates in fulfilling his offering to the Lord, characterizing his wavering as lacking proper intelligence.

In closing this chapter, let's remember Ubhaya-bharati, the wife of Mandana Misra, a *mimamsa* scholar. She mediated the debate on *shastra* between her husband and Shankaracharya. Srila Prabhupada mentions her in *Chaitanya-charitamrita* 2.9.244.

Ubhaya-bharati was renowned for her learning. As the mediator of the debate, she had to be as equally learned as both opponents. And she was obviously of high character as both her husband and Shankaracharya trusted her to call the winner of the debate.

After her husband lost the debate with Shankaracharya, she challenged the *acharya* to a debate on the Kama Shastras, but Shankaracharya had been a *brahmachari* since birth and therefore had no experience in amorous love. He took a month's leave from Ubhaya-bharati and, by his mystic power, entered the body of a king who had just died.

After attaining this experience, he wanted to discuss erotic principles with Ubhaya-bharati, but without hearing his discussion she blessed him and assured the continuous existence of the Shrigeri-matha. She then took leave of material life.

Of course, Shankaracharya would not have agreed to her being a mediator or to debate him if he felt she was inferior to him.

Chapter Four

Vaishnavis in Mahaprabhu's Era

We will now dispel some myths, such as (1) Srimati Jahnava Thakurani is the only example of a female *diksha-guru* in Gaudiya Vaishnavism; which, therefore, (2) makes this *seva* exceedingly rare for Vaishnavis; (3) only a Vaishnavi of Jahnava Thakurani's caliber, i.e., an eternally liberated associate of Sri Krishna or Mahaprabhu, can fulfill the role of *diksha-guru;* and finally (4) Vaishnavis should only initiate women.

Srimati Lakshahira

The prostitute converted by Haridasa Thakura is known as Lakshahira (also spelled Laksha-hira or Hira Bai). Her name is found in *The Gaudiya Treasures of Bengal*.

As we hear in *Chaitanya-charitamrita,* she was originally sent by Ramachandra Khan to seduce and discredit Haridasa Thakura. Instead, she was purified by the power of his chanting and association. After her conversion she chanted 300,000 holy names daily. She was accepted as a great saint and eventually took disciples.

Srimati Sita Thakurani

Sita Thakurani was the wife of Advaita Acarya. According to the *Prema-vilasa* of Nityananda dasa, Sita Thakurani gave *diksha* (*krishna-mantra*) to her two servants Nandini and Jangali. The *vaikuntha-svarupas* of Nandini and Jangali are the well-known gatekeepers Jaya and Vijaya (*Gaura-ganoddesa-dipika* 89). That Sita Thakurani was their guru, along with other interesting facts, is corroborated in the well-known and respected compilation named *Gaudiya-vaisnava abhidhana* and in the *Sita-caritra* by Lokanatha dasa.

Srimatis Nandini Devi & Jangali Devi

These Vaishnavis also gave *diksha.* However, the Sri Nandini Math in Jangali Tola, is the chief seat of the Sakhibhava Vaishnavas. So their line is a *sahajiya* one. Whether Nandini and/or Jangali established these practices or they were later introduced in their line is unclear.

Srimati Narayani Devi

Narayani Devi was the mother of Srila Vrindavan dasa and the niece of Srivasa Thakura, who gave her shelter after her husband died. We find her receiving great blessings in *Chaitanya-charitamrita Adi* 8.41: "Narayani eternally eats the remnants of the food of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Srila Vrindavan dasa Thakura was born of her womb."

There is some evidence that she acted as a *diksha-guru* in the latter part of her life and initiated many disciples in West Bengal. More research needs to be done to confirm these details.

Srimati Jahnava Thakurani

Jahnava Thakurani is the consort of Nityananda Prabhu. She became one of the greatest leaders of our tradition in its second generation. Virabhadra and Ramachandra, the sons (biological and adopted respectively) of Nityananda Prabhu, were two of the most famous among her initiated disciples.

In *Chaitanya-charitamrita Adi-lila* 11.8, purport, Srila Prabhupada shares, "Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura writes in his *Anubhasya*, 'Virabhadra Goshani was the direct son of Srila Nityananda Prabhu and a disciple of Jahnava Devi. His real mother was Vasudha. In the *Gaura-gaṇoddesha-dipika* (67) He is mentioned as an incarnation of Kshirodakashayiī Vishnu. Therefore Virabhadra Gosani is nondifferent from Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.'"

In *Chaitanya-charitamrita Adi* 11.9, we have this statement, "Although Virabhadra Gosani was the Supreme Personality of Godhead, He presented Himself as a great devotee. And although the Supreme Godhead is transcendental to all Vedic injunctions, He strictly followed the Vedic rituals."

In the *Adi* 11.9 verse the words are *veda-dharma.* This indicates that Virabhadra Gosani followed the rules of the Ve-

dic system. So his taking of *diksha* from Jahnava Thakurani has to be accepted as part of the Vedic system. In other words, taking diksha from a female was not outside Vedic parameters.

Yadunandana Acarya's wife, Laksmi, was a very humble and submissive lady. She had two beautiful daughters named Srimati and Narayani. By the arrangement of Sri Ishvari (Jahnava Devi), these two girls became the fortunate wives of Virachandra Prabhu. On the day of the wedding, Yadunandana took initiation from Virachandra, and Sri Jahnava happily accepted Srimati and Narayani as her disciples. (*Bhakti-ratnakara,* ch. 13)

She is also confirmed as a *diksha-guru* both in the *Gaudiya-vaisnava abhidhana* (pg. 1246-47) and in the *Prema-vilasa* (15, 20) of Nityananda dasa.

The *Bhakti Ratnakara* by Narahari Chakravarti Thakura contains much information about her pilgrimage to Vrindavan, her meetings with prominent Goswamis in Vrindavan, her spiritual authority and leadership, and how she was received and honored. And the *Narottama Vilasa,* also by Narahari Chakravarti Thakura describes her presence at and contribution to the Keturi festival.

For more information about Sri Jahnava Thakurani read *Bhakti Ratnakara* and *Prema Vilasa.* And also here online:

"Women Saints in Gaudiya Vaishnavism" by Jagadananda dasa, https://www.harekrsna.de/woman-saints.htm.

Srimati Ishwari-Draupadi Devi[9]

Srinivasa Acarya's first wife, Srimati Ishwari Thakurani was highly devotional. Gauranga Priya, his second wife, also possessed exalted devotional qualities. Their sweet dispositions and efforts in worshiping the Deities were highly commendable. They worshiped the Lord with great sincerity, devoid of interest in *karma* or *jnana*.

Many people became disciples of Ishwari Devi. In *Karnananda*, Yadunandana Thakura describes the disciples of Sri Ishwari:

"Jaya Krishnacharya, Sri Jagadisacharya, and Syama Vallabhacharya were three great *acharyas* who were disciples of Sri Ishwari. The women in the family of Srinivasa's brother-in-laws were highly devoted to Sri Ishwari. They were always engaged in doing good for humanity, as well as constantly singing the holy name throughout the day and night. They never drank water until they had completed the chanting of lakhs of *hari-nama*.

[9] Information about Iswari Devi and Gauranga Priya devi is from *Karnananda* by Yadunandan Thakura, disciple of Hemalata Thakurani.

"Among them the elder was Sri Satyabhama Thakurani, and the younger was Sri Chandramukhi. They were always absorbed in discussing the hymns they had learned from Sri Ishwari. Sri Rupa Goswami and Sridasa Goswami [Raghunatha dasa Goswami] took great pleasure in acknowledging the good qualities of these two ladies. Daily they recited *slokas* from the 'Shikshashtaka' of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, *Chaitanya Kalpavrksa*, *Karpanya Panjika*, *Hari Kushumanjali*, *Vilasa Kushumanjali*, *Prema-bhajana-kandaksha*, and *Catupushpanjali*. When chanting these verses, they were overcome with ecstasy and called out the names of Sri Radha-Govinda. Her sons, Radha Vinoda Chakravarti and Kishori Chakravarti dedicated themselves to their mother. All of them were disciples of Sri Iswari."

Srimati Gauranga Priya Devi

Gauranga Priya Devi was the second wife and a disciple of Srinivasa Acharya (*Gaudiya-vaisnava abhidhana* p. 1224) She was from a Chakravarti *brahmana* family. Her father was Raghunatha Chakravarti, a resident of West Gopalapura. She initiated a number of disciples, including Gurucharana dasa, who wrote a book at her behest called *Premamrita* which is based on the *Prema-vilasa* (*Gaudiya-vaisnava abhidhana* p. 1203).

Srimati Hemalata Thakurani

Hemalata Thakurani was the eldest daughter of Srinivasa Acharya and a contemporary of Jahnava Thakurani. With the blessings of her father, Sri Hemalata became the spiritual guide of many disciples. Srinivasa also blessed his next two daughters, Sri Krishnapriya Thakurani and Danchana Latika.

Her prominent disciple, Yadunandana, was a prolific poet and author. In his well-known book *Karnananda*, which is primarily about the life of Srinivasa Acharya and which he wrote on Thakurani's order, he describes how Hemalata Thakurani tore the *kanthi-mala* from Rupa Kaviraja's neck to indicate that she was ostracizing him for his *sahajiya* preaching and his challenge to Gaudiya orthodoxy. Yadunandana writes about this incident and other exercises of her authority in *Karnananda*.

From *Karnananda* (chapter 2) "Now the disciples of Sri Hemalata shall be described. Sri Suvala Chandra Thakura, and his nephew Sri Gokula Chakravarti were her disciples. Sri Radhavallava Thakura from Mandala village, Sri Vallavadasa of the Goswami family, and Yadunandana Vaidya dasa of Malihati village were all disciples of Sri Ishvari. Kanurama Chakravarti and his two servants Darpanayana and Chandi, Ramacharana, Madhu Miswas, and Radha Kanta Vaidya were other disciples of Hemalata. Jagadisha Kaviraja and his follower, who was the brother of Radhavallabh Kaviraja were initiated by Hemalata."

"One day my spiritual master, Sri Hemalata, revealed the glories of Ramachandra to me."

"I shall describe another episode which I heard from my guru, Sri Ishwari Hemalata." (*Karnananda*, ch.3)

Srimatis Krishnapriya & Vishnupriya[10]

These two sisters 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 dasa's chief disciple Ganganarayan Chakravarti, they were told by Narottama himself to take initiation from their father. They lived for some time at Radha Kunda in Vraja. Their reputation was sufficient that Raghunatha dasa Goswami's Govardhana *shila,* which had been given to him personally by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, was entrusted to their care by Mukunda, the disciple of Krishnadasa Kaviraja (who had received it from Raghunatha). This in itself was a highly unorthodox act that resulted in a certain amount of dissent in the conservative community.

[10] "Women Saints in Gaudiya Vaishnavism" by Jagadananda Das, https://www.harekrsna.de/woman-saints.htm.

Rupa Kaviraj[11] publicly criticized Srimati Krishnapriya Devi in an assembly of Vaishnavas listening to a *Bhagavata* reading. The Vaishnavas present all offered obeisance to her, 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."

Both sisters accepted disciples.

Srimati Sucharita Devi[12]

Sucharita Devi was married to Bhavaka Chakravarti of Borakuli village, West Bengal, who was an embodiment of devotional love. She was an intelligent woman and received the favor of Sri Ishwari. It was her practice to chant one lakh of *japa* daily and regularly discuss the pastimes of Mahaprabhu.

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[11] Swami B.G. Narasingha's article on the Ativadi Apa-sampradaya (gosai.com), citing Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati's article in *The Harmonist* (Vol. 18, No. 18, 1922) says this is the biographical sequence of the single Rupa Kaviraja: He took *diksha* from Sri Krishna-charana Chakravarti. He grew proud of his learning and committed a grave offense against Srimati Krishnapriya Thakurani by publicly rebuking her for chanting *nama* while he was reciting the *Bhagavatam*. He then published *sahajiya* manuscripts, falsely attributing them to Rupa Goswami (the "Sauromya" doctrine — imitating the *gopis* in the *sadhaka-deha*). For all of this, Srimati Hemalata Thakurani tore his *kanthi-mala* from his neck and expelled him from the Vaishnava community. He contracted leprosy, fled to Bengal, was rejected, then died in Orissa in the village of Khuriya-grama. Vishvanatha Chakravarti Ṭhakura refuted his philosophical conclusions in his *Sarartha-darshini* commentary.

[12] *Karnananda* of Yadunandana Acarya.

Sri Rajavallava Chakravarti was her eldest son and was a man of high qualities and a great devotee of Srinivasa Acharya. Her other two sons, Sri Radhavinoda and Sri Kishanidasa, took mantra from her.

Srimati Gangamata Goswamini[13]

Gangamata Goswamini was a disciple of Haridasa Pandita Goswami, the *sevaite* of Govindaji who is mentioned in *Sri Chaitanya-charitamrita.* Among others, King Mukundadeva of Jagannatha Puri and a number of Lord Jagannatha's *sevaites* received *diksha* from her.

Her acceptance of disciples is confirmed in *Gaudiya-vaisnava abhidhana* (pp 1197-98) and by the present day *mahanta*, Balarama dasa Goswami, at the Gangamata Goswamini Matha in Puri.

Her original name was Sachi. She was the daughter of a rich landowner in Puntia in Orissa. She left home to go to Vrindavan where she took initiation from Haridasa Goswami of the Govinda temple. On the orders of her spiritual master, she went to Radha Kunda, where she lived for several years with her godsister Lakshmipriya.

[13] "Women Saints in Gaudiya Vaishnavism" by Jagadananda Das, https://www.harekrsna.de/woman-saints.htm.

Afterward, she was again instructed by her spiritual master to establish herself in Jagannatha Puri, taking *kshetra-sannyasa*. She took up residence at the home of Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya. When she arrived there, only a *shalagrama-shila* named Radha-Damodara 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 Jagannatha 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 known as the white Ganges (Sveta Ganga) from which the water for the Jagannatha temple, including the water that is used for bathing Jagannatha, is drawn.

Once, on the auspicious occasion of bathing Mahavaruni (a rare astrological alignment), which takes place in the middle of the night, she was washed by the currents of the Ganges inside the gates of the Jagannatha temple. The temple guards thought that she was a thief and had her arrested, but King Mukundadeva again had a dream of Jagannatha who told him that he should set her free. He and many of the other *sevaites* of Jagannatha eventually took initiation from her. Because she had been washed by the Ganges water which springs from the feet of Lord Jagannatha, Sachi became known by the name of Gangamata Goswamini.

If Sri Jagannatha Deva, the Lord of the Universe, considers it appropriate for a king in *varnashrama* to take *diksha* from a Vaishnavi, then no one can argue with the principle that women can initiate.

The house of Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya is now more commonly known as Gangamata's Math and is one of the major pilgrimage centers of Gaudiya Vaishnavism in Puri. Several *siddha babajis* were initiated in her line, which is traced back to Gadadhara Pandita and employs the distinctive nupur-style tilak.

Srimati Iccha Devi

(Early–mid 17th century)

Srimati Iccha Devi, later known by her initiated name Shyama dasi, was a leading female figure in the post-Goswami Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition and the wife of the saint Rasikananda (1590–c.1652). A lifelong devotee of Krishna, she accepted initiation from Shyamananda Prabhu alongside her husband and was entrusted with exceptional religious authority, being appointed head priest of the Gopiballavpur headquarters in present-day Odisha. There she oversaw Deity worship, served pilgrims and devotees, and helped establish Gopiballavpur as a major center of Gaudiya Vaishnava preaching. Her prominent role illustrates the important leadership positions that spiritually accomplished women could hold within the Shyamananda–Rasikananda lineage.

Chapter Five

Gaudiya Transmission Lines

It would be a mistake to attribute the elevated position and reputation achieved by Vaishnavis in orthodox Gaudiya Vaishnava lineages to the influence of *sahajiya* doctrines and dismiss their presence. Although there may be Vaishnavis in certain lineages who are or were influenced by *sahajiya* thought, this is not the case for all lineages, as we'll see. In fact, orthodox Gaudiya Vaishnava women remained true to the core beliefs of Mahaprabhu's *sampradaya*.

Here we discount the myth that religious, conservative Indians will not accept Gaudiya Vaishnavism if there are Vaishnavis in our *parivara.* These Vaishnavis have already been accepted in Gaudiya lineages *for hundreds of years*. And Indians have accepted Rishikas, women ascetics, and *gurus* throughout history, including the modern day, as in the case of Amma, Annadamayi Ma, and Chitralekha (who we'll meet shortly as a contemporary, powerful Vaishnavi influencing millions of people), and many others.

Let's look at Vaishnavis in various Gaudiya transmission lines stemming from the branches of the Sri Chaitanya's *prema* tree. The women in these lineages are recognized as *diksha-gurus.* Their names such as Goswamini, Mata, or

Acarya are appellations that refer to lineage holders, heads of a *parivara*, and succession links. Generally, *shiksha-gurus* aren't counted in the numbered lists in formal *parampara* lines. In other words, being listed in a line signifies that they gave *mantra diksha.*

It's said that many of these women headed temples, ran *ashramas,* maintained disciples, and, as stated, performed *mantra* transmission. This reflects that Gaudiya history contains Vaishnavi guru authority.

The following quote is from Haridas Shastri [1918 – 2013], a prominent Gaudiya Vaishnava *guru*-scholar, was a prolific author and well-educated Gaudiya Vaishnava scholar. He belonged to the Gadadhara *parivara* and emphasized that the practice of Vaishnavis giving *diksha* in that lineage was a norm rather than an exception. We can note there is no *sahajiya* influence in the Gadadhara *parivara*:

"Only Sri Chaitanya gave complete status to women in everything, whether it was worship of *shalagrama,* worship of the deity, chanting, or initiation. Before Him no one else allowed women to do those things. In *varnashrama* or even in other Vaishnava *sampradayas,* women were always considered as less than men. But Sri Chaitanya gave them equal rights, as far as devotion is concerned.

"Mahaprabhu had an equal vision toward women, because every human being has a right to worship Bhagavan,

and there is no discrimination in that. Therefore, He gave equal rights to women to worship just like men. He ordained that women should not be discriminated against when it comes to the service of Bhagavan. . . .

"Previously there was a tradition that the *mantra* was to be taken from the mother, and not from the male. The mother is considered to be superior to the father. The mother is considered as the first guru of the child. So in our Vaishnava *parampara*, *diksha* was taken from the wife (mother) and not from the husband (father). . . ."

Diksha-parampara of Srila Gadadhara Pandita

(lineage of initiation into mantra):
Gadadhara Pandit
Bhugarbha Goswami
Chaitanya Goswami
Bhimananda Goswami
Kashirama Goswami
Svarnamani Goswamini
Hemamani Goswamini
Kiranamani Goswamini
Cintamani Goswamini
Durganath Goswami
Vinoda Bihari Goswami
(7 men, 4 women)

Vesha-parampara of Srila Gadadhara Pandita

(lineage of initiation into *babaji* order):

Gadadhara Pandit
Nayanananda Misra
Vallabha Misra
Srimati Thakurani
Madhusudana Goswami
Nityananda dasa Mahasaya
Ramakrsna dasa Mahasaya
Vinoda Bihari Goswami
(7 men, 1 woman)

In Nityananda Prabhu's line coming through Jahnava Devi, which is known as the Baghnapara Goswamis, in which Bhaktivinoda Thakura took *mantra diksha*, several women are listed as gurus.

Diksha Lineage of Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura

1. (Nityananda Prabhu) Jahnava Devi
2. Ramacandra Goswami
3. Rajavallabha Goswami
4. Keshavacandra Goswami
5. Rudreshvara Goswami
6. Dayarama Goswami
7. Maheshvari Goswamini
8. Gunamanjari Goswamini
9. Ramamani Goswamini
10. Yajneshvara Goswami

11. Bipin-bihari Goswami
12. Bhaktivinoda Thakura
13. Lalita Prashad Thakura

Although we consider Jagannatha dasa Babaji the predominant guru of Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura, the Thakura always respected his *diksha-guru*, Bipin Bihari Goswami, who was a Vaishnava scholar. In his autobiography, Bhaktivinoda says that Chaitanya Mahaprabhu sent Bipin Bihari to him, and in his *Gita Mala* Bhaktivinoda offers prays to Ananga Manjari as well as Vilasa Manjari (the identity of Bipin Bihari Goswami in the spiritual world). The Thakura critiqued corruption but didn't invalidate the potency of his lineage or the Vaishnavi gurus in it.

The Baghnapara lineage of Thakura Bhaktivinoda is not classified as a *sahajiya* lineage. The controversy around the line stems from the giving of *siddha-pranali*, which includes one's guru identifying the disciple's place in the *lila*. Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura rejected the idea of *siddha-pranali* in modern times as having the influence of *sahajayism* because of misuse of the system where people were receiving an eternal identity without being qualified.

Given that, we still have Bhaktivinoda Thakura listing the *siddha pranali* of the *diksha-gurus* in his line. He gave *siddha pranali* to his son Lalita Prasad Thakura. And he describes the eleven aspects of *siddha pranali* in his book *Harinama Cintamani.* Therefore, he received it and gave it.

Caution must be exercised when judging the Vaishnavi *diksha-gurus* in the Bhaktivinoda *parivara*. To deny the historical presence of these Vaishnavis, or claim they are unauthorized, *is equivalent to denying the potency of the mantra* given to Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura. Isn't it necessary for an *acarya* in the *parampara* to be properly initiated?

In summary, to reject Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura's *diksha* initiation in the bona fide lineage, which includes Vaishnavi gurus, means all the subsequent branch(es): Gaudiya Math, ISKCON, and other sects in the Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura *parivara*, lose claim to authenticity. Unfortunately, some devotees are ready to do this to win an argument that Vaishnavis cannot be *diksha-gurus*. Would this be called spiritual self-destruction? It would be fatal.

Another Diksha Lineage from Nityananda Prabhu

(I've only included the Vaishnavi diksha-gurus in this line indicating their chronological place in the lineage.)

4. Srimati Kadamba-mala Goswamini
5. Srimati Navakumari Mata
6. Sri Kalindi Mata
7. Sri Annapurna Mata
8. Sri Taramani Mata

9. Srimati Kishori Mata
10. Sri Sharada Sundari Mata
12. Sri Gita Mata Goswamini

See pictures of the Vaishnavas of this lineage here: https://tinyurl.com/24e3zdps

Other Gaudiya Vaishnava Lineages

1. Lineage descending from Jahnava Thakurani and Narayani Devi down to Prana Gopal Goswami, a respected *acharya* of the *sampradaya* in the early 1900's in Bengal: 2 men, 9 women.
2. Lineage descending from Lokanatha Goswami and Narottama dasa Thakura down to Siddha Sakhicharan dasa Babaji: 10 men.
3. Lineage descending from Advaita Acarya and his son Krishna Mishra down to Nikunja Gopal Goswami of Navadvipa: 6 men, 6 women.
4. Lineage descending from Jahnava Thakurani and Dhananjaya Pandita down to Kunjabihari dasa Babaji: 13 men, 1 woman.
5. Lineage descending from Lokanatha Goswami and Narottama dasa Thakura down to Jnanananda Chakravarti Thakura: 10 men, 7 women.
6. Lineage descending from Jahnava Thakurani down to Tinkadi Goswami: 14 men.
7. Lineage descending from Jahnava Thakurani down to Bhaktivinoda Thakura: 8 men, 4 women.

This makes a total of 62 men and 27 women. In other words, in these Gaudiya lineages *there are 30% Vaishnavis.* It should give us an idea of the general pattern one will find throughout the Gaudiya lineages.

Should anyone like to confirm this, they can visit the seat of these lineages and look at the records of their disciplic lines.

Some claim that the seven Gaudiya lineages just listed are *apa-sampradayas* because they are hereditary lines, though they haven't provided proof of this. Even if these are all hereditary lines, it's not to be assumed that there are no bona fide gurus in the line. Srila Jiva Goswami describes in *Bhakti Sandarbha* anuchedda 187:

> *prema tāratamyenaiva bhakta mahattāratamyaṁ mukhyam*
>
> "A saint's greatness is according to the amount of their prema."

Sri Krishna is perfectly independent and can empower a woman or one born in a hereditary line

Chapter Six

Vaishnavi Saints in the Modern Era

Some Vaishnavis I include here offered mantra-*diksha* but without the Brahma Gayatri. These Vaishnavis, initiated by Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura or Srila B. R. Sridhar Maharaja, offered *harinama-* and *mantra-diksas.* They sent their disciples to their godbrothers to receive the Brahma Gayatri.

In the case of the female disciples of Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada and other *gurus* who receive *harinama* and *mantra-diksha*, along with Brahma Gayatri can offer both *harinama* initiation and full *mantra-diksha* to disciples.

As I mentioned earlier, I have also included some Vaishnavis who did not or do not offer *harinama* or *mantra-diksha* but have a noteworthy quality or preaching ability.

Srimati Pishima Goswamini

According to *Women Saints in Gaudiya Vaishnavism*, Chandrashashi Mukhopadhyay, later known as Pishima Goswamini, is the only woman mentioned in Haridasa dasa's

Gaudiya Vaishnava Jivani; more precisely, she appears to be the only woman given a distinct biographical account there. She is not mentioned as giving *diksha.*

Her story centers on the Gaura-Nitai Deities found today in Vrindavan in Banakhandi near Loi Bazaar.

These Deities belonged to Lord Chaitanya's childhood companion Murari Gupta, whose name is carved on the base of one of the Deities. They were apparently lost at one time and later rediscovered in Siuri in Birbhum district in north-western Bengal. A wandering Orissan monk, Balarama dasa Babaji, while passing through Siuri had a dream in which he was instructed to take over the service of the Deities.

Not long thereafter, twenty-year old Chandrashashi, the daughter of a wealthy landowner in the Nadia district, went to Siuri for business. She became attracted to the Deities and one night Gaura-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, Balarama dasa was not prepared to give food prepared by her to the Deities, so she took initiation from him so that she could comply with Gaura-Nitai's request.

A few days later, when she was about to leave Siuri for home, she had another dream in which Gaura-Nitai begged her not to leave, for otherwise who would give them such

good things to eat. Like children, they tugged on her skirt 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 Balarama dasa who found the missing bit of cloth in the hands of the deity of Gaura. From that day on, she abandoned any intention of returning home to her village and decided to stay on in the service of Gaura-Nitai.

Not long thereafter, however, speculations about the nature of her relationship with Balarama dasa started in the town. Balarama dasa and Chandrashashi decided, again on the basis of instructions given to them in a dream, to take Gaura-Nitai with them to live in Vrindavan. They placed the Deities on a boat and made the 1,600-kilometer trip along the Ganges and Yamuna to Vraja. Chandrashashi, known in Vraja as Pishima ("aunt") managed to build a new temple in Banakhandi for the Deities who became known locally as Pishima's Gaura-Nitai.

According to legend, one day, while preparing a meal for Gaura-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, Gaura-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 Yamuna three times a day, chanting on her *mala* daily, etc., but her real focus was on *archana* Deity worship. She was engaged in a nearly-conversation with Gaura-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 one account, when on one cold winter morning Pishima's successor, Gopishwar Goswami, bathed Gaura-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.

Haridasa dasa recounts that Gopishwar Goswami personally told him that when Pishima Goswamini first asked him to take over the service of Gaura-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 did, but was rather moved by the sentiment of friendship. He

said that Pishima then went to the Deities and pulled on their chins and they grew to take on their present form.

Srimati Sadhu Ma/ Siddheshvari Devi[14]

(d. 1944)

Sadhu Ma is the affectionate name of Siddheshvari Devi, a rare and remarkable woman saint of Gaudiya Vaishnavism in Braj.

Her father was Govinda Chandra Goswami of the Pabna district (now Bangladesh). She's a direct descendant of Sri Advaita Acharya and was born during the annual Durga Puja festival. Her father recognizing something extraordinary in her, considered her an incarnation of Yogamaya.

From childhood, she was immersed in devotion. She studied *shastra* directly under her father, who initiated her into the tradition. When he passed away, she took *sannyasa* and wore the traditional saffron cloth of a *sannyasi*.

Still a young woman, she set out on pilgrimage throughout India, visiting all the major sacred sites — alone, without resources, depending entirely on Krishna for her protection. Arriving at Tarapith — the cremation-ground temple of Bengal, sacred to the goddess Tara — she

[14] *Braj ke bhakta* by O.B. L. Kapoor, or Adi Keshava dasa, a disciple of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura.

encountered Bama Khepa, a legendary Shakta saint and *avadhuta* who lived there. He was known for recognizing souls of rare spiritual stature. He too acknowledged her as an incarnation of Yogamaya and told her to go first to Belur, and then Vrindavan.

When Sadhu Ma arrived and settled in Vrindavan, her life blossomed into full spiritual leadership. She built a large ashram dedicated to Radha-Kunjakishori near the gardens of the Ranganathji temple.

She gathered hundreds of disciples — Punjabis, Bengalis, prominent citizens — and her influence spread far. She built temples and *ashramas* in: Belur (West Bengal), Govardhan (Braj), Bhubaneswar, and Chakratirtha in Puri.

True to the Advaita Acharya family tradition, she rigorously observed the *Hari-bhakti-vilasa*, including Vedic fire sacrifices in all her temples — *except* in Braj. In Vrindavan, she reportedly had a vision of Srimati Radharani, who told her that such external rituals were unnecessary there, in the land of pure devotion.

She had a deep love for *rasa-lila* performances and her love for Mahaprabhu was so intense that she is said to have fainted when she heard a kirtan describing Sri Chaitanya's *sannyasa* ceremony being sung.

She placed the highest emphasis on service to devotees. All who came to her called her Mother. She had dealings with Braj's more unconventional saints, including the famous eccentric yogi Gwariya Baba.

Srimati Ma Yashoda[15]

(1882–1944)

Ma Yashoda took initiation from Balkrishna Goswami of the Radha-raman temple. She is most famously known as the *diksha-guru* of Ronald Nixon (Krishna Prem) the first Westerner to enter deeply into Gaudiya Vaishnavism as a Vaishnava *sannyasi* living in India. It's said that he was the first Western guru in India. He inspired other Western seekers and accepted disciples.

Krishna Prem's story is fascinating and therefore much attention is given to him. But we need to remember the extraordinary person he surrendered to: Ma Yashoda.

The details of her ecstatic devotion in pure love for Krishna and her mystical visions are compelling and moving.

Krishna Prem went to India as a young Cambridge-educated lecturer and found in Yashoda Ma not merely a teacher but a divine mother in the truest Vaishnava sense. She was born Monika Devi in a Bengali family around 1882 and was

[15] See *Journal of Vaishnava Studies,* 30.2, Spring 2022 for the article by Gerald T. Carney about Ma Yashoda.

married to a British ICS officer. Her devotion was extraordinary — saturated with the mood of *vatsalya,* parental love for Krishna.

When Ronald Nixon first encountered Yashoda Ma at Lucknow University around 1921, something irrevocable shifted within him. He accepted her as his guru and she initiated him into Gaudiya Vaishnavism giving him the name Krishna Prem. In 1930, they established a small *ashrama* on Mirtola Hill in the Kumaon Himalaya near Almora, Uttarakhand — a place that would become legendary among seekers. The *ashrama* was dedicated to Sri Radha-Krishna, and guru and disciple lived a life of intense austerity, devotional ritual, and *sadhana*. Yashoda Ma ran the *ashrama,* conducting daily worship with a precision and love that Western visitors found electrifying and unprecedented.

Her devotion was entirely practical and embodied, not philosophical, rooted in the daily *seva* of the Deity with flowers, food, and song. Sri Aurobindo, who knew of her through correspondence, described her as a remarkable soul. She passed from this world in 1944, leaving Krishna Prem to carry the flame of Mirtola alone. He honored her memory by continuing the *ashrama's* strict regimen until his own passing in 1965, having never left India after his initiation.

Yashoda Ma shows that bhakti transcends nationality, gender, and social convention — that a Bengali widow living

on a Himalayan hillside could transmit the most intimate flavor of Krishna consciousness to an Oxford-educated Englishman and through him to the entire Western world.

Srimati Devi

Srimati Devi aspired to *sakhya-rasa* as O.B.L. Kapoor (Adi-keshava dasa) recounts in *Braj ke bhakta*.

She took *diksha* from 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 *sakhya-rasa*. Though his guru wanted him to take disciples and preach devotion to Krishna, Krishnananda Swami was reluctant because he wished to avoid the association of women. For years he had kept the vow that he would never look at the face of a woman and this continued until he came in contact with Srimati, an eleven-year old, widowed girl, fully dedicated to the worship of her Krishna Deity. She 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 on a piece of paper the *maha-mantra* and some instructions on 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, in a vision, Lord Balarama told Krishnananda 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 *sakhya-rasa.* She began to dress like a boy; her behavior, her language, etc., all took on the characteristics of a *gopa* friend of Krishna and people even began to call her *bhaiya* ("brother"). She became progressively absorbed in 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, Balarama and Krishna are calling their friends to come."

Overcome with emotion, Krishnananda Swami replied, "Go ahead, buddy. I'll be right along." Having received this permission from her guru, she entered the eternal world of Vraja.

Srimati Girija Devi

Girija Devi was the wife of a rich landowner in Jamira in the state of Bihar and was used to a life of great luxury. She lost 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 to calm her. She began to develop an interest in devotion to Krishna and then a desire to move to Vraja. Her husband eventually gave her permission to go.

In Vrindavan, Girija Devi rented a room in the Radha-ramana neighborhood and quickly began to experience visions of the Deity, Radha-raman. Srimati Radharani would appear to her to complain about imperfections in the service, which would have been impossible for an outsider to know about. On occasion, Radha-raman 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, inexplicable events caused the *sevaites* of Radha-raman 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 the 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 were able to open the locked door, even though he had the key. Another neighbor, a Vaishnavi, 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 Girija Devi 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 Radha-raman Himself.

Srimati Urmila devi dasi

Urmila dasi was a disciple of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura. Her son, Damodara dasa, was an Ayur Vedic practitioner and disciple of Bhakti Kushum Shraman Maharaja, an *acharya* at the Yoga Pitha in Mayapur.

Urmila dasi was a serious *sadhaka* and gave excellent classes, which her husband (also a disciple of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura) encouraged her to continue. She had about three hundred *harinama* disciples in Odisha.

The local Odisha people, who are very traditional and conservative, saw no problem in her holding the post of guru. In Odisha there have been a number of female gurus,

including Gangamata Goswamini, Nandini Devi, and some say Madhavi Devi.

Urmila dasi sent her disciples to take *mantra diksha* from one of her *sannyasi*-godbrothers, since she didn't receive *mantra diksha* herself.

Srimati Vinode Vani devi dasi[16]

Daisy Botwell
(1887–1981)

The following are excerpts are from an article in the Journal of Vaishnava Studies noted in the footnote. Letters between Vinoda Vani dasi and others are one source of these quotes, and another source is writings by members of the Gaudiya Math about her:

"Vinode Vani dasi dedicated her life, wealth, and energy to the development of London's Gaudiya Math. She was recognized as a deeply committed, highly elevated Vaishnava teacher by leading figures in the Gaudiya Mission.

"On May 11, 1933, a temporary Gaudiya Math center was established at Greyton Garden, Kensington, London, and the visiting *sannyasis* began holding regular lectures from

[16] See "Journal of Vaishnava Studies," 30.2, Spring 2022 for the article by Ferdinando Sardella (Pranava dasa) about Vinode Vani. His article includes excerpts of letters she wrote to Gaudiya Math members, that reveal her devout nature, astute philosophical intelligence, and service to Mahaprabhu's mission.

that location. Vinode Vani was among the early seekers and intellectuals that attended these lectures and is said to have been so moved by their presentations that she decided to dedicate her life to the path of *bhakti* as propounded by the Gaudiya tradition. Stella Harris was another of the regular attendees at these lectures. Later initiated as Vishnupriya dasi, she also became a dedicated member of the Gaudiya Mission and one of Vinode Vani's closest associates.

"The Gaudiya Mission 1952-1953 Annual Governing Body Report makes mention of her: 'Kumari Srimati Vishnupriya dasi joined [Vinode Vani] in [all spiritual] functions . . . acted as an able colleague, [and helped fund] the printing and publication of Scriptures . . .'

"Vinode Vani contributed in various ways to the development, maintenance and expansion of London's Vasudeva Gaudiya Math—from cultivating regular guests to holding discourses on Gaudiya Vaishnava philosophy to organizing important festivals and serving as the Math's secretary. Among all these contributions, however, perhaps the most significant was her generosity in offering her own dwelling for use by the Vasudeva Gaudiya Math. At first, it was a dwelling on 46 Christ Church Avenue, Brondesbury, which Vinode Vani had been able to rent. Then, on or around May 11, 1961, she came into possession of a suburban house on 27 Cranhurst Road, Cricklewood, the use of which she immediately offered to the Math.

"In the new premises, Vinode Vani continued to receive guests and celebrate festivals such as *Gaura-purnima*, *Shri Krishna-jayanti* and *Narasimha-caturdashi*, regularly reporting these activities to leaders of the Gaudiya Mission in India, who openly expressed their appreciation.

It appears that she was initiated by A. B. Goswami, also known as Bhakti Saranga Goswami, in April 1937. Though it's said that she was initiated by Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura that has been called into question since he passed away in 1936.

"She remained unmarried throughout her life—and especially her life as a devotee—Vinode Vani displayed not only a broad interest in philosophy and religion, but a natural aptitude for comprehending these subjects as well. Moreover, judging from the correspondences in our possession, philosophical discussions were a mainstay of her written interactions with others as can be seen from the following remark by Raghava Chaitanya, who once described Vinode Vani's letters as "thought provoking, enlightening, and inspiring" (1960).

"She officiated the initiation of Milan Ghosh and others on behalf of Bhakti Kevala Audulomi."

She also initiated Ram Dashi devi dasi, her only direct disciple.

Srimati Ram Dashi devi dasi[17]

In 1971, at twenty-five years old, Ram Dashi devi dasi received *diksha* from Vinode Vani in London. She is the only disciple of Vinode Vani devi dasi. Her parents and grandmother were disciples of Srila Bhakti Keval Audulomi Goswami Maharaja.

Srimati Maitri devi dasi

Maitri devi was a disciple of Sadananda Swami, a German disciple of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura. You can learn about her disciple Kalakanthi dasi, on this Free Radical Podcast:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hr7ChP5IsHc

Srimati Krishnamayi didi[18]

(1898-2002)

Krishnamayi dasi was a disciple of Srila Bhakti Rakshak (B.R.) Sridhar Maharaja. Later in her life she assumed, on the request of senior Gaudiya Math members, the role of *diksha-guru* with a *pranama-mantra* composed for her by a Gaudiya Math *sannyasi.* She received *harinama-* and *mantra-diksha*, which included all mantras except the Brahma Ga-

[17] This information is from Nathan Hartley, Narada dasa, author of *The Hare Krishna's in Britain.*

[18] Information here was obtained from an article about her here: https://hari-katha.org/other/kmdidi_eng.htm

yatri. She gave *harinama-* and *mantra-diksha* to seven or eight disciples and sent her male disciples to a godbrother to receive the Brahma Gayatri.

She completely gave her life to Srila B. R. Sridhara Maharaja. She would go to his living area after breakfast each day, chanting *japa* near him and leave in the evening, before dark. Srila Sridhara Maharaja, considered her a *shuddha-bhakta*, a pure devotee of Lord Krsna. And he wrote a Sanskrit poem about her, which is included in his *Gita* commentary.

In her old age, she was looked after by Jahnava Didi, who is seen in photographs pushing her wheelchair. She was looked after by women and men according to their capacity and she gave initiation to those requesting it.

After Srila Sridhara Maharaja left this world in 1988, Krishnamayi Didi established a temple in Navadvipa, a few minutes' walk from the main railway station. Jahnava dasi went with her to look after her. Gaura Krishna Prabhu (now Giri Maharaja), and Bhakti Nandana Swami Maharaja relocated with her as well.

Krishnamayi dasi spent her days chanting, always happy and fully absorbed. She was very revered by the local community, including many disciples of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura. She was a shining example of a Vaish-

navi. Some devotees remember seeing elderly *sannyasis* offering their *pranams* to her.

You can read more about her life here: https://gosai.com/writings/the-life-example-of-srimati-krsnamayi-devi

Srimati Jayasri Goswamini[19]

Srimati Jayasri Goswamini is a grand disciple of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura and disciple of Patitapavana Goswami Thakura the youngest disciple of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura.

She has been the *acharya* of the Shree Guru Prapanna Ashram since 1994. She was appointed by her spiritual master through written wills, entrusted to continue his Gurudeva's mission of preserving and propagating the message and teachings of Srila Rupa Goswami, Srila Raghunatha dasa Goswami, and the lineage of spiritual masters in their disciplic succession. She gives *harinama-* and *mantra-diksa* to men and women. She sends her male disciples to a godbrother to receive Brahma Gayatri.

[19] *Guru: The Principle, Not the Body* by Madana-mohana dasa, page 40.

She is untiringly serving the propagation of the congregational chanting and glorification of the Hare Krishna *maha-mantra* throughout Bengal. Like Krishnamayi didi, she gives *harinama-* and *mantra-diksa* to men and women and-sends her male disciples to a godbrother to receive Brahma Gayatri.

The photo above shows *sannyasis* and *brahmacharis* attending her Vyasa-puja ceremony in 2019. They are from Gaudiya Vedanta Samiti, Sri Gopinath Gaudiya Math, and the Sri Chaitanya Gaudiya Math. More information about her is here.

https://shreeguruprapannaashram.wordpress.com/

Srimati Shyamarani/Jadurani devi dasi

(1947-)

Jadurani devi dasi is a *harinama* and *mantra-diksha* disciple of Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada who gave her the name Jadurani devi dasi. She was one of his first Western disciples. She is the *shiksha* disciple of Srila Bhak-

tivedanta Narayana Maharaja, who gave her the nickname Syamarani devi dasi.

Syamarani has dedicated her life to practicing and propagating bhakti. Under the initial guidance of Srila Prabhupada, she learned how to paint spiritual artwork of Krishna and His *lilas, avataras,* and incarnations. She has painted more than four hundred mesmerizing pieces of spiritually infused artwork, loved by devotees all over the world.

She has authored two books: *The Art of Spiritual Life,* a comprehensive memoir, and *Bhakti Art Illuminations,* a compendium of all of her artwork.

The organizers of the 2018 Bhakti Fest gave her the spiritual humanitarian award for her contributions to devotional art and philosophical teachings.

In 2021, she presented her *Bhakti Art Illuminations* to India's Prime Minister Modi and President Ram Nath Kovind. Modi was so impressed by her work that he replayed some of their meeting on his radio show, "Maan ki Bat," in which he praised her role in carrying forward India's spiritual and cultural traditions.

She is the founder and leader of a bhakti-yoga museum and cultural center called Sacred Vedic Arts in South Florida. She's highly learned in *shastra* and lectures regularly.

Having been urged by many senior Vaishnavas to do so, she gives *harinama-* and *mantra-diksha* to male and female devotees.

You can find out more about her and her projects here: *https://sacredvedicarts.org/founders/*

Srimati Narayani devi dasi

(1948 -)

Narayani devi dasi, is a disciple of Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. She studied music at Northwestern University and joined ISKCON in Boston in 1970. She has done many services for Srila Prabhupada including Deity worship in the Calcutta (Kolkata) temple, traveling book distribution in Western India for the Bombay (Mumbai) temple, and teaching Bhakti Shastri, Bhakti Vaibhava, and Bhaktivedanta courses in the VIHE (Vrindavan Institute for Higher Education) in Vrindavan. She helped write the VTE curriculum for Bhakti Shastri and has written a series of twenty books,including *Srimad Bhagavata At a Glance* which has a picture for every verse of the *Bhagavatam,* and *Bhagavad-gita at a Glance* which has a picture for each verse of the *Gita.* She is a member of the GBC Sastric Advisory Committee.

Having gone through the institutional requirements of ISKCON to be authorized to give *diksha,* she has initiated two disciples. To continue to respond to other requests for

initiation, she is waiting for ISKCON GBC to lift a moratorium on her (and others) giving *diksha.*

You can connect with Narayani devi dasi here:
https://www.facebook.com/narayani.acbsp

Here's an interview with her regarding her *guru seva*:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnGUI4GubHw

The Unnamed

There are a few Vaishnavi disciples of Srila Prabhupada who accept disciples. We're unable to mention them by name because of the negatively charged atmosphere within ISKCON created by those who oppose Vaishnavis offering this *seva.*

If and when leaders of the institution cease trying to legislate the heart relationship between *guru-shishya* then this situation can be solved. Or, conversely, if qualified Vaishnavis just move forward to take the responsibilities being given to them by divine arrangement of the independent controller, Sri Krishna, then the situation can also come to an end and then the transcendental system will be put back into its proper place.

Around the world, many Vaishnavi disciples and granddisciples of Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada

and other Gaudiya Vaishnava *acharyas* offer substantial *shiksha*. It would take a whole book to properly acknowledge them all – and I don't know them all! But we can at least pause briefly and bow to their dedicated, selfless *seva* to thousands of people around the world.

Srimati Jahnava devi dasi

Jahnava devi dasi is married to Ekachakra dasa. She was initiated by Srila Tamal Krishna Goswami.

Jahnava devi dasi's devotional journey began in Beijing in 1993, where she quickly distinguished herself through extraordinary dedication to Srila Prabhupada's mission. By 1994, she had become the most successful book distributor in China, regularly distributing 30–40 books per day. Encouraged by her spiritual master, she soon surpassed even that remarkable standard, becoming the first known devotee in China to distribute more than 100 books in a single day.

Despite various challenges, she continued her service by joining the BBT translation team and later dedicated several years to translating Srila Prabhupada's books into Chinese before being sent to Taiwan to help establish Krishna consciousness there.

When Jahnava arrived in Taiwan in 1998, the local yatra remained very small despite decades of preaching efforts by

visiting devotees. Through her preaching, personal cultivation, organizational abilities, and leadership, she helped transform the situation. She played a central role in developing local devotees, organizing systematic preaching programs, and creating a stable foundation for ISKCON's growth.

Under her leadership, ISKCON was officially registered as a religious non-profit organization with the Taiwanese government in 2002.

Her spiritual master repeatedly expressed appreciation for her service, appointed her regional secretary for Taiwan, and encouraged devotees to cooperate with her leadership. Within only a few years, she helped establish a thriving local community.

Over more than three decades of devotional service, Jahnava has combined preaching, teaching, translation, and management in a remarkable way. She has translated over forty volumes of Srila Prabhupada's books into Chinese, making essential Vaishnava literature accessible to thousands of readers. Her translation service culminated in successfully convincing the topmost academic publisher in China (the China Social Science Press, the publishing wing of the Mainland Chinese government thinktank) to legally publish the *Bhagavatam* and the *Bhagavad-gita* in January 2014, gaining local scholars' recognition and government's

support in the process, something inconceivable a few years back and still inconceivable in most countries.

She developed systematic educational programs that have introduced large numbers of people in Taiwan and Mainland China to Krishna consciousness, guiding many from initial curiosity to serious devotional practice.

Her efforts contributed not only to the growth of ISKCON communities in Taiwan but also to the establishment of numerous ways of making Krishna consciousness available in Mainland China. Those who have worked with her often attribute her success to her unwavering dedication, deep knowledge of philosophy, concern for the spiritual welfare of others, and ability to inspire and train new devotees. Doesn't someone who has performed all these services qualify as an initiating spiritual master?

Ekachakra dasa, who is from Paris, was distributing books in China and introduced Jahnava to Krishna consciousness. He edits Jahnava's translations of Srila Prabhupada's books into Chinese. She is currently working on the Eleventh and Twelfth Cantos. Ekachakra Prabhu assists her in all manners of her outreach programs. He is fluent in Chinese and also lectures.

Watch this extraordinary kirtan-outreach event Jahnava dasi organized in China some years ago:
https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=605328950686169

Srimati Upasana Goswamini

(1977 -)

Shrimati Upasana Goswamini is from a well-known, respected *brahmana* family. Her spiritual master is Prabhupad Madangopal Goswami. She is married to Premagopal Goswami, who is an initiating guru. She offers *mantra-diksha* to intimate disciples and family members, both men and women.

Srimati Premadhara devi dasi[20]

(? -)

Premadhara dasi is a disciple of Ananta dasa Babaji, who was renowned for his extraordinary humility, prolific scholarly output of over fifty commentaries on foundational Gaudiya texts, and deep personal realization. He initiated approximately 3,500 disciples and left an enduring legacy as a saint of the highest spiritual caliber.

He asked Premadhara dasi to initiate even while he was still physically present. While ISKCON has philosophical differences with Radha-kund Gaudiya Vaishnavas on some issues, few challenge the extensive knowledge of the Gaudiya Vaishnava *siddhanta* and tradition that Ananta dasa Babaji

[20] *Guru: The Principle, Not the Body* by Madana-mohana dasa, page 41-42.

had, and undoubtedly acted in accordance with rather than contrary to when appointing Premadhara Devi as a guru.

She preaches, gives sastric discourses, counsels devotees, and initiates male and female disciples into *hari-nama* and mantra.

Srimati Chitralekha devi dasi

(1997 -)

Chitralekha dasi was initiated into Gaudiya Vaishnavism when she was just four years old under the guidance of a Bengali saint called Sri Girdhari Baba.

When she was six years old, she went with her parents to Barshana to attend Ramesh Baba's (an esteemed saint of Vraja) preaching program with her parents. At the end of his *hari-katha*, Ramesh Baba handed the microphone to Chitralekha and asked her to say something.

She spoke impeccably for nearly half an hour, spellbinding everyone present. Ramesh Baba blessed and praised her.

It was evident that Chitralekha dasi could be a preacher. Later on, Ramesh Baba organized her first preaching in Tapovana, near Vrindavan. Her parents and others were concerned about her ability to deliver seven days of Sri Bhagavat-katha and urged Ramesh Baba to organize a two-day program instead. But he had full faith in her divine powers, and she wonderfully spoke *hari-katha* for seven days.

She holds *hari-katha* on *Srimad Bhagavatam* all over India and is a wonderful *kirtaniya.* She has a large following worldwide, across India, the US, UK, Africa, and elsewhere. Some say she has many disciples, but it's unclear if that means through *diksha.* She's on Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/chitralekhaji/

Srimati Uma Didi

(1933– 2023)

Srimati Uma Didi was a highly respected Gaudiya Vaishnava saint and bhakti-yoga teacher. A direct disciple of Srila Bhaktivedanta Vamana Goswami Maharaja, she dedicated her life to renunciation, *guru-seva,* and preaching the philosophy of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu across the globe.

She was born in West Bengal into an affluent family and was the daughter of a highly respected member of society. She married in her youth but was widowed shortly after and sought higher spiritual meaning.

She saw Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada and Srila Prajnana Keshava Maharaja at various times when she was a young girl.

In 1970 she received *diksha* from Sri Srimad Bhaktivedanta Vamana Goswami Maharaja. In 1986 she renounced

her family home and took up permanent residence at the sacred Sri Keshavji Gaudiya Matha in Mathura.

Because of her deep devotion and integrity, she was granted the rare privilege of permanently residing in the *math*, where she was affectionately known by the community as "Ma" (Mother). She was known for her intense *gurunistha* (unwavering faith and dedication to the guru) and strict spiritual practices, such as never letting her *japa mala* (chanting beads) out of her sight.

Under the instruction and shelter of her *shiksha-guru*, Srila Bhaktivedanta Narayana Goswami Maharaja, she traveled globally. She became widely celebrated for her unique ability to simplify complex Gaudiya philosophical truths, making them accessible to spiritual seekers of all backgrounds.

Devotees have related that she slept very little, a couple of hours a day, and would stay up all night chanting the holy names. She gave *shiksha* to many and was asked for *diksha* by many but kept the matter of whether she gave *diksha* confidential.

Srimati Uma Didi passed away peacefully on the morning of February 14, 2023, while fully conscious and surrounded by her community, leaving behind a legacy of unconditional love and spiritual dedication.

You can read memories of her given at her memorial here: https://www.vineofdevotion.com/remembering-srimati-uma-didi/

Srimati Bhakti Lalita devi dasi

(1970 -)

Bhakti Lalita devi dasi is a disciple of Srila B. S. Govinda Maharaja, who is a disciple of Srila B. R. Sridhar Maharaja. She spent twenty years serving Govinda Maharaja at the Sri Chaitanya Saraswat Math in Navadvipa. He noted her knowledge and deep renunciation and gave her saffron cloth. She offers *shiksha* and lectures extensively. You can learn more about her in this podcast:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmNwjgIAjSQ

And here: https://www.facebook.com/BLalitaDD

Srimati Charu Chandrika devi dasi

(1969 -)

Charu Chandrika dasi is a disciple of Srila Bhaktivedanta Narayana Maharaja. She has been a *vanaprastha* living in Vrindavan since 1998. She traveled with Maharaja on his world tours for many years. In 2007, Narayana Maharaja told her to travel and preach around the world. She has taken up that instruction and offers *katha* and guidance during her annual world tours to many countries. You can find her here:

https://www.facebook.com/caruchdasi

Srimati Gaurachandrika devi dasi

(? -)

Gaurachandrika dasi is married to Chaitanya Chandra Charan Prabhu, a powerful preacher and guru in Kazaksthan. She is the fully active *guru-mata* for hundreds of devotees there. She creates courses for women about caring for the home and husband. And her preaching combines conservative feminine roles with full empowerment of women preachers.

Srimati Mallika-mala devi dasi

(? -)

Mallika-mala devi dasi is a disciple of His Grace Chaitanya Chandra Charan Prabhu. She's an internationally renowned preacher and spiritual leader. She serves as the GBC for several regions including Russia and Kazakhstan.

Blending her deep realization of bhakti with her professional background as a psychologist, Mallika-mala Prabhu has become a leading voice in Humane Pedagogy. She serves as the Head of the Center for Humane Pedagogy in Kazakhstan and Vice-President of the International Center for Humane Pedagogy, working closely with the legendary educator Shalva Amonashvili. Her contributions to the field have earned her the prestigious title of "Knight of Humane Pedagogy."

In 2008, following the vision of Bhakti Tirtha Swami, she established the first overseas branch of the Institute for Applied Spiritual Technologies (IFAST) in Kazakhstan. Through this platform, she has orchestrated numerous spiritual initiatives that have touched the lives of thousands globally, guiding many toward the path of Krishna consciousness.

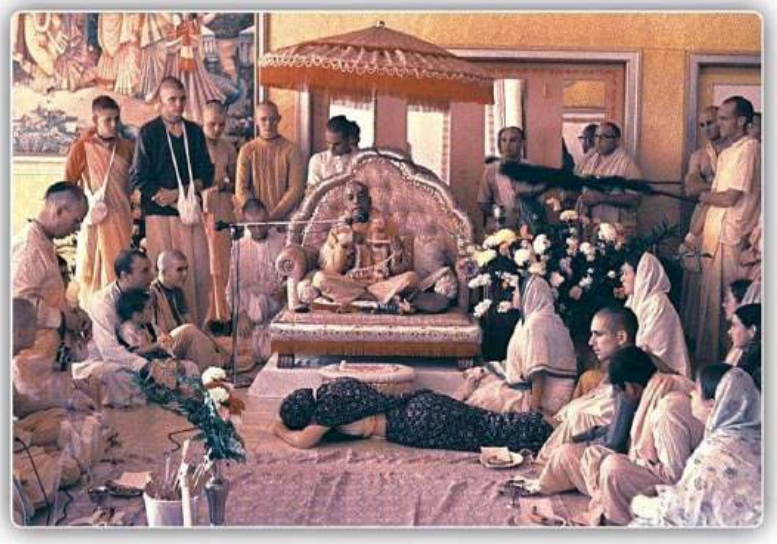
A cornerstone of her preaching mission is the Online Bhagavad-Gita Institute, founded in 2014. Under her guidance, more than 27,000 students have been introduced to the eternal teachings of Lord Krishna as presented by Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada.

Mallika-mala Prabhu regularly leads international festivals, retreats, and *yatras* to the holy *dhamas* of India, nourishing the hearts of devotees from across the Americas, Europe, and the CIS.

Beyond her spiritual leadership, she is a distinguished professional holding five international patents in psychiatry and endocrine pathology. She is also the author of several influential books, including *Windows into a Child's World*, *The Art of Relationships*, and *Strong Yet Weak*.

As a preacher, mentor to dignitaries, and a compassionate friend to many, she has dedicated her life to sharing the nectar of Krishna consciousness in a way that is both deeply

traditional and profoundly accessible to the modern world. You can find one of her projects here: https://gitainstitute.org/

I contacted two other Vaishnavis, not associated with ISKCON, who offer *diksha*, but they wanted to remain anonymous. I bow to them and honor their request. And I've been unable to contact another three Vaishnavis for more information.

History has let many prominent Vaishnavis slip from its memory. It's our loss that we've not been able to include them, who certainly contributed to the dissemination of Mahaprabhu's teachings.