

The Goswaminis and Their Contribution to Female Education in Bengal

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***Abstract:** An interesting feature about women within the fold of Gaudiya Vaishnavism was that they were quite well educated in an age when education was denied to most women. The objective of this paper is to bring to light how the Goswaminis of Bengal made a contribution to the spread of female education on the basis of various medieval works which refer to educated women and their contribution to society in the medieval and colonial periods. Their education centred around scriptural learning. Their education enabled them to enjoy a better position in society. They dwelt in a strongly patriarchal world but being educated helped them to have discussions and debates with men and have male disciples as well. In such ways they could subvert the dominant gender stereotypes. Leading female Vaishnava spiritual leaders from Bengal like Jahnava Devi and Hemlata Thakurani were well versed in the scriptures. which the Goswaminis of Khardah (Jahnava Devi lived at Khardah) were renowned for their knowledge. During the colonial period, Vaishnava women acted as teachers. Thus the Vaishnava society of Bengal made a striking contribution to the education of women in an age when female education was generally neglected.*

Keywords: Education, Female Teachers, Goswaminis, Scriptural learning, Vaishnavism etc.

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Introduction

Social hierarchies and discriminations inherent within the Brahmanical social order held sway in most parts of India in the medieval period. Opportunities of education were denied to most women. Patriarchs upheld the belief that a girl who could read or write would become a widow¹. However, this was not a universal phenomenon. In Medieval Bengal, Gaudiya

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Vaishnavism stressed on devotion to the Lord as the ultimate qualification of a devotee and consideration of caste and gender were ignored. The intense emotional appeal of Bhakti weakened the shackles of Brahmanical society. Hence, although it did not have any social reform agenda, in effect, Bengal Vaishnavism acted as a social reform movement. An interesting feature about women within the fold of Gaudiya Vaishnavism was that they were quite well educated in an age when education was denied to most women. The objective of this paper is to bring to light how the Goswaminis of Bengal made a contribution to the spread of female education on the basis of various medieval texts such as the *Bhaktiratnakara*, *Muralivilasa*, *Premvilasa*, *Sitacharit*, *Chaitanya-Charitamrita* and other such works which refer to educated women and their contribution to society in the Medieval and Colonial periods. Their education centred around scriptural learning. Their education enabled them to enjoy a better position in society. They dwelt in a strongly patriarchal world but being educated helped them to have discussions and debates with men and have male disciples as well. In such ways they could subvert the dominant gender stereotypes.

In Medieval Bengal, Vaishnava Bhakti became extremely popular under the influence of Chaitanya and his associates. It was termed Gaudiya Vaishnavism keeping in mind its particular geographical environment. Gaudiya Vaishnavism laid stress on complete surrender and devotion to The Lord and disregarded the various Brahmanical injunctions which discriminated amongst people on the basis of caste and society. So, the followers of Chaitanya were against the subjection of women and shudras². All were welcomed within the fold of Bhakti on terms of equality.

In his spiritual speculations Chaitanya put the position of Radha above that of Krishna and this accorded an exalted position to women in Gaudiya Vaishnava theory³. Although he did not include women among his disciples, women, however, participated in the *sankirtan* processions organised by him. They also participated in the *Kazidalan andolan* organised by him⁴. After Chaitanya Gaudiya Vaishnava theory was gradually developed by the Goswamis of Vrindavan the various sacred texts written by them which enunciated Gaudiya Vaishnava doctrine laid stress on the importance of the Guru without whose help Bhakti could not be realised. While Sri Krishna and Radha were the divine couple and object of veneration the Guru was a *Manjari* or a special category of the *Sakhis* of Radha⁵. It was only with the help of the guru that a *Bhakta* or devotee could reach Krishna⁶. Women were admitted in the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement not just as disciples but also as *gurus* or spiritual preceptors. Prominent among those women who assumed a leadership role were Jahnava Devi, Sita Devi and Hemlata Thakurani. The word *Guru* literally means a teacher. The term was used here to denote a spiritual or religious preceptor.

Leading female *Vaishnava* spiritual leaders from Bengal like Jahnava Devi and Hemlata Thakurani were well versed in the scriptures. The women spiritual leaders inspired a number of treatises on *bhakti* as well as biographical works. Many of their disciples were noted *Vaishnava* authors. One of the earliest female religious leader from Bengal was Sitadevi, wife of Advaita Acharya one of the leading Vaishnava Bhakti saints of Bengal. After her marriage, she took *diksha* or religious initiation from her husband and began her journey on the

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spiritual path. She was probably the first woman within the fold of Gaudiya Vaishnavism to assume ecclesiastical leadership. According to Sukumar Sen, during Advaita's lifetime she had taken charge of the groups of Vaishnavas that had gathered round him and she had a large following of her own⁷. Two of them Nandani and Jangali were believed to be possessors of extraordinary esoteric powers. They were in fact men who took the 'form of women' to worship Krishna. The *Sitacharita* mentions that Sitadevi said that they had to assume the form of women to become the *dasis* of Krishna. She dressed them up as women and they were miraculously transformed into women⁸. While the miraculous transformation of a man into a woman is difficult to believe, this story is a reflection of a very common trend among any religious system. Such miraculous stories are closely linked with the process of deification of a religious dignitary or a person with a spiritual bent of mind to the status of a divine being. Such stories were probably not true but show the awe and respect in which she was held by her disciples and later generations.

Sitadevi had five sons and most of them were her spiritual disciples who had taken *diksha* from her. Sources point to a number of other disciples of her who had settled in different parts of Bengal. But, we do not have any reference to any disciple of Sitadevi who was a real woman. This continued in later periods as well as L.S.S. O'Malley writing in the early twentieth century had noted that Goswamis of the Advaita line refused to initiate women⁹. It is sad that Sitadevi did not try or could not try to change the dominant patriarchal bias in Society.

Jahnava Devi was a woman spiritual leader from Bengal who flourished during the latter half of the sixteenth and the early half of the seventeenth centuries. Jahnava Devi was the younger daughter of Suryadasa Pandit and the second wife of Nityananda. (Nityananda was a prominent leader of Gaudiya Vaishnavism in Bengal and a close associate of Chaitanya. According to legend, when Chaitanya settled in Puri he entrusted Nityananda with the task of spreading Vaishnavism in Bengal). Various leading male Vaishnava leaders visited the household and conversed with both Nityananda and Jahnava Devi on matters of doctrine¹⁰, which was a remarkable thing for the age and proof of the fact that the Vaishnava society of Bengal was ready to show respect for a woman with a spiritual bent of mind and interested in scriptural learning.

Jahnava Devi played a prominent part in the Vaishnava movement of Bengal particularly after the death of Nityananda. She now emerged as the leader of a prominent group of Vaishnavas. She showed her independence of thought in moving away from the religious dogma preached by Nityananda. Nityananda had popularised the worship of the friendly mood of Krishna. The worshipers of the Nityananda School regarded Nityananda as Balaram and considered themselves to be cowherds or male friends of Krishna and Balaram¹¹. Jahnava Devi followed the Vrindavan Goswamis who worshipped Radha and Krishna from the erotic point of view. Like the Vrindavan Goswamis, she too emphasized the necessity of *Manjari* worship and she also laid stress on the importance of the Guru without whom Bhakti could not be meaningful. While discussing her religious ideas Dr. Ramakanta Chakraborty had praised her approach as pragmatic. He had said, "She understood that without roots in philosophy and

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theology the dervish dance of Nityananda and the Gopals would never achieve respectability in the elite society of Bengal”¹². Jahnava Devi was herself the *Guru* or religious preceptor of many leading Vaishnavas of the time. Her step-son Virabhadra and her adopted son Ramachandra took *diksha* or religious initiation from her. Both Virabhadra and Ramachandra became prominent Vaishnava leaders. She was the religious guide or *Guru* to numerous others as well.

She played an important role in the development and acceptance of the religious doctrine of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Chaitanya had not left behind any doctrinal texts. The theological literature of Gaudiya Vaishnavism was composed by the six Goswamis of Vrindavan, which laid emphasis on the worship of Radha and Krishna from the erotic point of view. She personally travelled to Vrindavan to meet the Goswamis settled there. It is said that the Vaishnavas of Vrindavan were ‘mad with joy’ to hear the news of her arrival. The greatly respected Goswamis Rupa and Sanatana touched her feet which shows the great respect in which she was held. They praised her for her deep knowledge of the *Bhagawata* and they had long discussions about the relationship of Krishna, Radha and her *Sakhis* or friends¹³. Jahnava Devi’s prominent role in the Vaishnava society of Bengal was once again seen during the Kheturi festival (a large gathering of the Bengal Vaishnavas at Kheturi Village in the Rajshahi district). Here the Vrindavan dogma was finally accepted as the unalterable Vaishnava creed. While Narottama Datta was the main organizer he always took permission from her before starting any ceremony during the festival and it was under her instructions that the decision was taken to recognise Chaitanya as the *yugalavatara* or dual incarnation of Radha and Krishna on earth and it was decided that he was to be worshipped according to the *yugamantra* or twin mantra of Radha-Krishna worship¹⁴.

Hemlata Thakurani was another leading female Vaishnava leader from Bengal. She was the daughter of Srinivas Acharya, one of the leading Vaishnava leaders from Bengal. She became known as a Goswamini (female of *Goswami*, original meaning of the word was “master of the cows” but the term later came to designate a religious preceptor) during the lifetime of her father. The place where she resided became famous as Hemlata Thakuranir Pat – it was a village known as Budhaipara situated on the western bank of the Bhagirathi river. She too had numerous disciples. A list of her disciples includes noted Vaishnava authors like Subalchandra Thakur, Gokul Chakrabarty, Radhaballabh Thakur and Yadunanadan Das. Among her disciples Yadunandan Das is the most well known because of the numerous books written by him. The work *Karnananda* is the most famous book written by him. He states that he wrote the book inspired by Hemlata Thakurani and she also helped him in the composition of the work by giving him vital information about Srinivas Acharya and other vaishnavas of the time. The author wanted to name his work *Shakhavarnan* or *Shakhaprakash* but Hemlata Devi was so pleased when she heard the composition that she named it *Karnananda* – giving pleasure to the ears. The book is divided into a number of chapters called *niryas* and each *niryas* ends with a description of the greatness of Hemlata Thakurani¹⁵.

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Hemlata had a considerable following in Bengal. Her manner of the worship of the Lord and singing his praises became extremely popular throughout Bengal¹⁶. An incident from her life brings out the fact that she was an accomplished scholar of Gaudiya Vaishnava theology. Once Rupa Kaviraj was giving a sermon on theology when she objected to his views that worship of the Lord's idol or *Srimurti* and the observation of fast on *ekadasi* would not lead to the attainment of *Braja*. She immediately protested that such explanation was incorrect and was not in keeping with the teachings of the Goswamis of Vrindavan or of her father. However, she did not immediately proclaim his interpretation as unfounded. She organised a huge *Sabha* or meeting of the Vaishnava Community and here a renowned scholar Vishwanath Chakraborty proved Rupa Kaviraj's interpretation to be incorrect. Rupa Kaviraj was not ready to accept his mistake, hence Hemlata Thakurani was greatly angered and tore-off all the strings of beads from his neck except one¹⁷. The entire incident brings out the fact that not only was she well versed in the scriptures and in the established religious theology. She was a confident lady who was not afraid of pointing out the mistakes of an established male scholar and formally punishing him for his mistake.

Thus, we find that all these three women were extremely well versed in theological knowledge which enabled them to emerge as religious preceptors or *Gurus*. They were certainly aided by the fact that they were born in some of the leading Vaishnava families of the time which enabled them to become well versed in theological knowledge and learning. It also owed something to the particular religious environment of Bengal. Edward C. Dimock had pointed out that one factor behind the allotment of an important position to women in the Bhakti tradition of Bengal was the influence of the Tantric tradition in Bengal. He had quoted Woodroffe to say that according to *Tantra Shastra*, a woman may not only receive *mantra* but may as a *Guru* initiate others by giving *mantra* to others¹⁸.

The acceptance of women as religious preceptors or *Gurus* also encouraged and enabled women to take steps for the spread of female education in Bengal. They were *Gurus* or teachers who realised that to become well versed in spiritual matters, their disciples both men and women must be educated. They encouraged learning of both Sanskrit and Bengali language. They inspired a large number of treatises on bhakti as well as biographical works. Many of their disciples were noted Vaishnava authors. The *Sitacharita* and the *Sitagunakadamba* written by Vishnudas Acharya and Loknath Das respectively are two biographical works composed by two disciples of Sitadevi which deal with the life and teachings of Sitadevi. These are the earliest biographical works dealing with the life of a woman. Similarly, Premadasa the author of the *Vamshishiksha* and Nityananda Das the author of *Premvilasa* were greatly influenced by Jahnava Devi while Yadunandan, the author of *Karnananda* was greatly influenced by Hemlata Thakurani. Jahnava Devi taught Sanskrit and Bengali to a lot of women as a result of which the Goswaminis of Khardah (Jahnava Devi lived at Khardah) became renowned for their knowledge and learning. Later these women took special efforts to spread education in different regions and among different social classes. Hemlata Thakurani too had a pronounced influence over the intellectual circles of her time, particularly in northern Murshidabad and Bishnupur. Hemlata Thakurani had a

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significant role to play behind the rise of Bishnupur as a prominent centre of education in Medieval Bengal. She herself not only accepted women as disciples but also educated them. This led to the popularity of the practice of copying religious texts by Vaishnava women. Thus, the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad of Bishnupur has numerous copies of manuscripts of religious texts made by women. One such example is a copy of the *Premavilasa* made by the queen of Bishnupur, wife of Raja Gopal Singh which is preserved in the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Library at Bishnupur¹⁹.

Dr.Dinesh Chandra Sen had shown how the growth of Vaishnavism led to the spread of education among all sections of the population in Medieval times. Mukundaram, writing in the sixteenth century has given a vivid picture of the education of women in the age. Not only women of higher castes but even low caste women received a fair education. Khullana (mentioned in his work), was an educated woman who could read and write and when she read a forged letter produced by Lahana, she expressed her disbelief on its genuineness as it was not in the handwriting of her husband²⁰. An informal form of education for the masses developed by the Vaishnavas was the system of *Kathakatha* – the *kathakas* would travel from place to place to place narrating various mythological stories to the common folk. The aim of the *kathakas* was to instil moral and spiritual instruction. Their audience chiefly consisted of womenfolk who were greatly impressed and inspired by these stories²¹. Such stories with moral messages instilled a strong sense of morality and righteousness among the womenfolk. The coming of the eighteenth century witnessed a decline of the Vaishnava faith, it was a period of great Shakta revival all over Bengal. Most of the Goswamis became subject as much to caste rules as the orthodox society itself. Many joined corrupt cults and new entrants included the ignorant and the morally outcast. The sect sadly failed to realise its social reforming potential to the full. Female education remained confined to a small segment of the total population of Bengal – the Vaishnava Society and people in close contact with the Vaishnavas.

The practice of educating women among the Vaishnavas continued into the colonial period as well. Living during the fag end of the eighteenth century, Harshundari Dasi (the daughter of Raja Shivchandra Raibahadur residing in the Posta area of north-western Calcutta) was an educated woman. She was taught by a young Vaishnava woman²². Debendranath Tagore in his autobiography had mentioned the frequent visits of *Ma Gosains* to their home. The Vaishnavi women were well-versed in both Sanskrit and Bengali. They imparted knowledge of various Sanskrit couplets dealing with Vaishnava theory with their explanations in Bengali²³. According to Krishna Lahiry, the Tagores trusted the *Goswaminis* as teachers because of the regular programme that they offered. While they generally visited the household daily to provide education, sometimes they even settled down within the compound walls for months to serve as teachers. Along with imparting a knowledge of Bengali language and literature, they also gave commentaries of Bengali and Sanskrit classics such as the *Gita Govinda*. Their curriculum also included penmanship. Women of the Tagore family of all ages were taught by these teachers. *Sisubodh* (a book for children) was the most commonly used text book from which they taught alphabets, daily prayers and handwriting.

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Writing was first practised on palm leaves, then on banana leaves and then on Sandpaper²⁴. The Suvarnabaniks had become active supporters of Vaishnavism under the influence of the Vaishnavas of Khardah and in this period the women of Suvarnabanik families were reputed to be educated.²⁵

British writers had also noted the prevalence of education among the women of Vaishnava families. William Adam in his *Second Report on the State of Education in Bengal* had mentioned that in Nattore, the mendicant Vaishnava community was able to read and write and also instructed their daughters to do so. He called it a welcome exception to the general state of ignorance prevailing among the masses and attributed the situation to their religious faith which had successfully instilled a love of reading among members of the sect including the women²⁶.

However, the effects of this support for female education could not reach the entire population of Bengal. When the Christian missionaries came here they felt the need of spreading education among a greater section of the female population of Bengal. Since they found it difficult to make women come out of their homes to attend school, they began a home education venture in the middle of the nineteenth century which they termed as 'Zenana Education'. The word "zen" is a Persian word meaning, 'women'. The word 'zenana' was used by the missionaries to mean ladies quarters. The Christian missionaries termed their home education venture (educating women in their homes) as the Zenana Education Movement. Their initial target was to educate women of the upper class Bengali Hindu households. The inner quarters of these households were termed *antarpur* in reality but the missionaries referred to them as the 'zenana' and the teachers became known as 'Zenana teachers'. The movement was quite a success. The existence of an earlier indigenous tradition of educating women within the household among certain sections of the society certainly made the Christian 'Zenana teachers' more acceptable to certain sections of the society²⁷. With hindsight, writers like W.W. Hunter and Melville T. Kennedy referred to the female Vaishnava teachers imparting education within the confines of the household as 'Zenana teachers'.

Conclusion

However, the role of the Vaishnavite women in female education gradually declined with the progress of the nineteenth century. One factor behind this decline was the competition offered by the Christian missionaries with their modern, western curriculum in an age when there was a growing demand for western educated brides. Another factor was the immoral practices which had crept into certain segments of the Vaishnava community which made many upper caste orthodox Hindus look down upon the Vaishnavas as immoral and sexually dissolute²⁸. The colonial government had plans to open a Normal School for such women to train them for educational work but the plan could not be implemented²⁹. Opposition to interactions with Vaishnava women was quite strong. Thus, an editorial in the *Somprakash* (December 3,

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1868) mentioned that in the Dacca Female Normal School only Vaishnavis had applied for admission and other people were not willing to send their daughters to study with them³⁰. A letter from the Headmaster of the Female Normal School, Dacca to the Inspector of Schools South Eastern Division dated September 14, 1867 shows the Headmaster at pains to explain that all categories of Vaishnava women were not disreputable and should not be shunned and only respectable Vaishnava women had been enrolled in the school³¹. But society was not willing to give up its prejudices.

The Vaishnava faith allowed women to participate in public worship and to act as spiritual guides and teachers. Their religious freedom enabled them to become harbingers of social change and improvement at least in the field of female education. Vaishnava faith emphasized literacy of all sections of the population including women to make them aware of Vaishnava religious literature and enable them to have a better grasp of religious matters. Many women learnt to read and write while others benefitted from the tradition of *Kathakatha* (religious story telling with a moral message). The Vaishnava women acted as indigenous 'Zenana teachers' prior to the beginning of the Christian 'Zenana movement'.

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