WOMEN GURUS IN GAUDIYA VAISNAVISM: A SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY IN NABADWIP

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Certified that the Thesis entitled

Women Gurus in Gaudiya Vaisnavism: A Sociological Inquiry in Nabadwip submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the supervision of **Prof. (Dr.) Ruby Sain, Professor, Department of Sociology, Jadavpur University, Kolkata (India),** and that neither the thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere / elsewhere.

Countersigned by the
Supervisor
Dated:

Candidate:
Dated:

Dedicated to the loving memory of my Baba,

Subrata Das

whose dreams were silenced by duties,
yet he kept watering my wishes for as long as he lived.

Acknowledgement

This acknowledgment may feel more like a marathon than a sprint, but a road as long and meaningful as this certainly merits an extensive tribute. After all, it takes a village to raise a child - and I can confidently say that this thesis is no less than my own daughter, nurtured by the love and support of so many incredible individuals. Each chapter carries traces of their kindness, their wisdom, and most importantly, their belief in my ability to see this through. This is, thus, the moment to not only reflect on my own journey but to celebrate the people who stood by me, inspired me, and made the seemingly impossible, possible.

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To all of you, this work is as much yours as it is mine.

Preface

In the quiet dawns of Nabadwip, as the soft chants of Hare-Krisna drifted through the air, the foundation for this study was unknowingly laid. This work is not merely an academic pursuit; it is a journey through both the personal and the scholarly - a dual pathway shaped by formative experiences and a profound curiosity about the complexities of faith, authority, and gender. To the reader, this preface may be an introduction to my study, but to me, it is an attempt to capture the confluence of academic rigour and personal reflection, the conjoined worlds of scholarly inquiry and lived tradition.

Although I do not identify as a Gaudiya Vaisnava, my many visits and holidays spent in Nabadwip have given me a close view of the tradition's essence. Gaudiya Vaisnavism, with its earnest reverence for the feminine divine, embodies a Daedalian blend of devotion and hierarchy, interlaced with both veneration and restraint. Growing up, I became quietly aware of this paradox. My first lessons in spirituality came through observing my maternal grandmother - her devotion, her tireless commitment to rituals, and her quiet resilience. These qualities became a window into a world where faith and practice coexisted with boundaries that, while subtle, were undeniably present.

Years later, as I embarked on my academic journey, the half-formed, juvenile questions that arose during my childhood sojourns in Nabadwip evolved into a deeper desire to understand not only the tradition of Gaudiya Vaisnavism but also the nuanced roles that women hold within it. Why, in a tradition that venerates the feminine, were women so rarely seen at the forefront of guruhood? How do women who navigate this tradition reconcile their devotion with the limitations imposed upon them? The journey of this research, therefore, became one of academic inquiry as much as personal reflection - a means to explore a landscape that is both familiar and academically profound.

This study began with a focus on women who had assumed the role of guru, rare figures whose lives gently push against the male-dominated landscape of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. Yet as I immersed myself in fieldwork, I found the story expanding. I encountered women ascetics, whose lives, while not always recognized by formal titles, held a quiet authority and deeply spiritual resonance. Their paths, though distinct from those of recognized gurus, mirrored a deep commitment to faith. Including them felt essential; it became clear that to fully understand

the roles women play in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, one must look beyond official titles and see the broader continuum of devotion within which these ascetics operate.

In investigating these women's lives - whether those recognized as gurus or those on a quieter ascetic path - I encountered themes that stretched far beyond the boundaries of individual experiences. The intersections of gender, spirituality, and authority form a complex web in which each woman's journey contributes to the larger narrative of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. Through a sociological lens, this study explores how these women negotiate their place within a tradition both supportive of and restrictive toward female authority. It delves into the theological interpretations, social expectations, and individual agency that shape each woman's path to spiritual authority. Each story opens the casement into how spirituality and social structure intersect, how personal faith navigates societal norms, and how authority can be both cultivated and contested within a devotional framework. This is a study that seeks not only to document but to understand - to give form to the lived experiences of women in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, whose paths are as varied as they are interwoven.

Writing this preface has allowed me to reflect on the delicate counterbalance between my personal connection to Nabadwip and my academic commitment to objective inquiry. While my personal history with this place has undeniably influenced my interest in this topic, my aim throughout this journey has been to approach the study with the clarity and precision that it deserves, bringing an analytical lens to the themes of devotion, gender, and authority that resonate so deeply within Gaudiya Vaisnavism. It is my hope that this work stands as a bridge - between the realms of the personal and the academic, the past and the present, the tradition and transformation.

In presenting this study, I hope it serves not only as an academic contribution but as an invitation to the reader to look beyond institutional roles and see the quiet strength, resilience, and devotion of the women who are integral to the Gaudiya Vaisnavite contexture. This work is, in part, a tribute to those who, often unseen and unacknowledged, carry forward a legacy that is both spiritual and socially significant. May their stories inspire a broader understanding of what it means to lead, to devote, and to transform within a living tradition.

Abstract

Set against the backdrop of Nabadwip, this study delves into the often-overlooked spiritual lives and evolving roles of women within Gaudiya Vaisnavism. Originally focused on women in guru roles, the study expanded to include women ascetics upon observing that many of them embody qualities resonant with spiritual leadership. This inclusion was driven by the recognition that, while they may not formally hold the title of guru, their practices reveal a depth of devotion and spiritual authority that align closely with the ideals of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. Through a sociological lens, the study examines how these women navigate and negotiate their positions in a tradition steeped in patriarchal structures yet deeply centred on the veneration of the feminine divine. It investigates how social expectations, theological frameworks, and individual agency shape their journeys toward spiritual authority. Key themes include the influence of caste, lineage, and socio-economic background - where Brahminical heritage and material privilege often intersect with, yet do not fully define, a woman's capacity to assume spiritual authority.

Anchored in qualitative research methodologies, the study employs narrative inquiry and thematic analysis to capture the nuanced experiences of these women. Certain theoretical foundations reveal the complex intersections of gender, spirituality, and authority within this religious tradition. The analysis reveals that while Gaudiya Vaisnavism embraces theological inclusivity through the veneration of Radha, institutional practices and hierarchical leadership often remain male-dominated. By amplifying the voices of women gurus and ascetics, this study challenges existing frameworks of guruhood, suggesting that Gaudiya Vaisnavism holds an unrealized potential for inclusivity.

Kaliyuge Gour Krisna janiyachi ami
Bishesh sandeha mor ghuchaile tumi

(Chaitanya Bhagavata. Sutra Khanda 19)

In the Kaliyug, the Bright one is the Dark one
You have dispelled all doubts of mine

Every love is an exercise in depersonalization on a body without organs yet to be formed, and it is at the highest point of this depersonalization that some- (.....) acquires the most intense discernibility in the instantaneous apprehension of the multiplicities belonging to him or her, and to which he or she belongs. (.....) We each go through so many bodies in each other.

(Gilles Deleuze, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia)

From realizing the bright one through many avenues, towards dispelling that brightness by becoming many through one, this Ph.D thesis is a journey. It is a journey that uses the lives of certain women - powerful, confident, vulnerable, determined and doubtful; charting of course tough terrain, negotiating all resources and the lack thereof, to the best of their abilities for an end that is uncertain. It is, simultaneously, a journey of self-discovery on the researcher's part.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Ei kotodur Nabadwip graam

Surodhuni beshtito param ramya sthaan

(Bhakti-ratnakara, Fourth Wave)

Yonder lies the village of Nabadwip,

A most loving place surrounded by the tuneful song of Ganga

Nabadwip, where ancient temples stand as enduring testaments of devotion and the gentle flow of the Ganga murmurs tales of divine grace, the material and spiritual realms intertwine in a captivating harmony. This town, deeply rooted in tradition and cultural depth, is not only my birthplace but also a cherished destination shaped by the ancestral ties of my mother's family. My earliest memories here are painted with the vibrant hues of festivals and the rhythmic cadence of Radha-Krisna chants that echoed through the streets. I still recall the quiet mornings when the first light of dawn would gently stir the town awake, the silence broken only by the soft sounds of local women preparing for their sacred morning rituals. These women held a unique and vital role in the town's spiritual landscape, their presence adding to the nuances of its cultural mosaic. Though their contributions are often overshadowed in historical narratives, they remain central to the lived experience of devotion in Nabadwip, embodying a communal spirituality that extends beyond personal worship.

Having spent many childhood visits at my *mamabari*[1] here, I fondly recall watching the daily rituals of my grandmother with great admiration. Like many other local women, *Taayi*, as I lovingly called her, would rise before dawn, bathe in the sacred waters of the ghat, and gather a variety of flowers along her path after putting on fresh clothes. As I write this, I can still picture her with her silver hair cascading down her back, as she meticulously arranged the blossoms. With deft hands, she would weave these blossoms into exquisite garlands - whispering prayers with each delicate stitch, and finally making way to Mahaprabhu Bari or Sonar Gouranga Mandir. As a young child, I would often accompany her - my heart set on the sweet rewards of *prosaad*[2] that awaited us. The anticipation was palpable; I would watch, wide-eyed, as the garlands transformed from simple flowers into offerings of love and devotion. Upon arriving at the temple, I would quietly observe her present her creations to the

Gosai or *Sevait*[3], bowing in humble *pronaam*[4] before disappearing into the early morning mist.

The depth of Taayi's devotion was palpable, her prayers whispered like secrets to the Divine. Yet, there was a subtle but unmistakable absence within the sacred spaces of the temples - a lack of feminine presence in the *garbhagriha*[5], where the most sacred rites are performed. This absence left a distinct silence, one that seemed to echo with unspoken questions: Where are the women in these revered spaces? Why do only Gosais hold authority in all matters of the sacred?

As a child, I did not dwell upon these questions deeply; they were simply threads in the complex web of my upbringing. However, as I grew older and pursued sociology as my academic discipline, I began to reflect on these observations through a more analytical lens. My coursework introduced me to the importance of perspective - to viewing the world not just as it is but as it could be. I started to recognize that what I once took for granted was part of a larger narrative - one that warranted scrutiny and understanding. I started revisiting my childhood experiences with new eyes. I began to understand that the roles women played were not just cultural footnotes but crucial elements in the spiritual economy of the community. I found myself asking why women in Nabadwip were not more visible in positions of spiritual authority? Why were the temples filled with the echoes of their prayers, yet the faces that led the rituals remained predominantly male? These contemplations ignited a passion within me to explore the issue further and embark on a study that would illuminate whether women were indeed rising to spiritually authoritative roles within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition. I, thereby, envisioned a research journey that would not only seek answers but also give voice to the often-silenced stories of women in spirituality. Thus began my academic pursuit into the realm of "Women Gurus in Gaudiya Vaisnavism: A Sociological Inquiry in Nabadwip," a personal quest driven by my longing to uncover the spiritual landscape of a town that has always held a special place in my heart. With each step in this journey, I carry the legacies of the women I have witnessed - those who embody the essence of devotion and whose stories deserve to be told.

No story of Nabadwip is complete without consideration of Sri Krisna Chaitanya, referred to as the Great Lord or Mahaprabhu by countless devotees over the ages. He is the full moon, 'the Nabadwip Chandra,' in whose ethereal light the glory of the town emanates its rich cadence. It is not a surprise, therefore, that as I set forth on this academic undertaking, I

found myself often reflecting on His teachings, and realized that His life's work was not merely a spiritual pursuit but a revolutionary movement that invited all - regardless of gender - to partake in the divine dance of devotion. This was a sharp contrast to the absence that I noticed in the literature that informed and emerged out of the communities that participated actively in Gaudiya Vaisnava spiritual practices in Nabadwip. To redress that, I hope to contribute to a discourse that recognizes and celebrates the multifaceted roles women play within the spiritual domain. Equipped with a trust that the land of my birth will not deprive my endeavour, I approached my research with a sense of urgency and excitement, knowing that uncovering these stories can lead to a broader understanding of the spiritual (and gender) dynamics at play in Nabadwip and beyond. My hope is that through this research, I will not only answer the questions that have lingered in my heart but also inspire others to seek out the voices of women in spiritual authority, honouring their contributions and celebrating their journeys.

In these early passages, the use of the first-person voice has been intentional, serving to convey the personal origins of the study's central questions, reflecting the intimate foundation upon which this inquiry is built. This approach allows for an authentic engagement with the researcher's own experiences, which shaped and informed the initial motivations behind this study. While these sentiments are foundational to the conceptualization of the research, the use of the first-person voice has been intentionally limited to this introductory portion. For the remainder of the thesis, an objective, scholarly tone is maintained, ensuring that the research not only preserves its personal resonance but also adheres rigorously to the academic standards of impartiality and critical analysis.

1.1 Sambhavami Yuge Yuge: Vaisnavism through the Ages

Grhitaivisnudiksako visnu-pujaparo narah
Vaisnavo 'bhihito

(Hari–bhakti–vilasa: 11 from Padma Purana)

One who receives initiation in the Visnu mantra, and is devoted to the worship of Visnu
Is a Vaisnava

By the 1st century CE, Hinduism in its most popular form, was clearly divided into five main sampradayas, or communities - in a narrow semantic: the Vaisnava, the Saiva, the Sakta, the Saurya, and the Ganapatya. What is important is that all these groups first used 'Samkhya[6]'

and later on 'Vedanta[7]' to form their philosophical basis. It was also important that although each of them ascribed Supreme Godhead to their own deity, they also accepted the others as subsidiary deities. For Bhagavatism, which came to be known as Vaisnavism at a later stage, Vaisnava philsosopher and saint Ramanuja, through his dualist interpretation of the Brahmasutras[8], provided the main philosophical base (Brahmasutras according to Sri Ramanuja, 2012). Therefore, before engaging in specific analysis, it is imperative to understand the broader context of Vaisnavism, which, at core, is a major Hindu tradition that venerates Lord Visnu and His various incarnations. Its roots extend back to the Vedas, the ancient sacred texts of Hinduism, where hymns within the Rig Veda are dedicated to Visnu (Dutta, 1951). However, it was in the epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata that the narrative and devotional aspects of Vaisnavism began to crystallize (Klostermaier, 1989). What distinguishes Vaisnavism from other sectarian affiliations in the Hindu practice is the overt emphasis of devotion, or bhakti, over jnana, yoga, yajna, tantra and other methods, though it is not summarily devoid of these tendencies altogether. Although the Ramayana presents Lord Rama as the paragon of an ideal king, embodying the principles of *dharma* (righteousness) and *bhakti* (devotion), it is in the Bhagavad Gita within the Mahabharata, where Lord Krisna, in a dialogue with Arjun, advocates bhakti as a means to attain liberation - by highlighting the significance of unswerving commitment to the Divine:

ananyāś cintayanto māṁ ye janāḥ paryupāsate
teṣāṁ nityābhiyuktānāṁ yoga-kṣemaṁ vahāmy aham

(The Bhagavad Gita, 9.22)

To those who worship Me unwaveringly, contemplating upon Me without deviation,
I sustain what they have and carry what they lack.
I am the bearer of their well-being and safeguard what they possess.

The historical evolution of Vaisnavism is a multifaceted narrative that spans millenia, reflecting a dynamic interplay of cultural, philosophical, and social forces. A significant phase in the evolution was marked by the Gupta period (4th to 6th centuries CE). The Gupta rulers served as patrons of Vaisnavite traditions, actively contributing to the flourishing of temple architecture and the promotion of devotional practices dedicated to Visnu within their realm (Nehra, 2010). Notably, the Varaha and Visnu temples in the Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh emerged as iconic architectural masterpieces, standing as tangible testaments to the widespread devotion to Visnu during the Gupta era. These temples not only symbolized the

religious avidness of the time but also reflected the political and cultural ethos of the Gupta rulers, who recognized the significance of promoting the Vaisnavite tradition to unify their subjects and showcase their authority. This patronage, thus, left an enduring legacy, contributing significantly to the trajectory of Vaisnavism and shaping the religious and cultural landscape of ancient India during this period.

The process of syncretism, however, was slow and perilous, for the acceptance of Visnu-avatar Krisna as a Vaisnava deity was not immediate or automatic. The Sabha Parva of Mahabharata[9] shows clear disagreements about His godhead, and even the Bhagavad Gita have subtle elements stating this conflict. However, by the Gupta age, this syncretism appears to be complete. Vaisnavism also became distinctive from other sampradayas with its own set of textual canons, including the *Vaishanakha*[10] from the Vedic tradition and the *Pancharatra*[11] from the Tantric tradition. However, what really consolidated its status and the divine identity of Krisna were the interpretations of Brahma Sutra, first non-dualistically by Sankaracharya and later on by the qualified dualistic and non-dualistic commentaries on the same by Ramanujacharya and Madhavacharya, respectively (Brahmasutras with Madhvacharya's Commentary, 2023).

Pioneered by Ramanuja, the Bhakti movement, with origins in South India, gradually gained momentum during the 7th to 10th centuries CE principally through the poetry of the Alvars (devotees of Lord Visnu) and the Nayanars (devotees of Lord Shiva). It reached its peak in the 15th and 17th centuries, playing a transformative role in shaping Vaisnavism. A key aspect of the movement was its emphasis on direct and personal devotion to God, a paradigm shift that transcended traditional caste and societal divisions (Mullatti, 1989). This egalitarian approach resonated deeply with the masses, fostering a sense of inclusivity and breaking down barriers that had long separated individuals based on their social standing. By advocating for a more direct and personal connection with the Divine, the movement democratized spirituality and made it accessible to people from all walks of life. The emphasis on such a kind of devotion created a more inclusive religious landscape, where individuals found solace and inspiration in their direct relationship with the Divine, irrespective of their social background.

The epoch of the medieval period further witnessed the emergence of two major philosophical schools within Vaisnavism: *the Vishishtadvaita Vedanta* of Ramanuja and *the Dvaita Vedanta* of Madhava. Ramanuja propounded a philosophy that posited a nuanced

relationship between *jivatma* (the individual soul) and *the paramatma* (Supreme Reality). In Vishishtadvaita, the doctrine of qualified non-dualism asserts that while the individual souls are distinct entities, they are intricately connected to and dependent on the Supreme Reality. Contrastingly, Madhava's Dvaita Vedanta, which represents a radical dualistic perspective within the Vaisnavite tradition, posited a stark ontological distinction between the individual souls, the material world, and the Supreme Reality. According to Dvaita Vedanta, the Supreme Reality (Visnu or Krisna) is eternally distinct from the individual souls and the material universe. This philosophy, with its emphasis on the irreducible duality of the individual soul and the Divine, presented a distinctive and robust interpretation of Vaisnavite theology. The contrasting perspectives of Ramanuja and Madhava continue to shape the intellectual contours of Vaisnavite thought and reflect the dynamic nature of philosophical inquiry within this tradition (Dasgupta, 1922). However, these inquiries often ventured into sophistry and divorced from appeal for the masses. This was corrected by the simple yet profound poetic utterances of the Bhakti poets who mark the next turn in the evolution of Vaisnavism.

The devotional poetry of Surdas, Tulsidas, and Mirabai during the Bhakti movement contributed in strongly reinstating the democratization of Vaisnavism (Basham, 1954). Surdas, a blind poet-saint, is renowned for his compositions dedicated to Krisna. His poetry, infused with deep devotion and lyrical beauty, resonated with people across social strata. On the other hand, Tulsidas, through his magnum opus *Ramcharitmanas*, contributed significantly to the popularization of the worship of Rama. This epic, written in the vernacular Awadhi language, made the narrative of the Ramayana accessible to the common people, thus fostering a deep connection with the Divine. The Rajput princess, Mirabai, is also renowned for expressing her intense devotion to Krisna through soul-stirring poetry. Her verses that transcended social barriers were often set to music, and became a potent medium for the expression of personal and divine love - thus appealing to a broader audience and furthering the democratization of devotional practices (ibid). Such compositions served as a liberating force within Vaisnavism by moving away from complex theological treatises to emotionally charged expressions in local languages. This shift enabled individuals from diverse backgrounds to engage with and participate in the devotional ardour centred round Krisna and Rama, thereby contributing significantly to the transformative landscape of Vaisnavism during the Bhakti movement.

Thus, from its Vedic roots and the epics to the Bhakti movement and the medieval philosophical schools, Vaisnavism has continuously adapted to diverse historical contexts. One of its most distinctive and dynamic aspects, as envisioned by Chaitanya, is Gaudiya Vaisnavism which will be discussed in the next section.

1.2 Avatar Sara Gora Avatar: Chaitanya and the Gaudiya

Bhunjibo premar sukha bhunjaibo loke
Din bhab prokas koribo kolijuge
Bhakat janer sange bhakati koriya
Nijo prem bilayibo ishwar hoiya
Nijo guno sankirtane prokas koribo
Nabodwipe saci grhe janam labhibo.

(Chaitanya Mangala, Sutrakhanda: 17)

Of love I will drink and make others drunk,
I will reveal myself in humility,
Will be devoted with devotees,
Will bestow love as God,
Will sing my own praise in choric odes,
In Nabadwip will I assume birth in Sachi's home.

The term "Gaudiya" has evolved through different layers of meaning across various contexts. It began as a reference to a geographic area in deltaic Bengal, specifically west of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly basin, gaining prominence during the Gupta era and eventually flourishing as an important region under the Pala and Sena dynasties. While the geographical connotation of "Gaudiya" is rooted in its identity as a significant landmass in ancient Bengal, its environmental significance is connected to what might be termed a "yellow revolution," representing the lush, agricultural productivity of the land, with vast stretches of golden paddy swaying gently in the wind. Politically, "Gaudiya" came into importance after the decline of the Gupta dynasty, when King Shashanka established a significant kingdom, followed by the Pala dynasty and later the Sena dynasty, who made Nabadwip a celebrated capital. The agricultural richness of the region, shaped by the confluence of the Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers, made it not only a political centre but also a cultural and economic hub.

Yet, the deepest, most evocative layer of "Gaudiya" lies in its spiritual essence. The term goes beyond the realms of geography and politics to embody an ethereal connection, like a river flowing into the ocean of the Divine. Gaudiya is a land blessed as the birthplace of Chaitanya, who set in motion a spiritual movement that embraced the most sublime of all emotions: the divine love between Radha and Krisna. Thus, to the devotees of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, this land is not merely soil and riverbeds; it is a sacred landscape where every grain of sand, every petal of a flower, and every gentle breeze is 'imbued with the bhakti of Nimai[12].'

A theology initially developed by Chaitanya, the Gaudiya manifestation of Vaisnavism was consolidated around His persona soon after His demise by His biographers - some of whom were close to Him during His lifetime, others being early devotees. It was based on considering Chaitanya as Krisna Himself, who in the Kaliyug has taken birth in Nabadwip to lead human beings from their sorrow and perils through the dissemination of the *mahamantra*, the chanting of the four-lined formula. His orientation was that of 'the supreme devotee,' which, till date, is identified with Radha. The philosophical and theological manipulation to get across this point and prove Chaitanya's Krisnahood within Gaudiya Vaisnavism is subtle and multifarious and demands a study on its own, which is clearly not the objective of the present thesis.

This exploration of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, on the other hand, is more sociological where Chaitanya remains as a ubiquitous presence. The researcher mostly engaged with two seminal biographical works, namely *Chaitanya Bhagavata* by Vrindavan Das and *Chaitanya Charitamrita* by Krisnadas Kaviraj Goswami - supplemented with insightful conversations with Sri Gorachand Bhattacharya during field visits to Nabadwip (dated 23/09/2022; 25/09/2022; 13/04/2023; 14/04/2023; 17/08/2023; 20/08/2023; 16/10/2023). A retired and seasoned Sanskrit teacher in Nabadwip Bakultala High School, Gora Dadu, as affectionately called, graciously shared his immense knowledge garnered over years of scholarly dedication. He elucidated relevant excerpts from the extensive biographies and provided crucial insights into the historical and philosophical underpinnings of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. Through various conversations, the researcher came to understand that a core aspect of this tradition was the belief that the path of bhakti transcends social hierarchies, which allows individuals from diverse backgrounds to access the Divine through sincere devotion. Chaitanya's teachings gained popularity as He began to promote the congregational chanting

of Krisna's names - a practice that became a communal activity fostering a sense of unity among devotees by inviting participation from one and all. Gora Dadu described how these gatherings transformed into vibrant festivals where people engaged in singing, dancing, and sharing their devotion, creating an inclusive environment that appealed to a wide audience. Despite facing opposition from orthodox factions who perceived Chaitanya's teachings as a threat to traditional practices, He maintained His commitment to inclusivity and love - engaging with individuals from various backgrounds, emphasizing that true devotion was open to everyone. Chaitanya's philosophy, thus, resonated particularly with the marginalized, providing them with a spiritual pathway that was often denied to them in the prevailing socio-religious structure.

Drawing on literature, conversations with Gora Dadu, insights from Nabadwip locals, along with personal observations and field understandings, the researcher has sought to briefly isolate certain aspects of Gaudiya Vaisnavism that align with the broader purpose of the present study:

Achintya Bhed-abhed Philosophy: A distinctive feature of Gaudiya Vaisnavism is the Achintya Bhed-abhed that was formulated by Chaitanya. The theological elaboration of this philosophy was later expounded by His followers, notably Baladeva Vidyabhushana[13]. Often translated as "Inconceivable Oneness and Difference," it emphasizes the simultaneous and inconceivable unity and difference between Krisna and His creation. The term combines "Achintya" (inconceivable), "Bhed" (difference), and "Abhed" (non-difference), conveying that Krisna is both distinct from and identical to His energies and manifestations. The jivas and the material world are different from Krisna in that they are His dependent energies, yet they are non-different as they originate from Him. This relationship, being beyond human comprehension, underscores that the Divine cannot be fully understood through logic alone but through devotion and realization. To put in simple words, this invaluable doctrine serves as the basis for bhakti - encouraging the soul to awaken its natural love for Krisna while acknowledging its unique individuality.

Devotion to Radha and Krisna: Followers of Gaudiya Vaisnavism view Radha and Krisna not merely as historical or mythological figures but as the ultimate embodiments of divine love and the highest spiritual reality. This devotion, therefore, is characterized by profound and intense expressions of *prem* (love) and *bhakti*, marked by an intimate and personal relationship between *the bhakta* (devotee) and *the Bhagavan* (the Divine). This devotional

relationship is often conceptualized as "rasa," a term broadly signifying the nuanced flavours of loving exchanges between the devotee and the divine couple. Among them, the madhurya rasa[14] between Radha and Krisna is considered the pinnacle of spiritual devotion, symbolizing the purest and most complete form of divine love.

In this light, Gaudiya Vaisnava practitioners engage in a variety of devotional activities aimed at developing a loving relationship with Radha and Krisna. Central to this practice is the chanting of the Hare Krisna mantra, which is believed to invoke the divine presence and purify the heart in preparation for deeper devotion. The recitation of sacred texts, that recount the pastimes of Radha and Krisna, such as the Tenth Canto of the Bhagavata Purana (particularly chapters 29 to 33), as well as works like the Chaitanya Charitamrita, Chaitanya Bhagavata, Gopal Champu[15], and Krisna Karnamrita[16], also occupies a significant place in the devotional routine, rejoined Gora Dadu during a colloquy (dated 25/09/2022). Through these practices, devotees seek to transcend the material world and attain a state of divine love - striving for a blissful union with the divine couple.

Naam-sankirtan: Naam-sankirtan, or the congregational chanting of the divine names of Krisna, is the heart of devotional practice in Gaudiya Vaisnavism. Devotees drawn from diverse groups and fields collectively chant the mahamantra, often accompanied by the rhythmic beats of the *mridanga*[17] and *kartal*[18]. Beyond the audible beauty, they believe that these vibrations reach deep into the heart, dissolving impurities and promoting a spiritually charged environment. Not limited to worship spaces, naam-sankirtan often occurs in public settings, festivals, and events, aiming to immerse a wider audience in 'Krisna consciousness.' The communal chanting of Krisna-naam, therefore, both reinforces group identity and offers participants an opportunity for personal spiritual elevation. Such auditory experiences are, thus, not just ritualistic; they are immersive and personal - involving an inner surrender that aligns one's soul with the divine presence (Schweig, 2007).

Scriptural Foundation: The philosophy and practices of Gaudiya Vaisnavism are deeply embedded in Hindu sacred texts, particularly the Bhagavad Gita and the Bhagavata Purana, as well as the writings of saints like Rupa Goswami and Sanatan Goswami. During conversations with practitioners, it became clear that these texts are not just doctrinal guides but are treasured as windows into divine reality. The Bhagavad Gita, with its dialogue between Lord Krisna and Arjun, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding karma, dharma, and bhakti. The Bhagavata Purana complements this by detailing Krisna's

divine pastimes, offering devotees a glimpse into the joy and love that characterize the relationship between the Divine and the soul. These scriptures, whether read or chanted, form the cornerstone of both individual practice and community teaching, continuously inspiring the theological and emotional landscape of Gaudiya Vaisnavism.

Cultural and Artistic Expressions: The cultural and artistic dimensions of Gaudiya Vaisnavism manifest in various forms, including music, dance, and literature. Guy L. Beck's (2012) work, *Sonic Liturgy: Ritual and Music in Hindu Tradition* provides wonderful insights into the sonic dimensions of this tradition, shedding light on the intricate relationship between ritual, art, and devotional experience. The researcher has humbly attempted to enumerate certain highlights of that discussion below:

- ***Devotional Music:*** Gaudiya Vaisnavism, as has been already established, places significant emphasis on the congregational chanting of the holy names. The practice serves as a powerful medium for devotees to express their love and devotion to the Divine, with its rhythmic and melodic elements fostering an atmosphere that deeply engages both the heart and the mind. Additionally, the practice of sankirtan, which involves group devotional singing or chanting that praises the Divine, also plays an essential role. While sankirtan can include elements of naam-sankirtan as well, it further extends to other forms of devotional expression, such as recounting divine pastimes, prayers, or musical performances, thereby encompassing a broader spectrum of collective worship within the tradition.

- ***Dance:*** Dance, within Gaudiya Vaisnavism, transcends mere physicality and emerges as an essential facet of worship, one that symbolically expresses the divine pastimes of Radha and Krisna. During a key discussion with Gora Dadu (dated 14/03/2022), the sacred value of dance was illuminated. He referenced *Hari-bhakti-vilasa*[19] to explain how disturbing a devotee engrossed in singing and dancing is regarded as an offense warranting karmic consequences - "A non-devotee who disturbs the singing and dancing devotees of Lord Krisna will be reborn as an animal." Such reverence for dance emphasizes its role as a vehicle of ecstatic devotion and respect toward divinity. The researcher's observations of the dancers' expressions and movements at festivals and local gatherings made it obvious that this art is not simply for aesthetics; rather, it serves as a direct pathway for devotees to physically manifest their spiritual connection.

- ***Literature:*** The literary corpus of Gaudiya Vaisnavism serves as an intellectual and devotional foundation, especially through texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, Bhagavata Purana, and compositions by Jayadeva, Vrindavan Das, Krisnadas Kaviraj Goswami, Lochan Das, and the Six Goswamis of Vrindavan[20]. These works, which blend narrative, poetry, and philosophical discourse, serve not only as spiritual guides but also as cultural connectors. Among practitioners, as the researcher observed, reciting and discussing these texts form a core aspect of communal life, often with emphasis on interpreting *divine leela* to inspire personal devotion. The central role of such texts is evident in the numerous shrines, homes, and temples visited by the researcher, where devotees regularly recite and meditate on their passages. The oral transmission and reinterpretation of these works during interviews with local scholars and devotees revealed an ongoing engagement with the texts, reflecting an evolving yet deep-rooted relationship with their spiritual heritage.

- ***Visual Arts:*** The visual culture of Gaudiya Vaisnavism is rich and elaborate, notably manifested in temple architecture and iconography. Nabadwip's temples, dedicated to Radha and Krisna, exhibit vibrant carvings, paintings, and decorations, often illustrating key episodes from their lives and leela. Interestingly, this aesthetic devotion extends into private homes, which are observed to be adorned with similar images, symbols, and even miniature shrines that mirror temple iconography. This practice not only brings the temple experience into domestic spaces but also acts as a bridge between public and private worship, fostering an atmosphere of constant devotion. In interviews, several devotees - notably householder ascetics - mentioned that their homes serve as 'garbagriha' and are sanctified by these visual representations, which they believe invite divine presence. This symbiotic relationship between the communal and personal spheres of visual expression underscores the pervasive influence of Gaudiya iconography across all levels of devotees' lives.

- ***Dietary Practices:*** Bhakti Yoga, revered within Gaudiya Vaisnavism as the highest form of spiritual practice, is considered the most effective means to reunite the soul with the Divine. Central to this practice is the preparation and offering of food to Krisna, transforming cooking into a devotional act. By meditating on pleasing Krisna through each step of the preparation, the act is believed to render the food 'karma-free,' neutralizing any karmic residue associated with the harvesting and cooking

processes. This sanctified food, known as 'prosaad,' is imbued with divine mercy, and consuming it is considered to purify the mind from material desires, thereby enhancing one's eligibility for the practice of bhakti.

Gaudiya Vaisnava adherents traditionally follow a strict sattvic diet, primarily vegetarian and consisting largely of fruits, vegetables, and dairy, while deliberately avoiding certain protein sources. During the month of Kartik ('Damodar' in the Vaisnava calendar), many devotees - especially those from Brahmin lineages - undertake additional dietary restrictions in observance of the month's revered status in this tradition. Kartik, marked by the saying, "Na Kartikasamo Maaso, Na Kriten Samam Yugam, Na Vedam Sadrisham Shastram, Na Tirtha Gangaya Samam," highlights this month's supreme spiritual importance, alongside the Satyayug, the Vedas, and pilgrimage to the Ganga. Accordingly, during Kartik, several vegetables, such as brinjal, bitter gourd, pointed gourd, cauliflower, and red spinach, are eschewed for their rajasic or stimulating properties, which are seen as counterproductive to devotional purity. Turmeric is also omitted as a seasoning to avoid flavour enhancement, with salt as the sole condiment. Orthodox practitioners often refrain from consuming curd or buttermilk during this time, referencing Krisna's butter-theft during this month. Milk consumption, however, remains unrestricted.

Broadly, Gaudiya Vaisnava dietary norms restrict the intake of items like onions, garlic, spring onions, Malabar spinach (puishaak), masoor dal (red lentils), carrots, and snake gourd. Traditional justifications for these prohibitions can be traced to the Padma Purana, which recounts how the body parts of a cow sacrificed and then revived in a yajna transformed into these substances, rendering them unsuitable for Vaisnavas: garlic is linked to flesh, fish to discarded parts in water, red lentils to blood, onions to skin, and carrots to bones. Interestingly, Malabar spinach is avoided due to its association with the entrails of Hiranyakashipu, the demon king. These restrictions are further substantiated in the Hari-bhakti-vilasa, which provides an extensive list of proscribed foods. Ginger, however, and a combination of ginger and green chilies are used sparingly, as these are seen as acceptable within Puranic guidelines.

A distinction in rice consumption practices is also notable among Gaudiya Vaisnavas. Those coming of orthodox Brahmin backgrounds abstain from *seddho chaal* (boiled

rice), both for offerings and personal meals, favouring only *Atap chaal*, *Govindabhog chaal*, and *Tulsibhog chaal* for their adherence to devotional purity. Conversely, the Sahajiyas, who follow the ritualized practice of *madhukari*[21], do not discriminate in rice types for personal consumption but prefers to avoid boiled rice in deity offerings. Generally, Gaudiya Vaisnavas consume primarily the *bhog*[22] offered to the deities, which are composed of a diverse range of dairy products and fruits. These practices, as gathered from conversations with locals and respondents, serve to uphold dietary restrictions that resonate deeply with the community tradition's devotional ideals.

The above discussion highlights not only some of the primary elements of Gaudiya Vaisnavism but also attempts to illustrate how most of them act as vehicles for conveying the spiritual teachings of Chaitanya that transcend mere religious doctrines in order to become a holistic way of life. However, despite the advocacy for inclusivity and universal devotion, there remains a critical need to evaluate the entrenched gender norms within this tradition. The context for this evaluation will be established in the next section.

1.3 Bhakter Ma, Krisna-prem-e Mawgna: Contextualizing Women Gurus in the Study

In the early stages of this research, one fundamental question that came to mind is whether the prominence of Radha within the Vaisnava pantheon and the general weight attributed to the feminine principle and virtues in the Gaudiya Vaisnava culture, has, in any way, impacted the status of women in this tradition. Particularly intriguing is an observance in Nabadwip, where individuals commonly greet each other with phrases like "Joy Radhe" or "Radhe Radhe." This customary salutation not only underscores the omnipresence of Radha's name but also implies a reverence for the divine feminine. Such habitual expressions raise questions about the potential implications of this cultural and spiritual emphasis on the perception and treatment of women within the community. Interestingly, many female analysts have shown that the worship of goddesses has no established relation to the alleviation of the status of women in societies wherein such worship is practiced. In this context, Sinclair remarks, "Quite frequently, the very aspects of women glorified in a religious system are used as justification for the social and political denigration of women. Different ideological definitions and perceptions of men and women further the separation and isolation of women. Seldom does this work to women's advantage. Even when women are seen as spiritual, as in the nineteenth- century cult of true womanhood, the expression of such spirituality was believed best confined to the privacy of the domestic world" (Sinclair,

1986). The strict emphasis on renouncing sexuality and the perceived risks of associating with women during spiritual practices do not necessarily enjoin the deliberate hatred or denigration of women, though it likely offered little support for their inclusion.

It would, however, be incorrect to critique the Chaitanyaite stance towards women on the basis of strict standards of behaviour shown by those who modelled themselves on His example. The medieval bhakti movements broadly manifested a more democratic attitude towards religious practices, granting equal rights to individuals from lower castes, untouchables, and women. During the Bhakti movement in medieval India, which Chaitanya significantly contributed to, women found an elevated platform for spiritual expression. The egalitarian ethos He propagated fostered an environment where devotion took precedence over societal norms, enabling women to actively participate in the spiritual discourse (Mullatti, 1989; Brezezinski, 1996). Besides, the emphasis of Gaudiya Vaisnavism on devotion and the divine union of Radha and Krisna, inherently acknowledges the equal spiritual potential of both men and women. In addition, the philosophical foundations of this tradition, particularly the Achintya Bhed-abhed philosophy which has been discussed earlier, underscore the idea that the soul's relationship with the Divine transcends material gender distinctions. Hence, Balaram Das[23] could sing that women of respectable lineages danced publicly in sankirtan processions (Sen Gupta, 1970). As a matter of fact, women in Bengal have always enjoyed a comparatively higher status than anywhere else in India and the verity of this fact is reflected in the existence of cults of feminine deities (Wulff, 1986). Speaking particularly of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, with the limited availability of information, it has been approximately concluded that the status of women attained a high point when Jahnava Devi and a few other powerful individuals exercised considerable leadership in the Gaudiya Vaisnava practice (Chakravarti, 1985).

The biographies of Chaitanya depict few female Vaisnavas as practitioners of the formal practices of devotion. It must be noted that they were devotees of Chaitanya rather than Krisna, and their elevated status in the hierarchy of Chaitanya's associates can primarily be accorded to the relation they shared with Him. These women, considered to be *nitya-siddha*, that is, eternal associates who descended with Him to participate in his leela, have, in the later reconstruction of Chaitanya's life as myth or literature, taken on archetypal female roles that, in some aspects, overwhelm the historical facts of their lives. Contrary to a relative lack of interest in the lives of Chaitanya's wives (Lakshmipriya and Visnupriya) and mother (Sachi

Devi) on the part of the Vrindavan-oriented Vaisnava community, Bengalis as a whole, show an enduring attachment to them as the main *ashrayas* or "vessels" of emotion in the dramatizations of His life, which traditionally end with his renunciation, "Nimai-sannyas" (Brezezinski, 1996). The narration of this story in the Chaitanya Bhagavata among a host of other influential works, has in many ways, self-consciously paralleled the tale of Krisna's abandonment of His family and the gopis in Vrindavan. Chaitanya's departure is final; even though He is alive, He is lost permanently as a son and lover. Hence, the dominant sentiment is that of separation and pity for those wounded by the departure of the object of love (Personal communication with G. Bhattacharya; dated 14/04/2023).

In the history of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, the followers of Chaitanya were mostly married householders, which included Advaita Acharya, Nityananda, Srivas Acharya[24], among others. Consequently, their teachings attracted a large number of men and women, who naturally became followers of this tradition across extensive rural areas of Bengal from the 16th century onwards. In principle, the Vaisnava tradition, whether in its Gaudiya manifestation or otherwise, does not prioritize or diminish one's marital status as a prerequisite for spiritual quest, nor does it view one's gender or social identity as obstacles on the path of devotion. Krisna-prem alone is considered as the sine qua non for a devotee (Dey, 2020). Dey further adds that there is no explicit mention in the scriptures prohibiting women from participating in Hari-naam or in sankirtan, fairs, festivities, and pilgrimages in medieval Vaisnava literature; rather hagiographers often depict women engaging in them with great enthusiasm. However, in the realm of hagiographical literature, it is a rarity to come across individual women, with only a few notable exceptions, who aspired for or attained recognition as independent women gurus within the tradition. The few who garnered significant privilege and recognition as Vaisnava gurus in their own right include Ganga Devi (daughter of Nityananda and his first wife, Vasudha), Sita Devi (wife of Advaita Acharya and a mother-figure to Chaitanya who assumed some leadership responsibility after the demise of her husband alongside her elder son Achyutananda); Jahnava Devi (the second wife of Nityananda), and Hemlata Thakurani (the eldest daughter of Srinivas Acharya). Among these individuals, Jahnava Devi arguably achieved the greatest renown as a woman guru for a significant period. A number of reasons can be speculated for her rise to prominence. She was, in all probability, widowed when still fairly young. She had no children herself, but her nephew and step-son, Virabhadra (born of Vasudha, Jahnava's younger sister and co-wife), had yet not reached an age to be able to exercise leadership in the dynastic system that had

apparently been envisaged as suitable for the continuation of the movement in the absence of another appropriate leader. Thus, Jahnava entrusted herself with the responsibility to fill this void.

Over time, Jahnava earned humongous respect throughout the Gaudiya Vaisnava community. She was known as 'Ishwari,' or the feminine form of the commonly used word for God, implying great mastery over others. Despite her scholarly identity, she does not seem to have given public discourses on scripture and was even reticent when in the association of male devotees. She never performed kirtan herself, and only remained an audience to it. Her apotheosis as *Ananga Manjari*, the younger sister of Radha, is perhaps what distinguishes her from most other notable women in Gaudiya Vaisnavism. The *Gaura-ganoddesha-Dipika*[25] of Kavi Karnapur, that describes the identities of prominent associates and followers of Chaitanya, not only identifies her with Revati (the wife of Balaram[26] in Krisna leela) by virtue of her being the wife of Nityananda (who is identified with Balaram), but also gives recognition to the Ananga Manjari identification. Contrary to this, although Lakshmipriya, the first wife of Chaitanya is identified with Rukmini (the wife of Krisna) while Visnupriya, His second wife is identified with Satyabhama (the wife of Krisna in Dvaraka) (Brezezinski, 1996), these identifications are of much lesser esteem in the massively Vrindavan-influenced Gaudiya Vaisnavism of later days than that of Jahnava with Ananga Manjari (Personal communication with G. Bhattacharya; dated 14/04/2023).

Despite the success of a few extraordinary women at various points in Gaudiya Vaisnava history, identifying a woman guru in present-day Gaudiya Vaisnavite Nabadwip remains a challenging endeavour. History, as we know, is mostly written by men about men; there is hardly any accounting by historians of the thousands of women in every religious tradition who have led simple lives of sanctity and asceticism, solely by virtue of their sexual identity. Besides, there is sufficient basis in the Gaudiya Vaisnava symbols, theology and spiritual ideals to give space for the assertion of women, provided the inner call comes. The researcher's decision to undertake this study, in the first place, thus, stems from a confluence of academic curiosity, a commitment to gender inclusivity, and a recognition of the challenges women face as gurus in this particular tradition. First, the dearth of comprehensive scholarly studies on the role of women gurus within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition sparked an academic interest. Second, it is an unquestionably accepted and acknowledged fact that religious institutions have traditionally been marked by patriarchal structures that limit the

participation and leadership roles of women. However, within the broader context of Gaudiya Vaisnavism that is known for its emphasis on divine love and equality, there exists a unique potential for challenging and redefining gender norms. This research, thus, seeks to unfold the nuances of contemporary attitudes within Gaudiya Vaisnavism towards women in leadership roles, shedding light on the extent to which patriarchal norms persist or are being actively contested within this spiritual community. In this context, the ground-breaking works of feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (1993), and Rita M. Gross' *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (1996) provided invaluable perspectives on the intersection of gender and spirituality, thus offering theoretical frameworks that informed the researcher's understanding of gender inclusivity within the tradition in question. Third, this research is driven by a sincere recognition of the challenges that women encounter as they assume roles of guruhood in Gaudiya Vaisnavite Nabadwip. One of the most significant challenges lies in navigating the historical and cultural legacies that have shaped the stereotypical gender roles within many religious traditions, including Gaudiya Vaisnavism. The recognition of such challenges, however, is not intended to perpetuate a narrative of victimhood but rather to highlight the subjects' resilience and spiritual prowess at the face of it.

1.4 Krisna Prem-er Ma, Shey ki Guru hoye na? Contextualizing Women Ascetics in the Study

The silence surrounding women gurus in contemporary Gaudiya Vaisnavism cannot be solely attributed to a lack of historical precedence, as surmised from the last section. In the context of the ongoing discourse around it, it is important to recognize that this issue remains unsettled within this community. Divergent perspectives persist, with a prominent viewpoint suggesting that women are ineligible to serve as diksha gurus. However, this stance does not exclude women from meaningful spiritual engagement. Instead, women often navigate two alternative pathways: the role of a siksha guru, or the pursuit of asceticism. While siksha gurus are generally regarded within the broader framework of guruhood and understood as a complement or extension of it, asceticism represents an independent, though allied, category.

In India, the term 'asceticism' has come to be associated with multifarious meanings, and is no longer exclusively synonymous with *sannyas*, or renunciation (Bevilacqua, 2017). Denton (2004, 104), in writing about women ascetics, argues, "Women become ascetics for a wide variety of reasons and a summary of the social, cultural and economic factors that push them

toward asceticism cannot adequately reveal the degree to which strivings of a more religious or spiritual sort draw them to this way of life."

Historically, there have been contexts where the ascetic path for a woman was often chosen to mitigate the perceived risks associated with unbridled and unregulated sexuality, particularly for widows or celibates who may have otherwise been subjected to the authority of a husband (Bevilacqua, 2017). But as Lubin (2013) suggested, with the rise of the ideal of 'interiorized piety,' and the growing skepticism towards traditional priestly rituals, personal practices for individuals to cleanse themselves of sin and accumulate merit through rigorous self-discipline started gaining prominence. For the laymen, both men and women, it became a method for enhancing their overall well-being and worldly success by temporarily renouncing their desires. By refining their inner potential and transcending human limitations, individuals started believing that they could attain divine favour and extraordinary abilities. The practices involved a temporary withdrawal from worldly affairs, with expected benefits primarily manifesting as material blessings in the human sphere. Thus, while traditional asceticism was characterized by the abandonment of worldly attachments and a retreat from familial responsibilities, contemporary manifestations of asceticism reflect a spectrum of practices and interpretations. For women devotees of Visnu or one of His avatars, ascetic path can be followed in three ways: as *vairaginis* or *tyaginis* (renouncers), as *brahmacharinis* (maidens) in female institutions, or as *householder ascetics in their married life* (Bevilacqua, 2017). This changing nature of asceticism underscores the fluidity and adaptability of spiritual practices in response to contemporary contexts. In a rapidly evolving world marked by globalization, urbanization, and technological advancements, asceticism, may manifest in diverse forms, accommodating the needs and aspirations of individuals while remaining rooted in tradition. Today, we witness individuals maintaining an ascetic lifestyle while fulfilling familial responsibilities, thus harmonizing material duties with devotional practices. Additionally, there is a growing emphasis on 'internal renunciation,' focusing on detachment from material desires while continuing to engage with external life - a concept that aligns with the Bhakti tradition's emphasis on cultivation of devotion with everyday experiences. Furthermore, emphasis is on individual choice, allowing practitioners to tailor their level of renunciation according to their spiritual goals and personal circumstances, encompassing both strict and moderate forms of ascetic practices. Thus, these shifts highlight the dynamic nature of asceticism in the modern world, reflecting its ability to evolve in response to changing times and contexts. By this virtue, studying the narratives of women

ascetics in Nabadwip within the broader framework of guruhood can suggest a possible interplay between the two brackets within the given tradition. What remains to be seen is whether the ascetics have the potential to evolve into gurus in the future, thus contributing to a potential increase in their representation within the tradition. Literature specifically highlighting prominent women ascetics in the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition in Nabadwip remains scarce, however. To address this lacuna, the researcher turned to O.B.L. Kapoor's *Vraja ke Bhakta*, Volume 1 (2007). The five volumes of this seminal work were originally published in Hindi, and due to her limited proficiency in this language, she sought assistance from a colleague to elucidate the vital sections for her understanding. Drawing particularly on the first volume, the researcher has focused on the lives of two Bengali-origin Gaudiya Vaisnava women, with an attempt to align their stories with those of this study's ascetic-participants, capturing both the challenges and spiritual transformations these women encountered. Both transitioned from ordinary householders to committed ascetics due to unique spiritual experiences, illustrating the profound shifts often characteristic of such paths.

The first case is that of Pishima Goswamini, born Chandrashashi Mukhopadhyay, who is briefly mentioned in Haridas Das' *Gaudiya Vaisnava Jivani* (Kapoor, 2007). Her spiritual journey revolves around her deep connection to the deities of Chaitanya and Nityananda (or, Gour-Nitai), now enshrined in Vrindavan near the Loi Bazaar. Originally belonging to Chaitanya's companion Murari Gupta, these deities were reportedly lost and later rediscovered in Siuri, a town in Bengal's Birbhum district. Balaram Das Babaji, an Orissan monk, had a vision in which he was instructed to care for the deities, coinciding with the arrival of a young woman, Chandrashashi, in Siuri. Her connection with the deities grew exceptionally through dreams, wherein Gour-Nitai appeared as young boys, urging her to serve them. Following these visions, she took initiation from Balaram Das and later made a life-altering decision to devote herself entirely to Gour-Nitai's worship.

Speculations regarding her association with Balaram Das led them, under divine guidance, to relocate the deities to Vrindavan, where they settled in the Bankhandi locality. Known affectionately as "Pishima" (meaning aunt), she became renowned for her unwavering dedication to Gour-Nitai, and her personal life was imbued with unique interactions with the deities. A particularly poignant story recounts her distress when menstruation prevented her from performing ritual worship. In a divine vision, the deities reassured her, likening her devotion to that of a mother caring for her children without interruption. Following this

experience, her menstrual cycle ceased, freeing her to continue her worship without hindrance.

Pishima's life epitomized rigorous Vaisnavite practices, including bathing in the Jamuna thrice daily, extensive chanting, and steadfast deity worship. In her later years, as her physical abilities waned, she entrusted the service to Gopeshwar Goswami, a devotee in Nityananda's lineage. Though inexperienced, Gopeshwar's efforts were closely monitored by Pishima, who, through her deep connection with Gour-Nitai, knew if rituals were performed improperly. In one incident, after Gopeshwar bathed the deities in cold water on a winter morning, Pishima perceived that Gour-Nitai had caught a cold. To his astonishment, she demonstrated their discomfort by wiping their dripping noses, prompting him to seek her forgiveness with renewed humility.

At the age of 106, Pishima foretold her impending death, and true to her prediction, she passed peacefully while chanting before her beloved deities. Her life and legacy as an ascetic underscore the intense, intimate connection she fostered with Gour-Nitai, leaving an indelible mark on the Vaisnavite community in Vrindavan.

The second life story examined here is that of Yashoda Ma, a figure who, though not widely recognized for individual achievements, is primarily esteemed through her spiritual association with her disciple, Sri Krisna Prem. The precise chronology of her life remains elusive, but it is documented that she passed away in 1944, a detail noted by the Bengali singer and devotee Dilip Kumar Roy in his significant work, *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem* (1968). Notably, Sri Krisna Prem was originally Ronald Nixon, a British pilot who served in the First World War. Following his military service, Nixon embarked on a spiritual quest to India, motivated by an overpowering sense of having been miraculously spared during a mission in Germany. An alumnus of Cambridge, Nixon initially joined Lucknow University as an English professor and resided with the institution's first Vice-Chancellor, Gyanendra Nath Chakravarti, a prominent figure in the Theosophical movement.

Within this intellectual and spiritually inclined milieu, Nixon encountered Chakravarti's wife, Monika Devi, who harboured a maternal affection for him, affectionately addressing him as "Gopal" - a gesture reflecting the intimate cultural practices of many Bengali women. Although outwardly engaged in the social routines of a Western-influenced lifestyle, Monika Devi exuded a quiet spiritual depth. As Nixon later recounted to Roy, Monika Devi often

withdrew from the superficial revelries of social gatherings to immerse herself in meditation. Intrigued, Nixon eventually followed her on one such occasion, discovering her engrossed in profound spiritual contemplation. In response to his inquiries, Monika Devi shared that she and her husband had both gravitated toward Vaisnavism and had received initiation from Bala Krisna Goswami of the esteemed Radharaman lineage in Vrindavan.

Impressed by her devotion, Nixon expressed his own desire for initiation. Seeking to fulfil this request, Monika Devi journeyed to Vrindavan, where she took sannyas to be able to initiate him formally. It was during this transformative period that she received the monastic name "Yashoda Ma," while Nixon was conferred the spiritual name "Sri Krisna Prem." Together, they travelled to Mirtola, near Almora in the Himalayan foothills, where they established an ashram with a shrine dedicated to Radha and Krisna, christening it "Uttara Vrindavan." In this idyllic setting, Yashoda Ma contributed to the local community by teaching literacy skills to children and establishing a dispensary, while Sri Krisna Prem's literary prowess drew a diverse following, encompassing both British and Indian devotees. The ashram, thus, became a confluence of cultural and spiritual exchange, exemplifying a unique fusion of Indian devotional practices and Western intellectualism.

While the precise dates of Pishima's and Yashoda Ma's earthly lives remain undocumented, their legacies offer historical context and inspiration for modern women ascetics in the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition. Although these aspects will be discussed in thematic detail throughout the study, it is pertinent to note that the concept of guruhood, today, extends beyond the formal authority to initiate disciples. The desire and capacity to assume the role of a guru can often be understood as a form of resistance against traditional expectations. This resistance has myriad reasons and justifications, including the scriptural, the social as well as individual volition. However, irrespective of the reason, it is always informed by the femininity of the subject which is, in one way or another, made susceptible to the patriarchal orientation that is to be found ingrained within Gaudiya Vaisnavism. This study, therefore, includes the ascetics along with the gurus to understand compliance and resistance to Gaudiya Vaisnavite spiritual practice from the perspective of a woman practitioner.

1.5.1 "Jeijon jaaye, Krisna-kripa paaye": Nabadwip, the field

The scattered makeshift dwellings lining the roadside, streets strewn with cinders and powdered brick, sloven hue of waste clusters, linearly arranged light-posts every five hundred meters, few temporary roadside vendors, heavy good carriers stationed along the roadside laden with daily comestibles and groceries, piles of gunny bags filled with pulses freshly unloaded from the carriers, intermittent patches of greenery to the right side of the road, or the expansive Chaitanya Setu spanning the Ganges - all collectively betoken the town of Nabadwip. At the very outset of this chapter, it has been mentioned how Nabadwip is both a geographical as well as a semiotic space within Vaisnavism. As such, there has always been a danger of combining the two. The change of the geographical and cartographic specificity of the place designated over the years has not helped also matters. The oft-changing course of the lower stream of the Ganga, the vicinity of which is one of the defining features of this space, have shifted the boundaries of this locale over the years. Often used metonymically as 'Nadia' or 'Nuddea' in colonial tracts, it is important to geographically specify Nabadwip and look at its cartographic, topographical and demographic evolution over the ages to affix the specificity of this study.

Geographical and Environmental Landscape:

Occupying 6.58% landmass of the Indian subcontinent, Nabadwip is a coalescence of nine islands - Antardwipa, Simantadwipa, Godrumdwipa, Madhyadwipa, Koladwipa, Ritudwipa, Jahnudwipa, Modadrumdwipa, Rudradwipa (Das et al., 2021) - formed as a result of sedimentation, and morphed into a compact landmass - derived from the combination of 'naba' (new) and 'dwip' (island) - situated along the eastern banks of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly (referred to as Ganga henceforth) in Nadia, West Bengal. It seems plausible that this geo-morphological phenomenon is thought to be one of its kind of silt-carrying river. Here, it is a result of the hydro-geomorphological process of the triangular tract of the Bengal delta. The compact island has a tilde-shaped squiggle of green stretches, encapsulated by these nine islands. The topography of the town is mostly alluvial consisting of plains, plateaus and delta. The entire landmass is watered by the Ganga and its tributaries - Mayurakshi, Damodar, Kangsabati and Rupnarayan.

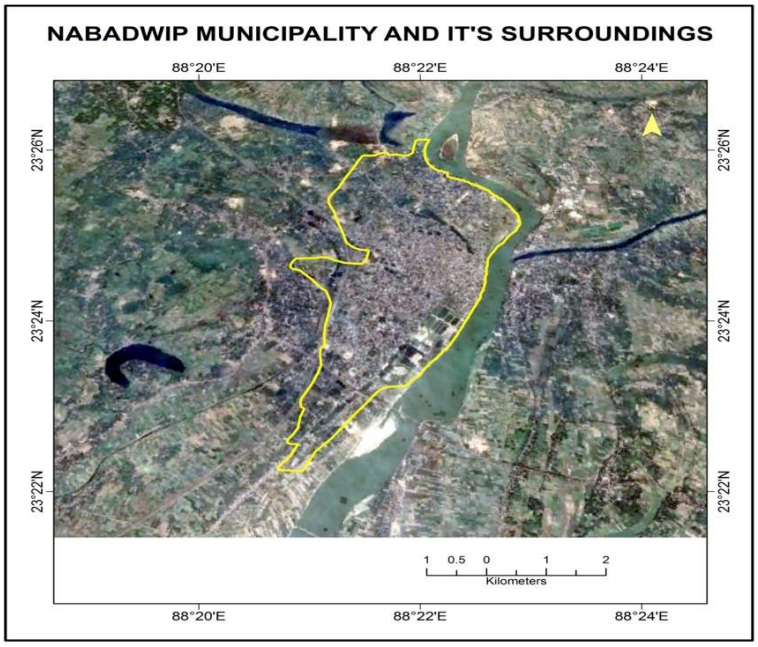

Figure 1: This trigram-shaped geoglyph etches into the earth's surface in a Gangetic delta of the Bengal region

Due to its geographical location in the Gangetic region of West Bengal, Nabadwip experiences a tropical humid climate, characterized by an extended rainy season. Incessant monsoon rains result in frequent waterlogging and annual flooding. Documentary evidence further indicates that the Gangetic alluvial plain, spanning approximately 97.39 km², offers ideal conditions for diverse flora and fauna, functions as a natural water reservoir, and supports robust agricultural productivity (Roy, 2017). Historically, this fertile plain facilitated extensive rice cultivation during the pre-medieval period, enriched by the silt and minerals deposited by the Ganga river-basin, originating from the Brahmaputra-Padma-Bhagirathi watershed. This agricultural heritage is reflected in the term *Gaudiya*, symbolizing a 'yellow hue.' This association is also embodied in the architecture of Nabadwip, where many structures are built from yellowish stone, epitomizing the *Gaudiya rong* (yellow colour) that symbolizes the region's cultural and historical identity.

Physical Landscape:

Equipped with a bustling commercial hub facilitated by the Saptagram (on the bank of river Ganga) and Tamralipta (on the bank of river Rupnarayan) river ports, and serving as a centre for education, the Nadia Town Committee of the mid-19th century evolved over the course of the 20th century into the fully developed municipality of Nabadwip. This, however, came to fruition through subsequent experiments and consistent failures to select the kind of amenities

that would be conducive to its people. Through a series of setbacks, the town eventually thrived into its present form, analogous to a large number of Gaudiya Vaisnava devotees, who still maintain Chaitanya's philosophy of mental and physical worship of Radha-Krisna. It must be borne in mind that despite constant encounter with digitized globalization and rapid urbanization, the religious fervour of most of the people has remained unchanged.

A bird's eye view shows a number of shops on the streets of Nabadwip selling religious artifacts, along with others selling multiple items for daily uses. This is primarily in the central market-place on Poramatala Road that additionally houses cyber cafés, clothing stores selling wearables majorly sourced from the textile factories in Shantipur, among others. On another street, there are a large number of shops selling assorted items, such as stationaries, pulses, packaged milk and fruit juices, etc. Diagnostic laboratories, Nabadwip State General Hospital, non-government nursing homes like Nabadeepalok, Seba Niketan, Sevayan, Sumati Vila, to name a few, clinics, medicine outlet shops are tantamount to state government patronage, besides adequate provisions for antenatal care of women both in government and private hospitals. This apart, gold and silver jewelry shops are found aplenty, as are those selling electrical appliances, musical and electrical wares, etc. Fresh vegetables and other comestibles including fish, meat and pasteurized dairy products are supplied by the large-scale dealers. Another important aspect of the local market are the tea stalls run by locals to provide service to the frequenters who stop by on early mornings or late evenings. Drinking water is supplied through pipelines to every household, the source being ground water from wells, bore-wells and deep tube-wells. The overall finances of the town are operated by a network of few nationalized banks, providing services to individuals as well as to small-scale businesses. Besides and most importantly, the town receives supply of electricity from West Bengal State Electricity Distribution Company Limited (a Government of West Bengal enterprise), serving both commercial as well as domestic purposes.

Bengali language is found predominant, followed by Hindi and English few and far between. Two newspapers - *Nabadwip Barta* and *Nabadwip Muktidut* - are highly circulated dailies to a large number of the town's residents. Besides, the popular Bengali daily, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, is also circulated both on and offline. Three levels of academic institutions - Kindergarten, Primary, Secondary schools are common in the town. Some of the renowned schools include Nabadwip Bakultala High School, Nabadwip Hindu School, Nabadwip Siksha Mandir High School, Nabadwip Tarasundari High School, Nabadwip Balika

Vidyalaya, Nabadwip Jatiya Vidyalaya, Nabadwip Saraswat Mandir High School, and Nabadwip Gouranga Vidyapith. The two acclaimed colleges serving purposes of higher education are Nabadwip Vidyasagar College and Bharati Chatuspathi Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya. Furthermore, the public library, Nabadwip Sadharon Granthagar, and the archaeological museum, Nabadwip Puratattva Parishad also comprise important parts of the academic activities in this town. Another remarkable observation is the provision for girl's education in all premises - home, the school and the college. It represents a well-planned effort by the state government to break down the myth of 'unenviable illiteracy' that was forced upon Indian women until recently.

The residential premises of the town are under the supervision of Nabadwip Municipality, ranging from sanction of the ground map to assessment of tax payability depending on the size of the house. The majority of residents are affiliated with various sampradayas, predominantly centred round Gaudiya Vaisnavism. Their local clusters are conspicuously visible, when they participate in kirtan and patth-sessions[27] at the temples in the evenings, mostly from 7PM to 9PM. With the continuous political metamorphosis, the town has reached to its final shape, thereby becoming politically conducive, religiously pervasive and commercially persuasive. Almost all buildings attributive to administrative, residential, and religious purposes bears a praiseworthy achievement that further suggests a progressive turn in upholding the heritage status of the sprawling town. Alongside the Ganga on the eastern border, a series of premises with architectural design and beauty, such as Radha-Krisna temples, ashrams including small nature park, ponds, and gardens have come up one after another establishing an intricate temple-Ganga complex. Amidst overcrowding and deep clusters of sprawling commercial hubs, the town has distinctly retained its Gaudiya identity notwithstanding the Western influence. Thus, while it might not be practical or feasible to exactly replicate Nabadwip elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent due to its distinctiveness, the deep significance of this town within the beliefs and sentiments of Gaudiya Vaisnavas is undeniable.

Demography:

A demographic profile of Nabadwip for the present study, retrieved from the 2011 Census, reveals a total population of 125,543 individuals, with 65,415 males and 60,128 females. The distribution of residents across various wards is detailed in Table 1, and the population density is 1,452 per km².

Table 1: Nabadwip ward-wise population where (M) indicates 'Municipality'

Ward	Total Population	Male	Female
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0001	6117	3115	3002
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0002	3485	1722	1763
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0003	3929	1995	1934
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0004	6728	3515	3213
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0005	7973	4152	3821
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0006	5896	2993	2903
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0007	6555	3350	3205
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0008	4643	2397	2246
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0009	3422	1752	1670
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0010	2936	1490	1446
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0011	4311	2203	2108
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0012	4187	2138	2049
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0013	3481	1854	1627
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0014	5227	2646	2581
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0015	4500	2335	2165
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0016	5754	2915	2839
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0017	5436	2827	2609
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0018	7485	4284	3201
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0019	7474	4062	3412
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0020	6318	3289	3029
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0021	3995	2039	1956
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0022	4356	2265	2091
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0023	3831	1890	1941
Nabadwip (M) WARD NO.-0024	7504	4187	3317

Source: DDW_PCA1910_2011_MDDS with Ul.xls of Census 2011

Of the total population, Hindus are predominant, although the presence of Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and other communities also claim their respective spaces, albeit inconspicuous, in the canvas of the demographic vignette (see Table 2).

Table 2: Religious demography details

Religion	Total Population	Male Population	Female Population	Population %	Literacy
Hindu	124253	64736	59517	98.97%	86.6%
Muslim	998	527	471	0.79%	0.55%
Christian	46	21	25	0.04%	0.03%
Sikh	7	5	2	0.01%	0.01%
Buddhist	4	3	1	0.00%	0.00%
Jain	6	2	4	0.00%	0.00%
Other religions and persuasions	7	3	4	0.01%	0.01%
Religion not stated	222	118	104	0.18%	0.14%

Source: https://etrace.in/census/town/nabadwip-west-bengal-801681/

The present study, focusing exclusively on Hindu Gaudiya Vaisnava women, recruited respondents primarily from the eastern and southeastern regions of the town (see Figure 2). Notably, fieldwork observations revealed an intriguing pattern: nearly all Chaitanya temples and ashrams assert a prominent presence along the eastern side of the town, situated near the banks of the Ganga (see Figure 3).

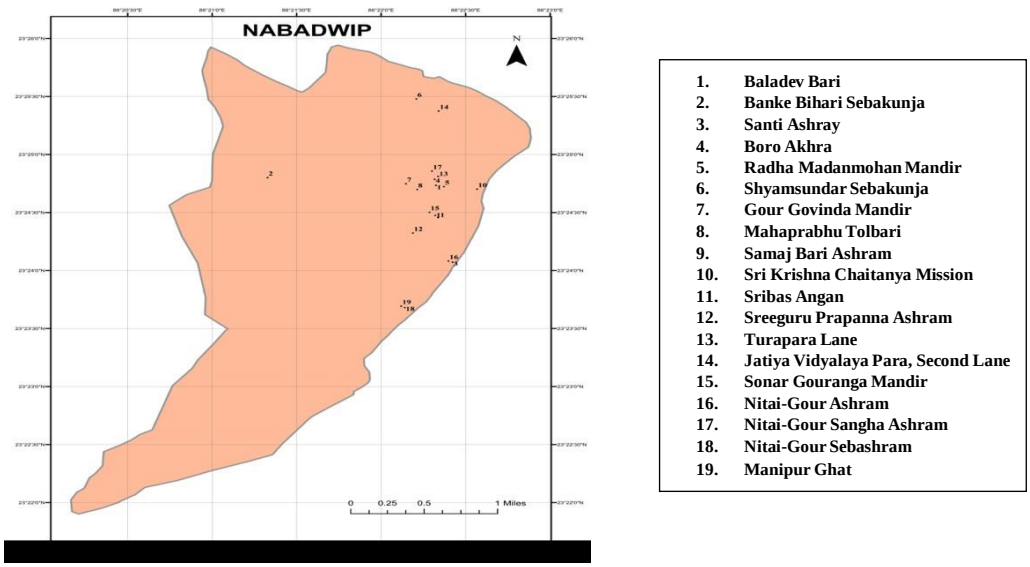

Figure 2: Indexed location of the respondents

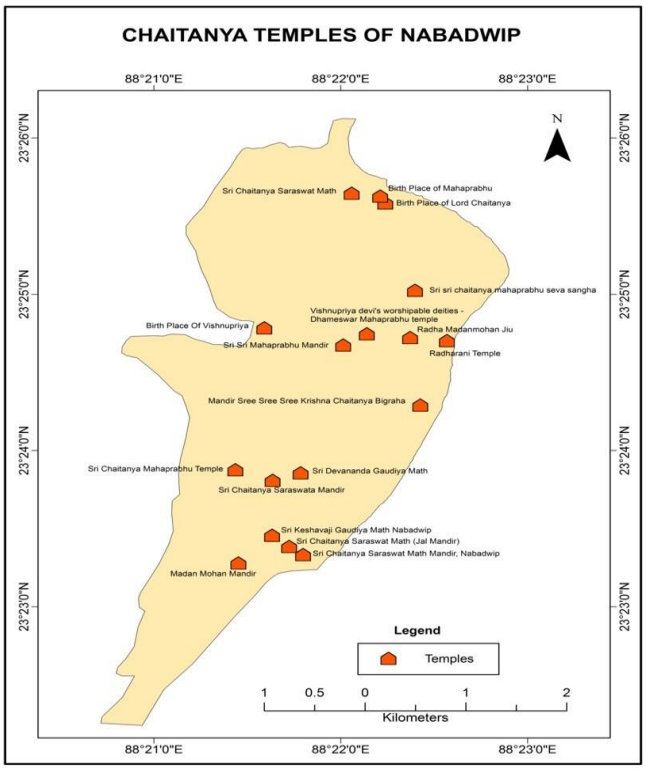

Figure 3: Locations of the sacred places of Nabadwip

Socio-cultural Setting:

Through immersive fieldwork conducted over multiple phases and an in-depth exploration of Vaisnava artifacts, a profound insight emerged: Gaudiya Vaisnavism is deeply interwoven with the cultural essence of Nabadwip. Blending humility with evocative narratives, the townspeople approach mundane rituals with a quiet mysticism, seamlessly integrating daily activities with a contemplative visualization of Krisna in the mental landscape of Vrindavan.

Following tete-a-tete with the town's locals, it becomes evident that expressions such as 'Hare Krisna,' and 'Joy Radhe' transcend mere salutations, embodying a way of life deeply infused with bhakti to Radha-Krisna. These phrases signify more than casual interactions; they communicate an implicit affiliation with the broader spiritual fraternity of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Observing the devotees, one cannot help but admire their blend of practicality and spiritual fervour. They navigate their daily obligations while seamlessly maintaining a steadfast commitment to their worship of Radha-Krisna.

At convivial gatherings, vibrant assemblies of kirtaniyas[28] come together, creating a dynamic spiritual atmosphere. Some hold *khol*[29], others carry harmoniums strapped around their necks, while many accompany the melodious chants with cymbals and *khanjanis*[30]. Adorned with

the symbolic rasa-kali mark on their foreheads, they sit in a lotus posture on the floor, filling the hall from corner to corner. Their practice is overseen by trainees garbed in white *dhotis* and cotton *chadars*, each bearing a *tilak*[31] mark on the forehead. Periodically, some approach the leaders of the sampradaya for guidance on ritual observance, until the gathering culminates in the event known as *Harir Loot*[32], characterized by the distribution of the Lord's prosaad.

Following this ritual, the head of the sampradaya - referred to as 'guru' or 'guruma' as the case may be - delivers a sermon to the assembled devotees - a salient feature of most ashrams in Nabadwip. This discourse is neither overly brief nor excessively prolonged, but carefully crafted, engaging the visiting devotees who listen with rapt attention. Beyond a monologue, these sessions include moments for interactive exchange, with questions answered and various spiritual topics discussed thoughtfully. The preceptor demonstrates patience and humility, responding to even the most nuanced queries. They possess an attractive charisma that draws everyone in, embodying a wonderful balance of efficient leadership and spiritual humility that is reflected in every ritual they perform, every instruction they deliver, and every advice they provide - a hallmark of the devout Vaisnava. On each day, the same unvarying schedule is maintained. The preaching session is always conducted in the evening, typically lasting over an hour. It seems plausible that the preceptor's level of preparation varies depending on the mode of communication chosen. For monologues, they approach the discourse fully equipped with knowledge of the subject matter; conversely, in the case of question-and-answer sessions, they adopt a spontaneous demeanour, drawing from their vast experiences spanning from leading a Brahmachari life to leading a sampradaya or ashram. Their wealth of experience enables them to adeptly address a diverse array of questions from the gathered devotees, fostering a dynamic dialogue. Throughout fieldwork, the researcher had the privilege of attending numerous such gatherings, where men and women alike actively participated.

Devotees from across the country and abroad converge in Nabadwip during four major annual festivals: Dol Purnima, Rath Yatra, Janmashtami, and Raash Purnima. These pilgrims find accommodation in ashrams, budget hotels, homestays, or government guesthouses, falling into three primary categories: casual visitors, local devotees, and disciples who have undergone diksha. United by their devotion to Radha-Krisna and/or Chaitanya, these pilgrims venture out during festivals, filling the town's streets and lanes. The sounds of rhythmic khol

beats, clinking cymbals, and the chanting of *Hari-naam* echo throughout the town, capturing the essence of the place. Such a religious rendezvous can be attributed to the powerful current of bhakti that was long back initiated by Chaitanya, which, in turn, promoted a phenomenal transformation from orthodoxies to a more liberal way of praising Krisna, thereby resulting into the fruition of Gaudiya Vaisnavism.

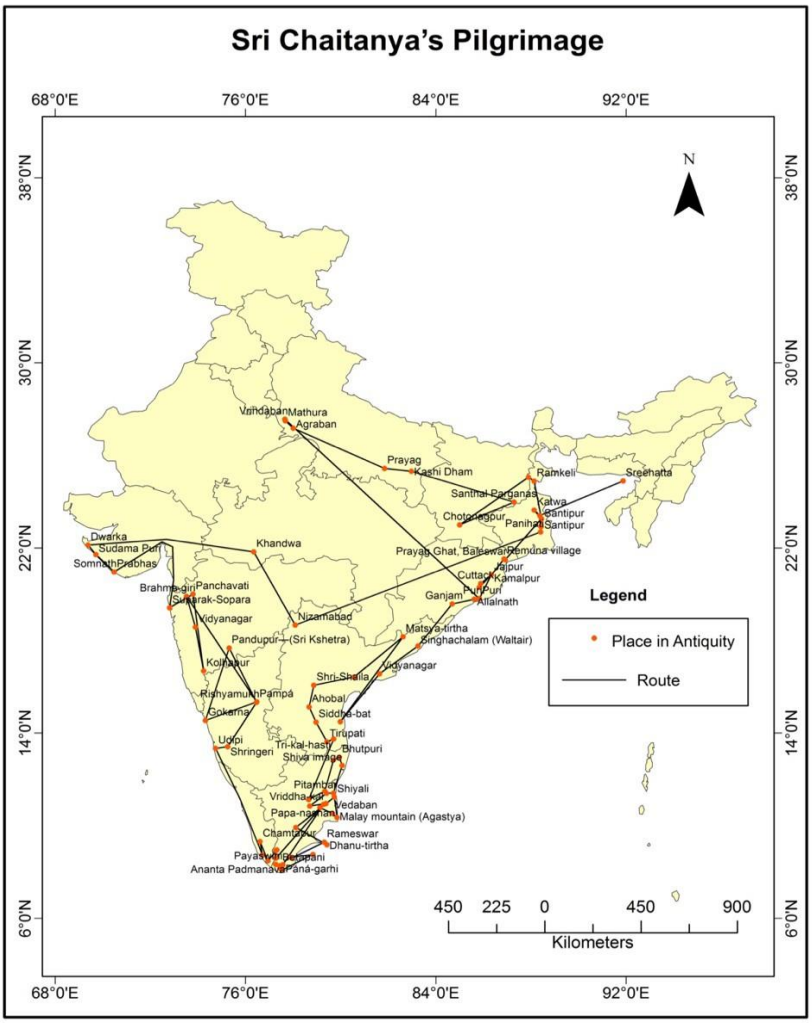

Figure 4: A map denoting the pilgrimage of Sri Chaitanya across India in the 16th century. Dashed lines indicate the way to cross from one pilgrim spot to another

Speaking of Chaitanya, it is essential to highlight the significance of the pilgrimage depicted in the above map (see Figure 4). This pilgrimage, undertaken by Him in the late 16th century, played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Gaudiya Vaisnava movement. Through His journey, Chaitanya sought to steer the masses away from conventional doctrines by laying down designated rules of simplifying the practice of worshipping Radha-Krisna through pilgrimage and chanting of the mahamantra. As a Sanskrit scholar well-versed in Vedic

scriptures, He elevated the Bhakti Movement to unprecedented heights by revolutionizing conventional Vaisnavism into the more accessible form of neo-Vaisnavism, thereby making it accessible to the broader populace.

During the course of His extensive pilgrimage, Chaitanya intermittently delivered sermons, practiced Krisna-naam through chants and sankirtan, and kept visiting a spectrum of *vigrahas*[33] in the south - moving from Godavari to Dhanus Tirtha (Kerala), from Dhanus Tirtha to Pandharpur (erstwhile Pandupur), from Pandharpur back to Godavari, from Godavari to Sree Khetra (Puri), from Sree Khetra to Chaitanya Doba (Halisahar), from Chaitanya Doba to Shantipur, from Shantipur to Jharkhand, from Jharkhand to Benaras, from Benaras to Vrindavan via Mathura after passing the sacred river Jamuna, and from Vrindavan back to Sree Khetra via Benaras (see Figure 4). It is believed that the third leg of His pilgrimage, leading to Benaras, held a deeply personal significance - a sort of mystic quest - before His eventual arrival in the spiritual haven of Vrindavan as the torchbearer of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. Accompanied by devoted followers, Chaitanya would engage in ecstatic dances, raising both hands above their heads, evoking the spirit of *rasa leela*, while chanting mantras in harmony with the rhythmic beats of the khol, cymbals, and conches (Sarkar, 1922). Even today, in the precincts of Nabadwip, this is commonly found as a daily schedule of *parikrama*[34] performed by most devotees.

The fundamental objective of the pilgrimages undertaken by Chaitanya was to impart the essence of bhakti and foster a pluralistic approach among believers, aimed at distancing them from the menace of the caste system. Regardless of caste and creed, Chaitanya is known to have embraced all under His spiritual guidance, encouraging them to embark on pilgrimages to their respective regions (ibid). The present-day form of Nabadwip, once under Muslim and later British rule, still sustains the essence of holiness and popularity under the patronage of the federal government of India; as a matter of fact, efforts are underway to elevate Nabadwip to the status of a UNESCO heritage site, acknowledging its historical significance and cultural richness.

Another important feature of the town of Nabadwip is the observance of the different 'Vaisnava Maash' among the devotees. To gauge the prevailing Vaisnava inclinations within the community, an analysis of Vaisnava temple data across various wards was conducted during the course of the present study, focusing on the scheduled annual ritualistic ceremonies. Each month of the calendric year is infused with unique rituals and observances

that resonate with the tradition's spirit. Madhava (January), Trivikrama (May) and Narayana (December) are dedicated for 'Gaudiya Vaisnava Guru Vandana' (reverence for the teacher) as well as different stringent rituals for the worship of Krisna. Kesava (November) is a harvesting month, whose revelation is 'Grand Annakut Mahotsav' (Rice Mountain Festival) in addition to the auspicious Sri Govardhan Puja. Devotees are believed to experience states of supreme bliss in Vamana (June), Hrishikesh (August), and Madhusudhana (April) that coincide with Rath Yatra (Chariot Festival), Janmastami, Radhastami, and Sri Ram Navami, respectively. Govinda (February) and Damodar (October), on the other hand, convey the spiritual relevance of Goddesses by strictly adhering to the observance of Sri Saraswati Puja, Abirbhab Dibash of Visnupriya Devi and Urja Vrata, Damodar Vrata, Kartik Vrata and Niyamseva Vrata. Visnu (March) and Padmanabha (September) elevate devotees to the highest point of ecstasy through Dol Yatra and 'Sri Nabadwip Dham Parikrama,' whereas Visvarup Mahotsav in Sridhara (July) is held in the honour of Chaitanya's elder brother, Visvarup.

The socio-cultural setting of Nabadwip, thus, epitomizes the rich heritage and spiritual devotion ingrained within Gaudiya Vaisnavism, serving as a beacon of communal harmony and cultural richness for future generations to cherish. As endeavours continue to heighten the town's status, its significance as a centre of spiritual enlightenment remains poised to endure. However, it is important to note that the idea of bhakti in Nabadwip is coated with sensibility, improvisation and sagacity. Besides the worship of Radha-Krisna, that of other Hindu deities like, Goddess Pora Ma, Goddess Kali, Lord Shiva, have continued in this town ever since the medieval period, thereby making it one of the most sacred spots in the country. Thus, the practice of Vaisnavism (worship of Radha-Krisna, Gopal, Madan Mohan, Jagannath, Mahaprabhu and Sonar Gouranga, to name a few) coexists with that of Saktism (worship of Pora Ma, Hanuman, Goddesses Durga and Kali, Adya Ma, Ma Siddheswari), and Saivism (worship of Lord Shiva, Baba Gangeswar). The town's blend of reverence for multiple deities reflects an openness and fluidity in faith that fosters an inclusive community ethos. Yet, it is Gaudiya Vaisnavism that anchors Nabadwip's cultural and devotional life within its distinct theological framework.

1.5.2 "Iha bina traan naai": Nabadwip, the reason

For quite a century, Nabadwip held profound significance as a prime place of commercial importance as well as the pride of Sanskrit learning centre, besides being acknowledged as

the birthplace of Chaitanya. The legacy began during the time of King Ballal Sen[35], and achieved the greatest height by his son, King Lakkshman Sen, whose efforts were duly supported by the Muslim empires as well as the colonial government that followed. During Chaitanya's era, Nabadwip emerged as a prominent hub for the study of 'new logic' or 'navya nyaya' under the guidance of Raghunath Shiromani and Vasudeva Sarvabhauma[36] (Dutta, 1937). With multiple centres of Nyaya knowledge already established, the town surpassed Mithila in its fame in this field, attracting scholars from all corners of India and beyond to delve into disputation and logic (Bhattacharya, 1958). Nyaya, known for providing the logical structure of Vishistadvaita, served as the philosophical bedrock of Vaisnavism. In addition, Nabadwip also emerged as a nucleus of navya-smriti under the stewardship of Raghunandan Bhattacharya[37], popularly known as Raghunanda Smarta, or, Smarta Bhattacharya. His tenets laid the foundation for the Dayabhaga system of inheritance[38], influenced the ritualistic traditions of Eastern India, and later served as the framework for the development of the Indian Penal Code, refined by Jagannath Tarkapanchanan[39] of Triveni a few kilometres South (Bandopadhya, 1960). Besides, Nabadwip also flourished as an important nucleus of tantric practice and scholarship. It was here that Krisnananda Agambagish[40] resided and wrote his highly revered compendium, *Brihat Tantrasara* (Sarkar, 2023). Such texts contributed to the evolution of Gaudiya Vaisnava theology and praxis, influencing its growth during Chaitanya's time and continuing to shape its trajectory thereafter. While the influence of dharmasastra on property and marriage regulations within Vaisnava communities warrants a separate study, tantra exerted a profound influence on religious practices, fostering a form of syncretism, and definitely the reverence of the guru - the subject of this study.

For any researcher selecting Nabadwip as their field of study, the town significantly broadens the scope of inquiry and enriches the observational landscape. By harmonizing sacred ideals with everyday life, Nabadwip bridges the gap between tradition and modernity, integrating diverse beliefs and practices at both local and national levels by continuing to attract a wide range of pilgrims, devotees, and scholars from across the globe. This may be due to a number of factors: firstly, the town is dotted with numerous temples, ashrams, and sacred sites that serve as focal points for religious gatherings and spiritual practices. Secondly, the calendar here, as mentioned earlier, is replete with festivities and gatherings that offer devotees plenty of opportunities to participate in kirtan, bhajan, and other devotional activities - thus spurring a sense of spiritual connection among practitioners. Thirdly, like many traditional spiritual

centres, Nabadwip, too, grapples with contemporary challenges of urbanization, changing demographics, and societal transformations. Amidst these challenges lie opportunities for revitalization and reinterpretation of Gaudiya Vaisnava practices in response to the needs of modern society. It is important to note that the exclusion of ISKCON[41] in Mayapur from this study is a deliberate choice aimed at facilitating a more localized and nuanced examination of indigenous practices and perspectives. While ISKCON undeniably plays a significant role in the global dissemination of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, its presence could introduce external influences that may obscure the unique dynamics within Nabadwip. By concentrating exclusively on Nabadwip, this study endeavours to highlight the authentic expressions of women's spiritual authority in this context.

The decision to carry out this study in Nabadwip was, therefore, solidified after careful consideration of the town's historical legacy and its significance within the tradition. While personal connections to the town did add a layer of familiarity, the commitment to undertake this research here is grounded in the objective recognition of its cultural and scholarly relevance to the study - a perspective that was, of course, shaped by the many visits made here earlier.

Furthermore, extensive literature review and discussions with scholars and local community members provided valuable insights into the socio-cultural and religious milieu of Nabadwip, fostering a curiosity to explore the extent to which the town might support the emergence of Gaudiya Vaisnava women gurus. Thus, based on these factors and a growing conviction in the potential richness of the research setting, the researcher made the informed decision to make Nabadwip the field of study. The researcher has aimed to mitigate any predilections that might arise from familial links to the area, and any perceived biases are entirely unintentional, as the primary objective is to contribute substantively to the understanding of the lives and roles of women gurus and ascetics in this unique context.

1.6 Objectives of the Study

The present research seeks to study the roles and experiences of women within Gaudiya Vaisnavism, exclusively focusing on women gurus and ascetics in Nabadwip. A number of objectives are designed to address various facets of their spiritual involvement, theological perspectives, and the negotiation of gender roles in this tradition, as hereby discussed:

The first objective is to highlight the significance of women gurus in Gaudiya Vaisnavism through an understanding of their personal experiences and the evolution of this tradition in Nabadwip. The research aims to understand how women gurus have shaped and been shaped by the spiritual landscape of Nabadwip, where Gaudiya Vaisnavism has a deep historical and spiritual presence. Through an exploration of their experiences, the researcher has attempted to provide insights into how these women navigate their spiritual roles within a tradition predominantly led by men and how they contribute to the preservation and transformation of Gaudiya Vaisnava ideals and practices over time.

The second objective is to discern the theological perspectives surrounding spiritually significant women's involvement in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, drawing on primary and secondary sources. This objective seeks to uncover doctrinal interpretations and traditional viewpoints regarding the eligibility and authority of women in spiritual leadership roles. The researcher has sought to analyze texts, commentaries, and community discourses to identify the scriptural and philosophical grounds upon which acceptance or resistance to women's spiritual roles is based, contributing to a nuanced understanding of gendered spiritual authority in Gaudiya Vaisnavism.

The third objective is to gain insights into the personal journeys, spiritual practices, views on lineage and discipleship, social roles, challenges, and leadership approaches of Gaudiya Vaisnavite women gurus, as revealed through in-depth interviews. This objective aims to document the lived experiences of women gurus and to analyze how they perceive their roles within the guru-disciple relationship. Attention is paid to their unique spiritual practices, their approach to discipleship, and the challenges they encounter in fulfilling their roles. This objective also seeks to understand how they negotiate social expectations and constraints, shaping their identity and leadership within the community.

The fourth objective is to trace the similarities and differences in spiritual journeys, practices, and perspectives between Gaudiya Vaisnavite women gurus and women ascetics, based on insights from interviews. This objective aims to distinguish the roles of women gurus from those of women ascetics, studying their spiritual paths, practices, and community roles. Through this, the research has tried to illuminate the distinct yet intersecting ways in which women engage in spiritual practices within Gaudiya Vaisnavism, highlighting areas of overlap and divergence in their experiences and contributions.

The fifth objective is to assess the extent of agency exercised and the negotiation of gender roles by Gaudiya Vaisnavite women gurus and ascetics, and to consider the broader implications of these findings for understanding women's roles in spiritual authority per se. This objective seeks to analyze how women gurus and ascetics in Gaudiya Vaisnavism navigate traditional gender expectations, exercise spiritual agency, and create spaces for women's authority within a male-dominated spiritual framework. It has been framed with a humble hope that the findings from this objective will contribute to a broader discourse on women's roles in spiritual authority across religious traditions.

1.7 Methodological Framework

Recognizing that traditional narratives of spiritual authority have often been male-centric, this study seeks to foreground the experiences and voices of Gaudiya Vaisnavite women, drawing insights into how they negotiate and reinterpret roles of guruhood and asceticism in present-day Nabadwip. To achieve this, the researcher has tried to employ a methodological framework that is sensitive to the depth and diversity of participants' experiences, while also being attentive to the cultural and spiritual ethos unique to this community. By adopting a structured yet flexible approach, the methodology aims to facilitate a layered understanding of the subjects, allowing the study to engage thoughtfully with complex themes around gender and authority. The following sections will delve into the qualitative approach that underpins this research, detailing how it aligns with the study's objectives.

The Approach

This study adopts a qualitative approach, ideally suited for exploring complex social phenomena, understanding lived experiences, and capturing the depth and richness of human behaviour (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Qualitative research encompasses methods such as narratives, case studies and observation and adopts the interpretive stance that contrasts with positivist paradigms (Parkinson and Drislane, 2011). In other words, this approach allows researchers to examine phenomena within natural and real-life contexts, fostering an understanding grounded in the participants' authentic environments. The central aim is to explore and deepen insights into phenomena, experiences, conditions, processes, and issues as they naturally unfold. By collecting open-ended and emergent data, the researcher emphasizes the generation of themes directly from the data itself, allowing findings to emerge organically from the fieldwork (Robson, 2002).

At the outset of this study, a marked absence of qualitative research within this field was observed; despite extensive exploration, no comprehensive qualitative studies appeared to be available at the onset of the research. This gap highlighted an opportunity to contribute substantively by conducting an inquiry that could bring forth rich, contextual insights previously unexplored. A qualitative approach offered the most suitable pathway for this objective, as it allowed for an in-depth understanding of the backgrounds, spiritual lineages, practices, experiences, and roles of women gurus in Gaudiya Vaisnavism within the framework of their own lived realities. Initially, the research focus centred exclusively on women gurus; however, during initial field visits, the researcher encountered women identified as "ascetics" who embodied characteristics resonant with guru status. This discovery broadened the scope of inquiry and prompted a recalibration of the research objectives, necessitating an approach that would help in understanding the evolving dynamics at play. Thus, qualitative inquiry became increasingly essential for a comprehensive exploration of these nuanced facets, allowing the study to authentically capture voices and experiences often overlooked in prior scholarship.

The Unit of Analysis

In research, the unit of analysis is the basic building block upon which researchers draw conclusions and generalize findings (Trochim and Donnelly, 2008). Defined as the primary subject or entity under investigation, the unit of analysis varies according to research objectives, ranging from individuals to larger social constructs, such as organizations or communities, in social research contexts (Bryman, 2016). This choice determines the scope and focus of the inquiry, aligning directly with the objectives of the study.

For this study, the individual women gurus and ascetics in Gaudiya Vaisnavite Nabadwip comprise the unit of analysis. Each participant offers a distinct perspective, making it possible to explore variations in their spiritual backgrounds, lineages, practices, and roles within their community. The core data set includes 15 living women gurus, 4 women ascetics, and 2 posthumous cases, the latter of which were examined through disciples' narratives. These disciples' accounts served to supplement the understanding of the lives and experiences of the deceased gurus without shifting the primary focus from individual women gurus to their communities. The core unit of analysis is thus maintained throughout, allowing for a rich, individualized examination of each woman's unique journey and contribution.

The Sampling

In any qualitative research, the selection of appropriate sampling techniques plays a decisive role in ensuring the richness and depth of data collected. Unlike quantitative research, where random sampling methods are commonly employed to achieve generalizability, qualitative studies prioritize the in-depth exploration of specific phenomena within their contexts. In the present study, non-probability purposive snowball sampling techniques were determined to be particularly suitable for several reasons.

First, the population of women gurus and ascetics within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition is relatively small and dispersed, making it challenging to obtain a representative sample. Participants were selected based on specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives, thereby employing a non-probability sampling approach. This approach is frequently used when obtaining a comprehensive list of the population under study is impractical or impossible (Creswell, 2013). Given the niche nature of the research topic, there were no readily available sampling frames or lists of potential participants.

Second, the characteristics and experiences of women gurus and ascetics are of particular, and perhaps the only interest in this study, which warranted a purposive approach to sample selection. Also known as judgmental sampling, this approach requires participants with specific attributes or perspectives that align with the research objectives (Patton, 2002). By concentrating on women gurus and ascetics in Gaudiya Vaisnavite Nabadwip who embody the traits and roles being studied, this research seeks to gather detailed insights into their lived experiences. This participant selection was intentional, and random selection methods were deliberately avoided to ensure that the sample consisted of individuals with the desired characteristics and insights.

Third, access to potential participants can often be challenging due to factors such as geographic dispersion or the secretive nature of their roles. In such instances, snowball sampling, or chain-referral sampling, is employed to identify and recruit participants through referrals from existing participants. This technique ensures that the sample includes individuals who possess the requisite characteristics and perspectives (Creswell, 2013). In this study, a small number of women gurus meeting the inclusion criteria were initially selected as “seeds” and interviewed. Following these interviews, participants were asked to refer additional potential participants who shared similar characteristics or experiences. This

iterative process continued, with each woman guru referring others - be they gurus or ascetics - until the desired sample size was achieved (Bryman, 2016).

The Method

Case study is one of the most widely employed research methods in qualitative studies. Unlike surveys that necessitate collecting extensive data from a large, diverse, and widely distributed population, case studies are more focused in nature. In social research, this method involves an in-depth examination of a particular individual, group, event, or phenomenon within its real- life context (Yin, 2003; Stake, 1995). It requires comprehensive data collection and analysis to understand the complexities, dynamics, and unique characteristics of the case under investigation (Creswell, 2013). As Stake (2000) notes, "Some of us emphasize the name case study because it draws attention to the question of what specially can be learned from the single case."

For this study, the researcher employed the multiple case study method as proposed by Yin (2003). This method is particularly suitable when investigating multiple cases is essential for gaining a thorough understanding of the subject, surpassing what could be achieved through the examination of a single case (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Furthermore, given the unique backgrounds and experiences associated with each case, this study emphasizes theoretical replication rather than literal replication. While the cases gathered for this research may be comparable (or occasionally identical), the reality of each case is distinct. Consequently, the investigative focus shifts from generalizability of findings to the world at large, and towards understanding the unique experiences of each case. Nevertheless, since the cases were situated within the same geographical context (Nabadwip) and adhered to the same Hindu sect (Gaudiya Vaisnavism), there exists the potential for similarities in the research findings across multiple cases. Thus, while each case retains its individuality, instances of emerging similarities or themes from the data were noted accordingly. In multiple case study method, it is the convergence of unique narratives within a similar setting that provides both context and depth to the research, thereby bolstering its credibility (ibid).

The primary criterion for case selection in this study was the identification of individuals recognized within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition as women gurus. Interestingly, the network of women gurus facilitated the discovery of women ascetics through a snowball sampling process. A key criterion for identifying these ascetics was their potential for

assuming guruhood within the tradition, despite not having formally done so. Adopting an air of naivety, these ascetics intentionally veil themselves behind the guise of fulfilling 'stri-dharma,' which rendered it challenging to penetrate their reserve even after extended periods of acquaintance. However, the researcher endeavoured to establish a meaningful connection with the ascetics to imbue each case study with understanding and depth, similar to the rapport developed with the women gurus. Moreover, a critical criterion for selecting both women gurus and ascetics was their willingness to participate in the study and engage in interviews. This ensured active collaboration and maintained the integrity of the research process.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection in qualitative case studies typically involves several techniques aimed at gathering rich, detailed, and contextually relevant information. Some of these are interviews, observation, document analysis, surveys, focus groups, visual methods, etc. (Marshall and Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 2009). For the present study, the researcher chose to employ interviews as the primary technique for data collection from the selected cases. To facilitate this, a semi-structured interview schedule was prepared and utilized - combining open-ended and closed-ended questions - to ensure a thorough exploration of the research topic while maintaining flexibility in participants' responses. It was meticulously crafted following preliminary visits to the field and insightful discussions with local residents, and underwent several iterations and revisions in consultations with the research-supervisor, scholars and practitioners to ensure clarity, relevance, and sensitivity to the religious and cultural nuances of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. The detailed schedule is attached as Annexure II. Following is an outline of its section-wise distribution:

- The first section on socio-demographic profiles is structured with close-ended questions to gather specific information about the respondents' background.
- The second section delves into respondents' childhood and early life experiences to encourage them to share anecdotes and reflections on their journey towards becoming gurus or ascetics.
- The third section on the significance of Nabadwip invites respondents to reflect on the role of this town in preserving and passing on the spiritual heritage of the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition.

- The fourth section on the scholarship of Chaitanya probes into respondents' interpretations of His teachings, their personal connection with His philosophy, and the influence of His scholarship on their spiritual practices.
- The fifth section on the understanding of bhakti and prem explores respondents' understanding of devotion, divine love, and the significance of practices such as sankirtan and surrender.
- The sixth section pertaining to the understanding of guruhood and significance of guru, examines respondents' personal experiences in seeking and recognizing their own guru, and the perspectives on the guru-sisya relationship within the tradition. It is further sub- sectioned into two, specifically addressing challenges faced by women gurus and ascetics, respectively, within the Gaudiya Vaisnavism tradition.
- The seventh and last section encompasses general questions, addressing topics such as rituals, historical examples, the significance of lineage, challenges in interactions, male agency in spirituality, unique perspectives, and contributions to tradition and gender equality.

In addition to the above, supplementary questions were employed during interviews to delve deeper into respondents' responses. First, follow-up questions were oftentimes asked in order to seek clarification or elaboration on specific points mentioned by participants (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). For instance: *You mentioned about family traditions that played a role in your early spiritual development. Could you elaborate on the kind of traditions?* Second, women ascetics were often presented with hypothetical scenarios and asked to imagine how they would respond in those situations (Bryman, 2016). These questions, termed as 'vignette questions' in methodology, helped explore participants' attitudes, beliefs, and decision-making processes in a controlled context (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). An example includes: *Suppose you decide to offer guidance to fellow practitioners – be it diksha or siksha. How do you think your role would be perceived within your family and community?*

The interview process in this study faced significant challenges due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, which lasted from March 2020 to January 2022. The various phases of complete and partial lockdowns severely restricted field visits and the initiation of interviews as originally planned. Consequently, reliance was placed on the assistance of a trusted informant, a local resident of Nabadwip, who played a crucial role in facilitating communication during this period of uncertainty. Technology was leveraged to maintain

regular contact with him through phone calls and messaging apps, enabling remote instructions. This collaboration proved immensely helpful in planning of fieldwork amid heightened restrictions, culminating in the first interview with a woman guru in September 2022, marking a significant milestone in the research process. Snowball sampling techniques were employed to gradually expand the participant pool, resulting in data collection from 15 living gurus. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the researcher studied 2 posthumous cases by conducting interviews with their respective disciples, which allowed her to gather insights into their life stories and legacies. Finally, interviews were conducted with 4 women ascetics, who were identified through referrals from the women gurus previously interviewed.

In the process of identifying and contacting potential participants, the researcher aimed to establish interpersonal relationships, recognizing that the foundation of dialectical research lies in the development of trust and connection between the researcher and the subject (Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba, 2008). Acknowledging the significance of this relationship, face-to-face communication was prioritized not only to facilitate meaningful dialogue but also to observe both verbal and non-verbal cues (Bavelas, Coates, and Johnson, 2000). All interviews were conducted in Bengali to ensure clarity and ease of communication, with locations chosen by the participants to enhance their comfort and openness. The 15 living women gurus were interviewed in their respective ashrams where they reside, while information regarding the posthumous cases was gathered from two prominent temples in Nabadwip: Sri Krisna Chaitanya Mission (also known as Radharani'r Mandir) and Samaj Bari Ashram. Of the 4 ascetics interviewed, three were accessible in the comfort of their homes, while one was interviewed at Sreeguru Prapanna Ashram of which she is a resident.

At the beginning of each interview session, the researcher provided a comprehensive explanation of the research protocol and obtained informed consent from the participants for audio recording the discussions. The use of audio recordings was deemed essential for preserving the authenticity of the interviews (Sacks, 1992), as they capture nuances such as tone, intonation, and pauses, all of which contribute to the overall meaning of the conversations. Sacks posits that audio recordings add vigour to research, allowing the researcher to replay the actual events of a conversation. Additionally, note-taking was employed as necessary to enhance the comprehensiveness of the interview records. Each interview typically lasted between seven to eight hours, occasionally extending to nine or ten hours, as participants engaged in religious duties and activities that necessitated breaks.

Additionally, follow-up visits were arranged for eleven cases to address specific questions and clarify responses recorded earlier.

Upon observing converging information and the emergence of common patterns among participants, the researcher identified a point of data saturation (Fusch and Ness, 2015) after eight visits to Nabadwip conducted intermittently between September 2022 and January 2024. While visits did not occur every month, each stay in the town averaged four days, during which the researcher typically covered interviews with approximately three cases per visit. At this juncture, she concluded data collection in the field and proceeded to complete verbatim transcription - a critical process in qualitative research for converting audio or video recordings into a manageable and analyzable format (Gillham, 2005). Saldana (2015) emphasizes the importance of transcription as a crucial step in qualitative data analysis, highlighting that transcription involves careful listening and detailed documentation of verbal and non-verbal elements, facilitating the identification of patterns, themes, and emerging concepts during analysis. For the present study, the researcher personally undertook the transcription process following each round of interviews. This hands-on approach facilitated a deep engagement with the data, as meticulously listening to the recordings multiple times ensured that both the spoken words and nuances of tone were accurately captured. In the process, the researcher enhanced familiarity with the raw data, honing the ability to discern emerging connections and patterns. With the aim of identifying commonalities and themes across the dataset, she thoroughly read and re-read each transcript to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content and context of the participants' narratives. As each transcript was reviewed, the researcher highlighted passages and phrases that appeared relevant to the research objectives, thereby generating codes that emerged organically from the data without preconceived categories or themes. Examples include:

Bangladesh Liberation War;	Relocation after marriage;
Filial love between guru-sisya;	Guru-nistha;
Donations from disciples;	Madhukari;
Naamkirtan;	Sankirtan;
Nitai-Chand's lineage;	Baladev Bari; etc.

Subsequently, the codes were organized into a coding scheme, grouping similar codes and developing themes based on recurring patterns identified in the data. Upon completion of this process, the generated themes were reviewed to ensure they accurately reflected the content of the data, with each theme defined in clear and concise terms across chapters. The manual coding and thematic analysis of the data enabled the researcher to identify significant patterns within the participants' narratives, ultimately resulting in the emergence of eighteen distinct themes. Notably, some groups of codes were applicable across multiple themes, albeit in a limited capacity, reflecting the nuanced interconnections within the data. The results of the thematic analysis were then reported, integrating relevant quotations and examples from the transcripts as necessary to substantiate the identified themes. This technique allowed for a detailed exploration of the qualitative data, uncovering rich insights and nuanced understandings of participants' experiences, perspectives, and beliefs (Nowell et al., 2017).

Reliability and Validity

In social research, the quality of a study is typically evaluated through four key constructs: reliability, external validity, internal validity, and construct validity (Kidder and Judd, 1986). Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide alternative terminology, referring to these as consistency / dependability, applicability / transferability, credibility, and neutrality / confirmability, respectively. While concerns of reliability and validity remain crucial in qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), they are inherently approached with distinct methodologies, given that qualitative inquiry does not aim to produce quantitative measurements for these constructs. Instead, it emphasizes contextual understanding and depth, thereby aligning with constructs that support interpretive validity rather than replicable metrics.

- ***Reliability (Consistency / Dependability):***

Reliability pertains to the concern regarding the replicability of the research methodology and the likelihood of obtaining similar results (Kidder and Judd, 1986). In the context of the present study, however, achieving identical results is improbable. Therefore, the researcher attempted to address the issue by providing a description of the research procedures and instruments used so that other researchers may be able to collect data in similar ways (Given, 2008). Firstly, the profile of each woman guru and ascetic featuring age and locational details have been detailed in Annexure I. Secondly, a standardized semi-structured interview schedule was prepared that is included in Annexure II. While the questions maintained a high

degree of consistency across interviews with both women gurus and ascetics, some of them were specifically tailored for each group. Importantly, interviews were often adapted based on respondents' answers, allowing the discussion to unfold in response to the individual perspectives and experiences shared. Thus, although the initial framework for each interview was standardized, the final structure evolved uniquely for each respondent. This design ensured that the interview format was both consistent and adaptable, accommodating a range of responses. In addition, the procedures for conducting interviews and analyzing data are clearly detailed within the study to provide transparency and enhance replicability.

- ***External Validity (Applicability / Transferability):***

The concept of external validity refers to the extent to which a study's findings can be generalized beyond the specific cases examined (Kidder and Judd, 1986). However, the challenge of generalization is particularly pronounced in qualitative research due to the typically smaller sample sizes and the contextual specificity of such studies. While broad generalizability was not the primary aim of this study, Yin (2003) highlights the importance of selecting multiple cases, noting that these cases, "offer contrasting situations, [and] the results represent a strong start toward theoretical replication - again vastly strengthening the external validity of your findings compared to those from a single case alone" (p. 54). Yin further advocates for the use of replication logic as a means to enhance external validity in qualitative research.

To bolster the external validity of the present study, two methodological strategies were implemented. Firstly, respondents were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on those who could provide in-depth insights and information relevant to the study, rather than through random sampling. Secondly, multiple cases were analyzed instead of relying on a small number of cases, since studying a broader range of cases can help mitigate the limitations of generalizability in qualitative research (Bryman, 2016). These strategies not only strengthen the robustness of the findings but also ensure that the insights gained hold potential relevance beyond the specific cases examined. Together, these approaches align with Yin's (2003) emphasis on replication logic, whereby studying contrasting cases supports theoretical replication.

- ***Internal Validity (Credibility):***

Internal validity pertains to causal relationships, as opposed to unrelated happenings or illegitimate connections between events (Kidder and Judd, 1986). The emphasis, therefore, is on ensuring a rigorous alignment between the raw data and the researcher's interpretations and conclusions, focusing closely on the research methodology and data sources to uphold this alignment. A main threat to internal validity arises from the interpretive nature of qualitative data, particularly when inferences are based on individual interviews (Yin, 2003). To address this potential limitation, the current study employs a thematic analysis framework to scrutinize and support interpretations. This method allowed for careful categorization of emergent themes, enhancing the credibility of findings by ensuring that interpretations were firmly rooted in the data. Additionally, when novel or contentious topics emerged in one interview - such as "swapnadesh" or "Mala-Chandan" - these were further discussed with other respondents to verify their relevance and consistency across cases. Thus, throughout the analysis, an openness to unexpected findings was maintained, with consideration given to alternative explanations to avoid premature conclusions.

- ***Construct Validity (Neutrality / Confirmability):***

Construct validity examines the extent to which a study accurately captures the concept of interest (Kidder and Judd, 1986). To enhance construct validity, this study follows Yin's (2003) recommended practices by employing multiple sources of evidence through diverse case selections, incorporating both women gurus and ascetics. Additionally, to ensure transparency and traceability of findings, a structured chain of evidence was established, documenting the progression from raw data to final interpretations. However, the accuracy of certain data relies heavily on respondents' memories, as they were required to recall and convey experiences from their childhoods and early life, spiritual or otherwise. Recognizing the potential challenges this presents, Yin (2003) notes that establishing construct validity in case study research can be particularly complex due to factors such as reliance on respondents' memory and subjective reporting. In light of these complexities, this study remained vigilant in corroborating the accounts with complementary information wherever possible.

Ethical Concerns

In conducting this study, a comprehensive approach to ethical considerations was employed to maintain the integrity of the research and ensure the well-being of all respondents. Given the researcher's familiarity with Nabadwip and its cultural context, she remained aware of potential biases and took deliberate measures to mitigate them, adhering strictly to ethical research standards. Foremost, informed consent was meticulously obtained from each respondent. This process entailed a detailed explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality protocols, and respondents' rights (Liamputtong, 2006). Each respondent was given ample opportunity to seek clarification on any aspect of the study and provided consent voluntarily, fully informed and without coercion. Secondly, safeguarding the confidentiality and security of data was prioritized, with stringent measures in place to protect all recorded data, including audio files and field notes, against unauthorized access or disclosure. Thirdly, during the interviews, careful attention was given to fostering a supportive, non-judgmental atmosphere. Given the nature of the subject matter, respondents occasionally encountered sensitive or emotionally charged topics. In these instances, emotional support was offered as required, ensuring that they felt supported. Furthermore, the autonomy of each respondent was respected, with an emphasis on their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any obligation or repercussion. Lastly, respect for the respondents' cultural and religious beliefs was paramount, particularly given the deeply spiritual and unique nature of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. Each respondent's perspective, beliefs, and knowledge were approached with humility and sensitivity, with an understanding of the idiosyncrasies associated with the tradition. Consultations with the research-supervisor and subject experts ensured that the research methods employed were culturally sensitive and appropriate. In line with these efforts, findings have been reported with precision and sensitivity, avoiding any misrepresentation or stigmatization of the respondents and their beliefs (ibid).

1.8 Framing the Discourse

The present study embarks on an exploration of guruhood through the enigmatic yet transformative presence of women within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition. Through a multi-layered sociological lens, it attempts to delve into the intersection of faith, gender, and authority, unraveling how these women negotiate and redefine their roles within a spiritual landscape historically dominated by male figures. Across seven chapters, this inquiry does

not merely document the rise of women gurus in Nabadwip, but instead, seeks to uncover the subtle, yet powerful forces shaping their spiritual journeys and the very make-up of religious life in this town. Through this study, the researcher aims to map not only the paths these women tread but also to interrogate the social and theological constructs that both constrain and elevate them, revealing a dynamic and evolving narrative of spiritual authority. The opening chapter grounds her personal motivations and establishes the contextual foundations of the study. It begins with an exploration of Vaisnavism across epochs, setting the stage for a deep dive into the Gaudiya sect and the transformative legacy of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Subsections delineate the emergence of women gurus, reframing their roles in a largely patriarchal milieu, and introduce the lesser-explored realm of women ascetics, poised yet constrained from assuming guruhood in its entirety. This chapter not only contextualizes the study within Nabadwip - a site of intense devotion and doctrinal evolution - but also articulates the objectives and methodological framework steering this inquiry.

The second chapter undertakes a comprehensive review of the existing literature and theoretical frameworks that inform this study. Divided into three interconnected sections, this chapter, by critically engaging with relevant scholarly work and theoretical perspectives, situates the research within broader academic debates and outlines areas where further inquiry is needed. Beginning with an exploration of the historical position of women in the Hindu tradition, the chapter considers how gendered roles and spiritual responsibilities have influenced women's pathways within spiritual pursuits. Moving forward, it traces the evolution of Vaisnavism in India, highlighting the cultural and theological shifts that set the foundation for Gaudiya Vaisnavism's unique responses to women's spiritual authority. It also provides insights into the Gaudiya tradition's distinctive devotional philosophy, shaped by Chaitanya's teachings, which encouraged direct, personal bhakti - thus reimagining traditional roles to allow broader spiritual participation while preserving structural hierarchies that influenced women's access to formal leadership. The literature then transitions into a focused discussion on guruhood and asceticism in the broader Hindu tradition, examining the doctrinal and social expectations placed upon them. Finally, the literature review culminates in an examination of how women navigate, adapt to, and sometimes subvert traditional structures to attain spiritual authority. Notably, the discussion extends beyond the Gaudiya tradition to consider broader trends in Hinduism, observing how contemporary socio-religious movements have either supported or contested the role of women in positions of spiritual authority. The chapter's second section, then, assembles key theories that frame this

study, offering lenses through which to interpret the themes and findings presented later. Through an interdisciplinary approach, this section synthesizes various theoretical lenses to scrutinize how women's spiritual authority negotiates between structure and agency, tradition and transformation, within a male-dominated spiritual arena. The chapter, then, concludes by identifying research gaps, delineating areas that remain insufficiently explored, especially regarding women's negotiation of power, agency, and identity within Gaudiya Vaisnavism.

In the structural composition of this thesis, the researcher has deliberately chosen chapter titles that evoke metaphors of growth, transformation, and transcendence, reflecting the organic and cyclical nature of spiritual development. The journey of the women gurus in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, like that of a seed maturing into a tree, embodies stages of awakening, expansion, and rootedness. Through these titles, the researcher aims to mirror the lived experiences of these women, where each phase of their lives is imbued with symbolic meaning - shaped by distinct circumstances and experiences. The third chapter, for instance, titled *Seeds of Spiritual Transformation: Early Influences and Life-Paths*, represents the initial stirrings of spiritual inclination and the foundational elements of identity. Much like a seed encapsulates latent potential, the early life of these women holds within it the hints of their future roles as gurus or ascetics. In these early experiences lie the inherited legacies, education, and personal awakenings that will eventually flourish. This chapter, thus, examines the socio-cultural and spiritual soil in which their journey begins.

In the fourth chapter, *Growth to Guruhood: Self, Family, Mystical*, the process of emerging and striving, akin to the tender yet determined growth of a plant reaching toward light is examined. Here, the hurdles, such as personal crises and societal resistance, that these women encounter on their path to guruhood or asceticism have been explored. Growth is often non-linear and fraught with obstacles, much like a plant must adapt and respond to the challenges of its environment. This stage encapsulates resilience, adaptation, and the strength required to sustain one's spiritual vision in the face of societal expectations.

The fifth chapter, *Flowering of the Sacred: Diksha, Bhakti, Gender*, reflects the culmination of growth in full bloom, where the spiritual identities of these women are fully realized. This chapter explores the significance of diksha and siksha, the intricacies of the guru-sisya relationship, and the intersection of bhakti and gender roles. This is where their personal transformation becomes communal, with their unique identity as both women and gurus/ascetics finding full expression - much like a flower manifesting its complete form and

purpose. On the other hand, *The Inverted Tree: From Personal to Social*, the sixth chapter title, draws from the symbolism of the *ashvatth* in Indic philosophy, where roots are situated in the heavens while branches reach down to the earth. This image captures the paradoxical nature of the guru's life, exploring how they navigate the dynamics of being both revered figures and active participants in their communities - creating a bridge between the transcendent and the temporal.

In the seventh chapter, the researcher has carefully integrated the insights and revelations that emerged through the course of this study. Some of these revelations - initially elusive or hidden within the complex layers of the data - only became evident as the research unfolded. This phase of revelation and subsequent synthesis with existing theoretical perspectives involved revisiting, re-evaluating, and ultimately deepening the researcher's own understanding of the core subject matter, revealing facets that were not fully anticipated at the outset. It has, however, been ensured to the best possible extent, that the final reflections were not only personal revelatory but also grounded in scholarly discourse.

Endnotes

[1]A Bengali term meaning maternal home or the house of one's mother's family.

[2]Sacred food or offerings that have been ritually consecrated and distributed to devotees after being offered to a deity.

[3]Traditionally, these terms refer to individuals who perform devotional service to a deity in temples. A *sevait* typically cares for the deity, while *gosai* can also refer to ascetics or spiritual teachers. Notably, both terms generally apply to males.

[4]Bowing down or touching the feet of deities, elders, or spiritual figures.

[5]Innermost sanctum of a Hindu temple, where the primary deity resides.

[6]One of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy, attributed to sage Kapil, which emphasizes a dualistic cosmology of consciousness (*Purusa*) and matter (*Prakriti*).

[7]A major school of Hindu philosophy based on the teachings of the Upanisads, that explores metaphysical concepts such as the nature of reality and self, and includes sub-schools like Advaita (non-dualism), Vishishtadvaita (qualified non-dualism), and Dvaita (dualism).

[8]A key text in Vedanta philosophy, traditionally attributed to Badarayana, which systematically interprets the Upanisads, elaborating on the nature of Brahman (the Supreme Reality) and the path to liberation.

[9]One of the eighteen books (parvas) of the Mahabharata, this section describes the royal court and assembly (*sabha*), including the game of dice between the Pandavas and Kauravas, which sets the stage for the Kurukshetra war.

[10]Refers to a branch of Vedic tradition emphasizing rituals, practices, and values aligned with the worship of Visnu.

[11]A tradition within Vaisnavism focusing on the worship of Visnu through specific temple rituals and tantric practices. It provides detailed guidelines on deity worship and has influenced many temple traditions. The name "pancharatra" literally means five nights, since the Vaisnava Agama Sastras outlining these practices were revealed by Lord Visnu in five nights to all the Rishis. For details, refer to *Smith, H.D. (1975). A descriptive bibliography of the printed texts of the Pāñcarātrāgama (Vol.1). Oriental Institute: Copies can be had of Manager, University Publications Sales Unit, M.S. University of Baroda Press (Sadhana Press).*

[12]An affectionate name for Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, who was born under a *neem* tree in Nabadwip in 1486. In Bengali culture, neem trees are often associated with auspiciousness and are believed to protect against diseases and negative influences. His family and followers used this name as a term of endearment, and it remains a beloved name among devotees.

[13]An 18th century Gaudiya Vaisnava theologian and philosopher.

[14]A concept, central to Gaudiya Vaisnavism, that describes the relationship between Radha and Krisna as one of the highest forms of divine love, characterized by sweetness (*madhurya*), intimacy, and transcendental romance.

[15]A literary work by Jiva Goswami celebrating Krisna's pastimes in Vrindavan.

[16]A devotional work attributed to Bilvamangala Thakur, extolling the beauty, charm, and divine qualities of Krisna.

[17]A traditional Indian double-headed drum.

[18]Small hand cymbals or clappers generally used in devotional music.

[19]A 16th century Vaisnava text compiled by Sanatan Goswami, detailing the rules and rituals of Vaisnavism, especially those for daily worship and devotional practice.

[20]Pioneers of Gaudiya Vaisnavism who were instrumental in establishing temples and theological foundations for the movement in Vrindavan.

[21]The traditional practice of collecting alms, often associated with mendicants. The word is derived from *madhu* (honey) and implies gathering alms from various households, akin to how bees collect nectar.

[22]Offerings of food presented to deities, which are later distributed as prosaad to devotees.

[23]A prominent 15th century saint and poet from Odisha, known for his devotional literature dedicated to Lord Jagannath. He was one of the five renowned poets of the era, collectively called *Panchasakha*, and contributed significantly to the Bhakti movement.

[24]Close associates of Chaitanya.

[25]A 16th century text by Kavi Karnapura that details the identities of Chaitanya's associates, mapping them to their roles in Krisna's pastimes.

[26]Krisna's elder brother, born to Devaki and Vasudeva.

[27]Sessions of scriptural study or recitation, often conducted in groups.

[28]Devotees who perform *kirtan*, or the musical chanting of the holy names, especially popular in Gaudiya Vaisnavism. They often lead communal singing and dancing as an expression of devotion, usually accompanied by traditional instruments.

[29]A double-headed drum made of clay, commonly used in Bengali and Assamese devotional music.

[30]A small hand-held percussion instrument similar to a tambourine.

[31]A mark, often of sandalwood paste, worn on the forehead and other parts of the body by Hindu devotees.

[32]Scattering or throwing handfuls of sweets, especially *batasha*, a type of Indian candy in honour of Hari, for people to catch – typically after a patth or kirtan session.

[33]A deity's image or statue in Hindu temples.

[34]The act of circumambulating a sacred site, temple, or deity.

[35]A 12th century ruler of Bengal from the Sena dynasty, credited with formalizing caste distinctions in Bengal and consolidating Hindu social structure.

[36]Eminent scholars in the Nyaya school of Hindu philosophy.

[37]A 16th century scholar from Bengal, instrumental in establishing rituals and liturgical practices.

[38]Contrasting with the Mitakshara system of inheritance, it is a traditional Hindu inheritance system based on the principle of lineal succession, where the nearest male relative in the family (usually son) inherits the property of a man dies intestate.

[39]A renowned Sanskrit scholar of 18th century Bengal, well-versed in various branches of Hindu philosophy, including Nyaya and Mimamsa.

[40]Renowned pundit and sadhak of tantra tradition hailing from Nabadwip, who popularized Kali Puja in Bengal by turning it into a benevolent and devotional household practice.

[41]The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) was established by Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in July 1966 in New York, USA, as a continuation of the Brahma-Madhava-Gaudiya sampradaya. Today, ISKCON has close to 1,000 centres worldwide, with its headquarters located in Mayapur, Nadia.

Chapter 2

Mapping the Discourse: Literature, Theories, Research Gaps

The study of women's spiritual authority within Gaudiya Vaisnavism reveals a landscape marked by a conspicuous scarcity of direct scholarly literature, particularly when approached from a sociological standpoint. Most existing scholarship is deeply rooted in theological interpretations, relying heavily on original Sanskrit hagiographical and biographical texts, which typically require a specialized theological framework for thorough understanding. Recognizing the limitations imposed by this theological focus, this study refrains from delving into those texts. However, select quotations from these scriptural or biographical sources have been incorporated into relevant sections of the thesis to provide context and depth where applicable. To build a foundational understanding, the study draws primarily on abridged and translated works available in English and Bengali, with some references in Hindi. These sources, albeit limited, have been systematically incorporated into the literature review to attempt at an in-depth study of the context surrounding women's spiritual roles in this tradition. Moreover, the importance of a theoretical overview cannot be overstated in sociological research, as it provides the conceptual scaffolding necessary for nuanced analysis. In this chapter, the researcher has also drawn from relevant and adjacent sources to construct a theoretical framework that aligns with the unique dynamics of gender and spirituality within Gaudiya Vaisnavism. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that sociological theories are continuously evolving - with contemporary frameworks emerging regularly. While significant theories have been included, the scope of this study precludes an exhaustive treatment of all recent developments. Consequently, the dual realities of sparse direct literature and a continually developing theoretical landscape highlight the existing research gaps, which will be further elaborated upon in the concluding section of this chapter.

2.1 Literature Review

The available literature directly addressing women gurus and ascetics in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, particularly within the cultural context of Nabadwip, is sparse. To create a thorough understanding of this topic, it was essential to explore adjacent fields and intersecting areas within Hindu studies and Vaisnavism. This literature review, thus, spans a range of topics that collectively illuminate the historical, social, and theological frameworks relevant to the study. By drawing from broader discussions on women in Hinduism, the

evolution of Vaisnavism, Chaitanya's unique devotional approach, and contemporary Hindu spiritual authority, the researcher has aimed to build a nuanced understanding of the roles, challenges, and transformative potentials for women in the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition.

2.1.1 Position of Women in the Hindu Tradition

The status of women in the Hindu tradition forms the backbone of understanding the complex intersection between gender and spirituality. This section is essential because, historically, societal expectations and religious doctrines have heavily influenced women's participation in spiritual leadership roles. Reviewing literature on this area helped gain insights into the traditional constraints and allowances within Hinduism that may have influenced or limited the roles available to women. Although there have been distinguished women philosophers, teachers, poets and thinkers, only a few are remembered as role models for Hindu women. In studying women's journey toward spiritual authority, this section attempts to enable a critical examination of whether Gaudiya Vaisnavism diverges from or aligns with these broader norms in its treatment of women gurus and ascetics.

Pandian (2001:561), for instance, has pointed out that woman, especially in many streams of Hinduism, serves as a sacred conduit to "conceptualise and comprehend the often masculine cosmological and social organisations" in which the role and being of woman is itself minimized. This idea resonates with **Babb's (1970)** observation that Hindu ideology presents an essential duality in the concept of woman: on the one hand, she is a fertile, benevolent giver, and on the other hand, she is aggressive, malicious - the destroyer. In times of prosperity, she embodies Goddess Lakshmi, bestowing wealth and well-being upon homes; yet, in moments of misfortune, she can bring about ruin. Both perspectives highlight how Hindu thought often places woman in roles that support or reflect broader cosmological structures, even as these roles oscillate between creation and destruction. Similarly, **Beck (1971)** revealed about two facets of femininity: 'shakti,' which is the energizing principle of the universe, and 'prakriti,' or nature, which is the undifferentiated matter of the universe. Although the author stated that without the feminine, there would be no force or energy in the universe, all beings have their share of shakti, a share with which they are endowed at birth but which they increase or decrease through subsequent actions. Nevertheless, it is reiterated that the woman embodies shakti, the primordial energy of the universe. In this context, **Marriott and Inden (1972)** wrote about prakriti, which is the active female counterpart of the cosmic person, and purusa, the inactive or male aspect. But while the

authors stated that prakriti represents the undifferentiated matter of nature, purusa provides the mind, which is a structured code. The authors showed that the unity of Purusa-Prakriti underlies the idea of biological conception: the male contributes the hard substances, such as, bones, nerves and the structuring elements, while the woman contributes the soft flesh, skin, blood and unstructured elements. In other words, the woman, as quoted, is the field or soil in which the man places his seed.

Hellman's (1998) research interestingly investigates whether commonalities exist in the depictions of goddesses and women, and explores the qualities attributed to the feminine aspect of the Divine. The author's study of the Puranas reveals that goddesses embody two primary attributes: shakti and prakriti. These traits are deemed positive only when governed by masculine forces, with protective and creative qualities of goddesses controlled by male deities. Goddesses such as Lakshmi, Sita, or Parvati honour and heed their husbands, whereas those like Kali and Shitala are viewed as dangerous because they are not controlled by male gods. **Hole (2000)** concurred with Hellman, noting a dynamic of power where femininity is subordinated to masculinity. According to the author, Prakriti, representing the wild and untamed, becomes perilous if not controlled by the male essence, Purusa. This control is necessary because women, embodying more Prakriti, are seen as possessing dominant power. Even goddesses adhere to this order, as illustrated by the story of Kali, who, in a rage, threatens destruction until subdued by her consort Shiva. This act of Purusa overcoming Prakriti restores harmony, reinforcing the necessity of male dominance over female power. **Mukherjee (1983)** pointed out that later Sanskrit texts, vernacular scriptures and oral traditions also define the ideal woman as one who does not strive to break the shackles of control. The author mentioned a woman's happiness or salvation as a function of her faithful devotion to her husband, citing the example of Sita, who proved her virtue as a wife to Lord Rama on several occasions. **Srivastava (1997)** mentioned that oral traditions essentially inculcate these norms, with one addition: the woman's desire for her husband and the dismay at his absence. The author cited a minor theme in classical literature in which devotion and a sense of duty emphasized that the longing for a man's return and the mutual love between man and woman dominate the traditions created and maintained by women alone. According to the author, however, even in these female traditions, the husband's respect and duties towards his wife are rarely discussed, further claiming that textual traditions and passages that dictate that men should treat their wives well are rare. **Kosambi (1956),** then, noted how mythology and law books provide endless models of the good wife, but there are no prime

examples of the good mother. The author also stated that it is the mother who transforms into the mother goddess, who is both the giver and the destroyer, and how mothers and mother goddesses have control over their sexuality, in direct contrast to wives. Through extensive study of Manusmriti[1] and the Stridharmapaddhati[2], **Burghart (1983),** in this light, highlighted the expectations placed on women, whereby they were expected to follow a specific dharma (stri-dharma) determined by their nature (stri-svabhava). The fulfilment of this dharma was believed to occur through marriage, household life, and the raising of children. **Altekar (1962)** added to this perspective by noting that women were viewed as inherently impure and sinful due to menstrual and childbearing processes, supposedly lacking a natural inclination towards dharma. Because of this perceived impurity, women were required to perform multiple ritual acts to attain purity. Additionally, due to their perceived sinfulness, women were considered to be under the protection and control of a male authority. **Olivelle (1998),** in this context, asserted that women were expected to adhere to the same religious state as Sudras - which has similarly been discussed by another scholar, **Svyatnenko (2016).** The latter discussed about how women in classical Hindu texts were often perceived as of lower order, often equated to the Sudra level, irrespective of their actual caste, but sometimes also seen as positive prototypes of dharmic women through various goddess' representations. The author further outlined about the patriarchal and sexist gender culture in Brahminism, highlighting that the social status of women improved due to Buddhism, where both men and women are considered equal in ethics, thus leading to an expansion of women's rights and freedoms. **Mulatti (1989),** however, pointed out that while women were accepted into the community through marriage, they were deemed unfit for Vedic knowledge and orthodox religious practices. Manusmṛiti, according to the author, emphasized that marriage was mandatory for women as it was considered the Vedic sacrament for them. This reinforced the idea that a woman's success was primarily linked to marriage and family life.

The influence and role of women in worship, Hindu texts and society have increased in contemporary times. In worship, Hindu women take part in daily puja, domestic worship and temple worship. **Bose (2010),** in discussing about women's involvement in home worship, emphasized the agency and sanctuary that women find in religious practices within their domestic spheres. Similarly, **Oxtoby (1996)** mentioned that the main form of worship performed by Hindu women today is daily domestic puja, which gives them a positive and somewhat powerful role in Hinduism. Although the author pointed out various types of pujas

or worship services, the daily puja is a domestic service in which the entire family participates to express their devotion to a particular deity. Despite the fact that all family members can attend this service, women are the main participants because certain domestic rituals must be performed specifically by the women of the household. The author further illuminated that not all Hindu women can hold this powerful role, as certain rituals can only be performed by unmarried or married women and not by widows. For married women in particular, the entire family depends on them to perform these rituals, giving most Hindu women an influential leadership role. As an instance, **Pintchman (2004)** pointed out about the women in northern India performing a daily ritual called Kartik Puja[3] in autumn. Kartik, which is also celebrated as a deeply sacred month by the Hindus, calls for abstinence from certain foods and involves a daily bathing ritual. After completing their ritual bath, women and girls engage in a distinctive form of worship by crafting icons of Hindu deities from mud, primarily representing Lord Krisna, and then offering reverence to these sacred representations. The author believed that such rituals could provide psychological support to the women themselves because they allow them to actively control events rather than being completely dependent on them. Although **David (2009)** noted that the role of Hindu women in temple worship is not as important as in domestic worship, their role has improved significantly, particularly in the West. The author mentioned that in most Hindu temples in India, male priests lead and control worship, acting as purified vehicles for intimate relationships with the deity. However, as he also noted, Hindu women in the West take a more active role in temple worship. This is because most women are employed and remain no longer confined to the home, for which they enjoy greater social and religious freedom. The author cited the example of a Hindu temple in East Ham in Great Britain, where female believers are not just participants, but have also transformed into religious specialists and ritual leaders. This gives them access to religious agency that is usually considered a taboo in Brahminical Hindu worship. **Leslie (1991)** also indicated a recognizable woman in temple worship, Shyama Devi, who founded one of the first Hindu temples in Britain in 1969. The author indicated that this leadership role is also expressed in classical Hindu texts such as the story of the powerful warrior Goddess Mahatmya[4] in "The Devi Mahatmya." Therefore, it can be said that that while the role of women may not yet be equal to that of men, their status has been gradually improving over time. Despite Brahmanic asceticism traditionally offering no space for women - an exclusion noted by **Clémentin-Ojha (1988),** who found that the *Dharmasastras* reserve *sannyas* exclusively for men of the three higher *varnas* - Indian literature has nevertheless portrayed women as following an ascetic path in various religious

currents, especially those rooted in the concepts of *shakti* (divine feminine) and *bhakti* (devotion). **Tripathi (2007)** highlighted the diverse ways in which the bhakti ideology spread, involving a broad range of orthodox and reformist groups and traditions. The author emphasized that since 'moksha' was dependent on God and all people were considered equals in God's eyes, gender and social standing should not be barriers to adhering to the bhakti stream. Consequently, women gained the right to actively engage in religious activities, as devotion became a central aspect of their religiosity. **Denton (2004),** too, mentioned about how the bhakti currents spread across various Indian regions from the 8th century onwards, emphasizing devotion and surrender to God through a path based on love, without the need for Brahmans or Sanskrit texts as intermediaries. As a matter of fact, even many ancient Upanisads, as **Pechilis (2004)** highlighted, portrayed women as intellectuals and experts in religious matters. For instance, the Bṛihadaraṇyak Upanisad presented Maitreyi[5] as actively participating in theological discussions, showcasing her knowledge on religious subjects. **Clémentin-Ojha (1988)** also wrote about how the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Kathasaritsagara[6], and Sanskrit plays and poems described women as philosophers, hermits, and renouncers, pointing to examples like Kalidas' Sakuntala, and Pandita Kausiki - women ascetics who possessed comprehensive knowledge of the Vedas.

Gupta (1992), then, wrote about the Sakta groups that ushered in a new wave which welcomed women. The author asserted that women, being potential mothers, were considered closer to Shakti than men, and womanhood was seen as a blessing. Consequently, many Sakta religious texts treated women with respect, and in tantric schools, women gurus were and are continued to be preferred. Gupta highlighted two main themes in tantric practice: the inversion of conventional social relations and the importance of the body as a means of achieving salvation. These themes allowed women to engage in various activities, such as using drugs and having a sexual partner, which directly disregarded conventional expectations of stri-dharma. Moreover, within tantric groups, the veneration of virgins and married women as representations of the goddess introduced men to new perspectives on women. This practice instilled a sense of self-respect and confidence in women. In this context, **Clémentin-Ojha (1988)** added that women were admitted into orders that had previously excluded them, owing to the existence of multiple sub-sectarian orders and the autonomy of gurus in choosing followers. On the one hand, she highlighted the Dasanami sampradaya[7], theoretically barring women from sannyas due to Sankaracharya's intolerance towards women among ascetics, while on the other, she also mentioned about the Ramanandi

sampradaya[8], a Vaisnava order founded by Ramananda in the 15th century, which recognized women's right to sannyas. **Knight (2006),** in this regard, discussed how women associated with the Saiva cult could become 'sannyasins,' while those influenced by Sakta and tantric currents were often referred to as 'yoginis.' He also mentioned that women devoted to Visnu or one of His avatars could become 'vairaginis' by following the ascetic path outlined in various Vaisnava sampradayas. They could also choose to live as Brahmacharinis in female institutions or during marriage. Knight further cited examples of female Baul renouncers[9] from West Bengal and Bangladesh, who identified as sannyasins, tyaginis, and vairaginis, engaging in an austere lifestyle based on ritual sexual practices within couples. On similar lines, **Keay (1931)** provided examples of ascetic life within marriage, such as vairagis in a specific region of the panth, typically the wives of men who had become vairagis. **Horstmann (2003),** too, noted that wives of household sadhus, like gharbharis of the Ramavat[10], led austere lives. In fact, it was not uncommon for the wives of household ascetics to follow their husbands' paths, as exemplified by Sarada Devi, the wife of Ramkrisna Paramahansa, who became a guru after His death. These instances showcase the diverse ways in which women have entered and embraced asceticism within various Hindu traditions. Female renouncers had the choice between living as vagrants, traveling between pilgrimage sites, and settling in ashrams or other places of worship. According to **Hausner and Khandelwal (2006),** women's communities provided a protective environment against potential violence or disrespect from men, cynics, and skeptical or hostile members of the householder community. This highlighted the challenges women may face before embarking on the ascetic path, considering societal expectations and potential opposition to their choice of renunciation. **Olivelle's (2008)** article "Village vs. Wilderness Ascetic Ideals and the Hindu World" provided insights into how women's bodies were perceived as at risk in ascetic works, with their poses often seen as objects of desire. This depiction is drawn from various sources such as medieval hagiographies, devotional poems, autobiographies, and modern studies. The portrayal sheds light on the challenging lives that women aspiring to fulfil their religious quests faced, especially when deviating from socially acceptable norms.

Understanding the challenges faced by these women involves examining specific instances of female religious figures who created models that later ascetics utilized to support their religious beliefs. **Gupta (1992),** for example, presented the story of Ammaiyar[11], revered as a saint-poetess of the 6th century, who is described as a stunning woman who, due to her religious beliefs, developed occult abilities to frighten and coerce her husband into giving up

on her. Gupta further detailed that she decided to leave her house and practice devotion in the forest, where she received two blessings from Lord Shiva: the ability to become ugly and the ability to see Shiva dance. According to Gupta, Ammaiyar's transformed state is emphasized as a departure from the socially accepted normal world, positioning her as a prototype of the 'aghorini' - a human form of Bhairavi[12], the female counterpart of Bhairava, and Shiva as a ghoul. Additionally, **Mullatti (1989)** provided another example of a Saiva bhakta named Mahadevi, who joined the Virasaiva group in Kalyani[13], dedicating her life to the devotion of the 'Shiva-lingam.' She embraced a life of wandering, begging, and living in caves while adhering to strict rules and practicing physical abstinence. Mahadevi was acknowledged by her male peers as an enlightened woman, and her spiritual accomplishments were shared through her scriptures. These stories exemplify the diverse paths and experiences of women ascetics within the Saiva tradition. Furthermore, **Denton (2004),** in the article "Female Asceticism in Hinduism," presented the exemplary lives of three women who faced challenges owing to their austere lifestyles. First, is Lallesvari - a 14th century Brahman woman from Kashmir, who was banished by her mother-in-law due to her strong religious beliefs and self-reliant nature, coupled with her childlessness. Living the life of an 'avadhuta'[14] under the guidance of a tantric master, she used both wine and meat in her religious offerings. Despite facing criticism and abuse for her antisocial way of life, Lallesvari overcame the challenges and earned the respect of society through her honest spirituality. Second, is the 16th century Rajput princess, Mirabai. Married to Bhoj Raj, the son of Rana Singh[15], Mirabai was allowed to worship Krisna until her husband's death. However, after his demise, her in-laws disapproved of her lifestyle, and attempts were made on her life. Despite completely absorbing herself in religious sadhana, Mira had to compromise on her social responsibilities to continue living in the society. Third is, Bahinabai, a 17th century ascetic woman, who devoted her life to spiritual practices besides fulfilling all duties towards her husband. Turning to Tukaram[16], a saint of lower caste, she faced opposition from her husband when participating in the former's singing sessions. Her trances attracted people to their home, causing embarrassment for their esteemed Brahmin family. **Gupta's (1992)** observation of Bahinabai's life reveals that she resolved the conflict by internalizing her religious activities, primarily through dreams of Tukaram. Despite her husband's disapproval and attempts to change her attitude, Bahina found a way to pursue her spiritual path while remaining at home. This kind of narrative exemplifies the challenges faced by women ascetics in navigating patriarchal values within society. The need for women to internalize their religious practices and compromise on their desires due to societal expectations reflects

the constraints placed on female autonomy in a traditionally static society. The life-stories of Mirabai, Bahinabai, and many others serve as evidence of the complex dynamics between women's spiritual pursuits and societal norms, highlighting the struggle for autonomy within a patriarchal framework.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, according to **Sinclair (1997),** notable figures such as Vivekananda and Dayananda Saraswati made significant contributions to the understanding of female asceticism. Sinclair argued that Vivekananda recognized the importance of empowering Indian women through education, especially after his exposure to international perspectives. **Khandelwal (2006),** however, pointed out that Dayananda played a crucial role in raising awareness about female asceticism before Vivekananda. He emphasized the influence of Arya Samaj, which propagated the fundamental belief that gender distinctions did not exist in ancient Hinduism. It advocated for the education of girls in both secular and Sanskrit studies, along with the opportunity for women to receive sannyas from a guru of the same gender. These developments in the 19th and 20th centuries marked a shift in perspectives on female asceticism and contributed to a more inclusive approach, recognizing the role of education and gender equality in spiritual pursuits. **Rüstam (2003)** highlighted Asha Debi's reference to Vivekananda's vision in the article "Sannyase Hindunarir Adhikar" (The Hindu Woman's right to Sannyas). Asha Debi, a sannyasin of the Ramkrisna Math, mentioned about Vivekananda's idea of establishing a women's Matth, which was later named the Sri Sarada Matth after the wife of Ramkrisna. According to the author, Sarada Matth primarily focused on social service, aligning with Sarada Devi's perspective on religious sadhana, emphasizing self-emancipation and contributing to the world's welfare through philosophical study and practical skill development. **Denton (2004)** also contributed to this discourse by mentioning about the emergence of Kanya Pitth (seat for virgins), influenced by the first pitth established in 1940 by Anandamayi Ma. He examined three such centres in Varanasi, housing Brahmacharinis who, through the diksha mantra, are formally initiated into celibacy by the head female renouncer. These instances exemplify the genuine objectives of female religious centres, aiming to elevate the educational standards of girls. The goal is to provide them with a foundation in traditional religious teachings, enabling them to pursue various paths such as asceticism, a retired lifestyle, or a contented marriage.

Tracing the multifaceted evolution of women's roles within Hindu spirituality and societal contexts underscores the need to gain critical insights into how Gaudiya Vaisnavism's

approach to women as spiritual leaders may contrast with or mirror broader Hindu norms. However, in order to facilitate this exploration, it is crucial to first engage with the existing literature on the evolution of Vaisnavism. This contextual groundwork will lay a solid foundation for a deeper understanding of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, as well as the concept of guruhood, encompassing both gendered and non-gendered frameworks.

2.1.2 Evolution of Vaisnavism in India

In this section, the researcher has attempted to provide a review of how Vaisnavism has evolved over time, highlighting key doctrinal shifts and beliefs that have emerged throughout its history. While the primary focus of this particular review is not to establish a direct correlation between these developments and the emergence of women's leadership within Gaudiya Vaisnavism, it definitely offers essential background on the historical context in which the tradition has evolved – both as a spiritual lineage and a social movement within the broader landscape of Hinduism.

Vaisnavism, as commonly known and echoed by **Hopkins (1895)**, stands as a major tradition within Hinduism, placing emphasis on the veneration of Lord Visnu as the Supreme God. Visnu, revered as the preserver and guardian of the world, constitutes the Hindu Trinity alongside Brahma - the creator, and Shiva - the destroyer. **Omkarnath (1985)** stated that the essence of the Trinity, as widely reflected in almost all verses of the Bhagavad Gita, personifies the highest point of oriental thoughts of Indian spirituality through devotedly synthesizing it in the form of other spiritual trinities of the three paths of knowledge, action, and devotion, an idea reiterated by **Gambhirananda (1992; 1997).**

A fundamental tenet in Vaisnavism centres around the belief in Visnu's incarnations, commonly referred to as "avatars." **Tarkaratna (1983)** expressed his perspectives on the attributes of Visnu, identifying Him as the master with authority and control over the world. The author also highlighted various names associated with Visnu, such as Narayana, Vasudeva, Bhagavat, Krisna, among others. This emphasizes the diverse appellations and roles attributed to Visnu in Hindu theology. According to **Sarkar (2021),** Visnu is mentioned in various Suktas of the Rig Veda, signifying His presence as a potent deity, although not the primary one. The author interprets from his research that the world is believed to be covered with the dust raised by Visnu's luminous travels across the globe, establishing Him as an invulnerable protector, impervious to harm. In the Rig Veda, as per **Dutta (1951),** Visnu's

presence is discerned through three manifestations: light, lightning, and the Sun. These manifestations are associated with the Sun's three positions - its rising, culmination, and setting. Additionally, the author notes that Visnu is depicted as a close ally of Indra and is referred to as Indra-Visnu. **Das (1925)**, then, argued that Visnu assumed a prominent position in later Vedic literature, contrasting with His subordinate role in the Rig Veda's pantheon of gods. According to **Singh (2021),** Visnu assumed multiple incarnations to restore cosmic order and safeguard dharma in times of jeopardy. The author emphasized the worship of Krisna, noting His dual portrayal as the heroic and salvific figure in epics and the irresistible charmer in romance, poetry, and popular legends. This multifaceted role and appeal of Krisna have left an indelible mark on Indian religious and cultural history, exerting a profound influence on diverse aspects of Indian society and spirituality. The idea that Krisna might have had a historical existence rather than being solely a deity has been a subject of scholarly discourse. **Raychaudhuri (1936)** delved into prehistoric Hindu literature, noting the presence of a human Krisna but remained silent about the deity Krisna. The author posited that both Buddhist and Jain traditions acknowledge Vasudeva as a historical figure, suggesting that early non-Hindu sources recognized Krisna as a real person. Furthermore, the ancient epic of Mahabharata is mentioned by the author as preserving traces of the original human character of Krisna. Texts like the Chhandogya Upanisad, according to Raychaudhuri, believed to predate the rise of Buddhism, also reference Krisna, providing further evidence for His historical existence. The author further highlighted the importance of the Jain tradition, positioning Krisna as the immediate predecessor of Parsvanatha, the 23rd Tirthankar. While Parsvanatha is believed to have lived around the 9th BCE, the author infers that Krisna, preceding Parsvanatha, must have existed before the said era. This perspective contributes to Krisna's prominence in Vaisnavism as a historical figure.

Klaiman (2007) asserted that the evolution and maturation of 'Krisnaism' as a sect within mainstream Hinduism, as garnered from evidence found in the Mahabharata and other texts, constituted an intricate and multi-faceted historical process. The author pointed out that the emergence of Vaisnavism occurred during the post-Mauryan-Gupta period, supported by literary and archaeological records of that era. Klaiman identified popular poems narrating heroic tales of legendary figures from the Mahabharata and Ramayana as principal repositories of Vaisnava myths and teachings related to religious sanctity. **Winternitz (1927)** presented an alternative perspective on the Mahabharata, highlighting Rama as a human being rather than an incarnation of Visnu. The deification and identification of Rama with

Visnu were considered by scholars to be later interpolations into the Ramayana, possibly added towards the end of the 2nd century AD. The earliest rendition of the epic depicted the emergence of devotional cults and offered a sectarian account of Vaisnava divinities, including Vasudeva-Krisna, Krisna, and Narayana. **Jaiswal (1967)** in his book, "Origin and Development of Vaishnavism," detailed that the Vaisnava cult, in the 4th through 6th centuries, exhibited steady progress eastward, concurrently with Buddhism, Jainism, and Saiva-Sakta worship. **Mukherjee (1966),** on a similar note, asserted that a higher number of inscriptions featuring Vaisnava references and Vaisnava images could be found in North and East Bengal as opposed to West Bengal. Building on this, **Gonda (1970)** proposed in "Visnuism and Sivaism: A Comparison" that Krisnaism, as a sect of popular Hinduism, might have originated in north-central India. **Chakravarti (1985)** specifically referred to the rise of a popular Vaisnava movement in this region, suggesting that it could be an outcome of assimilating various local cults into an existing form of orthodox, Brahmanical-sanctioned religion centred around the worship of Narayana-Visnu.

In another edition of his book "The Origin and Development of Vaishnavism," **Jaiswal (1981),** in citing religious historians, stated that the promotion of a specific form of Vaisnavism that centred on the worship of Krisna was a response to several pressures on the Brahmanical system. The author indicated that these pressures included competition from other religious systems, changes in the social structure of the Hindu community, and contemporary political and social developments. The analysis underscored that the worship of Krisna had spread both to the northern and southern extremes of the Indian subcontinent by the 4th century AD. In his book "Early History of Vaishnavism in South India," **Aiyangar (1920)** conducted a detailed analysis of the cultural diffusion of Vaisnavism in southern India. He highlighted the Alwars, Nathamuni, and Yamunacharya, as imperative in representing Vaisnavism in the region. First, he emphasized the pivotal role of the Alwars, portraying them as the earliest Brahmin messengers who sowed the seeds of Vaisnavism in the south. These Alwars, recognized as a lineage of Vaisnavite reformers from the 9th to the 15th centuries, promoted bhakti and deep reverence for Krisna through their Tamil songs and hymns, making Vaisnavism accessible to a broader audience. Their devotion extended to various forms of worship, including idol worship and recitation of divine names, influenced by sacred texts such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Bhagavata Purana. Moving forward, Aiyangar discussed Nathamuni, a prominent Vaisnava sage in southern India, who played a vital role in developing the Ramanuja school of thought[17]. Nathamuni, with vast knowledge

in Sanskrit literature and expertise in Yoga, composed notable works like "Nyayatattva," covering various philosophical aspects. The author also highlighted Nathamuni's contribution to combined Sanskrit and Tamil scholarship by introducing the recitation of Tamil Vedas during Visnu's temple festivals.

Speaking of Vaisnavism in northern India, **Bezbaroa (1925)** contended that its roots can be traced back to earlier times of the 14th century AD, highlighting local traditions associated with Krisna, further mentioning about notable Vaisnava reformers from the north, including Ramananda, Vallabhacharya, Sri Sankaradeva, and Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, each of whom had significant roles in shaping and popularizing the different aspects of Vaisnavism. Ramananda, a prominent Vaisnava teacher, had twelve disciples from diverse social backgrounds, including a cobbler, a Rajput, a Jath, a Muslim (Kabir), and a barber. Bezbaroa highlighted the contributions of Ramananda's pupils, such as Nabhaji, who wrote the "Bhaktamal," and Tulsidas, the seventh in descent from Ramananda, who is renowned for his Hindi Ramayana. The author also discussed Jayadeva, the author of the "Gitagovindam," emphasizing his worship of Radha and Krisna and his role in the development of the Chaitanya tradition in the early 16th century, besides pointing out various minor sub-sects, including Khaki, Molukdasi, Dadupanthi, and Nagas, which often focused on the worship of Rama and Sita, with an emphasis on contemplating and chanting Rama-naam. The author mentioned about another sect in Maharashtra, known as Vithal-bhaktas. This sect with followers found even in Gujarat, Karnataka, and central India, is also referred to as "Vaisnava Vir." Their primary deity of worship is Pandurang, Vithal, or Vithoba, whom they consider to be the ninth incarnation of Visnu. Interestingly, they are associated with Buddhadeva and are sometimes referred to as "Bauddha Vaisnavas" due to their belief in Vithoba as an incarnation of Buddhadeva, specifically, Buddha. This reflects a unique blending of Vaisnavism and Buddhist elements within the religious beliefs of the Vithal-bhaktas. Founded by a saint named Pundalik in the 14th century CE, the Vithal- bhaktas had a rich tradition of sectarian literature, including texts like 'Bhakta-Vijaya,' 'Pandurang-Mahatma,' and 'Hari-Vijaya,' emphasizing the relationship of love and devotion between the *upasaka* (worshipper) and the *upasya* (object of worship).

In later periods, as **Gode (1922)** wrote, Visnu became a household god, whose divinity has often been cited in the name of 'Narayana' and more prominently 'Vasudeva Krisna.' While elaborately explaining the genesis of Vaisnavism, **Bhandarkar (1913)** mentioned about the

three streams of religious thought of "the cult of Vasudeva" that emerged from the Puranic times to juxtapose the propagation of Visnu in polytheistic practices in later periods. One stream of thought is attributed to Visnu as the Vedic god, the second one is Narayana as the cosmic and philosophic god, and the third one is Vasudeva as the historical god. In this regard, **Thoothi (1935)** mentioned that Visnu, Narayana, and Vasudeva were decisively commingled to later on impute Vaisnavism which then slowly started gaining exclusive predominance. **Long's (2020)** argument addresses that each Vaisnava devotee has allegiance to theistic practices pertinent to Vaisnava bhakti traditions that tend to have an experience involving a personal God (for instance Krisna) conceived in the said tradition. The practical method of working out the doctrines in everyday life of a Vaisnava irrespective of Vallabhaite, Ramanujaite, or Chaitanyaite School is exhibited in terms of 'Marga' ('path' in literary sense). The work of **Macnicol (1915)** reveals about the three Margas in Hinduism in order to attain salvation for any devout: i) Jnyana Marga, i.e., the path of knowledge, (ii) Karma Marga, i.e., the path of action, and (iii) Bhakti Marga, i.e., the path of devotion. **Balfour (1923)** strongly put forward that all Margas, specially (path of) knowledge "must be reverently followed and patiently obeyed." The Vaisnavas, however, stick to Bhakti Marga with an allegiance to Karma Marga, as both are likely to be 'fused into one single path of service' **(Thoothi ibid:75).**

In summary, Vaisnavism has emerged as a significant branch of Hinduism, with its influence extending across various geographical regions of India. Numerous scholars have highlighted its cultural foundations, underscoring the importance of comprehending its beliefs and ideals. To further explore the essence of this tradition, the subsequent section will specifically study the emergence of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, with a particular focus on the life and teachings of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Nabadwip.

2.1.3 In Chaitanya's Footsteps: The Gaudiya and The Bhakti

This section delves into the Gaudiya tradition, which was revitalized by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's teachings on bhakti as the pathway to divine connection. Chaitanya's philosophy emphasized a deeply personal and communal form of devotion, which brought a transformative dimension to Vaisnavism by encouraging an inclusive approach to spirituality. This inclusivity potentially supports an openness to women's roles within the spiritual hierarchy, making this review essential. For the present study, understanding how the doctrines of bhakti shape the experiences and acceptance of women as gurus and ascetics

within Gaudiya Vaisnavism is crucial to analyzing their social and spiritual legitimacy in Nabadwip.

Discussing the concept of *bhakti*, **Sharma (1964)** noted that the term is derived from the Sanskrit verb root *bhaj*, meaning "to seek devotion," as referenced in the Shvetashvatara Upanisad of the Yajur Veda. In a related view, **Bhandarkar (1913)** observed that the *Bhagavad Gita* presents perhaps the 'earliest articulation of the *Bhakti* system or the Ekantika Dharma[18].' Expanding on this, **Gambhirananda (1997)** explained that through such *bhakti*, as highlighted in the Kaṭha Upanisad and Bṛihadaraṇyaka Upaniṣhad, one can achieve profound serenity of soul, or *Brahmi*, with a steadfast and focused mind. As per the author, the word "bhakti" denotes self-surrender and loving devotion to the personal deity and God's transforming grace for the 'bhakta' or 'devotee.' **Bhattacharyay (1991),** in this context, highlighted the central role of bhakti in numerous religious practices, emphasizing the importance of deep and sincere love and commitment to a deity or God. The author then discussed how confession or acknowledgment of one's shortcomings and seeking forgiveness was a common practice in some religious traditions, serving as a means of purifying the soul. Simplicity in life, characterized by a lack of luxury and materialism, was often viewed as a way to detach from worldly distractions and focus on spiritual growth. Honesty and integrity were identified as essential principles by the author, emphasizing that one's actions and dealings played a crucial role in moral and ethical development. The author also underscored the significance of self-control and mastery over the sense organs to avoid distractions and maintain inner discipline. Additionally, meditation was presented as a practice allowing individuals to turn inward, contemplate, and connect with their spiritual selves or deity. Furthermore, the author provided insights into the common aspiration in religious practices to seek the favour and blessings of God or a deity. Deep love, hope, and a desire to be close to God were identified as significant aspects of devotion and spiritual progress. Inner peace and tranquillity were often sought as outcomes of spiritual growth and connection with the Divine. Additionally, experiencing excitement and a profound sense of God's presence were recognized as transformative spiritual experiences. Bhattacharyay noted that these principles and qualities could be found in various religious and spiritual traditions worldwide, with specific interpretations and practices varying across different cultures and belief systems.

Thoothi (1935) wrote that as a pan-Indian phenomenon against the backdrop of Hinduism, bhakti was developed into sophisticated theologies and practices primarily by Vaisnava

traditions all around India. This was especially during the Bhakti renaissance of the medieval period, from the 11th through 16th centuries C.E. Here, it is important to mention about the version in **Novetzke (2007),** where bhakti swings between two sociological constructs: one that forms a social movement and the other that attributes to personal devotion. **Majumdar (1960)** added a theoretical flavour while describing bhakti from the point of view of religion to analyze it as 'a doctrine and a theology' identified with Vaisnavism, which has also been earlier agreed upon by **Raychaudhuri (1920).** The latter further stated that bhakti is almost identified with Vaisnavism in terms of the revelation of Visnu worship as has been mentioned in scriptures and supported by the majority of archaeological, historical and written documents depicted in verses, songs, and stories. In Vaisnavism, as rejoined by **Thoothi (1935),** bhakti means prayer, devotion, worship, adoration. It presupposes complete surrender to the Lord (Krisna) by worshipping and serving Him, thereby seeking His love and goodwill. Thoothi further added that devotees of any caste can obtain salvation by bhakti, thereby indicating a complete surrender of caste distinctions.

As revealed from the studies by **Thoothi (1935), Eaton (1993),** and **Sarkar (1922),** in Gujarat and Bengal, Narasinh Mehta and Chaitanya respectively associated themselves with the Vaisnava cult of bhakti along with singing of hymns and dancing in religious fervour. Subsequently, as even **Hopkins (1896)** pointed out, Vaisnava devotees irrespective of caste and creed and including vairagins ('passionless ones') assembled in different modes of ritualistic liturgies, such as, sankirtan, pilgrimage, chanting and singing of hymns, dancing – all of which culminated into one single chorus of bhakti. This aestheticization, according to **Thoothi (ibid:86)**, has made Vaisnavism the most acceptable religion, washing away the last remnants of Buddhism from the lower social status of the Hindu society.

Roy (2013), in providing a detailed analysis of Indian spiritual and philosophical traditions, outlined two primary paths or approaches to attaining a connection with the Divine. In so, the author highlighted the love affair between Radha and Krisna as a central theme in the mythology and devotion of many Vaisnava traditions, particularly in the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition. According to the author, divine love is often referred to as "Madhurya Bhava" or the sentiment of sweetness, considered one of the five primary sentiments in the path of devotion, or Bhakti Yoga. These five sentiments, also known as "rasas," represent different types of loving relationships with the Divine. The identified rasas are Shanta Rasa, Dasya Rasa, Sakhya Rasa, Vatsalya Rasa, and Madhurya Rasa. On similar lines, **Lahiri (1993)**

asserted that in eastern India, particularly in Bengal, Radha occupied a distinctive and central position within the devotional and philosophical framework. The author elucidated that Krisna was venerated as the Supreme Personality of Godhead, with Radha revered as His most beloved and divine consort, embodying the essence of divine love and devotion. In her work, the author highlighted Radha's relationship with Krisna, symbolizing the highest form of bhakti in the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition. She delved into the concept of Radha and her connection with Krisna, exploring anecdotes involving the gopis and illustrating their love as a complex and evolving history within Hindu literature and religious traditions. Several texts, as reported by the author, provided varying levels of detail on Radha and the gopis. Early texts such as the Harivansh Purana and the Visnu Purana were mentioned, portraying the devotion of the gopis to Krisna. Additionally, essential texts like the Padma Purana, the Brahmavaivarta Purana, and the Srimad Bhagavata Purana were highlighted by the author, offering more comprehensive insights into the 'gopi-bhava' (the devotional attitude of the gopis) and the Radha-Krisna relationship. In a similar context, **Dutta (1945)** in the book "Baishnab Sahitye Samajtattwa" mentioned about the "Prakrit Paingal" text, composed between the 7th and 8th centuries, featuring Radha. Radha was also identified as 'Hladini Shakti'[19] in the Brahmavaivarta Purana. Based on this, the author scrutinized that Radha was regarded as the presiding deity of the soul of Krisna, playing a significant role in the devotional and philosophical framework. In this tradition, the author perceived Radha's relationship with Krisna as the epitome of divine love and devotion, celebrating various aspects of her character. In addition, **Tarkabhusan (1905)** wrote about a pair of idols depicting Radha and Krisna in a temple in Paharpur, which held significant archaeological importance. The estimated dating of these idols to around the 10th century, according to the author, provides insight into the historical context and the manifestation of devotion to Radha and Krisna during that period. **Dasgupta (1962)** highlighted the development of Radha-Krisna devotion and the composition of Radha-Krisna literature in Bengal as a significant aspect of the region's cultural and religious history. The scholar mentioned several books written in Bengal that focused on their divine love, such as "Brahmansarbaswa" and "Vaishnava Sarvasva" composed by Halayudas, "Haricharitam" by Chaturbhuj Bhattacharya, and "Sri Krisna Vijaya" authored by Maladhar Basu and Aniruddha Bhatta. These works and theological connections contributed to shaping the religious and cultural landscape of Bengal, particularly in the context of Radha-Krisna devotion and literature.

During the Middle Ages, Bengal, akin to numerous other regions in South Asia, underwent a succession of foreign conquests and the rule of various dynasties and empires, notably the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire - both of Islamic origin. Islam made inroads into Bengal during this era, witnessing both voluntary conversions and instances of rulers adopting the religion for diverse reasons. However, it is crucial to scrutinize historical accounts from this period with a critical perspective, recognizing that individual observations and narratives may be influenced by the observer's standpoint.

According to **Dutta (1976),** as outlined in his book "Banglar Itihas," in 1518, Duarte Barbosa, a Portuguese writer and traveller, visited Bengal and observed a rapid adoption of Islam by the Bengalis. The author suggests that during this period, conversions to Islam in Bengal were a nuanced process influenced by factors such as trade, political alliances, and the appeal of the religion itself. This led to a surge in conservatism within Hinduism, marked by an increased practice of casteism in Hindu society. The author contends that the ascendancy of Muslim rulers during this era challenged Brahminical Hinduism, leading to a shift in the influence and prestige of Brahmins. The autocratic rule of Muslim leaders compelled Brahminical Hinduism, centred on rituals, to adapt to the evolving cultural landscape. Dutta further notes that some individuals and communities sought alternative religious expressions and practices, turning to the worship of non-scriptural idols and, in some instances, even participated in religious chants and worship. This religious transformation, as depicted by the author, signifies a process of adaptation and evolution in religious practices during this transformative period. **Tirtha (1947)** in his work, "Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu," delved into the evolving political and social landscapes of Bengal over the centuries, marked by the rule of the Pala, Sena, and Mughal dynasties. The rulers of these dynasties often relied on the support and services of Brahmins, Vaidyas, and Kayasthas for various administrative and cultural functions. Consequently, a significant portion of Vaisnava literature was composed in Sanskrit, aligning Gaudiya Vaisnavism with the broader traditions of Hinduism.

At the time of the emergence of Chaitanya, **Dutta (1937)** described Nabadwip as the Sanskrit centre in Bengal and East India, attributing numerous significant features to the town. The author highlighted Nabadwip's reputation for scholars, literary pursuits, religious studies, and contributions to various fields, particularly knowledge science and tantra. Nabadwip was also recognized as the primary centre for Nyaya or Neo-Logic, with influential philosophers like Raghunath Shiromani and Vasudeva Sarvabhauma playing pivotal roles in establishing its

prominence in Neo-Logic studies. According to the author, Nabadwip attracted students from various regions of India who came to the town for Nyaya education, contributing to its fame in educational pursuits. The author acknowledged the disharmony and division among the educated, leading to social discord among different social groups. Despite these challenges, active learners completed their education, and many obtained diplomas. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, through the introduction of devotional mass movements and human religion, established His prominence in Nabadwip, and later beyond. The three main centres of Gaudiya Vaisnavism were Nabadwip, Vrindavan, and Nilachal (referred to as Jagannath Puri). The key figures at the centre of this religious movement, besides Chaitanya were Nityananda, Advaita Acharya, Srivas Thakur, and Gadadhar Pandit, together known as "Panchatattva." From the perspective of **Sarma (2015),** Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is regarded as one of the last prominent Vaisnava reformers in a lineage that includes earlier figures like Nimbarka and Vallabha, who made significant contributions to the Vaisnava tradition. **Dutta (1937)** elaborated that Chaitanya's life was filled with episodes of ecstatic devotional singing and divine experiences. He had been revered and worshipped as a divine incarnation by His followers. The author highlighted that Chaitanya's teachings, particularly the practice of congregational chanting of the Hare Krisna mantra, were central to the devotional practices of His followers. Amidst traditions of piety, scholarship, and privilege, Chaitanya (also known as Visvambhara and Nimai) grew up as a well-born Brahman. The author provided a detailed picture of His life, covering His education, marriages, and association with devotion. Chaitanya received His elementary education in the Sanskrit Tol[20] of Sudarsana and Visnu Pandit before advancing to Gangadasa for more studies. As a student, He displayed intelligence and proficiency, particularly in Kalapa Byakaran[21], Kavyas[22], rhetoric, and Nyaya (logic). Chaitanya was married twice; His first wife Lakshmipriya, the daughter of Vallabha-Acharya, died of a snake bite, and He later married Visnupriya, who survived until His Sannyasa and death. Dutta highlighted that Chaitanya, like other learned Brahmins of His time, established a 'tol' and became known as 'Nimai Pandit.' At the age of 22, Chaitanya travelled to the Visnupada temple in Gaya to perform post-funeral rites for His father, where He met the Vaisnava saint, Isvara Puri[23]. Initiated into the bhakti cult by him, Chaitanya underwent a transformative change, becoming a passionate reformer. Embraced and supported by the Vaisnavas of Nabadwip, He became the central figure of a small group that included prominent personalities like Advaita and Haridasa. During this phase, Chaitanya introduced innovations in religious life, such as abolishing His tols and organizing sankirtan, often accompanied by musical instruments. This was a significant development in the

devotional practices of the time. The author noted that Chaitanya and His associates engaged in intense devotion to God through sankirtan, drawing people's minds towards spirituality and God. In this context, **Shihadeh (2007)** suggested that Chaitanya might have been influenced by Sufism, particularly in the context of practices like 'sama,' which involved singing and dancing in remembrance of the Almighty.

Chakravarti (1985) discussed that the teachings of Chaitanya had a profound impact on a diverse range of individuals, from common people to the elite, during and after His lifetime. The author noted that the teachings of Gaudiya Vaisnavism gained favour among rulers, zamindars (landowners), and high-ranking bureaucrats. Devout followers and patrons of the tradition played a crucial role in constructing temples and promoting Vaisnavism in their respective domains. Chakravarti further highlighted the influence of Bir Hambir, a notable ruler of the Malla dynasty in the region of Bankura in Bengal. The Malla dynasty was known for its patronage of art, culture, and religion, particularly Vaisnavism. According to the author, Bir Hambir underwent initiation into the Vaisnava tradition by Srinivas Acharya, a distinguished Vaisnava scholar and leader. This marked a significant period in the region's history, with notable contributions to the promotion of Vaisnavism and cultural development. The author pointed out that Bir Hambir's initiation led to the inauguration of the Madan Mohan puja in Bishnupur, which became a form of devotional service to Krisna. As a matter of fact, under his patronage, the influence of Vaisnavism extended to neighbouring areas like Manbhum, Dhalbhum, Singhbhum (Chaibasa), Bhattabhum (Ramgarh), Sabarbhumi, and beyond.

Das (1917) provided a detailed account of the rapid growth of the neo-Vaisnavism movement, illustrating how waves of enthusiastic bhakti swept through the community. Despite gaining widespread support, this sect faced vehement opposition, particularly from orthodox Brahmin scholars and the societal elite who strongly opposed the sankirtan. The author also highlighted the efforts of the Muslim rulers of Nadia to suppress the movement. According to Das, Chaitanya, along with His numerous followers engaging in nagar-sankirtan, courageously resisted the local Qazi and eventually won him over. The author reported that the Muslim rulers of 'Gour' (Nabadwip), upon learning about the multitude of followers drawn to Chaitanya, recognized Him as a genuine and selfless spiritual leader. The rulers acknowledged that people were naturally attracted to Him due to sincere devotion, not selfish motives. Consequently, the Muslim rulers expressed tolerance and goodwill towards

Chaitanya and His Vaisnava followers. Chaitanya, thus, was allowed to teach and preach His beliefs without encountering hostility from the Muslim community.

Das' account suggests a level of religious tolerance and coexistence in certain historical contexts, where different religious communities peacefully coexisted and practiced their faiths side by side. This episode reflects the rare courage, straightforwardness, and dedication of Chaitanya to the cause that was dear to his heart, as depicted in the "Chaitanya Bhagavata." **Sen (1922)** also quoted how the orthodox Brahmins, often holding positions of religious authority, were often critical of and opposed Chaitanya's religious movement and teachings. The author suggested that their attitude and opposition might have been a source of frustration for Chaitanya. Sen proposed that Chaitanya's decision to embrace sannyas may have been driven by a deep inner spiritual calling. He felt a strong inner urge and compulsion to abandon worldly attachments and dedicate Himself fully to His beloved deity, Krisna. After deciding to embrace the life of a sannyasi, Chaitanya sought initiation from Kesava Bharati, a Sanskrit sannyasi who formally initiated Him into sannyas. During this initiation, Chaitanya was given the name 'Sri Krisna-Chaitanya,' commonly abbreviated to Chaitanya. This name became universally recognized and associated with His spiritual identity and mission. For the remaining twenty-four years of His life, Chaitanya embarked on a profound and transformative journey as the apostle of Vaisnavism. He travelled extensively, preaching and propagating the faith of Krisna, spreading the message of devotion and the congregational chanting of the holy names of God. His travels took Him from the banks of the river Cauvery in the south to those of the river Yamuna in the north (see Figure 4, Chapter 1). Following this, Chaitanya embarked on a journey to Vrindavan along the banks of the Jamuna, accompanied by three of His followers - Nityananda, Ratana, and Mukunda. Subsequently, His intended destination was Banaras, but Chaitanya's disciples redirected Him to Santipur. During this time, He made a brief visit to Advaita's house in Santipur, bidding a heartfelt farewell to his grief-stricken mother. Ultimately embracing the life of a sannyasi, He left His home and did not return. Despite this, evidence suggests that Chaitanya's teachings continued to reach His disciples in various regions, illustrating the enduring impact of His spiritual journey and message. **Tagore (1950)** in writing about Chaitanya's embarkment on the mission to spread His spiritual message across the length and breadth of India, opined that His sense of duty and purpose was so potent that it could not be silenced, even in the face of entreaties from friends or even the emotional appeals of His mother, Sachi Devi.

Lahiri (1993) highlighted the profound respect that Chaitanya garnered as a revered saint and religious preacher among various Bengali families and communities. Emphasizing the transformative impact of Chaitanya's activities and teachings, Lahiri underscored the significance of devotional worship, kirtans, and the congregational singing of the Hare Krisna mantra. The author further noted that Chaitanya's contributions had a lasting effect on Indian culture, society, and religious life, fostering spiritual unity and devotion that transcended social and caste boundaries. With the emergence of British colonialism in India, Lahiri acknowledged the diverse changes it brought about, encompassing economic, social, and cultural shifts. The cultural exchange with British influences prompted Indian intellectuals and reformers to challenge colonialism, leading to the "Bengal Renaissance." During this transformative period, Lahiri detailed the ascent of Indian artists and writers, attributing the supremacy of Chaitanya's teachings and activities to inspire a deep sense of nationalism and patriotism among Indians. The author argued that Chaitanya played a pivotal role in catalyzing significant and unprecedented changes in Bengali society, culture, music, religious and philosophical thought, as well as art. **Majumdar (1969)** pointed out that Chaitanya's deep devotion to Krisna and His dedicated practice of the Hare Krisna mantra had a significant impact on the interpretation and representation of sacred texts, such as the Bhagavat Purana, which hold immense value in Vaisnavism. The author emphasized that Chaitanya brought a fresh perspective and added a new dimension to the understanding of these revered scriptures. Additionally, Majumdar highlighted that the influence of Chaitanya extended far beyond His lifetime, profoundly shaping the landscape of Vaisnava literature and playing a pivotal role in the development and propagation of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. The author acknowledged the enduring impact of Chaitanya's teachings on numerous influential figures and spiritual leaders, including Vrindavan Goswami, Nityananda, Narahari Thakur, Jahnava Devi, Kedarnath Dutta, Bimal Prasad Dutta, Abhay Charan Dey, and Jaipataka Maharaj. These individuals, inspired by Chaitanya's life philosophy, made substantial contributions to the growth and evolution of the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition.

Ghosh (1979) emphasized that despite Chaitanya's profound love for Krisna, He harboured no ill will towards other deities or religious communities. The author noted how during His pilgrimage, Chaitanya paid homage to deities representing various traditions, such as Sakta (Shakti or goddess worship), Saiva (Saivism, dedicated to Lord Shiva), and Ganpatya (Ganesha worship). This inclusive approach underscores the idea of respecting and embracing all forms of divinity. The author further highlighted Chaitanya's emotional and

even hysterical reactions upon seeing idols, interpreting these responses as indicative of a deep sense of devotion and a strong emotional connection to the Divine. Ghosh speculated that Chaitanya's message conveyed the equal worthiness of all gods and goddesses, emphasizing the absence of discrimination among deities. This, in fact, aligns with the inclusive and pluralistic nature of many Indian religious traditions.

Bhattacharya (1948) highlighted that Chaitanya's influence reached across diverse segments of society, including lower-caste individuals and women. The author emphasized that His teachings and the practice of bhakti were characterized by inclusivity, placing a strong emphasis on devotion to God without discrimination based on caste or gender. Chaitanya's transformative impact on religious practice was evident in His commitment to breaking down societal barriers and fostering a more inclusive and egalitarian approach to spirituality. His transformative influence was so profound that even individuals like Jagai and Madhai[24], considered morally degraded, as well as the Qazi (Muslim magistrate) underwent a positive change in their ways after encountering His spiritual guidance. On the same lines, **Sharma (1987)** pointed out that Chaitanya's Bhakti movement posed a challenge to the centuries-old scriptural restrictions that marginalized certain social groups. His teachings facilitated a transcendence of these restrictions, enabling direct connection with God through devotion. The author emphasized the democratizing impact of Chaitanya's movement, breaking down the rigid caste hierarchy and fostering a sense of spiritual equality among followers, as also seen in the works of **Bhattacharya (1948).** However, **Sharma (1987)** noted that post-Chaitanya's era witnessed conflicts and divisions within the tradition, giving rise to different sects and sub-sects within Gaudiya Vaisnavism, each interpreting Chaitanya's teachings uniquely. Despite these sectarian divisions, the author highlighted the significant contributions of Chaitanya's followers, such as the Six Goswamis of Vrindavan, in developing various theological and philosophical schools of thought within the tradition, while maintaining the core ideology of Chaitanya's teachings. These Goswamis (Rupa, Sanatan, Jiva, Gopal Bhatta, Raghunath Dasa, and Raghunath Bhatta) gave a systematic presentation of the doctrine of Gaudiya Vaisnvaism. To quote **Majumdar (1969: 213-214),**

Sri Chaitanya had instructed Sanatana to write a Vaisnava smrti. He had said to him "you have to write on bhakta, bhakti, Krishna-prema and determine the categories and the obligatory duties and customs of the Vaisnavas; you will have to discover the sacred spots in Mathura, Vrndavana which are very dear to me. I want to spread my religion there, but my

mother's order obliges me to remain at Puri. Hence you have to do everything on my behalf, your body is instrument of my action."

The dissemination of Gaudiya Vaisnavism through eminent leaders in diverse regions of India have been delved into by many authors. **Kulke (1978)** noted that after Chaitanya embraced monkhood and travelled to Puri, the responsibility of leading Vaisnavism in Bengal fell upon Advaita Acharya and Nityananda Mahaprabhu. Even Birbhadra, the son of Nityananda, played a significant role in the movement's dissemination, as pointed out by **Chakravarti (1985).** A noteworthy contribution of Birbhadra was his involvement in converting practitioners of Buddhist Tantric traditions into Sahajiya Vaisnavas. Sahajiya Vaisnavism, as described by Chakravarti, is a sub-tradition within Gaudiya Vaisnavism that emphasizes the inner experience of love and devotion to God, often through intense mystical and tantric practices. By converting followers from other traditions into Sahajiya Vaisnavas, Birbhadra and his contemporaries contributed to the expansion of Vaisnavism and the dissemination of Chaitanya's teachings. **Dasa (1978)** highlighted that within Sahajiya Vaisnavism, a distinction existed between external practices and the internal, mental, or contemplative aspects of the tradition. This differentiation, as presented by the author, was also observed in the broader context of the Tantra Vaisnava tradition. The external practices within Sahajiya Vaisnavism, according to the author, often involved ritualistic and physical aspects of devotion. These practices encompassed the worship of deities, engagement in sacred music and dance, undertaking pilgrimages to holy sites, and participating in the use of sacred symbols and rituals. The external practices served as a means to inspire and facilitate the inner, mystical experiences of devotion. Furthermore, Das elaborated on the mental or contemplative practices within Sahajiya Vaisnavism, which emphasized the internal aspects of devotion. This included practices such as deep meditation, visualization, mantra repetition, and other techniques aimed at fostering a direct and personal connection with the Divine. The integration of both external and internal practices was identified by the author as a characteristic feature of Sahajiya Vaisnavism, representing a holistic approach to spiritual growth. Practitioners aimed to strike a balance between engaging in rituals and external expressions of devotion while simultaneously cultivating profound inner experiences of love for God, often framed within the context of the loving exchanges between Radha and Krisna. In this context, **Dutta (2011)** mentioned that Radha-Krisna's inherent union is the main chant of the Sahajiya Vaisnava doctrine. The author opined that the "Parakiya" element in Sahajiya theory concentrated in Vaisnava's spiritual doctrine in various ways. The author

also believed that as a result of the spread of 'the religion of love' in Gaudiya Vaisnava theology, love or affection was particularly embodied and illuminated in Sahajiya Vaisnava religion. The community, as **Risley (1892)** mentioned, did not have a gotra, but claims to have hailed from the 'Achyuta gotra'[25] that comes from Lord Krisna Himself. The followers of the Sahajiya Vaisnava tradition consisted of both men and women, and unlike most other South Asian religious traditions, women often served as masters (gurus). Furthermore, as noted by **Hayes (1995),** a man could not realize the ultimate reality without the cooperation of a woman, adding that a woman's realization of the same also depended on the companionship of a man. The reasons for this collaborative nature of Sahajiya beliefs and practices lie in the blending of earlier tantric traditions with contemporary devotional practices centred on Krisna and His consort, Radha.

Bhattacharya (1957) also provided insights into Sahajiya practices within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition, and how they underwent evolution and diversification after the time of Chaitanya. While Chaitanya remained the central figure of devotion for most Gaudiya Vaisnavas, including those within the Sahajiya tradition, Bhattacharya noted that other poets and mystics were also revered as important sources of inspiration. The author highlighted two esteemed figures, Ray Ramananda and Swarup Damodar, who were prominent associates of Chaitanya and made significant contributions to the development of the Gaudiya Vaisnavism tradition. Known for their deep devotion and spiritual insights, their teachings and practices were respected by followers of the tradition. While Chaitanya's teachings and devotion to Radha and Krisna remained central to the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition, Bhattacharya acknowledged instances where other poets and mystics, such as Jayadeva, Bidyapati, and Chandi Das, were revered for their devotional compositions. Jayadeva, in particular, was noted for his composition of the "Gitagovindam," a celebrated work describing the love between Radha and Krisna. The Sahajiya Vaisnavas, as emphasized by Bhattacharya, sought to experience the intimate and loving pastimes of the divine couple, Radha and Krisna, within their hearts.

A significant count of literature highlights the evolving and adaptable nature of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, including Sahajiya Vaisnavism, as practiced by its followers. Also emphasized is the role played by spiritual gurus in guiding the practitioners of this tradition. While venerating Chaitanya and Nityananda, Gaudiya Vaisnavism also holds later acharyas and spiritual leaders, including the descendants of the Six Goswamis, in high regard. The tradition

is also reflective of adaptation to the changing social and cultural context, with some practitioners leading family lives and others choosing a monastic or ascetic path. Furthermore, in examining the modern era, many texts also acknowledge the adaptation of Vaisnavas to modern technology in their daily lives. The practice of widow remarriage within different groups and regions of Gaudiya Vaisnavism was noted, though it was not universally accepted. Chaitanya's influence in promoting democratic ideals among His devotees, evident in instances such as the celebration of love and unity among diverse societal groups within the Nera-Neri community of Sahajiya Vaisnavism[26] have been recounted in many literary works. This community arranged 1300 Neris for 1200 Neras, representing inclusivity and harmony among people of different backgrounds, including women, Sudras, the illiterate, the poor, and the outcast.

Goswami (1972) pointed to the interesting disclosure that Gaudiya Vaisnavism can be categorized into two sects: the theist and the atheist. The theists, as described by the author, are those who maintain faith in the scriptural practices of *Hari-bhakti-vilasa* and consider Sri Krisna Chaitanya (Chaitanya Mahaprabhu) as the primary object of worship - adhering to traditional scriptural rituals associated with Gaudiya Vaisnavism. On the other hand, the "atheists" reject or despise traditional scriptural rituals, opting for what they perceive as a simpler and more direct path to religious practice. Emphasizing a rejection of casteism within the context of the religion of love, they follow the path shown by Chaitanya. According to the author, these "atheists" tend to distance themselves from ordinary life and traditional religious practices, seeking a more direct connection with the Divine through devotion to Chaitanya, who dedicated His life to God's mercy for the salvation of humanity, as **Kaviraj (1922; 1957)** pointed out. In his writings, he further anticipated that Chaitanya, following in the footsteps of religious leaders like Gautam Buddha, Mahavir, Goshala, Guru Nanak, aimed to bring about positive change, unity, and equality through His religious pursuits. On similar lines, **Singh (2021)** highlighted Chaitanya's lifetime, portraying Him as a generous and humble leader who played a crucial role in safeguarding Hinduism and human society. Drawing a parallel with Buddha, the author emphasized Chaitanya's focus on justice, ethical conduct, universal love, compassion, and self-discipline. Despite not enjoying royal patronage like Buddha, Chaitanya's greatness as a saviour transcended His contemporary era and extended into the future, primarily through the practice of naam-sankirtan. According to the author, the Gaudiya mission successfully positioned Chaitanya on the global stage as a saint, propagating the ideals of Gaudiya Vaisnavism internationally. In contrast to Buddha,

who received respect and faith through royal support from Maurya, Kushan, and Pala kings, Chaitanya's Gaudiya Vaisnavism gained international recognition based on its inherent glory and universal appeal.

Chattopadhyay (1877) observed that while Chaitanya Himself may not have presented as a social reformer, His path catalyzed unprecedented social reformation in Bengal. The author noted that in the 19th century, prominent social reformers such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagara, Keshab Chandra, and Raja Rammohan Ray drew inspiration from Chaitanya's teachings. The author highlighted the context of the 19th century, when the educated urban middle class initiated feminist reform campaigns against traditional Brahmins under the influence of British ideas. Social reformists recognized the need to liberate women who had been subjugated for centuries, acknowledging that external education alone was insufficient. The author argued that Chaitanya's strong cultural and spiritual revolution simplified this crisis, positioning Him as an incarnation, social reformer, and messenger of salvation. **Sarkar (1922)** emphasized that Chaitanya's movement ushered in a positive change by actively involving women in religious practices, particularly congregational chanting and kirtans. The author pointed out that women were not merely permitted but encouraged to participate in devotional activities, considering their involvement crucial to the spiritual community. Chaitanya, according to the author, fostered a culture of respect for women within the religious framework of His tradition, granting them positions of honour and responsibility. The contributions of women to naam-sankirtan were not only valued but also recognized, so much so that housewives, too, were given the right to openly participate in such devotional activities, reflecting a more inclusive approach within the movement.

Ghosh (1907) provided valuable insights into the post-Chaitanya era of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, focusing on the widespread influence of the tradition in Bengal, particularly in regions like Sikharbhumi. Central to this expansion was Srinivas Acharya, who played a pivotal role in advancing the same. Srinivas, according to the author, actively worked to unite various sects and sub-sects of Vaisnavism that had emerged after the time of Chaitanya. Post-Chaitanya, different groups and lineages associated with prominent devotees like Nityananda and Adwaita, as well as centres like Vrindavan, had evolved distinct interpretations and practices of Vaisnavism. It was Srinivas, Ghosh contended, who played a crucial role in bridging these divides and fostering unity among the followers of Vaisnavism. **Sen (1915)** pointed out that the ideals of Chaitanya or Gaudiya Vaisnavism and its philosophy were in harmony with the

conventional law of change. According to the author, the historical influence of Gaudiya Vaisnavism has been significant, leaving a lasting impact on the religious and cultural landscape of the Indian subcontinent. Sen noted that in the 20th century, the massive advancements in science and technology, coupled with the spread of communism, posed challenges to traditional concepts related to God, soul, fate, and deliverance, including those of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. Despite these challenges, the author, through a deep analysis of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, revealed that its importance endured even in the face of social change. Sen thus emphasized that the ideals of Chaitanya transcended ages, emerging for the welfare of humanity on earth. This perspective underscores the enduring relevance of Gaudiya Vaisnavism amidst evolving societal dynamics. In this context, **Mazumdar (1973)** highlighted that the Hindus of Bengal experienced a revitalization through the example and ideals set by Chaitanya. He emphasized the moral upliftment that Chaitanya had instigated in the region, indicating the transformative impact of His teachings on the moral and spiritual fabric of the local Hindu community. Speaking of the transformation that came along courtesy of Chaitanya, the work of **Sengupta (1963)** holds special significance. Sengupta highlighted that, according to Gaudiya Vaisnava laws, even a low-caste person was considered superior to an atheist Brahmin. The author expressed the perspective that devout followers had a duty to desire and yearn for a more immediate and intimate spiritual experience, seeking to witness, touch, and sing about the grace of the deity. However, the author also acknowledged that over time, there have been fundamental changes within the framework of Gaudiya Vaisnavism based on the ideals of Chaitanya, noting about the evolution of the tradition and pointing out that not all practitioners strictly adhere to these principles. There is a recognition that the actual practice may vary among different teachers and followers. Consequently, the author indicated that, to some extent, modern-day Gaudiya Vaisnavism has undergone changes that have led to debates and discussions about how well it aligns with the ideals of simplicity and purity espoused by Chaitanya.

Chakraborty (2010) highlighted how the teachings of Chaitanya and the religious gatherings organized by Him provided a sense of deliverance and spiritual liberation, attracting various people, including those from oppressed backgrounds. The author noted how the Namasudras, a marginalized social group, found inspiration in Chaitanya's teachings and embraced Vaisnavism as a means of greater religious practice. However, the author pointed out that the actions of higher-class Vaisnava gurus and Goswamis later shattered the vision of equality and acceptance initially embraced by the Namasudras. In the 19th century, under the guidance

of leaders like Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur, the Matua religion[27] developed and spread, particularly in Odakandi village. These leaders emphasized principles of equality, friendship, and philanthropy, drawing inspiration from the teachings of Chaitanya. The author noted that the central religious advice of Guruchand and Harichand Thakur focused on establishing the autonomy of the lower-class people, reflecting their commitment to social justice and the eradication of caste-based distinctions. Through the efforts of Matua leaders and their commitment to ideals of equality and social upliftment, the Matua religion extended beyond Bengal, gaining followers across India.

The rearrangement of a country's religious and social history is a complex task, especially considering the expansive nature of the theological periphery compared to political and economic history. The history of a people is woven into their daily narrative - encompassing ideas, feelings, actions, and goals from the past to the present. However, individuals within a society are influenced by factors such as class, ethnicity, and family traditions, shaping their beliefs and behaviours, including those that are religious. The push for social progress or advancement often involves navigating through class, caste, religion, rituals, virtue, vice, morality, education, and the teachings of saints to break free from the grip of conservatism. In this context, Chaitanya's theological philosophy emerges as a simple and possibly effective approach to the search for God in that period.

2.1.4 Guruhood and Asceticism: Insights from Gaudiya Vaisnavism

Any analysis of Hindu traditions necessitates an understanding of guruhood as a foundational concept. The guru holds a crucial role in the transmission and development of the Hindu religious tradition. This role encompasses the passing on of religious knowledge and being a focal point of worship. Hinduism, characterized by its diverse social and religious life and the absence of a unified hierarchical organization, sees the guru as an integral figure in spiritual education and evolution (karma and reincarnation). Vaisnavism, as a specific sect within Hinduism, places equal emphasis on an ethical and religious way of life directed towards achieving the highest spiritual goal under the tutelage of such integral figures. To comprehend the progression of the guru as a concept in Hinduism, particularly in Vaisnavism and its Gaudiya form, this section has attempted to review some of the available literatures.

The word "guru" is pan-Indian, and its Sanskrit connotation has many historical and traditionalist implications that have far broader meanings than the commonly understood

term. It is within this broader and nuanced understanding of the term that **Mlecko (1982)** offers an etymological perspective: "gu" meaning "ignorance" and "ru" meaning "destroyer." **Gonda (1965: 240)** defines a guru as "the man who on account of his special knowledge and function was held to be a bearer of power conspicuous by his prestige, 'weight' and influence." Similarly, **Forstheofel and Humes (2005: 3)** write that in broader Hindu contexts, the guru is the individual who embodies and enacts spiritual gravitas, and thus has been viewed as "the adept, the skilled one, the preceptor, the saint, the destroyer of karma, the embodiment of god." The idea of a human being serving as a channel for divine revelation is at least as old as the Vedas, as suggested by **Singh (2000). Mahony (1997)** writes about the textual evidence in the Atharva Veda for the importance of the student-teacher relationship and its "fundamentally spiritual dimensions" from as early as 1000 BCE. Even though the earliest Vedic rishis were not gurus, per se, their words, or songs, were believed to have come from an *Eternal Source*, and over the ages, these words in the form of sacred songs, ritual instructions, and philosophical mystical teachings have been understood within Hinduism to carry with them other-worldly, divine, transformative power. However, in its earliest Sanskrit usage, the literal meaning of the word "guru" is "heavy" or "weighty." In this context, **Gold (1995:230)** writes that even if devotees of a guru might not be necessarily aware of the meaning of the word "guru," they nevertheless would "see the guru as heavy in many ways: a guru's authority is weighty; a guru's presence is imposing."

Drawing attention to the Vedic period, **Singh (1967)** asserts that the primary function of the guru was to provide instruction in various essential subjects, such as etymology, grammar, metrics, and mnemonics. Through philosophical and spiritual inquiries, the guru played a vital role in guiding the sisya (student-seeker-devotee); knowledge was predominantly transmitted orally, with minimal reliance on written texts, emphasizing the social aspect of education. The author highlights the significant value placed on accurate pronunciation and accent in Vedic recitation, emphasizing that these qualities could only be acquired through guidance from a qualified teacher. According to the Vedas, the guru was regarded as the ultimate source of knowledge and guidance for right action, making them an indispensable figure in the lives of the people. **Gonda (1965)** states that the guru in ancient India was typically a Brahmin, and students were carefully chosen from Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaisya families. The learning process heavily relied on imitation and association, and as a result, the students ideally resided in the gurukul[28], which represented the guru's extended family. The close, personal relationship between the guru and the sisya allowed the guru to

have a profound and transformative impact on the student's life. **Brent (1972),** in this regard, highlighted that the relationship between the guru and sisya was formally inaugurated through the Upanayana, a significant rite of passage in Hinduism. Drawing from the Atharva Veda (Verse 9), the author explained that the guru led the learner to a new birth during the three-day event. According to the Satapatha Brahmana[29] (Verse 4), the sisya then became dvija[30]. Following the initiation period, a twelve-year studentship with the guru commenced. However, completing this time with rigorous Vedic study likely remained an ideal, pursued most frequently by a few chosen Brahmins. All three steps involved activities of the sisya and required significant self-discipline. Thus, the period of studentship was not only a time of learning and vigorous discipline but also one of humble service to the guru.

Doniger (2009; 2014) provided insights into the meaning of gurus as found in the Rig Veda and Upanisads. According to the author, the Rig Veda (Verse 4) suggested that the guru was the source and inspiration for seekers to learn about the self or the essence of reality. The Upanisads emphasized the need for a guru, and the dialogues between Upanisadic gurus and their disciples, as Doniger noted, were didactic. The author also highlighted a subtle relationship between divinity and the guru in the Upanisads, where terms like 'Deva,' 'Bhagavan,' and **'**Isa' were used to represent the conception of Brahmin as a personal God, further noting that it was common for disciples to experience bhakti to the guru, who was seen as having attained liberation and was identified with Brahma. This relationship was mentioned as early as the Shvetasvatara Upanisad. It was also suggested that the guru's advice and wisdom were based on the spiritual path of obedience and devotion, indicating that reverence for the guru was evolving into a form of devotion similar to that of God, even before the medieval era of bhakti.

Doniger further wrote about the elucidation of the guru in the Dharmasastras, the Sastra of Manu (Verse 2) that distinguished between two types of teachers: the Upadhyaya, who taught only a portion of the Veda for his livelihood, and the Acharya, who invested the student with the sacred thread, taught the Veda with its Kalpasutras[31] (concerning sacrifices) as well as the Upanisads - all free of any charges. According to **Bhattacharya (1896),** the terms 'guru' and 'acharya' originally denoted a teacher of the Vedas. The author mentioned about gifts such as a field, gold, cows, horses, umbrellas, shoes, grain, vegetables, and garments that the sisya, who finished his education with the acharya or guru, might provide to his instructor, but not as payment. However, he also mentioned that the attributes of selflessness, devotion, and a

detached attitude toward material possessions appeared to have been fundamental components of guru conduct.

Under Manu (Verse 2), Bhattacharya further explained that the acharya was chief among all gurus, and in a significant passage in the Visnu Dharma Sastra, he was called an Atiguru (an especially venerable teacher). Citing Manu (Verse 2), the author specified that the guru was supposed to explain the scriptures to the sisya and embody them in a way that was aesthetically pleasing, clear, patient, and compassionate. The sisya performed tasks for his guru, including fetching water, collecting fuel, sweeping the area around the sacred fire, and begging for food. In essence, the author stated an association of a parental relationship between the guru and his sisya. **Spratt (1966)** elaborated on Manu's rules for the sisya's proper behaviour toward the guru whom he served. The author elucidated that the sisya must not pronounce his guru's name without an honorific title. Emphasizing from Verse 2 of the Manu, the author stated that whenever people justly censured or falsely defamed his teacher, the sisya must cover his ears or depart thence to another place. The statement suggests that the sisya who even slightly disapproves or disparages his guru will be born in a lower realm of existence in his subsequent birth.

Hindu epics assumed that gurus were necessary for both divine and human entities. **Srinivasa (1970)** mentioned about how the Visnu incarnations of Lord Rama and Lord Krisna, also had to bow down to their gurus. The author demonstrated the importance of the guru in the Ramayana when Hanuman was urged to leap as the "hero-son" of Desarin and Vayu, by the grace of the seers and gurus and consent of the elder apes in the hunt for Sita. On the other hand, **Organ (1970)** indicated nine lists of bhakti constructed by Rama which include devotion to the guru. The author showed the change in perspective regarding religious education and religious experiences which gradually evolved from the Brahmanical preservation of Vedic memory into a more popular religiosity that has diminished the immediate significance of scripture, the priest, and even the gods while elevating the importance of the teacher. Additionally, Organ analyzed the accounts of the Mahabharata, where Upamanyu (who later became the diksha guru of Krisna) and Aruni[32], were distinguished by their guru, Dhaumya Muni[33], based on exhibiting exemplary devotion to their gurus. Likewise, the author, citing from the Bhagavad Gita (Verse 4), asserted that bhakti was the worship and devotion shown to Bhagavan and that it could also be referred to as the attitude that a follower or devotee has toward his guru as the direct and personal

embodiment of the divine. Therefore, in epic literature, human personality could be seen as the primary focus, with the purely divine element existing as a subordinate force.

The strict identification of Ultimate Reality as a recognizable personality with distinct attributes rather than an amorphous being was a characteristic of the Puranic era. During the Puranic era, Hindu consciousness was infused with theistic and humanistic traits, which were manifested in poetry, art, architecture, sculpture, and daily religious practices. The idea of the avatar, as noted in previous sections, such as Krisna and Rama - is connected to the Vaisnavite Puranas (e.g., Visnu, Padma, Bhagavata). The fact that religion was focused on a human-like personality rather than a natural god or other ethereal entity was one aspect of this doctrine's significance. According to **Hazra (1940),** Krisna, the divine-human personality, has been reflected in the Visnu Purana in a variety of human relationships, including those between son and father with Nanda, child and mother with Yashoda, friend and friend with the cowherds, and beloved to lovers with the gopis. Eventually, the author realized and explained that these diverse interpersonal connections, with their corresponding human emotions (honesty, compassion, tenderness, and intense love), were forms of adoration for God. Based on the Markandeya Purana (Verse 14), Hazra asserted that these were related to proper attitudes toward parents and gurus to show how one could attain pleasures in this life as well as the next by serving them. However, those who defile those relationships were punished by the gurus.

Dasgupta (1962) expressed that a great deal of tantric practices was esoteric, secretive, and requires guru guidance. Regardless of the path, the tantric guru taught anyone who sincerely desired for 'sadhana.' The author also unfolded that intellectual knowledge or hereditary status alone was not of prime importance to a tantric guru. In the Kular Nava Tantra[34], as expounded by

Pandit (1969), tantric gurus could be categorized into six folds: *Preraka* stimulated interest in sadhana, the method of spiritual practice, by drawing attention to its beneficent results; *Suchaka* opened the eyes of the seeker to sadhana and its objective; *Vachaka* explained the method and the goal; *Darsaka* showed them in convincing detail; *Siksaka* taught step by step the discipline and details of the ritual; finally, *Bodhaka* endowed the aspirant with the necessary understanding of mind and illuminated his being with his spiritual light. The author unveiled that the tantras thus laid great emphasis on the developed and mastered abilities of the guru. The guru was consistently lauded in the highest terms and acknowledged as the

pinnacle of reality itself in nearly all of the tantras. The author denoted that the guru under tantra has extraordinary power and could be appraised as God Himself, as well as the father, the mother, and the guide.

Coming to the context of Vaisnavism, in his reading and review of the Yajnavalkya Smriti, **Srinivasa Chari (2018)** highlighted that one of the essential requirements for a Vaisnava to lead a religious life is to have a well-qualified acharya or guru. The author provided a detailed analysis of the position of an acharya in Vaisnavism. The term "acharya" refers to three people: (a) someone who studies sacred texts to gain philosophical knowledge; (b) someone who, by teaching others, helps others adopt the religious life prescribed by the sastra; and (c) someone who adheres to these rules strictly himself. On the other hand, a guru is someone who dispels ignorance regarding philosophical concepts. According to Srinivasa Chari's observation, a person seeking moksha, or ultimate freedom from slavery, required the blessings and spiritual direction of a preceptor. The author also cited that the knowledge acquired from a guru's teachings was the only kind that could be applied to the sadhana to reach the spiritual objective, contending that a spiritual seeker must speak of his guru's glory and exhibit the highest level of devotion to him. If this is not done, his spiritual knowledge will deteriorate. On similar lines, **Rukmani (2015)** suggested that the thirst for inner peace and tranquillity is a constant spiritual need, indicating the relevance of spiritual teachings from ancient times to the present day.

Barth (1882) provided elaboration on Vaisnavism, asserting that the highest deity, Narayana, is considered the most important acharya (Prathama-guru) in this tradition. Despite being the world's foremost authority, Narayana is seen as lacking a preceptor. According to the tradition, Narayana imparted the Vedas to Chatur Mukha Brahma[35], who then taught them to his sons and other people. The author mentioned that through great sages like Narada, Parasara, Suka, and Saunaka, the knowledge of Veda was disseminated. He further highlighted how Narayana took on various forms such as Matsya, Hayagriva, Nara, Narayana, and Krisna to disclose the wisdom of philosophy. With His blessings, Vyasa disseminated the Vedanta sutra and the great epic, the Mahabharata. The Guru Paramparasara Sloka[36] in the Vaisnava tradition, as the author pointed out, refers to a long line of acharyas extending from the Supreme Being to a person's guru, further emphasizing that an orthodox Vaisnava should honour this lengthy line of acharyas, extending from the individual to the Paramatman. This practice is not merely customary but mandated by scripture.

Speaking of specific spiritual gurus in Hinduism, the name of Ramkrisna Paramahansa is one of the firsts to come to mind. **Spencer (1971)** highlighted the emergence of Ramkrisna (1836-1886) and His adherents in modern times, crediting them with giving the guru widespread favourable recognition in both India and the West. Ramkrisna (born as Gadadhar Chatterji), a notable Hindu saint of the 19thcentury, was regarded by some as an avatar, as the author pointed out. Having exhibited a spirit sensitive to all religions, along with His advanced spiritual development, Ramkrisna served as a guru for a large number of individuals. The author further emphasized about Ramkrisna's manner being full of joyful vivaciousness, and His method of instruction focusing on experiencing rather than merely accumulating knowledge. This underscores the impact of Ramkrisna and His teachings on the perception and understanding of the guru in modern times. In this context, **Prabhavananda (1947)** highlighted the transformation undergone by Hinduism and the concept of guruhood through the efforts of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). The author noted that understanding traditional Hinduism required recognizing the combination of vertical paths to beatitude or liberation and the horizontal social life organization inherent in the religion. In the author's view, there was a partial liberation of these paths from the social structure in the previous century, allowing seekers from non-Hindu backgrounds to more easily seek spiritual guidance from the community's gurus without complete assimilation into Hindu society. Vivekananda's contribution to this advancement was illustrated through the establishment of Vedanta Societies in the West. After his participation in the International Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, Vivekananda continued to give lectures in the United States until 1896. He established Vedanta Societies in London, San Francisco, and New York. The author emphasized that the practice of Hindu gurus accepting foreign disciples without integrating them into the Hindu social fabric was an ongoing and evolving phenomenon. This showcased the evolving dynamics of guruhood in the modern era under the influence of figures like Vivekananda.

Obeyesekere (2014) discusses Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), a prominent figure in the Indian independence movement who was imprisoned for involvement in terrorist activities. The author reveals that during his imprisonment, Aurobindo had a transformative religious experience, achieved a state of samadhi through yoga[37], and upon release, he moved to Pondicherry to establish an ashram. In Pondicherry, Aurobindo dedicated himself to a life of study and developed a philosophical system influenced by Vedanta. According to the author, Aurobindo's spiritual path incorporated elements from yoga, tantra, and the theory of

evolution. His philosophical system, known as 'integral yoga,' aimed at progressing towards higher forms of awareness and achieving an integration of matter with spirit. Aurobindo's extensive writings on his system were primarily in English, allowing him to address an English- speaking audience both in India and the West. The author highlights the significant impact of Aurobindo's teachings and the development of his spiritual philosophy during his time in Pondicherry. **Biardeau (1989)** suggested that alongside Aurobindo, another figure from the same generation with a less prominent profile was the Tamil mystic Ramana Maharshi (1879- 1950), who resided and taught at Tiruvannamalai. According to the author, Ramana's teachings, rooted in pure Advaita, and his simple lifestyle, garnered interest and followers, particularly from Westerners. The author further observed that Ramana's teachings also served as an inspiration for several other gurus, including Nisarga Datta Maharaj, a low-caste bidi maker from Bombay, as well as 'Western' gurus like Jean Klein and Andrew Cohen, who continued to attract substantial followings, predominantly comprising Western devotees. According to **Wiener (1972),** another significant contemporary guru was Swami Sivananda (1887-1963). Initially drawn to a medical career due to his passion for service, Sivananda eventually reached the pinnacle of the medical profession. However, he decided to renounce his wealth, house, and status to become a wandering mendicant and later a sannyasi. The author noted that Sivananda spent several years living alone in the Himalayan jungles. In 1936, he founded The Divine Life Society with the aim of spreading spiritual wisdom throughout India and globally. **Singh (1973)** wrote about the notable sisyas of Swami Sivananda that included Swami Satchidananda, who later became a guru himself. Satchidananda, as mentioned by the author, regarded the concept of guru as the highest and also challenging. Additionally, the author mentioned about another guru, Muktananda, who held the belief that aspirants protected by a master skilled in spiritual matters could face even the most difficult situations fearlessly and navigate serious crises with ease. **Flood (1995)** highlighted the impact of Hindu, Buddhist, and Chinese ideas and practices on the counterculture of the 1960s, particularly in the West. The author noted that influential figures in popular culture, including the Beatles[38] and poet Allen Ginsberg[39], played a role in promoting Hindu ideas and gurus during this period. The lifting of immigration restrictions in the USA in 1965 led to a significant influx of Indian gurus to the West, including Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement, and the teenage guru Maharaji, founder of the Divine Light Mission. Other notable personalities mentioned by the author include Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, who introduced the Hare Krisna movement to the West in 1965; Swami Muktananda, founder of Siddha Yoga; and Bhagavan

Shree Rajneesh, who reinterpreted traditional Hindu views on renunciation and integrated Eastern meditation with Western psychotherapies. Some influential teachers, such as Anandamayi Ma, Satya Sai Baba, and Swami Sivananda, remained in India but had a substantial impact on followers both in India and abroad. Chaudhuri, too, mentioned about Swami Sivananda, in particular, who propagated Neo-Vedanta teachings formulated by Vivekananda, and his disciples, like Swami Chinmayananda, who established centres worldwide to continue these teachings.

Although a comprehensive survey of the guru's role throughout Indian history is beyond the scope of this study (see **Mlecko, 1982** and **Sooklal, 1990** for such surveys), it suffices to say that within certain Hindu contexts, gurus hold a unique position of spiritual leadership from which they receive intense adoration and reverence from their students. By the medieval bhakti period (c. 1000-1750 CE), "respect for the guru was evolving into a devotional form similar to that relating to worship of God" **(Sooklal, 1990: 19).** In the context of Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism, **Broo (2003: 103)** defines a guru as "a charismatic person who is offered special reverence by one or several persons on account of his awarding him/them initiation and/or especially important spiritual advice." **Sharma (1986)** mentioned that the role of the guru within the Chaitanya tradition, as in other Krisna-bhakti traditions such as the Madhava tradition, is crucial to an individual's soteriological progress. However, Daniel Gold raises a pertinent question concerning the guru's epistemic authority: "is the guru taken to be basically an exceptionally wise human being, a respected teacher of age-old traditions? Or is he or she considered first to be an instance of the embodied divine, somehow superhuman and distinct from ordinary mortals" **(Gold, 2005: 220).** As the author himself notes, this question has "far- reaching socioreligious implications" (ibid).

In order to understand the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition's epistemological framework, it is important to understand the specific role that a guru plays within it. **Broo (2003: 96)** has classified the two main categories of gurus within this tradition as 1) siksha gurus and 2) diksha gurus. The former provides spiritual instructions to their students, and the latter "initiates" or formally consecrates an individual into the Chaitanya tradition. One can possess several siksha gurus although one is supposed to have only one diksha guru. One's diksha guru can also function as one's primary siksha guru. Broo has also presented various reasons why Gaudiya Vaisnavas accept a siksha guru and a diksha guru: a) the siksha guru acts as a spiritual guide for their students, b) the diksha guru gives one the ritual and spiritual

eligibility to worship Krisna by initiating them as a student within Gaudiya Vaisnavism, c) scriptural texts such as the Bhagavat Purana (c. 9th to 10th century CE) mandate that one accept a diksha and siksha guru, d) the siksha guru acts a saviour who liberates their students from this world, and e) the acceptance of a siksha and diksha guru is a sign of humility that wins Krisna's favour **(ibid: 83–93).**

On a different note, **Bailey (1960)** provided an analysis suggesting that gurus could exhibit diverse characteristics, ranging from being utterly selfless, desiring nothing for themselves, to being greedy individuals seeking an easy living by exploiting the innocent or guilty, whom they referred to as "sisyas." The author noted that the guru-sisya relationship could also be reciprocal, with the sisya using the guru for purposes other than spiritual advancement. Spiritual advancement also includes leading an ascetic life - which is a part of almost every religion if not all. Asceticism, which is derived from the Greek word "*askeo"*, means 'to exercise' or 'to train,' is the discipline of denying one's bodily or psychological urges to achieve a spiritual ideal or objective. **Bronkhorst (2007)** divided Hindu asceticism into two main sources in his paper "Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India". These two sources are connected with the two cultures in northern India during the early period: (1) the culture of Greater Magadha and (2) Brahmanical culture. Most of the ascetic practices and ideas described in surviving Hindu literature draw upon both sources, presenting a mixture of their features. The term "Greater Magadha" referred to the area in the eastern Ganges valley during the introduction of Buddhism and Jainism. **Bronkhorst (1998)** further emphasized that the meaning of the fundamental tenet of this ideological framework was the notion of karmic retribution and rebirth, which maintained that every action one takes would have an impact on this life or the next and those who subscribed to this belief were certain that merely by existing in this world, one's inevitable rebirth whether as humans or as something else in this or another world would follow. Specifically, as per the author, all forms of asceticism that could be known to have originated in Greater Magadha were based on the wish to escape from the cycle of rebirth and karmic retributed.

Smith (2011) provided an intriguing exploration of asceticism in India, noting its association with special powers. The author found it unexpected that ascetics were credited with great mental abilities, considering the diverse mental activities in which they engaged. This observation holds true even in Buddhism and Jainism, where advanced ascetics became linked with non-mental skills, despite the emphasis on mental development within these

traditions. The author acknowledged that information about the unique abilities of ascetics in ancient India primarily came from narrative literature. This reliance on stories as a source of knowledge was not surprising, given that narratives served as a primary means of understanding prevailing views in the past. Smith highlighted a fascinating aspect of public perception, noting that individuals in the general public, when comparing ascetics, tended to attribute amazing abilities to those who captured their amazement. This tendency, according to the author, was likely irrespective of the specific ascetic movement to which the revered or feared ascetic belonged. Moreover, the author emphasized the diverse backgrounds of ascetics, suggesting that an ascetic could identify as a disciple of the Jina or the Buddha, a Brahmin committed to ascetic Brahminical living, or an ascetic detached from any specific religious current. This insight underscores the broad spectrum of asceticism in ancient India, with individuals following varied paths and affiliations. **White (2010)** explored early Sanskrit epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, highlighting the prevalence of immensely powerful Brahmins, often ascetics, whose powers surpassed those of worldly rulers and everyone else they encountered. White noted that the heroic valour of warriors in these epics paled in comparison to the ascetic powers wielded by Brahmins. From the author's perspective, these epics served as a powerful tool for the Brahmanical goal of establishing dominance in society, providing undeniable evidence to support their claims. Building on this, **Jacobsen (2011)** argued that under such circumstances, rival currents like Buddhism and Jainism felt compelled to compete, leading to the attribution of ever-greater abilities to ascetic saints within those traditions.

The historical background discussed provides insights into the motivations behind the adoption of asceticism in early India. According to **Olivelle (1998),** several driving forces compelled individuals to embrace ascetic practices. A primary motivation was the desire to avoid reincarnation and karmic repercussions, aligning with the goal of achieving ultimate Brahmanical purity. This suggests a profound spiritual dimension to asceticism, with practitioners seeking liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Olivelle also highlighted the need to escape societal constraints as a motivating factor for asceticism. Paradoxically, he noted that some individuals might choose an austere lifestyle due to social pressures, especially after austere customs had been formalized. This dual dynamic underscore the complexity of social and cultural factors influencing ascetic practices. Additionally, the author suggested that some individuals may have embraced asceticism with the aim of

acquiring supernatural abilities associated with ascetics. This hints at a diverse range of motivations, blending spiritual aspirations with a quest for extraordinary powers.

The commitment to ascetic lifestyles, often involving extreme measures and occasionally resulting in death, poses a challenge for historians seeking to understand the underlying motivations. **Olson (2015)** noted the existence of ascetic customs in various cultures, some of which lacked documented historical ties to India. While acknowledging the importance of belief systems in each ascetic tradition, Olson highlighted a critical observation. Despite the diversity of belief systems, the recurrence of comparable ascetic practices across various theoretical contexts suggests that belief systems alone might offer a limited, if any, explanation for the widespread adoption of asceticism. This insight challenges the conventional understanding that attributes ascetic practices solely to specific cultural or religious beliefs. Olson's perspective prompts a consideration of broader, possibly universal, factors that might transcend cultural and religious boundaries. The author's emphasis on the diversity of ascetic practices across different cultures underscores the need for a nuanced and comprehensive approach to unravelling the complex motivations behind ascetic lifestyles. **Bronkhorst's (2017)** paper, "Can Religion Be Explained? The Role of Absorption in Various Religious Phenomena," sheds light on key characteristics of asceticism across diverse cultures. The author noted a common thread among ascetics in various traditions - namely, a reluctance to identify with one's body and mind, coupled with a tendency to maintain distance from others, especially in challenging circumstances. One interesting observation made by Bronkhorst is the conviction held by ascetics that their inner selves are fundamentally distinct from their bodies and thoughts. This perspective aligns with certain Indian ascetic traditions. However, the author noted that this particular belief did not always accompany ascetic practices. In other words, the separation of the inner self from the body and mind was not a universal feature of asceticism. Bronkhorst suggested that specific beliefs, such as the Indian concept of karma, may not necessarily be the source of ascetic behaviours but rather their outcome. In this context, the paper implies that while certain philosophical or religious beliefs may coexist with ascetic practices, they may not be the driving force behind the adoption of austere behaviours. The relationship between beliefs and ascetic practices is complex, and the author encourages a nuanced understanding that goes beyond a simplistic cause-and-effect interpretation.

According to **Thurman (2002),** asceticism can be seen as having two ultimate goals, divided into mundane and spiritual levels. The mundane level involves ascetic practices aiming for intense and everlasting tranquillity, pleasure, or a form of eternal oblivion. On the spiritual level, asceticism purposefully strives towards the ultimate aim of a spiritual system, such as self-extinction for liberation in Buddhism or self-absorption in an all-powerful God in various religions, including Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. **Valantasis (2008)** asserted that asceticism plays a crucial role in integrating individuals into a culture. The integration occurs on various dimensions of human existence, including mental and physical, emotional and intellectual, conscious and unconscious, voluntary and involuntary, and religious and secular. According to the author, asceticism serves as a system of cultural formation, centering individuals or groups around their immediate cultural surroundings and the implicit but real system that supports them. In essence, asceticism becomes a powerful force in shaping a new identity.

The impact of modernity on ascetic practices, especially in contemporary society where religious virtues have declined, is notable. **Le Goff and Truong (2003)** highlight that asceticism has evolved from physical pain to intellectual pursuits. This transformation signifies a shift in the religious system's emphasis from the body to intellectual engagement. The scholar argues that, in the modern context, the body connects with God and flourishes through prayer, turning the expressive body into an objective, while the austere body serves merely as a tool for perfect concentration. Additionally, asceticism, though still a way of living, has lost its direct connection to salvation in contemporary times. **Jonveaux (2012)** adds that monks in the present day rarely use the term asceticism, considering it to have a negative connotation. Words like 'mortification' are deemed difficult to understand in today's world, leading them to prefer the term 'spirituality' instead. Despite a decline in the numerical adherence to primary ascetic practices like reducing sleep and fasting, asceticism remains prevalent in contemporary monastic life. Monks, adapting to secularized societies, may also enter into marital relationships to earn a living.

While the major tenets of ancient ascetic systems, such as chastity, fasting, and reduced sleep persist in monastic life, the contemporary interpretation emphasizes intellectual and spiritual pursuits over physical austerities. The body's role in asceticism remains crucial, particularly in the analysis of women ascetics within patriarchal and often misogynistic cultures. Their practices in Hinduism, for instance, provide rich material for contemporary explorations of

asceticism, underscoring the ongoing relevance of ascetic principles in shaping individual and communal lives in modern times. Thus, while traditional expectations are often challenged, they also reveal the potential for women to carve out spaces of spiritual authority. This understanding lays the groundwork for the subsequent section, which will focus on the contemporary spiritual authority of women in Hinduism, highlighting their contributions and the evolving perceptions of women's authority within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite community in Nabadwip.

2.1.5 Spiritual Authority of Women in Contemporary Hinduism

The contemporary Hindu landscape has seen evolving attitudes toward women's spiritual authority, with increasing visibility of women gurus and ascetics across various traditions. This section situates Gaudiya Vaisnavism within these broader transformations by examining how Hindu communities are navigating women's roles in spiritual leadership today. Reviewing this literature is essential to understand the external influences and shifting perceptions that might impact women's roles within the Gaudiya tradition in Nabadwip. By exploring trends and examples from other Hindu sects, the researcher has attempted to gain a comparative perspective that informs how Gaudiya Vaisnavism might align with or resist these broader changes, thus contextualizing the unique position of women gurus and ascetics in this study.

In the Hindu tradition, it is not explicitly forbidden for women to be gurus or spiritual leaders. But their relative numerical absence reveals religious mechanisms that serve to pathologize their presence outside such a leadership habitus. Renowned social anthropologist, **Meena Khandelwal (2004)** pointed out that Brahminic orthodoxy reveals its misogynous tendencies by attempting to restrict renunciation to upper caste Brahmin men. Therefore, renunciation and womanhood semiotically and experientially, are meant to denote mutually exclusive categories. In this context, **Naidu (2013)** observed that the relatively few women gurus encountered in historical records and contemporary empirical studies appear to offer a penetrating glimpse into what may be construed as a level of rupturing of a male divine teacher or leader of a tradition that is otherwise ritually and theologically sacralized for men. Naidu further posited the idea that women gurus remain 'entangled and imbricated' within implications of power and masculinized constructions of spiritual leadership. She also noted that women gurus operate within established norms of devotion and that the boundaries of context are not solid or fixed barriers that are impermeable to other textual and contextual

influences. According to Naidu, female spiritual leaders hold latent possibilities for the reorganization and reconstitution of embedded hierarchies and the architecture of gendered norms. **Charpentier (2010),** in her study, highlighted the presence of Indian women as gurus, challenging traditional views on women's roles in Hinduism. She added that these women navigate their dual roles as women and spiritual leaders, thus contributing to the reshaping of Indian religious discourse and practices. In this context, **DeNapoli (2013: 121)** has argued that women gurus enact multiple "maternal strategies" that "validate the feminine values of hearth, home, and family; domestic ideals of the highest order."

The works of **Hallstrom (1999), Lucia (2014), Rudert (2012; 2017),** and **Pechilis (2017)** among others extensively deal with Indian women gurus like Anandamayi Ma, Mata Amritanandamayi, Anandmurti Gurumaa, Sarada Devi and Gurumayi respectively. These women gurus claimed to be enlightened from birth (Anandamayi Ma and Mata Amritanandamayi), through sadhana (Anandmurti Gurumaa), and through the transfer of powers (Sarada Devi and Gurumayi) or via a combination of these elements. **Mukhopadhyay (2020)** has re-contextualized the women gurus in Hinduism by portraying through the examples of Sarada Devi and Anandamayi Ma, of how they are often seen by their devotees as the Goddess incarnate and how male ego would be completely surrendered to their spiritual authority. On the same lines, **Warrier's (2005)** work delves into devotional Hinduism within a modern context characterized by high consumerism and advanced communication technologies. It sheds light on the practices and beliefs of a rapidly growing contemporary Hindu guru faith in India, through specifically centering on Mata Amritanandamayi Mission. It highlights how devotees perceive her as an avatar and a healer who addresses the challenges of the modern world. Through ethnographic fieldwork among primarily urban, educated middle-class Indian devotees, the author provides valuable insights into emerging trends in popular Hinduism, which includes understanding how it is evolving in a post-colonial and rapidly modernizing Indian society.

DeNapoli (2023) examined the emergent leadership of two women gurus in South Asia (Mataji in Prayagraj, and Swamini in Gauriganj in Nepal) who have declared their status as Sankaracharyas (that is, heads of monastic institutions) based on revelatory experiences. This, as the author contended, aims to change perceptions of women's inferiority in Hindu society. Their self-declaration as "religious feminist influencers" break traditional patriarchal norms, paving the way for women's institutional leadership in the monastic hierarchy. The author

further observed that many gurus like Mataji and Swamini come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and so establish lineages of their own in order to give them 'a female-identified place, away from the male gaze, where they can be nurtured, learn skills, imbibe ideas beneficial to their well-being, and develop their full potential because they are women.' In another paper titled, "A Female Shankaracharya?: The Alternative Authority of a Feminist Hindu Guru in India," **DeNapoli (2019)** explored the concept of "dharmic feminism" through a similar case study, thus opening up new avenues for female authority within institutions where women have historically been marginalized (here, the Sankaracharya lineage). The paper highlights the advancement of a dharmic platform for gender equality by transforming contemporary Hinduism towards greater gender inclusivity.

The limited scholarship focused specifically on women gurus and ascetics in Gaudiya Vaisnavism highlights a critical gap in the academic discourse surrounding this important aspect of the tradition. While the researcher has tried to draw insights from related fields and adjacent studies, it remains clear that direct engagement with the experiences, roles, and contributions of these women is notably absent. This oversight emphasizes the urgent need for further scholarly exploration to illuminate the complexities and nuances of women's spiritual authority within Gaudiya Vaisnavism. Recognizing this research gap sets the stage for the forthcoming theoretical overview, which will provide a framework for understanding the interplay of gender, spirituality, and authority within the context of this tradition.

2.2 Theoretical Overview

Theories are a cornerstone in any sociological research, providing the conceptual framework and lenses through which the study's complexities are deciphered. In the context of the present research, this section, thus, is essential for contextualizing the study of women gurus and ascetics within Gaudiya Vaisnavism, particularly as it transcends the purely philosophical or theological discourse. While the examination of spiritual authority may seem inherently rooted in doctrine, situating this inquiry within a sociological framework allows for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play within the tradition in focus, particularly concerning gender roles and power structures. The goal, then, is to connect these understandings with the current research context.

2.2.1 Dynamics of Selfhood and Symbols: Mead's 'Meanings'

George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, a seminal theory in sociology, intricately examines human interaction through the lens of symbols and shared meanings. Mead posits that individuals engage in an ongoing process of social interaction, where the meaning attributed to symbols profoundly influences their understanding of the world. Central to his theory are the pivotal concepts of the "I" and the "Me." The "I" represents the spontaneous and creative aspect of the self, with individuals acting based on immediate desires and responses. In contrast, the "Me" reflects the internalized social roles, norms, and expectations acquired through socialization, illustrating the impact of societal structures on individual behaviour (Mead, 1934). In the context of the present study, Mead's symbolic interactionism can emerge as a powerful analytical tool. The "I" dimension can be crucial in exploring the personal agency of women gurus, understanding their unique perspectives, spiritual journeys, and individual responses to challenges within the given tradition. Conversely, the "Me" aspect can be considered as relevant in studying how societal influences shape their roles, by exploring how these women internalize and embody societal expectations, religious traditions, and cultural norms within the framework of Gaudiya Vaisnavism (ibid).

Although Mead did not extensively write about rituals, they can be viewed as a form of symbolic communication, where individuals engage in shared activities with meaning. In fact, the "Me" aspect, representing internalized social roles and norms, can be linked to how individuals collectively interpret and attribute meaning to rituals. For women gurus, the performance of specific rituals becomes a way of embodying their spiritual leadership and expressing their connection to the Divine. For instance, the choice of specific rituals or the adoption of particular attire by the gurus can hold deep symbolic significance. The act of performing rituals may signify their commitment to spiritual practices and their role as conduits between the Divine and the community. Besides, the attire they wear during rituals may symbolize their sovereignty, distinguishing them within the religious hierarchy. Through an interpretation of these symbolic acts, the roles and authority of women gurus can be constructed and reinforced.

2.2.2 The Transformative Space of Ritual: Turner on Transition

Victor Turner's "The Ritual Process" is characterized as expressing a broad sociological theory- an operational understanding centred on the dynamics of continuity and change. This

theory is methodologically rooted in the examination of rites that specifically deal with instances of socio-cultural and personal existential crisis. Turner's contributions to Ritual Theory are foundational, introducing concepts like "liminality" and "communitas" to elucidate the transformative power inherent in rituals (Turner, 1967). Liminality denotes the transitional phase during a ritual when individuals temporarily detach from their everyday social roles, providing a unique opportunity for a re-evaluation and potential transformation of their identities. Communitas, in contrast, signifies the sense of community and equality that emerges among participants during the ritual, fostering a shared experience that transcends usual social hierarchies.

Applying Turner's concepts of liminality and communitas can become particularly relevant in understanding the roles of women gurus and ascetics during rituals. The liminal phase, characterized by a temporary detachment from regular social roles, provides a unique space for such women to assert their spiritual authority. During rituals, women gurus particularly, may transcend traditional gender roles and assume leadership positions, challenging established norms. Communitas, on the other hand, can be fostered by the gurus who actively engage with the congregation, emphasizing shared spiritual experiences rather than hierarchical structures. For instance, if a woman guru leads a kirtan session, her active participation and leadership can redefine the communal dynamics of the ritual. The congregation, regardless of gender, may experience a sense of unity and equality as they collectively participate in the devotional practice. This challenges traditional notions of spiritual leadership being exclusively male and fosters a more inclusive and egalitarian religious community.

2.2.3 Sacred Boundaries and Social Cohesion: Durkheim's Dimensions

Emile Durkheim made profound contributions to the understanding of religion's role in society, particularly in his seminal work "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life" (Durkheim, 1915). This foundational work delves into the intricate dynamics of how religion functions as a cohesive force, fostering social integration and maintaining order within a community.

Firstly, Durkheim's conceptualization of the sacred and the profane forms the cornerstone of his sociological approach to religious institutions. He posits that societies designate certain elements as sacred, embodying collective beliefs and values that bind individuals together.

The sacred represents a realm of heightened significance and reverence, contributing to the establishment of a shared moral order within the community. Conversely, the profane encompasses ordinary, everyday aspects of life that lack such an elevated status. Secondly, rituals also play a central role in his theory, serving as key mechanisms for reinforcing the distinction between the sacred and the profane. Rituals, according to Durkheim, are collective activities that symbolize and express the sacred, creating a connection between individuals and the shared beliefs and values of the community. Through them, he contends, a sense of collective effervescence is generated.

In the present study, Durkheim's dimensions on religion can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of religious rituals and their impact on social order within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite community. Studying how women gurus engage with or change traditional rituals can provide insights into how their actions shape the community's shared understanding of what is considered sacred. For instance, an investigation of the involvement of women gurus in key religious ceremonies or festivals that are traditionally male-dominated can shed light on how their initiation and participation contribute to the shared moral and social fabric of the religious group. This could involve observing how their engagement in rituals fosters a sense of community, solidarity, and belonging among the followers. Furthermore, Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence - the shared emotional energy generated during religious rituals - prompts a consideration of how the gurus contribute to this communal experience. Studying instances where women gurus lead or innovate in rituals can offer insights into their role in generating a collective sense of excitement, devotion, and spiritual connection within the community. This act of reinterpreting or innovating in rituals aligns with Durkheim's idea that religious practices evolve and adapt over time, contributing to the continuous development of the religious life of a community.

2.2.4 Gendered Guidance: Eagly and Wood's Examination of Social Roles

Social Role Theory, developed by psychologists Alice Eagly and Linda Wood, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how societal expectations and cultural norms shape individual behaviour, particularly in the realm of gender roles (Eagly and Wood, 1999; 2012). At its core, this theory posits that social roles encompass sets of expectations and behaviours linked to specific positions within society. Individuals internalize these roles, influencing behaviour through a blend of socialization and adaptation to cultural norms. Furthermore, it is also contended that the division of labour and responsibilities between

genders is not an inherent or biologically predetermined outcome but rather a product of societal expectations and historical practices. Traditional gender roles, delineating specific tasks and responsibilities for men and women, are deeply embedded in many cultures and transmitted through socialization processes like family upbringing, education systems, and media portrayals. Many religious traditions, for example, prescribe specific functions and behaviours for individuals based on their gender. For instance, men may historically have held predominant roles as spiritual leaders and gurus, while women may have been assigned supporting roles or roles centred around domestic responsibilities. The theory suggests that individuals gradually internalize these roles as they navigate them within the religious community, principally asserting that conformation is not only due to external pressures but also as a means to secure social approval and acceptance.

Recognizing the dynamic nature of social roles, Eagly and Wood highlight that as societal expectations evolve, so do the roles individuals assume, reflecting an ongoing negotiation between cultural norms and individual agency. This becomes particularly relevant in understanding the fluidity of gender roles and how individuals respond to changing expectations within their social contexts. Women who assume the position of a guru, or even an ascetic, may face the challenge of negotiating between the traditional expectations associated with their gender and the evolving dynamics of spiritual authority. They might choose to conform to certain aspects of traditional gender roles while simultaneously redefining others. Or, they might choose to challenge traditional norms by actively participating in spiritual discourse, conducting ceremonies, and guiding the community in ways traditionally reserved for male practitioners. This internalization or challenge of traditional gender roles can impact not only the perception of a woman guru or ascetic in the Gaudiya Vaisnavite community but also influence her own sense of identity and agency. The theory, in this context, can thus depict how these women negotiate their roles, balance societal expectations, and contribute to the evolving landscape of gender dynamics in Nabadwip.

2.2.5 Agency and Structure: Giddens' and Bourdieu's Grounded Dualities

Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, offers an exhaustive framework for understanding the interrelationship between agency and structure in social life. At the core of Giddens' theory is the idea that individuals are not passive subjects shaped solely by social structures, nor are they entirely free agents detached from the

constraints of society. Instead, he posits a recursive relationship between agency and structure, where individuals actively contribute to the creation and reproduction of social structures, while these structures simultaneously shape and enable individual actions. This "duality" emphasizes that structures are both the medium and outcome of human actions (Giddens, 1984). "Structuration," then, involves the recursive production and reproduction of social practices through the interplay of rules and resources, constituting the fabric of social systems (ibid). Agents draw upon existing rules and resources to engage in practices, and through these practices, they modify the rules and resources, contributing to the ongoing structuration process.

This redefinition of gender roles is a crucial aspect in this study where the agency of women gurus and ascetics manifests within the Giddensian framework. Through their agency, they may introduce alternative models of authority, emphasizing inclusivity, compassion, and a departure from hierarchical structures. This active participation in reshaping the normative structure reflects the ongoing structuration process, where the subjects can actively contribute to the formation and transformation of social practices within the religious tradition.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice also helps in an understanding of this dynamic reciprocity. At the core of this theoretical framework is the concept of "habitus," a set of embodied dispositions, preferences, and internalized structures acquired through socialization (Bourdieu, 1977). It further shapes individuals' perceptions, decisions, and actions in alignment with the norms and values of their social context. This internalized structure, however, is dynamic, adapting to changing social conditions and influencing individuals in a largely unconscious manner. Individuals, then, actively contribute to the creation and reproduction of social structures through their practices - which then become sites where they engage in the ongoing processes of structuration (Bourdieu, 1990). There is a potential for the practices to be contested, as Bourdieu contends, thus offering avenues for social change and the redefinition of habitus. The women in this study, for instance, may not passively adopt pre-existing roles but actively reinterpret them, contributing to the evolving nature of gender dynamics within the tradition. By studying the ways in which they enact, challenge, or modify traditional roles, the researcher has attempted to show how their unique habitus fosters subtle shifts in gender norms. Through their practices, they can possibly negotiate identity and authority, which may invite social change by subtly contesting the patriarchal elements of Gaudiya Vaisnavism.

2.2.6 Constructing Consciousness: Berger and Luckmann's Basis

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's theory of "The Social Construction of Reality" is rooted in the foundational premise that reality is not an inherent, fixed entity but is actively constructed through human interaction, shared meanings, and linguistic expressions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This perspective challenges traditional viewpoints that posit reality as an objective and pre-existing truth awaiting discovery. The dynamic nature of their theory is exemplified by the assertion that reality is subject to continual negotiation and modification by individuals through their shared interpretations and communicative practices. Reality, thus, becomes an ongoing negotiation that aligns with the idea that societal context plays a crucial role in shaping collective understandings. As individuals engage in social interactions within specific contexts, shared meanings emerge, contributing to the continuous evolution of reality. This dynamic and interactive process, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals actively participate in the construction of the social reality they experience (ibid).

In the context of this study, this framework becomes particularly relevant when examining how the roles and experiences of the participants are socially constructed. Narratives, linguistic expressions, shared beliefs, and discourses - all play a crucial role in this construction, (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 2015). Analyzing narratives within Gaudiya Vaisnavism, found in sacred scriptures, oral traditions, or communal discussions, becomes essential to understanding the construction of the roles of women practitioners. Furthermore, the language employed in religious texts, rituals, and everyday discourse will be beneficial in understanding the community's cognizance and recognition of the roles played by women in spiritual authority. Additionally, examining shared beliefs within the tradition can provide an understanding of how their roles are socially constructed within the community.

2.2.7 Feminist Forces: Beauvoir's Boundaries and Friedan's Framework

Simone de Beauvoir's ground-breaking work, "The Second Sex," unfolds a multifaceted theory addressing the status of women in society. Published in 1949, this influential piece holds a pivotal place in feminist philosophy and existentialist thought (Moi, 2008). Within an existentialist framework influenced by her philosophical partner Jean-Paul Sartre, Beauvoir argues that existence precedes essence, emphasizing that women are not born with a

predefined essence but are shaped by their experiences and societal roles. She contends that women, historically treated as the "other" in relation to men, perpetuating their marginalization, reinforces their status as the secondary sex, contributing to social and existential inferiority. She further delves into how societal norms, cultural expectations, and historical traditions contribute to constructing femininity, positing that women are often assigned roles based on cultural and societal norms rather than individual capacities.

By critically examining traditional institutions like marriage and motherhood, Beauvoir notes that these roles often limit women's freedom and autonomy. She challenges the idea that women find fulfilment solely through these roles, advocating for women to independently define their lives. Additionally, she scrutinizes cultural and religious influences, exploring their role in perpetuating the subjugation of women (Simons, 1999). She, thus, calls for women to break free from societal expectations and define their existence, urging a radical transformation of gender relations and encouraging them to embrace their freedom and responsibility as individuals (Deutscher, 2008). A central aim of the work is to challenge patriarchal structures and advocate for women's liberation, presenting a comprehensive analysis of women's condition in society.

Beauvoir's scrutiny of traditional institutions and roles such as marriage and motherhood is pertinent in religious contexts, where gender norms might influence the perceived legitimacy and agency of women in spiritual roles. The emphasis on women independently defining their lives can encourage an examination of how women gurus navigate and redefine their identities within the religious framework of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, where women may have been historically associated with specific roles as wives and mothers. This resonates with the broader goal of understanding how these women exercise agency and challenge gender norms.

Along the same lines, Betty Friedan's seminal work, "The Feminine Mystique," published in 1963, presents a novel theory that deeply influenced the feminist movement and ignited a conversation about the role of women in post-World War II American society. The theory revolves around the concept of the "feminine mystique," a societal ideal that confined women to the role of the happy housewife and mother, perpetuating the notion that true fulfilment could only be found in domesticity. This mystique, as Friedan argues, stifled women's intellectual and personal growth, leading to a sense of dissatisfaction and unfulfillment among many of them. She criticizes the narrow focus on consumerism and the idealization of

the nuclear family, emphasizing that women were seeking more meaningful and intellectually stimulating lives beyond the confines of traditional gender roles (Friedan, 1963).

Friedan's work also delves into the societal pressures that propelled women into a narrow mold, hindering their potential for self-actualization. The theory presented in "The Feminine Mystique" posits that women's aspirations and capabilities were systematically undervalued and overlooked, contributing to a larger pattern of systemic gender inequality. Furthermore, the text serves as a catalyst for the second wave of feminism, inspiring women to challenge and dismantle the constraints imposed by the feminine mystique. It calls for the re-evaluation of societal norms, encouraging women to pursue education, careers, and self-discovery beyond the confines of domesticity.

The theory of the feminine mystique carries profound relevance when applied to the present study. The call to break free from restrictive roles, a central theme in Friedan's work, aligns with the objective of the present study. By challenging traditional gender norms, the participants in this study may have the potential to pave the way for others to seek more meaningful and intellectually stimulating roles within the religious context. Furthermore, the emphasis on the collective nature of dissatisfaction among women, forming a shared sentiment, can provide a foundation for understanding the experiences of women gurus and ascetics as a collective challenge, which may involve shared struggles and aspirations that will be eventually discussed.

2.2.8 Intersection of Identities: Crenshaw's Call and Lorde's Lens

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is a pivotal contribution to feminist thought, emphasizing the interconnected nature of social identities and their impact on individuals' experiences. At its core, intersectionality challenges the simplistic and compartmentalized approach often taken in analyzing social categories. In particularly addressing the experiences of Black women, Crenshaw recognized that the unique challenges faced by individuals could not be adequately understood by examining a single dimension, such as race or gender, in isolation (Crenshaw, 1989). Individuals simultaneously navigate various social categories, the convergence of which creates a complex matrix that influences how individuals are positioned within societal structures. It acknowledges that an individual's experience of privilege or oppression is not determined by a single identity but results from the interlocking dynamics of multiple identities. For instance, when considering a woman's experience,

intersectionality recognizes that her encounter with gender discrimination is entangled with other aspects of her identity, such as race or class.

Nabadwip, being a historically significant centre for Gaudiya Vaisnavism, has its own set of social, cultural, and religious dynamics. The application of intersectionality becomes crucial in unravelling the complexities of how gender, caste, and other identities intersect and impact the roles, agency, and societal perceptions of women gurus and ascetics in this specific geographical and cultural context. The relevance of intersectionality lies in its ability to provide a more accurate understanding of the challenges and opportunities for these women participants in Gaudiya Vaisnavite Nabadwip. Furthermore, in considering the intersection of identities, the study can aim to uncover potential disparities, biases, and power dynamics that might otherwise remain obscured.

Expanding upon the above foundations, Audre Lorde, a renowned Black feminist, poet, and scholar, also made significant contributions to intersectional feminist theory, emphasizing the importance of an inclusive and holistic understanding of identity. Her contributions to the issue can be understood through her concept of the "mythical norm," where she critiques the tendency in society to uphold a singular, often white, heterosexual, cisgender, and able-bodied identity as the norm. This mythical norm excludes and marginalizes individuals who deviate from these perceived standards (Lorde, 1984). Lorde's inclusive understanding of identity can allow for a recognition of the diversity within the population under study, for it is not uncommon or unlikely for women in spiritual roles to encompass a range of identities beyond gender, including race, caste, socio-economic background, and regional affiliations. There lies a possibility to go beyond essentialist notions and stereotypes while studying the cases, that will not only encourage an exploration of individual stories but also allow for a richer understanding of the diverse backgrounds, struggles, and triumphs within this spiritual community.

2.2.9 Dialectical Dissection: Adorno's Axiom

Theodor Adorno's "Negative Dialectics" represents a profound departure from conventional philosophical approaches, challenging the tendency of philosophical systems to oversimplify the complexities of reality (Adorno, 1983). In his critique, Adorno takes aim at the traditional dialectical thinking that often seeks resolution and reconciliation of contradictions, asserting that this process tends to reduce the richness of lived experience. He scrutinizes the ways in

which cultural products, ideologies, and societal structures contribute to the suppression of individuality and the imposition of conformity. Negative dialectics, thus, emerges as a form of critical thinking that embraces the non-identical - acknowledging and engaging with the inherent contradictions and complexities present in the world.

Within Gaudiya Vaisnavism, there exists a tension between traditional norms that may prescribe specific roles for women, often associated with familial and domestic responsibilities, and the evolving roles of women as spiritual gurus and/or ascetics. Adorno's approach can help in exploring these tensions without hastily reconciling contradictions. By adopting a negative dialectical perspective, oversimplification of challenges such women encounter can be resisted and an understanding of the nuances of how these women navigate and redefine their roles in a male-dominated tradition can be gained. A pre-mature categorization of the participants within predefined frameworks can, thus, be avoided, since adopting a negative dialectical perspective can help understand how these women negotiate their identities within the religious framework, without necessarily conforming to Western feminist categories. This openness to contradiction and ambiguity can enable a more authentic portrayal of the challenges and triumphs experienced by women practitioners in Gaudiya Vaisnavism.

2.2.10 Charisma in Command: Weber's Way

Max Weber, in his typology of legitimate authority, introduces the idea of charismatic authority that stands apart from the traditional and the legal-rational forms, and relies on the extraordinary qualities and personal magnetism of an individual (Weber, 1978). This concept of charisma holds significant relevance in the study of leadership dynamics, particularly in religious contexts. The enduring influence of charismatic authority can be observed in the foundational leaders of major world religions. For instance, figures like Jesus Christ, Buddha, or even Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu are considered charismatic leaders whose teachings and experiences contributed to the establishment of enduring religious movements (Armstrong, 1993).

Weber emphasizes the dynamic nature of charismatic authority, suggesting that it often emerges in times of societal crises or upheavals. However, its continued impact is contingent on the leader's ability to maintain the perception of extraordinary qualities among their followers (Weber, 1978). In this study, applying this theory is foremost relevant when

studying the historical and religious context of Gaudiya Vaisnavism in conjunction with the role of Chaitanya, whose life, characterized by intense devotion, ecstatic experiences, and the dissemination of sankirtan, aligns with the traits of a charismatic leader as outlined by Weber. This perspective enables a deeper understanding of the charismatic dimensions within the historical foundations of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, informing the broader context of the present study. Applying Weber's lens can help to understand how women gurus embody charismatic qualities, and whether their leadership gains recognition and acceptance based on these extraordinary attributes. But considering traditions being deeply rooted in cultural and gender norms, challenges in asserting this kind of leadership cannot be repudiated.

2.2.11 Asceticism and Authority: Weber's Worldview and Harpham's Heterodox

Max Weber's theory of asceticism, formulated in the early 20th century, delves into the sociological and economic aspects of ascetic practices. In his work, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," Weber explores the idea of inner-worldly asceticism to comprehend the rise of capitalism. He examines the relationship between the workforce's development, the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on wealth, the Protestant concept of living in the world (as opposed to Catholic monks who withdrew), and the doctrine of predestination. Hereby, he views asceticism as a "methodically controlled and supervised" conduct that involves remodelling the economic world based on theological principles, creating the necessary work force, fostering the required subjectivity, and justifying the preferred lifestyle (Weber, 1930).

Weber revisits the concept of asceticism in his work "The Sociology of Religion." Within the context of paths to salvation, he interconnects three elements of asceticism: the particular path of salvation, particular human conduct, and the means of training in that conduct. Transitioning from an economic perspective to the realm of sociology of religion, Weber places methodically controlled behaviour within the teleological path towards salvation. The particular goal of salvation and the process of achieving sanctification are born from a regimen, both psychic and physical, aimed at controlling and instilling in an individual an anti-instinctual response, all subordinated to the religious objective (Weber, 1963). Asceticism, in this context, is characterized as "a methodical procedure for achieving religious salvation." In view of this, Weber identifies asceticism as either world-rejecting, signifying salvation through withdrawal from the world, or inner-worldly, indicating salvation achieved through active participation in the world while rejecting its institutions.

In the context of the present study, where women ascetics often lead a household life without complete renunciation, Weber's worldview becomes particularly relevant. Ascetics in this tradition engage in methodically controlled behaviours to achieve spiritual goals, participating in the world while adhering to specific principles. The regulation of behaviours within the household setting aligns with ascetic principles aimed at achieving salvation while actively participating in the world. Another significant facet to consider is the role of ascetic women in community building. By leading household lives, they contribute to the creation of a tight-knit religious community. Engaging in daily activities such as cooking, cleaning, and nurturing familial relationships, these ascetic women become integral components of a community with shared spiritual values. The household, instead of being a retreat from the world, then becomes a centre for communal bonds and spiritual growth. Economically, too, the ascetic practices of the respondents warrant exploration, because the researcher has come across cases that often balance their spiritual pursuits with artistic endeavours or educational initiatives. This dual engagement exemplifies the compatibility of ascetic principles with economic contributions, challenging traditional dichotomies between asceticism and worldly responsibilities.

In Geoffrey Harpham's exploration of asceticism, particularly outlined in his work "The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism," asceticism has been defined as a bridge connecting different cultural landscapes, providing a shared foundation for meaningful interaction. This perspective resonates with the notion that ascetic practices, characterized by self-denial and discipline, constitute a universal component of cultural integration. Harpham posited that existence within a culture necessitates a degree of self-denial, aligning with the traditional understanding of asceticism as a practice rooted in restraint and discipline (Harpham, 1987). He further contended that the resistance to appetites and desires is crucial for cultural integration and functionality. This assertion parallels Michel Foucault's exploration of the ethical dimensions of culture, which underscores the importance of self-denial as a requisite for individuals to coexist harmoniously within a cultural framework (Foucault, 1983). By framing asceticism within these theoretical contexts, we gain a deeper understanding of its role in shaping cultural dynamics and individual behaviour.

However, in Harpham's framework, asceticism does more than fostering individual discipline; it structures oppositions without collapsing them, giving rise to the concept of anti-culture. This implies that ascetic practices not only contribute to the formation of cultural

norms but also create spaces for resistance and alternative cultural expressions. Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist approach can be relevant here, emphasizing how asceticism can be both a stabilizing force and a source of subversion within cultural systems.

Harpham's proposition that asceticism structures oppositions without collapsing them can become particularly relevant in this study, since the ascetic participants in it not only challenge existing cultural norms, but also create spaces for alternative expressions within the community. This dual role is particularly critical for understanding how women ascetics navigate and negotiate their positions within a predominantly patriarchal framework.

Furthermore, employing Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist approach enables a nuanced exploration of the layers of meaning embedded in the ascetic practices of these women, which may seek to uncover how their practices deconstruct traditional narratives surrounding femininity, spirituality, and societal roles, thereby offering fresh perspectives that challenge the status quo.

By positioning the study within established frameworks of the theories discussed above, the researcher endeavours to understand how the respondents in her study navigate their roles, challenge societal norms, and contribute to the transformative potential within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition. The deliberate consideration of asceticism as a theoretical lens adds an extra layer of depth to this part, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the intentional behaviours the women ascetics exhibit within the broader sociological context of Nabadwip. However, studies on the unique experiences and contributions of women practitioners in Gaudiya Vaisnavite Nabadwip remain largely underexplored, pressing the need for further inquiry into the delicate intersections of gender, spirituality, and socio-cultural dynamics. The next section will, thus, attempt to identify the research gaps.

2.3 Research Gaps

At the heart of this study lies a significant research gap concerning women gurus in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, primarily stemming from a lack of direct literature specifically addressing this phenomenon. While scholarly discourse on Hinduism, Vaisnavism, and Gaudiya Vaisnavism is extensive, there exists a marked absence of focused exploration into women's spiritual leadership within these traditions, particularly in the context of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. Although notable works, such as Mans Broo's (2003) study on gurus in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, provide foundational insights, they do not adequately address the roles and contributions of

women gurus, thereby leaving a substantial void in the literature. Despite scholarly contributions from authors like Marie-Therese Charpentier (2010), Antoinette DeNapoli (2013), and Maheshvari Naidu (2013), which touch upon the challenges Indian women as religious leaders face, these works do not delve deeply into the nuances of their spiritual authority. The complexities of their experiences, the societal challenges they confront, and their impact on their communities remain largely unexamined. Consequently, the understanding of women gurus in Gaudiya Vaisnavism is fragmented and lacks the subtle insights necessary for meaningful analysis and interpretation. The scant literature that does engage with their roles often relegates these women's experiences to the margins of scholarly discourse, reinforcing a cycle of invisibility.

In addition, a parallel research gap exists concerning the representation and documentation of women ascetics within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition. While the works of Robert Alexander Farrar Thurman (2002), Carl Olson (2015), and Johannes Bronkhorst (2017) explore asceticism's evolving nature and its relationship with various spiritual practices, there is a dearth of resources specifically addressing the experiences of women ascetics. Notable exceptions, such as the writings of Keay (1931) and certain sections of O.B.L. Kapoor's (2007) work, offer limited insights into the social contexts that shape women's ascetic practices. These women, often situated within domestic spheres, navigate a precarious balance between their spiritual pursuits and worldly responsibilities. The lacuna not only constrains understanding of the diverse paths available to women practitioners but also hinders a study of their potential to evolve into gurus.

Furthermore, the research gaps in this area are compounded by the complexity of intersecting factors such as gender, spirituality, authority, and tradition. This demands a tailored theoretical framework, yet such frameworks are notably absent in sociology. While feminist theory, intersectionality, social constructionism, symbolic interactionism, critical theory, and others offer insights into the labyrinthine of gender and spirituality, illuminating how societal norms, power dynamics, and social constructions influence the experiences of women practitioners in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, the entrenched patriarchal structures and hierarchical power dynamics within this tradition may present distinct challenges for women aspiring to spiritual leadership roles, which no single theory or combination thereof may fully encompass.

Thus, the absence of dedicated scholarship on women gurus and ascetics in Gaudiya Vaisnavism perpetuates a cycle of erasure and marginalization, reinforcing stereotypes and misconceptions about women's roles and capabilities in spiritual contexts. Overlooking the lives and experiences of these women undermines their agency and autonomy, while simultaneously perpetuating narratives that exclude them from positions of influence. This perpetuation not only hampers women's spiritual development but also deprives communities of the diverse perspectives and insights that women gurus bring to their spiritual practices. In light of these pressing research gaps, it is essential to prioritize the amplification of women's voices and experiences within Gaudiya Vaisnavism. By addressing these gaps, this research aims to contribute meaningfully to the existing literature, fostering a more inclusive understanding of spiritual authority within Gaudiya Vaisnavism.

Endnotes

[1]Also known as the Laws of Manu and traditionally attributed to the sage Manu, it is the most authoritative text of the Hindu code (Dharmasastras) in India. It outlines the code of conduct and laws for individual and society according to Hindu principles.

[2]A medieval Hindu text attributed to Tryambakayajvan, a pundit from Thanjavur. It outlines the expected roles and conduct of women within the traditional Hindu household.

[3]A Hindu festival, especially celebrated in Bengal, dedicated to Kartik - the god of war and son of Shiva and Parvati.

[4]Devi, or the Divine Mother.

[5]Wife of sage Yajnavalkya, renowned for her intellectual curiosity and contributions to Vedantic philosophy.

[6]A classical Sanskrit text of ancient Indian tales, compiled by Somdev. It translates to "Ocean of the Streams of Stories" and contains narratives on morality, adventure, and romance that have influenced Indian storytelling traditions.

[7]An order of monasticism founded by Adi Sankaracharya, categorized into ten divisions.

[8]A Vaisnavite sect founded by the saint Ramananda, primarily focused on the worship of Lord Rama.

[9]Members of the Baul community, known for their unconventional practices and songs of divine love and liberation.

[10]Devotees of the Ramavat sect which is dedicated to the worship of Lord Rama, particularly in the Indian state of Rajasthan. They are known for their practice of carrying Lord Rama's image in a cradle (gharbhar) during processions and rituals.

[11]A reference to Karaikkal Ammaiyar, one of the earliest female saints in Tamil Saivism.

[12]A female ascetic or yogini in Hindu and tantric traditions, often devoted to Lord Shiva.

[13]Also known as Lingayats, refers to a significant religious and socio-political movement that emerged in the 12th century in Kalyani, located in the present-day Indian state of Karnataka. Virasaivism promotes a monotheistic devotion to Lord Shiva and rejects caste hierarchies.

[14]A spiritual ascetic who has transcended all worldly attachments and conventions.

[15]Rajput prince and the husband of Mirabai, who is famed for her devotion to Krisna.

[16]A 17th century Marathi saint-poet known for his *Abhanga* devotional poetry dedicated to *Vithoba* (Krisna). He is a key figure in the Bhakti movement and is celebrated for his egalitarian spirituality.

[17]A philosophical school of Vedanta founded by Ramanuja, which advocates Vishishtadvaita, or qualified non-dualism.

[18]A concept in Vaisnavism describing the single-minded devotion to one deity, typically Visnu or Krisna, as a path to spiritual fulfilment.

[19]The divine energy of bliss, personified by Radha, who represents Krisna's spiritual pleasure potency.

[20]A traditional Sanskrit school, prominent in regions like Bengal, where ancient scriptures and Hindu philosophy are studied.

[21]A classical work on Sanskrit grammar. Ancient texts like this served as foundational guides for learning Sanskrit and interpreting Vedic scriptures.

[22]Sanskrit literary works, often poetic, that express high aesthetics and storytelling.

[23]The spiritual preceptor of Chaitanya.

[24]Legendary characters in Gaudiya Vaisnavism who, though initially notorious, were transformed by the grace of Nityananda and Chaitanya, symbolizing the power of divine forgiveness.

[25]A lineage representing 'the family of the Lord.'

[26]A sect within the Sahajiya tradition of Vaisnavism that emphasizes on the union of male and female principles through unconventional practices. For more, refer to: *Sarkar, A. Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu of Nabadwip: The Spiritual Teacher and a Great Saint of India. Journal of People's History and Culture, International, ISSN: 2395-7379.*

[27]A devotional movement founded by Harichand Thakur in Bengal, focusing on egalitarian values and devotion to a personal god. Matua emphasizes social equality and empowerment of marginalized communities.

[28]An ancient Hindu educational system where students live with their teacher (guru) in a communal setting, receiving holistic instruction, typically in spiritual, philosophical, and practical subjects.

[29]A prose text associated with the Shukla Yajur Veda, offering ritual explanations, myths, and insights into early Hindu cosmology and theology.

[30]Twice-born.

[31]Ancient Sanskrit texts that provide guidelines on rituals, duties, and sacrifices, forming the basis of Vedic ritualistic practices.

[32]An ancient sage mentioned in the Upanisads, known for his teachings on metaphysics and for his dedication to Vedic knowledge. He is often cited for his profound insights in the Chhandogya Upanisad.

[33]A revered Vedic sage and mentor to the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata*.

[34]A prominent tantric text that elaborates on the principles and practices of the Kaula tradition, focusing on spiritual transformation through esoteric practices.

[35]Refers to the four-faced Brahma, the creator god in Hindu cosmology. Each face is believed to represent one of the four Vedas, symbolizing knowledge and creation.

[36]A traditional verse that honours the lineage of spiritual teachers (guru parampara), emphasizing the continuity of knowledge and devotion across generations.

[37]A state of deep meditative absorption or union with the Divine, achieved through advanced yogic practice. In Hindu and yogic philosophy, *samadhi* is considered the ultimate stage of spiritual realization.

[38]The legendary British rock band whose members became interested in Indian spirituality and visited Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in the 1960s, popularizing Transcendental Meditation and Indian philosophy in the West.

[39]An American poet of the Beat Generation who developed an interest in Eastern spirituality, including Hinduism and Buddhism. Ginsberg's visits to India influenced his writing and spiritual outlook, especially regarding the practice of chanting.

Chapter 3

Seeds of Spiritual Transformation: Early Influences and Life-Paths

Nutanajaladharaya GopabadhuTidukulacouraya Tasmai Krisna Namaha

Sansaramahiruhasya Vijaya

(Bhasaparichheda, Karika 1.1)

In hue of the new clouds of rains, stealer of the adornments of the gopabadhus, Thou Krisna is the seed of the tree called 'samsara'

The metaphor of the 'seed' as a potential space for development is a repetitive trope within Vaisnava tradition, representing the latent capacity within each individual for spiritual growth and transformation. As is obvious from the above quote, the structure is supported by the positing of Lord Krisna Himself as the foundational "seed" from which the universe is engendered. Notably, the portrayal of child Krisna stealing the adornments of the *gopabadhus* (wives of cowherds) serves as a vivid illustration of this concept. The adornments, often interpreted as symbols of worldly attachments or the 'veneer of ignorance,' represent the illusions and distractions that obscure one's true spiritual essence. Krisna, in His playful and mischievous act, symbolically strips away these external layers, emphasizing the need to transcend ignorance in order to realize one's inherent spiritual potential. Such metaphors are relevant in illustrating the dual importance of divine grace and personal effort in the spiritual journey. While the 'seed' symbolizes the initial divine spark within each individual, its growth requires both Krisna's guidance and the devotee's dedication to cultivating a life aligned with spiritual principles.

Early influences are often the seeds on the basis of which later developments of life are directed. This is true for all, but most significant for lives that take a religious turn later on. Many theorists suggest that an individual's image of God is often formed early in life, with relationships to parents playing a particularly influential role in shaping a child's spiritual development (Richert and Barrett, 2005; Hertel and Donahue, 1995). Religion is frequently viewed as a means of sanctifying familial relationships, with the bond between parents and children serving as a foundational influence on spiritual formation. To this end, most religions, particularly the major world religions emphasize the importance of early religious education, encouraging parents and family members to invest considerable time and effort in nurturing their children's religious and spiritual growth. Within the Brahminical tradition,

there is a clear advocacy of this practice. The Upanayana, a sacred rite of passage, marks the initiation of a young child, particularly boys, into Vedic learning and spiritual responsibilities. Despite the educational system having undergone significant transformations over the centuries - shaped by various social, political, and cultural forces - the ritualistic framework of such practices remains strongly adhered to.

The situation is not different for the Gaudiya Vaisnava sampradaya as well, which continues to maintain vestiges of Brahminism strongly. Under such circumstances, due to strong family cultures and religious training alongside formal education, life experiences are usually seen to be a significant experience in the growth of one's spiritual life. A particular branch of sociological analysis known as life-history theory makes a thorough analysis of this experiential aspect of religion in one's early life based on detailed report gathering of the psychological aspects of individual growth, (Baumard and Chevalier, 2015) studying how organisms adaptively allocate resources in the face of trade-offs between different life-goals. The examination of early religious intervention provides insight into how it influences psychological responses to life-goals in adulthood. Individuals who were raised in religious environments tend to interpret certain formative experiences as "explorations" - pathways for personal and spiritual growth aligned with their religious framework. In contrast, those without a religious background may interpret similar experiences as "exploitation," viewing them through a lens shaped by different values or a lack of structured spiritual guidance.

As is clear from the above statements, education plays a very important role in the biographical development of an individual. Often it is a negotiation with the formal type which is expected to open up avenues for employment, or at least a degree of social status and authority in a practical sense, because of its wide acceptance and governmental endorsement. This tension was evident in the field interviews with women gurus and ascetics, where the dilemma extends beyond the personal to the state level. The Indian Constitution's strong secular stance discourages overt religious education in conventional schools, yet this gap is filled by family-based religious instruction at an individual level. This dynamic highlight a division of values - formal education serves practical needs such as career prospects and social recognition, while religious education fosters moral development and guides social interactions. For families which are strongly religious or have strong communal bonds leading to aspects like hereditary guruhood, the relative balance is often negotiated in myriad ways.

This also defines the aspect of legacy within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition. In Hinduism, legacy can be understood in various ways. Traditionally, legacy-building in most world religions follows tenets, sacred texts, spiritual teachers or prophets, and the community or sampradaya in concurrence with Prothero's four-part structure of religion (Prothero, 2010). Each of these elements contributes to the holistic formation of a legacy. However, unlike most world religions, Hinduism features a multifarious textual tradition comprising both authoritative texts and extensive commentaries to them, leading to the formation of various denominations. What this research has revealed is the formation of family-based denominational units within the wider fold of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, which can be referred to as "micro-legacies" - where the family becomes the central unit, exerting greater influence on the transmission of religious norms and practices than the larger denominational structure rooted in authoritative texts and the divinity of Chaitanya and His close associates. In fact, the field interviews clearly establish that despite sampradaya-based divergences, there appears to be a kind of regular pattern in which the aspect of legacy works within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite fold, whereby the family remains as a kind of unquestioned and absolutely significant factor. Guruhood is inherited either through a direct line of descent or often through marriage into the family. It is significant to note that marriage, here, often implies leaving behind one's own familial legacy and contributing to the legacy of the family an individual marries into, which will be discussed in details in the next chapter.

What the above represent are well set within a grid of continuity. However, there are also facets which lead to breakages. These breakages and fissures within the greater narrative of continuity is also important in understanding the emergence of Gaudiya Vaisnavite guruhood from a subjective position. The first of these is the aspect of *swapnadesh* and the second is the aspect of migration. While the first is a breakage in the internal aspect of life development, the latter represents an external rupture in life and family, involving geographical relocation. What is important, however, is the way in which one often intercepts with the other in shaping the overall trajectory of an individual guru's life and spiritual evolution.

Dreams in Hindu belief is the second state of consciousness, the first being the wakeful state. The Mandukya Upanisad, which enumerates the four states of consciousness does not consider dream as something structurally different from the wakeful state, but something that is a transition of the same. The same moves to the third state of deep sleep and the fourth, the

turiya[1], which implies release from all these states where consciousness remains as it is – a state desired by all ascetics. The hierarchical movement ensures that the dream state is not an imagined state but one that is divine and brings us closer to the truth of things as compared to the illusions that baffle our outward senses in the wakeful state (The Mandukya Upanisad with Sankara's Commentary, 2006). In certain Hindu traditions, dreams are viewed as illusions created by Visnu (Shulman and Stroumsa, 1999), with the entire cosmos considered the dream of Visnu Himself, who is asleep in His yogic slumber. Given this kind of mystic legacy, it is no doubt that revelations through dream, or swapnadesh, play an important role in Vaisnava thought. As a matter of fact, quite a few cases of this study were directly influenced by the emergence of dreams and instructions received therein. Though there are established psychoanalytic ways in which these dreams can be analyzed, yet unless the way in which the subjects and the community they belong in are taken into account while analyzing the dreams, a proper access to the embodiment of this factor cannot be intervened. So, that forms an important part of discussion, more so because this internal change also informs an external one, which means change of place by moving from one geographical location to another. This leads to the aspect of migration, often guided by factors foreign and unknown, or beyond one's means. In spiritual parlance, however, this is often viewed not only as a physical displacement but also as an internal journey, or *yatra*, on which all sects of Vaisnavism lay great stress. What remains to be seen is whether migration to Nabadwip can be romanticized as a cakewalk to spiritual fulfilment - which will be presented in a detailed analysis in a later section of this chapter.

3.1 Planting of Seeds: Early Life Experiences

Feminist scholars have long argued that early socialization processes are deeply gendered, often reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting women's access to spiritual authority and leadership. However, they have also highlighted how early life experiences can act as sites of resistance, where women reinterpret religious teachings and practices to challenge patriarchal structures. Spirituality, in this sense, becomes a form of agency, whereby individuals - particularly women - use these early experiences to construct alternative spiritual identities that challenge dominant norms. Critically, however, it is essential to acknowledge that while many women may find empowerment through these alternative interpretations, the landscape of spirituality is not uniformly liberatory. Some feminist scholars caution against romanticizing women's experiences in religious settings, noting that

the same religious structures that offer avenues for empowerment can also perpetuate oppression. For instance, the emphasis on nurturing and caregiving roles within religious traditions can limit women's aspirations for authority and reinforce stereotypes about femininity. It is, therefore, essential to approach these discussions with a critical lens, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of women's experiences within spiritual contexts and the diverse ways in which they negotiate their identities in the face of systemic constraints. For the respondents in this study, it becomes evident that their early life experiences diverge widely. While some were born into devout families where spiritual practices and values were embedded from childhood, others had to forge their own paths into spirituality later in life. In a traditional society like India, where caste, class, and gender norms play a significant role, family background often shapes an individual's spiritual trajectory. Individuals who are exposed to religious teachings from an early age often acquire 'spiritual capital,' which not only shapes their own spiritual practices but also informs their authority and legitimacy within spiritual communities. For those women gurus and ascetics who belonged to the privileged Brahmin caste, access to religious traditions and practices often provided a foundation for spiritual authority. This "cultural capital" that primarily refers to the knowledge, skills, and cultural competencies that individuals acquire through socialization, and which are valued within specific social contexts (Bourdieu, 1986), become manifested in the early exposure of these cases to religious texts, participation in rituals, and closeness to spiritual teachings - all of which contributed to their later spiritual roles. For example, Neena Goswami's journey was shaped largely by her maternal grandfather, who served as a priest at Dhameshwar Mahaprabhu Mandir in Nabadwip. This influence deepened even further after she married into Mahaprabhu Tolbari, a spiritually prominent family of the town. She recounts, *"I often went to the temple with him (her grandfather) and watched him perform rituals. I used to see the glow of love in his eyes…..[and]…..it filled me with peace. It was during those times that I realized that bhakti was not just about believing in something; it was about feeling a deep connection to something much bigger than myself. [My] Grandfather's teachings became a guiding light in my life, and inspired me to follow the path of bhakti……"*

Similarly, ascetic Mayarani Saha, in revealing the significance of ritual in shaping her spiritual understanding and engagement, says, *"Even though I only completed my education up to the primary level, my understanding of Sastras, Puranas, began early in my life. [My] Father made sure I learned Sanskrit from the moment I could barely speak or write. In the third standard, it became a mandatory ritual for me to read the Bhagavad Gita in Sanskrit to*

[my] father after he finished his meals. He would listen attentively, and this practice deepened my love for Radha-Madhav[2]. It felt like [my] father was passing on something precious to me that I would carry with me for the rest of my life." Likewise, guru Sudipa Goswami's father's discipleship under Anukul Thakur[3] provided her with a direct link to an established spiritual lineage. Receiving initiation from her father at the tender age of five marked the beginning of her spiritual journey. For all these women, the role of key figures - parents or grandparents - served as influential "significant others" who played a crucial role in shaping their spiritual identity (Mead, 1934). In yet another instance, guru Mithu Goswami's spiritual trajectory was heavily influenced by her maiden family's adherence to the Sakta tradition. The grandeur of its Durga Puja celebrations and their involvement in the regular worship of deities like Kali, Annapurna, Lakshmi, and Saraswati offered her a culturally rich religious experience ever since her infancy. This early exposure to ritualistic worship embedded within her an understanding of Saktism that transcended mere participation. Thus, notably, not all of the respondents, as conjectured, come of a Gaudiya Vaisnava background; however, what truly matters is the depth of their spirituality and the transformative power of their early spiritual experiences, to which each of them attested. The legacies passed down through generations, whether through direct teachings, participation in rituals, or the observance of familial traditions, construct pathways to spirituality that the respondents often draw upon throughout their lives.

Besides family backgrounds, the geographical place and cultural context in which an individual is born and raised significantly shape early life experiences as well. The concept of *place* encompasses not just the physical environment but also the cultural and social frameworks that characterize it. When individuals grow up in a religiously rich environment, the likelihood of developing a spiritual identity increase. That *space* transforms into *place* through the experiences and meanings that individuals associate with it (Yi-Fu Tuan, 1977). This transformation is particularly salient in religious contexts, where specific locations, such as temples, pilgrimage sites, or even the familial home, become imbued with spiritual significance. For example, Asha Goswami's upbringing in Chipi Gali in Vrindavan highlights the profound influence of early immersion in a Vaisnava environment. Vrindavan, being one of the most sacred places in the Vaisnava tradition, played a pivotal role in cultivating her spiritual identity, and understandably so. Growing up in an atmosphere where devotion to Krisna permeated daily life, she absorbed the values and practices of bhakti from an early age: *".....it felt like bhakti was a part of everything I experienced. In Vrindavan, every tree,*

every leaf, every corner have a story…..[and]……the air is filled with love for Krisna. The rivers, the temples, the trees – everything seem to speak out His name!" In the same light, ascetic Kalpana Goswami shared that her maiden home in Nabadwip had served as a 'tol' since the time of Chaitanya. She expressed that they were always surrounded by devotees and teachings that encouraged exploration of their faith, further emphasizing that she could not imagine her life without that influence, as it had profoundly shaped her understanding of bhakti and inspired her desire to share it with others through 'gaan' and 'kirtan.' Likewise, for many other respondents born in Nabadwip, a strong sense of belonging and spiritual legitimacy was noted. In fact, a particular respondent's identification as *"Nabadwip-er gorbito santan"* (proud child of Nabadwip) reflects how her place-based identity was central to her spiritual formation. Vrindavan and Nabadwip, therefore, are not just backgrounds; they actively shape beliefs and aspirations, demonstrating the concept of place attachment in sociology - referring to the profound emotional and psychological connections that individuals form with specific places (Altman and Low, 1992). Place attachment, thus, is a multidimensional concept, involving affective, cognitive, and behavioural components, where a place becomes a source of comfort, identity, and meaning. Vrindavan, associated with the pastimes of Lord Krisna, and Nabadwip, tied to Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, thus carry profound cultural and spiritual significance. The myths, rituals, and historical narratives of these places foster a strong sense of belonging and devotion. This connection influences spiritual practices, beliefs, and even personal identity, demonstrating how attachment to these places actively shapes lives and aspirations. Thus, the cultural capital gained from growing up in a sacred town seem to have endowed many of the cases with the authority and recognition required to guide others on their spiritual paths.

There is, however, an interesting incongruity depicting how many of the respondents, despite allegiance to Brahminism, had to defy or negotiate societal constraints to pursue guruhood. Several accounts highlight the experiences of women whose initial spiritual exposure was minimal or non-existent. As Upasana Goswami states, *"I did not know much about God or religion until I got married into the family of Radha Madanmohan Mandir. My maiden family, though Brahmin, was not particularly religious, and so it was only after marriage that I began to explore my own beliefs and started attending rituals and gatherings on the insistence of [my] Gosai (husband) and in-laws…..[it] felt like a part of me was awakening that I never knew existed."*

Upasana's experiences echo those of many respondents who found their spiritual paths later in life, often prompted by transformative life events or pivotal relationships that ignited their spiritual awakening. The narratives reveal that spiritual transformation does not follow a linear trajectory but unfolds as a complex interplay of influences. In-depth interviews illuminate their struggles to balance personal aspirations with societal expectations, highlighting the multifaceted nature of their spiritual journeys. For instance, Gourdasi Vaisnavi shares, *"I faced resistance from [my] elder brothers when I decided to pursue this path (of spirituality). They believed it was inappropriate for women. They worried about what others would say and wanted to marry me off at quite a young age. It hurt me to see their disappointment when I went against their wishes, but deep down, I felt a strong calling. I believed that following my heart was the right thing to do, even if it meant going against my family."* Thus, while many of the cases were socialized into spiritual practices from an early age, others acted against family resistance, suggesting that they exercised agency in pursuit of a spiritual path. This demonstrates that the structure, while influential, is not deterministic, allowing individuals to negotiate or even resist it. Also observed was the paradox of belonging to privileged yet restrictive backgrounds that accentuates the tension between social conditioning and personal empowerment, thus showcasing how spiritual transformation is often a nuanced process of navigating, resisting, and redefining cultural norms. This diversity in backgrounds highlights the role of "agency," referring to their capacity to make choices and act independently (Giddens, 1984).

Yet amidst the diverse early life experiences that shape the spiritual journeys of these women, one particularly intriguing narrative stands out. This account delves into a mysterious incident surrounding the birth of guru Brinda Das, which she believes holds significant spiritual significance: *"I have a peculiar story about my birth that my mother shared with me. She told me that I mysteriously disappeared for the first eight hours after I was born, and no one could find me. It was a Babaji in a red robe who eventually discovered me in a taro forest. He carried me home in his arms and coined me 'lokkhichhara*[4]*.' People do not believe me when I narrate this incident, but both my mother and I believe that this [incident] shaped my destiny….."* This kind of heterogeneity in early life experiences demonstrates that there is no single sociological explanation to why the respondents pursued spiritual leadership. From a sociological perspective, the life course approach proposed by Giele and Elder (1998) becomes relevant here, as it emphasizes how individual lives are shaped by the broader historical and socioeconomic contexts in which they unfold. Furthermore, the process of

acquiring cultural norms, values, and beliefs through social interactions is evident in many cases where familial and community environments provided spiritual socialization (Mead, 1934). However, it is also clear that early life influences are not always causal and systematic. The cases clearly reveal that spiritual transformation and leadership are shaped by a complex interplay of various factors, including structural conditions, socialization, individual experiences, and moments of personal revelation.

This observation challenges the notion that spiritual positions, be it of a guru or an ascetic, can be fully understood by tracing it back to early social and familial conditions, as is often done in Western sociological approaches. In the Indian context, where the diversity of influences defies any simplistic categorization, a more nuanced understanding of assumption of spiritual roles is needed. Consequently, this complexity problematizes the initial research questions by revealing that analogous spiritual profiles cannot be traced solely to similar sociocultural backgrounds. Therefore, while theories like Freud's "psychoanalytic theory" or Erikson's "stages of psychosocial development" suggest that early childhood experiences are crucial in shaping adult identity, the cases of these women indicate that spiritual inclinations are not always traceable to early life experiences. This resonates with Dipesh Chakrabarty's critique of "provincializing Europe" (2000), which argues that Western sociological concepts often fail to adequately capture the complexities of non-Western experiences. The spiritual paths of the cases in this study illustrate the need for a more context-sensitive approach that takes into account not just early socialization but also later life events, individual agency, and the influence of socio-religious contexts. This approach problematizes research questions that assume straightforward relationships between early life experiences and adult spiritual pursuits, thereby challenging the reductionism often found in Western sociological approaches.

3.2 Careful Sprouting: Education and its Dilemma

Education occupies a multifaceted space in the shaping of spiritual journeys, and its relationship to spiritual authority is neither straightforward nor universally consistent. In various spiritual contexts, education can serve as both an enabler and a mediator, but it does not always guarantee a direct path to higher spiritual recognition or authority. In many religious traditions, formal education - particularly in sacred texts, rituals, and philosophical doctrines - is often viewed as a foundational element of spiritual leadership. For example, in Christian and Islamic contexts, knowledge of scripture and theological concepts is highly

valued, and clergy are typically expected to possess advanced education in their respective religious teachings. In these cases, education serves as a credential that legitimizes an individual's authority to lead, teach, and interpret sacred knowledge for the community. Conversely, numerous spiritual paths prioritize personal charisma, innate wisdom, and lived experiences over formal education. In these traditions, spiritual authority may arise from an individual's ability to connect with others, inspire through personal narratives, or demonstrate experiential knowledge of spiritual practices. This complexity is further enriched by intersectional considerations. The impact of race, class, gender, and cultural background on spiritual education cannot be overlooked. Women and marginalized communities may face systemic barriers that limit access to formal religious education, yet they often develop alternative forms of spiritual authority that challenge prevailing norms. This raises critical questions about whose voices are heard and validated in spiritual contexts and how authority is constructed and contested.

The current investigation, thus, seeks to uncover the relationship between educational qualifications and spiritual authority among the respondents interviewed. In this context, the researcher observed a broad spectrum of experiences. Interestingly, all the cases with limited formal education - two, who had not received schooling beyond elementary levels and one, whose education truncated at the primary level - were from Sahajiya backgrounds. This pattern suggests a potential link between their limited educational opportunities and their sociocultural context. Even today, the Sahajiya section of the Vaisnava community is treated as if it were a separate caste. This is primarily because the Smarta principles[5], which form the basis of social and domestic life of Hindu society, are not adhered to by the Sahajiya Vaisnavas, which, in turn, makes them different even though they are a group of homeowners from the Grihasthya class of the sect (Risley, 1892). The Sahajiya tradition, thus, likely restricted access to formal education due to entrenched social inequalities, including caste-based hierarchies (Narayan, 2006). This, particularly in rural or traditional settings, tend to correlate with curtailed educational opportunities, as resources and social mobility are constrained (Desai and Kulkarni, 2008). However, one case within the Sahajiya group did receive secondary education, indicating that there are exceptions in all circumstances.

This study further reveals that numerous respondents originating from Brahmin backgrounds received secondary education, with some even completing their higher secondary levels. This variation suggests that educational opportunities are unevenly distributed, with Brahmin

women typically enjoying greater access to formal education compared to their Sahajiya counterparts. Here, too, it is essential to consider the socio-cultural dynamics at play. In many traditional settings, including those within Gaudiya Vaisnavism, higher education can provide a greater degree of agency and influence. As Neena Goswami shares, *"In my village, people always looked up to educated individuals, whether they were teachers or priests. When I became a guru, I noticed that my background in higher studies made people more receptive to my teachings."* This highlights how education is intertwined with cultural perceptions of authority, and how, despite the egalitarian ethos of bhakti, socio-cultural hierarchies persist in subtle ways. The educational background of a guru can, thus, impact their perceived authority and ability to command respect within the spiritual community.

For many of the respondents, education was not limited to what they received in school or through a traditional teacher-student lineage. Instead, it involved a personal quest for learning and a unique method of self-directed spiritual study. Notably, two gurus of Brahmin origin, having only secondary-level education, leveraged their limited formal schooling to undertake extensive study of religious texts and scriptures that served as an 'open university.' *"Even though my formal schooling stopped after the tenth standard, my real education began when I started reading the [Srimad] Bhagavatam on my own. Every night, after my household chores, I would dedicate an hour to reading of the scriptures. It felt like I was finding a part of myself with each verse,"* shares Nityapriya Goswami, highlighting how self-directed spiritual study has the power to transcend formal education. This observation again resonates with sociological insights on agency, albeit in a lens that shows how, despite structural limitations, individual agency can lead to significant personal transformation. Dedication to spiritual self- education can challenge and redefine conventional markers of knowledge, thereby establishing that the construction of spiritual authority may not always rely on formal institutional frameworks but rather on personal initiative and devotion.

To view another side of the spectrum, several gurus considered for the study demonstrated notable academic achievements. Siksha guru Bharati Goswami, with her Master's degree and B.Ed in Bengali, pursued a career as a teacher of Bengali, illustrating how formal education can facilitate diverse professional roles within both spiritual and educational domains. The late Roma Bandyopadhyay and Neena Goswami, too, achieved advanced academic milestones, including engaging in research and higher studies, with Roma authoring six philosophical books. Similarly, Mousumi Goswami, despite her academic background in

Mathematics, authored six insightful works on Vaisnavism, exemplifying how education can intersect with and enrich spiritual scholarship. She remarks, *"My journey into writing about Vaisnavism was not planned. I loved Mathematics and still do, but I realized that my deeper calling was to explain complex spiritual truths in simple terms. I believe my degrees helped me see patterns in spirituality that others might overlook."*

Being in a spiritual role, therefore, does not imply complete detachment from formal education or the academic discipline one was once engaged with. Instead, it often allows synthesis of secular and spiritual knowledge, creating a unique perspective that may enrich one's spiritual role and authority. This is also evident in the case of ascetic Kalpana Goswami, who holds a B.A. and a D.L.Ed. degree and has utilized her qualifications to work as a Primary School teacher at Shishu Shiksha Niketan. She shares, *"Teaching children taught me the value of simplicity. When I read the scriptures, I try to interpret them in a way that even a child could understand, because I believe that knowledge of [Chaitanya] Mahaprabhu should be accessible to people of all ages."* Kalpana highlights how her formal education and professional life have influenced her spiritual practice, enabling her to approach sacred texts with an emphasis on accessibility and simplicity. This integration of secular and sacred domains exemplifies how these individuals exercise agency in negotiating multiple, often overlapping, identities.

Education, thus, within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition, serves a dual role: it is not solely about the acquisition of knowledge but also about enhancing one's spiritual authority and presence. In Nabadwip, a historical centre of learning and spirituality, there is an evident reverence for both *bhakti* (devotion) and *gyaan* (knowledge). This reverence is deeply embedded in the cultural ethos of the community, emphasizing that education is not just a personal endeavour but a marker of one's spiritual status. However, from observations in the field, it was found that while education can have transformative power, it does not always play a defining role in achieving guruhood. A guru's educational level does not necessarily dictate their capacity to attract disciples or establish spiritual authority. Yet, the researcher did observe that living gurus with higher secondary education or beyond often exhibit a more commanding presence compared to those with minimal or no formal education. This distinction is reflected in the higher disciple count generally associated with the more educated gurus, all of whom were Brahmins. For these women, access to and accumulation of "cultural capital" due to their caste-position, was a strategic means to secure a more

prominent role within the spiritual community. Their knowledge of Sanskrit texts, rituals, and Vaisnavite philosophy often set them apart as bearers of "authentic" spirituality, bolstering their authority in the eyes of their disciples.

While higher educational qualifications can enhance a guru's commanding presence and influence, they do not singularly determine one's ability to lead or attract disciples. Field observations challenge the classical notion of education as a linear pathway to authority, and instead suggests that the social construction of authority within the tradition of Gaudiya Vaisnavism is fluid, allowing for multiple paths to legitimacy. A guru's authority is often grounded in their personal qualities and the perception of possessing extraordinary characteristics, rather than formal educational qualifications. One striking example is that of Sahajiya guru Brinda Das, who studied only up to the secondary level yet has garnered a significant number of disciples. On being asked about her influence, she says, *"People often think that in order to become a guru, you need to have years of [formal] education. But I believe, it is not about what you learn in books, but what lives in your heart. I may not have the highest degrees, but my bhakti to Chaitanya is what draws people to me. My disciples see that my teachings come from genuine experiences, and that is what resonates with them."*

Thus, while education definitely supplements a guru's position, the role of charisma (Weber, 1978) and the personal narrative cannot be overlooked. Often, the ability to articulate philosophical concepts in a 'sahaj' (easy) manner enhances the guru's standing in the eyes of disciples and potential followers. Guruhood, therefore, is constructed in diverse ways within spiritual contexts, thereby demonstrating that the construction of spiritual authority is a deeply contested terrain. The researcher, thus, found that the relationship between education and spiritual authority among the women gurus and ascetics studied is far from straightforward. Particularly in the case of gurus, education, though important, is only one of the many elements that contribute to their leadership. Their narratives highlight the multiplicity of paths to guruhood - some defined by formal learning, others by personal experience and charisma, and still others by a combination of both. The capacity to articulate complex spiritual ideas in simple terms, to connect with disciples and followers on a personal level, and to embody the values of compassion and humility - all serve as crucial factors in establishing and maintaining spiritual authority. The bottom-line remains that while formal education may elevate a guru's social standing, it is neither an essential nor a guaranteed path to achieving spiritual authority.

3.3 Nurturing Roots: Legacy and its Impact

In the sociological context of the present study, legacy transcends the mere continuity of family traditions or spiritual lineages and represents a broader, complex sociological construct that speaks to how authority, power, and other forms of cultural capital are preserved and legitimized across generations. Since spiritual capital intertwines with family lineage in traditions like Gaudiya Vaisnavism, legacy functions as a vital tool for many women in Nabadwip to establish themselves as gurus or ascetics, thereby highlighting how they navigate a deeply patriarchal religious structure to assert spiritual authority. As such, it also serves as a strategic resource, allowing women to reinterpret and reshape their inherited roles within the spiritual hierarchy. By aligning themselves with revered ancestors or established lineages, they not only gain legitimacy but also challenge the conventional male-dominated narratives of spiritual authority. This interplay between legacy and spiritual capital underscores how women, through their familial and spiritual inheritances, use legacy as both a shield and a tool to assert their place in a deeply gendered religious domain.

One of the most profound illustrations can be found in the cases of Asha Goswami, Mithu Goswami, and Mousumi Goswami, members of the Baladev Bari, a renowned family closely associated with the lineage of Nityananda. Their spiritual authority is deeply rooted in the family's bloodline, with their connection to Nityananda legitimizing their role as diksha gurus. As Asha explains, *"It is not just the family name; it is the bloodline that carries Nityananda's [spiritual] power. This is what the community respects, and this is what makes us gurus."* The weight of this inherited legacy, therefore, cannot be understated - it grants these women a form of spiritual authority that is pre-legitimized by their family's lineage, thereby allowing them to assume the role of spiritual leaders without the need to independently cultivate charisma or establish their own spiritual credentials.

This tradition of women assuming the role of diksha gurus within the Nityananda lineage dates back to Jahnava Devi. Recognized as the spiritual consort of Nityananda, she was a pivotal figure in legitimizing women's roles as spiritual leaders within the lineage, as has already been discussed in the earlier parts of this thesis. The practice of women becoming diksha gurus in families like Baladev Bari can, thus, be traced directly to Jahnava's influence. Mithu, for instance, embraced this tradition after marrying into the family, despite coming from a Sakta background and having previously led a non-vegetarian lifestyle. *"When I married into this family, I took on the role of a guru because it was expected, and it was an*

honour. I may not have grown up in this tradition, but now I am part of something much bigger than myself," Mithu shares, emphasizing how the spiritual legacy of Baladev Bari has not only transformed her lifestyle, but also shaped her current identity and role. Interestingly, the researcher also came to know of a distinctive tradition during her interviews with the three women gurus of Baladev Bari: sons are initiated by their own mothers, thus emphasizing the mother's pivotal role as the spiritual guide. Mousumi, on her thoughts on this unique bond, shares, *"When a mother initiates her own son, it is a continuation of everything that has come before. It is the legacy of Nityananda, and it is also the love of a mother for her child."* This demonstrates how legacy is not only a transmission of spiritual authority but also a deeply personal and emotional continuity, intertwining family love with spiritual duty.

Radha Madanmohan Mandir, closely related to Baladev Bari, also reflects this lineage through the guruhood of Upasana Goswami. Like her counterparts in Baladev Bari, Upasana's spiritual authority is not something she needed to earn through personal spiritual charisma alone, but something she inherited through her marriage into the family. Her guruhood, while less public, still represents the continuation of the Nityananda lineage. Further illustrating the complexities of carrying forward the legacy within the Nityananda tradition are the cases of Neena Goswami and Sudipa Goswami. Neena, for instance, initially derived her spiritual inspiration from her maternal grandfather, who was the head priest at Dhameshwar Mahaprabhu Mandir. However, her spiritual trajectory took a more formal turn when she married into the Mahaprabhu Tolbari, another family closely linked to the Nityananda lineage. Like the women of Baladev Bari, Neena assumed the role of a guru after her marriage, also initiating her sons into the spiritual path. Expressing about the weight of this responsibility, she says, *"I did not choose to become a guru - it was my duty. My sons look to me for [spiritual] guidance because that is how it has always been in our family. The legacy is passed through me."*

Sudipa's case, however, offers a slightly different perspective on the transmission of legacy within these families. Having been raised in the tradition of Anukul Thakur, she assumed the role of a guru after her marriage into the Sonar Gouranga Mandir family, following the customs of her new household. However, Sudipa has no sons whom she can initiate and pass on the lineage to. Her two daughters, now married, have settled into their own families. Consequently, the responsibility of continuing the guruhood at Sonar Gouranga Mandir is

anticipated to pass to the next generation, specifically the two sons of Sudipa's brothers-in-law. However, the fact that they do not reside in Nabadwip adds an additional challenge to the seamless transmission of this spiritual heritage across generations. Reflecting on this geographical and generational challenge, Sudipa shares, *"It is difficult because they are not here [in Nabadwip]. But the legacy still needs to be carried forward. It is not just about location – it is about making sure the traditions continue, no matter where we are."* This statement portrays the fluidity of legacy, where the geographical distance of potential successors creates a challenge in maintaining the continuity of spiritual traditions. The symbolic capital tied to the Nityananda lineage is at risk of being diluted when the next generation is not physically present in Nabadwip, where, as per the respondent, the spiritual heritage is most deeply embedded. This points to the fact that legacy, while potent, can be challenged and threatened by modern shifts in geography amidst other dynamics.

This study further reveals additional dimensions of legacy that extend beyond the Nityananda lineage. These other cases demonstrate how the transmission of spiritual authority and the preservation of spiritual capital can take various forms, often influenced by unique family traditions. One such case is that of Umarani Goswami, whose legacy presents a profound intersection of personal history and spiritual legacy. Umarani, during interviews, often reminisced about the formative role her grandfather played in shaping her spiritual mindset. She fondly recalled how, every evening, he would introduce her to bhajans, instilling in her a deep devotion to 'Shyamsundar[6]' from an early age. Her grandfather's strict adherence to spiritual discipline was evident in his reluctance to pass on his legacy to anyone he deemed unworthy of serving their family deity. His personal standard was so high that he would not even drink a glass of water from someone who was not initiated, reflecting the seriousness with which he guarded his spiritual lineage.

Umarani's journey of legacy continued after her marriage into a family where the veneration of 'Madan Gopal' and 'Mahaprabhu' aligned with her spiritual inclinations. Her own deep connection to Shyamsundar was seamlessly woven into the practices of her in-laws, creating a spiritual continuity between her natal and marital homes, with her husband entrusted with the responsibility of the family deity by her grandfather. In this way, the idol from Umarani's paternal home was incorporated into the religious legacy of her in-laws, symbolizing the merging of two sacred lineages. The legacy, here, is thus twofold: it honours the traditions passed down from Umarani's grandfather while simultaneously carrying forward the spiritual

responsibilities delegated to her through marriage. Her ability to integrate these two lineages showcases the complex ways in which many women navigate their roles as custodians of religious traditions, not only preserving but also expanding the scope of their spiritual inheritance.

A notable example of legacy in a more unconventional form is found in the cases of Nandarani Dasi, Dayamayi Vaisnav, Gourdasi Vaisnavi, and Brinda Das - all of whom are Sahajiya Vaisnavas. Unlike the diksha gurus of established lineages, these women are part of a more mystically oriented tradition which, though marginalized, preserves a distinct form of spiritual authority. Sahajiya Vaisnavism, often misunderstood and relegated to the fringes of mainstream Hinduism, offers a unique framework where diksha gurus like Nandarani and siksha gurus like Dayamayi can assert their spiritual leadership without relying on a formal lineage or institutionalized authority. The spiritual legacy they carry is often rooted in personal experience, mysticism, and a direct, intimate connection to the Divine, which transcends the patriarchal expectations of formalized guruhood. As Gourdasi shares during the interview, *"Our legacy is not in titles or rituals but in the heart's connection to the Divine. This is what sustains us and what we pass on."*

Beyond such cases, the legacy of women like siksha guru Bharati Goswami adds another dimension to this theme. Bharati, for example, has expressed a desire to continue the spiritual practices of her family, not out of obligation, but as a way of preserving and expanding the legacy she has inherited. Her late husband was a respected diksha guru, and their son, now 21, is not yet old enough to assume the responsibilities of guruhood. In the interim, Bharati is committed to carrying forward her husband's teachings, ensuring that they do not fade from public consciousness. As a siksha guru, she preserves the spiritual lineage, while waiting for her son to come of age and eventually take on the role of giving diksha, as his father did. Her case illustrates how this can be a conscious decision - a deliberate choice to uphold and transmit spiritual legacy, aligning both with personal values and societal expectations. In fact, many of the respondents take on the responsibility of preserving religious traditions, not only for their own spiritual growth but also as a way of securing their family's symbolic capital in the larger religious community. A reinforcement of the notion of symbolic capital is further highlighted by the two posthumous cases of women gurus studied in this research. The disciples of these gurus ensure that their legacies endure, as their spiritual insights are passed down through oral and ritual traditions. In such cases, the constructed legacy eventually

becomes a form of institutional capital as the guru's disciples and followers recognize and legitimize her spiritual authority. In a patriarchal society where women's authority is often contested, posthumous recognition becomes a means through which the community legitimizes and perpetuates their spiritual leadership. Speaking of patriarchy, the women ascetics in this study exemplify how legacy operates as a sociological mechanism for negotiating religious authority within deeply patriarchal religious structures. These women, while not formally recognized as gurus, serve as custodians of religious tradition, with their spiritual authority evolving in a more informal, yet equally potent manner. Their legacy, therefore, is an evolving narrative, where their symbolic capital positions them as potential future gurus, carving out new spaces for women's spiritual leadership in Gaudiya Vaisnavism.

In the broader sociological analysis, legacy, in most of the cases, transcends individual biography and becomes part of a larger structure of social reproduction within religious communities. Through a Weberian lens, the women in this study are situated within a framework of traditional authority, where the legitimacy of their leadership is partly derived from historical and community-based sources. However, as Weber points out, traditional authority often needs charismatic validation to be effective. In cases bearing the Nityananda lineage, the legacy carries with it an inherent spiritual charisma, while in other cases, personal charisma works to create a legacy that can be passed down. Furthermore, the emotional and relational dimensions of legacy significantly shape the spiritual journeys of these women. Their narratives illustrate that authority is not merely an individual endeavour but a collective process rooted in deep emotional ties and communal relationships. This observation aligns with Lofland's (1985) insights on the relational aspects of religious leadership, suggesting that spiritual authority emerges from personal investments in the community, rather than solely from institutional acknowledgment. However, the women in this study face formidable challenges in negotiating the patriarchal structures inherent in religious traditions. While legacy provides a pathway to legitimacy, many narratives indicate that women encounter resistance rooted in entrenched gender norms. Additionally, the geographical and cultural dynamics surrounding legacy transmission cannot be overlooked. Women gurus articulate the necessity of maintaining community connections and spiritual practices, particularly in contexts where successors may not reside in Nabadwip. Legacy, thus, is not just about inheritance - it also involves the active maintenance of one's role. As Mousumi puts it, *"I may have inherited this role, but I must constantly prove myself to my disciples. My legacy is*

not just about Nityananda- Jahnava; it is also what I do with it." This underscores that while legacy can provide a starting point for spiritual leadership, it does not guarantee ongoing authority, for it requires constant reinforcement - whether through continued religious practice, community engagement, or the ability to inspire and guide followers.

3.4 Cultivating Visions: Swapnadesh or Symbolic Cries?

Upon first encountering the term *swapnadesh* from a respondent, the researcher questioned whether the experiences were being genuinely conveyed or if there was an element of exaggeration or personal myth-making involved. The vivid accounts of divine communications during dreams seemed too extraordinary to accept at face value, and she wondered whether this was an interpretation of ordinary dreams in a more spiritualized manner to add significance to narratives. However, with time and conversations with more respondents, local inhabitants, and scholars in Nabadwip, the researcher realized that swapnadesh is indeed widely accepted within the larger fabric of Hinduism, specifically within Gaudiya Vaisnavism. This acknowledgment is not confined to personal beliefs; rather, it is a culturally embedded and socially validated phenomenon that has shaped the spiritual journeys of many revered figures. As more narratives were gathered, it became evident that these dreams hold a collective meaning within the community, transcending individual subjectivity and pointing towards a shared framework of divine experience.

The phenomenon of swapnadesh manifests in the form of messages or visions received in dreams that are often deemed divine or prophetic within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition. These messages and experiences include a wide range of signifiers and symbols closely associated with the tradition, which are replete with Chaitanya's teachings. Since dreams are often palpable manifestations of experiences, which are consciously and unconsciously imbibed at different phases of one's life, there is a possibility of indirect assimilation of Chaitanya's philosophy at an unconscious level which are then manifested through dream symbols and revelations, identified as swapnadesh. The messages, laden with symbolic meaning, serve as 'cultural currency,' reinforcing the spiritual beliefs and practices within the community.

Of the respondents in the present study, only three women gurus and a woman ascetic reported experiencing swapnadesh, claiming that these encounters significantly played a pivotal role in their spiritual journeys. The researcher, in delving deeper into the study,

observed that the experiences of swapnadesh are inherently linked to early life experiences and play a critical role in shaping the spiritual trajectories of these women. For instance, Purnima Devi, an ascetic residing at Sree Guru Prapanna Ashram in Nabadwip's Dakshin Banga Para received her first swapnadesh when she was only sixteen years old - an experience that she describes as *'rupantarkaari'* (transformative). *"The dream was vivid,"* she recounts, *"the words were clear: leave the material world and come to me."* This directive, she adds, influenced her decision to abandon her familial ties and embrace an ascetic lifestyle- a bold and defining choice that was largely shaped by the messages she believed were divinely ordained. The clarity of the message, as Purnima elaborated, left no room for ambiguity: *"I felt as though the voice was not my own,"* she explains, *"it was beyond me, as if someone else was telling me what I must do."*

Purnima's narrative, thus, is reflective of the fact that her choice to leave behind her family was largely shaped by the belief in divine ordination through swapnadesh. However, unlike Purnima's immediate propulsion toward asceticism, Mithu Goswami recounted that her experience of swapnadesh initially left her in a state of uncertainty and hesitation, characterized by a reluctance to abandon her established life. Having said that, her trajectory took an unexpected turn when her family received a marriage proposal for her from the younger son of Baladev Bari. This brought with it a host of uncertainties, as profound disparities in culture, tradition, heritage, and even dietary habits led Mithu's family to hesitate, casting doubts on the viability of the marriage. In the face of familial reluctance and her own apprehensions, Mithu found herself at crossroads and contemplated calling off the marriage altogether: *"I was not ready to give up everything,"* she explains, *"but the dreams kept coming. Whenever I thought of saying something, it felt like someone was pulling me from behind….."*

Initially having struggled with this call, Mithu was caught between her resistance to an arranged marriage and the feeling of being guided by a higher power. Eventually, she realized that these dreams were not merely suggestive but carried a weight of divine inevitability that was difficult for her to ignore. Even as she remained hesitant, the feeling of being metaphorically "pulled from behind" signified a loss of agency in the face of the Divine, with her reluctance eroded in due course. Her family, too, despite their efforts to intervene, found themselves unable to counteract what they eventually recognized as 'a greater divine plan at play.' Recurring swapnadesh ultimately led Mithu to accept the marriage proposal, a decision

she retrospectively recognized as a consequence of the divine messages she received. Although her initial days were marked by discontent and resistance, she eventually found herself adopting the practices and values of her new household. Mithu's experience of swapnadesh, thus, reveals a nuanced dynamic wherein spiritual transformation is not always immediate but is instead a process that involves grappling with the tension between worldly attachments and the call of the Divine. In this context, swapnadesh emerges not merely as a source of guidance but as a force capable of overriding individual hesitation, compelling an individual to undertake a path they may not have willingly chosen otherwise.

In contrast, Brinda Das reported a recurring dream featuring a Babaji who had saved her during infancy. *"It is as though he wants something from me, but I do not know what,"* she laments, her eyes welling with tears. *"Each time I dream of him, I wake up with a sense of loss."* A significant field observation is mention-worthy here: although recognized as a guru in her own capacity, Brinda faces significant restrictions due to the presence and influence of her sadhan-sangi[7], whose dominance was palpable throughout the interview, for he consistently interrupted her responses, often declaring, *"[.....] let me answer that. She (Brinda) does not know much"* - a situation poignantly reflecting Brinda's position as the 'second sex,' in line with Beauvoir's concept of women's subjugated status (Beauvoir, 1949). Moreover, Brinda is not permitted to perform diksha independently; instead, she could initiate disciples only in conjunction with her husband, following the yugal-diksha convention[8]. In this context of patriarchal domination, Brinda's recurring dreams can be understood as a symbolic cry for rescue from her current constraints. Recurring dreams often reveal unaddressed conflicts within her, providing insight into a deeper personal or collective unconscious (Jung, 2002). The Babaji's persistent presence, thus, might symbolize her unfulfilled need for spiritual agency - an archetypal saviour who embodies the freedom and empowerment she longs for in her waking life. The dreams are not merely random images but messages from her unconscious, attempting to draw her attention to the disparity between her potential as a guru and the limitations imposed on her by patriarchal structures.

Alternatively, from a Freudian perspective, these dreams can be interpreted as manifestations of repressed desires. Freud (1997) suggested that dreams function as a mechanism to fulfil wishes that remain unmet in waking life. Brinda's dreams may thus be an expression of her subconscious desire to reclaim the autonomy and spiritual authority that is denied to her in her everyday existence. However, rather than delving into specific Freudian concepts like

dream- censorship or repression, it is pertinent to acknowledge the broader psychological mechanisms at play. Brinda's narrative raises important questions about the complexities of swapnadesh not only as a spiritual but a psychological experience as well. Does the Babaji in her dreams symbolize divine guidance, or is he an expression of her subconscious resistance to the patriarchal constraints imposed on her spiritual journey? Should Brinda's dream be considered a swapnadesh - a direct communication from the Divine urging her toward a path of greater autonomy? Or, rather, are these dreams merely manifestations of her unresolved emotions and repressed desires for liberation? Given the limited biographical information available, a detailed psychoanalysis is not feasible and hence these questions remain unanswered. What is clear, however, is that Brinda's dreams underscore the complex, multi-layered ways in which swapnadesh can function as both a spiritual calling and a manifestation of unfulfilled desires, shaped by the socio-cultural dynamics of power and gender.

It is also important to consider the influence of her sadhan-sangi: Brinda's husband does not believe in her swapnadesh, dismissing it by saying that *"nothing like this happens with her,"* and, consequently, she has stopped discussing her dreams with him altogether. This lack of support, and the dismissal of her experiences by her partner, further underscores the feeling of isolation she endures, possibly intensifying the recurring nature of the dreams. In the same light, Nandarani Dasi's experience provides insight into the gendered nature of swapnadesh. *"My husband did not believe in the dreams,"* she says, *"and he forbade me from talking about them."* Such narratives reflect the tensions that arise when women's spiritual experiences challenge established gender norms and the ways in which the legitimacy of swapnadesh can serve as a means of negotiating authority within patriarchal structures.

Gendered aspects of swapnadesh are also evident in the differing ways in which male and female followers respond to the experiences of women like Mithu and Brinda. Mithu shared that while her female disciples often viewed her dream encounters as a sign of divine favour, their male counterparts were more skeptical. *"The men question it,"* she says, *"but the women believe,"* adding, *"but most say I am blessed, because I followed the swapnadesh."* Therefore, on the one hand, while a dichotomy works to underscore the gendered dynamics of spiritual authority and the challenges women face in asserting their spiritual legitimacy in a male-dominated religious landscape, on the other, the community's perception of viewing them as divinely chosen reinforces their spiritual authority. The Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition

holds that dreams can be a medium through which divine entities, particularly Krisna or Chaitanya, communicate Their will or grant insight to the devotee; thus, swapnadesh experiences become social artifacts that not only shape individual spiritual experiences but also influence collective belief systems (Mead, 1934). This is evident in how the meaning of these divine messages has become institutionalized and culturally ingrained within the spiritual landscape of Nabadwip. The shared understanding of swapnadesh, therefore, forms a "symbolic universe" - offering a collective narrative that gives coherence to individuals' experiences (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

For the researcher who initially had limited understanding of the concept of swapnadesh, intensive fieldwork abundantly helped unravel its deeper significance. What began as skepticism gradually transformed into an appreciation of its profound role in shaping individual and communal spiritual identities. The narratives shared by the respondents revealed that swapnadesh is not simply a personal mystical experience, but a culturally and socially embedded practice that carries considerable weight in defining spiritual authority and devotion within Gaudiya Vaisnavism. It, thus, serves as a lens through which we can better appreciate the unique spiritual pathways forged by individuals, as well as the nuanced intersections between faith, power, and identity within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition.

3.5 Transplanting Souls: Migration and Spiritual Growth

As a compound sociological process that extends beyond mere physical relocation of individuals, migration to Nabadwip, in the context of the present study, emerges as a distinctive and significant phenomenon that profoundly shapes the spiritual identities of many of the respondents. It represents more than a mere geographical shift, involving an immersion into a spiritually charged environment where the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition bestows meaning upon their roles. Therefore, this migration is both a physical and symbolic journey, signifying a movement towards spiritual fulfilment and communal recognition. This can be corroborated by the narratives gathered from respondents that indicate how migrating to Nabadwip was a critical juncture in their spiritual journey. For example, ascetic Mayarani Saha's migration experience is profoundly shaped by personal trauma and a deep sense of spiritual transformation. Reflecting on her journey, she shared how her migration from Karapara in Khulna, Bangladesh, to Nabadwip was driven by the need to find refuge after the horrifying events she witnessed during *Bangladesh Mukti Juddha*[9]. Recalling the tragic night when East Pakistani soldiers, or 'rajakor,' attacked her home, Mayarani narrates*, "They came*

in the dead of night, surrounding our home. I can still remember their towering figures, their large eyes, their dark, hairy bodies - they struck terror in all of us. My two brothers-in-law were dragged out to the courtyard and killed right in front of us. We were helpless, paralyzed by fear."

Holding her babies and her sister-in-law, Mayarani prayed fervently to 'Radha-Madhav,' fearing for her life and honour. *"I thought it was the end for us,"* she says, her voice still carrying the weight of that memory. *"I held my children and Kaberi (sister-in-law) close, and I prayed with all my heart to Radha-Madhav. Just as I fainted, it was as if God answered my prayers - the Mukti Fauj arrived and took control of the situation. We survived, and that moment made me realize that my life had a greater purpose."*

Mayarani's survival, along with her journey to Nabadwip, which she managed despite numerous obstacles, further solidified her belief in divine intervention. *"It was Radha-Madhav's will that brought me here,"* she contends. Her migration to Nabadwip, as her words disclose, was not only about physical safety but also about finding a spiritual sanctuary where her devotion could flourish: *".....moving here was like stepping into the embrace of Radha-Madhav's love."* Likewise, Pratima Goswami's migration from Rangpur, Bangladesh during the Mukti- Juddha was also a profound experience marked by both loss and renewal. Reflecting on those difficult times, she describes, "*We had to flee in the dead of night, leaving everything behind - our home, our lands, our memories. The insurgency was brutal, and we feared for our lives."* The persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh left her and her husband with no choice but to seek refuge in India. *"The violence and killings were everywhere. We saw neighbours being dragged out and killed. It was a time of absolute chaos and horror,"* she recounts, her voice heavy with emotion.

After crossing into India, Pratima and her husband found shelter in the latter's maternal uncle's house in Nabadwip. *"Coming to Nabadwip felt like stepping into a different world. It is a land of peace.....[and].....we finally had a place to rest our heads,"* she says, adding *"the turbulence of the war had taken away everything I had known, but here (in Nabadwip), I found something greater - a path to serve [Chaitanya] Mahaprabhu."* Similarly, the narratives of Nityapriya Goswami, who was born in Barisal, Bangladesh highlights how migration, in such cases, is motivated by necessity but eventually becomes a crucial element of spiritual life. During the Bangladesh Mukti Juddha, Nityapriya's family shifted to the Chamta refugee camp in Amghata in Krisnanagar when she was only 15 years old. She

recalls, *"The camp in Krisnanagar was a temporary haven, but Nabadwip gave me a permanent home."*

The migration narratives of Mayarani, Pratima, and Nityapriya reflect how individuals navigate historical disruptions by seeking solace in sacred geographies, where they reconstruct their identities and gain spiritual legitimacy. In this way, the researcher has attempted to highlight the transformative role of migration as both a refuge from socio-political turbulence and a spiritually ordained journey. Sociologically, such experiences help reveal the layered significance of migration in shaping communal belonging and spiritual authority within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition. A singular case, that of Brinda Das, stands out as she migrated to Nabadwip at the age of ten, accompanied by her parents, her 'guru-ma,' and 'gurudev' from Pakhanjor in Madhya Pradesh. Her narrative highlights how early immersion in the spiritual culture of Nabadwip played a critical role in her path to guruhood. Growing up in the spiritual environs of Nabadwip, she absorbed the rich heritage of the region from an early age, which laid the foundation for her present identity. Brinda's case is also unique in that she practices yugal-diksha, initiating disciples alongside her sadhan-sangi. This conduct reflects the Gaudiya Vaisnavite emphasis on the duality of Radha and Krisna, showing how doctrinal principles can influence the structure of guruhood in practical settings.

On the other hand, for some of the respondents, the journey to Nabadwip is directly linked to marriage, which signifies not only a union in the worldly sense but also an integration into the spiritual and cultural heritage of Nabadwip. Respondents like Upasana Goswami describe how their marriages brought them into the vicinity of Nabadwip, providing them with access to the established spiritual lineage of their in-laws. On the other hand, migration can also be driven by personal divine revelations, as seen in the case of ascetic Purnima Devi, who spoke of how swapnadesh compelled her to migrate from Dhupguri in Assam to Nabadwip's Prapanna Ashram. She explains, *".....[Chaitanya] Mahaprabhu called me to serve Him. Leaving home was not easy, but it felt like a divine command."* In other instances, migration is prodded by personal loss, as seen in the case of siksha guru late Dr. Roma Bandopadhyay, who lost her mother at an early age - an incident that prompted her father to move to Nabadwip from Berhampur along with her. Thus, whether through marriage, divine calling, or personal loss - migration to Nabadwip emerged as a spiritually enriching experience that allowed these women to immerse themselves in the sacred traditions of the place.

In contrast, the cases of five respondents, namely Mousumi Goswami, Neena Goswami, Sudipa Goswami, Umarani Goswami, and Radharani Goswami II, present a distinct narrative as their entire childhood was shaped within the sacred space of Nabadwip. This rootedness, according to them, offered a natural and profound connection with the land, which is considered spiritually potent. Neena's family roots, for example, traced back to Bhawanipore, Kolkata, but her formative years were predominantly spent at her maternal uncle's residence in Nabadwip. *"Growing up here (in Nabadwip) meant I was constantly surrounded by the chanting, the festivities, and the teachings of [Chaitanya] Mahaprabhu,"* she mentions, emphasizing how the environment molded her spirituality and personality. Similarly, Umarani, originally from Kajoragram in Asansol, was entirely brought up within the nurturing environment of Nabadwip following her father's passing. These cases highlight the importance of "spiritual environment" in shaping one's identity and authority, where the sacred space itself serves as an influential factor in spiritual development. All of the five women mentioned above later became gurus influenced by family traditions bestowed upon them through marriage.

It is important to note that although migration serves as a catalyst for spiritual growth and transformation, it is not a prerequisite for becoming a guru. This is evident from categorization of the narratives into two distinct categories: those who have always been permanent residents of Nabadwip, and those who have migrated from elsewhere. Interestingly, the almost equal distribution of these categories suggests that being a resident or a migrant does not play a significant role in establishing or diminishing one's validity as a guru or an ascetic. Instead, the narratives of these women and the socio-cultural conditions through which they are validated are what matter most in legitimizing their roles. As one respondent articulated, *"It does not matter where you come from. What matters is your bhakti and how you carry forward the teachings of Mahaprabhu. If He (Chaitanya) chooses you as His special one, you will either be born here (in Nabadwip) or come here in whatever way possible."* Understandably, the construction of identity and spiritual authority is deeply enmeshed within a sacred geography. For those who have migrated to Nabadwip, there is a dynamic interaction with spiritual authority informed by socio-cultural contexts that validate the cases as figures of devotion and authority. In ways more than one, the migration of these individuals is not an isolated event but rather a reiteration of the mythological and historical significance of Nabadwip as a space of refuge, renewal, and divine presence. The Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition itself is one that has historically valorized journeys, both internal and

external, as means of achieving higher states of spiritual consciousness. The arrival of these individuals in Nabadwip is, thus, symbolically a continuation of this legacy, contributing to the cultural narrative that shapes the sacredness of this geography.

This migration also highlights the role of sacred geographies in establishing spiritual legitimacy. As Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital suggests, spiritual spaces like Nabadwip act as repositories of symbolic capital, which individuals can draw upon to establish and enhance their spiritual authority. By moving to Nabadwip, the women in this study are not only relocating geographically but also situating themselves within a cultural milieu that carries inherent spiritual legitimacy. The sanctity of Nabadwip, its historical association with Chaitanya, and its contemporary status as a centre of Vaisnavite devotion provide a form of cultural capital that is utilized by these women to legitimize their positions. However, it is also crucial to note that migration, while providing opportunities for transformation, does not guarantee spiritual legitimacy in a uniform way. The interplay between migration and spiritual authority is nuanced and influenced by various factors, including personal experiences, socio- religious contexts, and the ability to align oneself with the traditions of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. For many of the respondents, the act of migrating to Nabadwip is a step towards aligning themselves with the spiritual and cultural ideals of Chaitanya's teachings. This alignment is not always a straightforward process but involves negotiating personal histories, familial expectations, and communal recognition. The narratives demonstrate that while migration can facilitate access to spiritual capital, the transformation into a recognized spiritual leader requires more than just geographical relocation; it demands a deep engagement with the symbolic meanings attached to Nabadwip and the ability to embody the spiritual values of the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition.

The significance of migration to Nabadwip is further enriched by the diversity of experiences among the respondents. While for some, migration is prompted by traumatic experiences, such as wars or personal losses, for others, it is a choice driven by spiritual aspirations or divine revelations. This diversity highlights the intersectionality of migration, where individual motivations converge with broader socio-political forces and religious symbolism. For instance, those who migrated as a result of socio-political turmoil (here, Bangladesh Mukti Juddha) often perceive their migration as an act of divine providence - a moment where the secular and sacred intersect to shape their spiritual paths. Their narratives underscore the dual role of migration as both a consequence of external circumstances and a

spiritually ordained journey, thus blurring the boundaries between agency and destiny in the construction of their spiritual identities. Conversely, those who are native to Nabadwip or have spent most of their lives in the region present a different perspective on spiritual legitimacy. Their rootedness in Nabadwip provides them with a form of legitimacy that is distinct from that of the migrants - a legitimacy that is based on the perception of an unbroken link to the town's sacred heritage.

Thus, the comparison between migrants and native residents reveals an interesting dimension of spiritual legitimacy within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition. While both groups draw upon the sacred geography of Nabadwip to establish their authority, the means through which they do so differ. For migrants, the act of coming to Nabadwip is often seen as a form of surrender- a willingness to leave behind their past and embrace a new spiritual identity in the sacred land of Chaitanya. For natives, however, their legitimacy is rooted in their lifelong immersion in the sacred environment of Nabadwip, which is perceived as a natural and continuous process of spiritual development. Thus, the almost equal distribution of migrants and natives among the respondents suggests that while migration can play a crucial role in shaping one's spiritual journey, it is not an exclusive path to spiritual authority. What ultimately legitimizes their roles as gurus or ascetics is not merely their place of residence but their ability to embody and convey the teachings of Chaitanya in a way that resonates with the community. Migration, thus, can be seen as a facilitating factor rather than a determining one; it provides the context within which spiritual authority can be established, but it is ultimately the individual's actions and the community's response that determine their legitimacy.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, the researcher set out to explore the initial years of the spiritual development of women gurus and ascetics within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition in Nabadwip. Through this exploration, she aimed to highlight some of the most significant aspects that contribute to the formative years of their spiritual journeys and the eventual assumption of their spiritual roles. The data gathered, presented through first-hand narratives from the women themselves, provides an authentic and deeply personal window into these developmental phases. From a sociological perspective, the findings from this chapter point toward certain common patterns that offer broader insights into the position of women leaders within religious communities, while also challenging conventional understandings of spiritual authority.

One of the key findings of this study is the diversity and variability of the pathways that lead women to guruhood and asceticism. Contrary to essentialist notions that might assume high religiosity from childhood as a prerequisite for spiritual authority, the women in this study emerged from a wide range of backgrounds - some deeply entrenched in religious upbringing, while others had little to no early exposure to the same. This disparity challenges the idea that spiritual authority is solely a product of one's religious background, indicatory of the fact that while early life influences, such as family background, can serve as catalysts for spiritual engagement, they do not predetermine the course of one's spiritual development. Spiritual authority, to say the least, is not monolithic; rather, it is shaped by a complex interplay of individual circumstances, personal agency, and external social forces.

The role of education, another critical aspect of this chapter, further complicates simplistic understandings of spiritual authority. The findings reveal that while formal education is often viewed as a tool for empowerment and legitimacy within religious communities, it does not always equate to increased agency for women. In fact, some of the most successful women gurus in the study attained their positions with minimal or no formal education. Instead of relying on academic credentials, these women often draw upon their personal charisma, self-training, or informal spiritual education to assert their authority. This shows that while formal education can enhance one's legitimacy, it is not a universal determinant of spiritual success. The women who rise to positions of authority do so through a combination of personal qualities, lived experiences, and community recognition, rather than through conventional markers of achievement.

The theme of legacy emerged as another important factor in the spiritual trajectories of these women, offering both inspiration and potential constraints. The historical legacies of figures like Nityananda and Jahnava serve as powerful sources of spiritual inspiration for the women in this study, yet they also represent a set of expectations that these women must navigate. This interaction between legacy and personal identity highlights a recurring pattern where women in spiritually authoritative roles must reconcile their individual spiritual paths with the weight of their predecessors' contributions. While these legacies provide a foundation upon which to build, they also impose certain expectations about how women should perform their roles within a patriarchal framework.

But perhaps the most complex and controversial topic explored in this chapter is swapnadesh. Initially presented to function as a form of divine communication, a more critical reading of the narratives reveals that swapnadesh is not merely a mystical experience but is deeply entangled with issues of power, gender, and psychological resistance. At many junctures, it became important to interrogate whether this divine call is truly an external force or a manifestation of internal psychological conflicts. The gendered dimensions of swapnadesh further complicate this question, as women's experiences of divine dreams are often dismissed or diminished by the male figures in their lives. This dismissal reflects a broader societal tendency to undermine women's spiritual authority, particularly when it challenges patriarchal norms.

Finally, migration introduces a critical dimension to the spiritual journeys of the respondents, highlighting how both physical and metaphorical movement shapes their identities and religious authority. The patterns emerging from this theme reveal that migration can act as both an empowering force and a site of negotiation, as women must balance their spiritual aspirations with the challenges and expectations of new environments. In this sense, migration is a transformative experience that can recalibrate women's spiritual roles and social positioning. However, as with education in this study, migration is not a definitive factor for attaining guruhood or asceticism. While the sanctity of Nabadwip may draw individuals seeking spiritual fulfilment, the findings underscore that the women who have migrated to this town and those who are native to it share almost similar trajectories in terms of spiritual authority. The researcher's analysis reveals no significant difference in the spiritual outcomes of these two groups, demonstrating that migration, while influential, is not a decisive factor in determining guruhood or asceticism. It is only to be understood as part of a broader constellation of factors that shape women's spiritual journeys, rather than as a primary determinant of spiritual authority.

In conclusion, it can be said that an important part of an individual's growth towards spirituality is determined by certain autobiographical factors that influence the psychological orientation necessary to carry out that role. As a poetic allegory, these external factors like education (or the lack of it), swapnadesh, and migration are often internalized and sublimated as internal journeys, too. In the next chapter, an attempt has been made to pick up the strings and see the growth of the seeds planted in childhood and early life, structured through strong social and cultural institutions, like marriage and livelihood.

Endnotes

[1]The fourth state of consciousness, beyond waking (jagrat), dreaming (swapna), and deep sleep (sushupti). It represents a state of pure awareness and unity with the Absolute, seen as the ultimate goal of spiritual practice.

[2]Reference to Radha-Krisna.

[3]Refers to Anukul Chandra Chakravarty (1888-1969), a spiritual leader and founder of Satsang, an organization dedicated to spiritual guidance and social service.

[4]A Bengali term used colloquially to describe someone considered lazy or unmotivated, often with a humorous or affectionate connotation. The word combines "Lokkhhi" (Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity) and "chhara" (without), suggesting someone without Lakshmi's favour in terms of diligence or wealth.

[5]Emphasizes on adherence to Vedic rites, following the teachings of Adi Sankaracharya.

[6]A popular name for Lord Krisna, particularly in Bengal, referring to his enchanting beauty as the dark-skinned god (Shyam).

[7]In Gaudiya Vaisnavism, particularly within the Sahajiya community, this term refers to a companion in spiritual practice or sadhana. Sadhan-sangi relationships are valued for mutual support in the journey of devotion and personal transformation.

[8]A spiritual initiation convention in Gaudiya Vaisnavism where devotees receive *diksha* as a couple or pair, typically in the worship of the divine couple Radha and Krisna.

[9]Refers to the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, during which Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan. The conflict was marked by significant struggles for autonomy, with deep cultural and political implications for the Bengali-speaking population of the region.

Chapter 4

Growth to Guruhood: Self, Family, Mystical

Dugdhemamosadhirviprastenayam sa usattam

(Srimad Bhagavatam, 1.3.14)

He (Visnu) milked this earth and made the plants grow, to make this Earth beautiful

The above verse reflects the divine nurturing of potential into fullness, much like the natural progression from seed to towering tree. Similarly, formative influences and significant life events in an individual's early years mature over time, guiding broader social engagements that shape personal trajectories. Through participation in various social institutions, these early experiences cultivate an individual's agency and facilitate pivotal interactions necessary for identity formation. This maturation process becomes crucial before one may adopt the path of guruhood or asceticism. To understand this trajectory in the lives of the respondents, the study, therefore, examines the critical social themes and influences, with an attempt to seek answers to significant interventions that gradually bring them to the threshold of becoming a guru or ascetic. Notably, this exploration begins with the institution of marriage. Involving questions of sexual ownership, economic domination, and questionable distribution of responsibilities, this is the kind of institution that is always at the whirlwind of diverse opinions. Between its purely economic understanding within patriarchal heredity law with assured parentage as highlighted by the Marxist critics following Engels, and its ideological construction consolidated through ages via religious sanction and social acceptability, marriage has been understood and practiced in different ways by different groups and constituencies. In a country like India, with patrilineal rights channelized in myriad ways and marriage guided through different modes and customs, the situation is all the more layered and polysemic. Particularly within the Hindu marriage rules and customs, there are clear differences between the rights and traditions upheld by different linguistic and cultural communities.

The earliest references to marriage in India are found in the Rig Veda, where marriage is portrayed as both a social and religious responsibility, making it a highly recommended institution. The archetype for marriage rituals and mantras was derived from the union of the Sun maiden, Surya, with Soma, the moon. Subsequently, the Grihya-sutras[1], which evolved from the Vedic texts, became the authoritative guides for conducting marriages. These sutras

comprise a compilation of Brahminic slokas focusing on marriage and domestic duties, firmly establishing marriage as a moral and spiritual duty. Within these texts, marriage is formally classified as a *samskara*, or sacrament, with its purposes and the roles of husband and wife clearly outlined. The obligations for each partner are articulated in detail, which may be broadly summarized as follows:

- To unite and support each other in the study of the Vedas
- Producing children of high moral character who would, in turn, lead a life of study and practice in tune with the Vedic prescriptions
- What is not clearly stated but implied is the leading of one's life in accordance to one's varna requirement
- Provide a way of liberation

The last point indicates that the categories of *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha* have been somewhat consolidated by then, and marriage came to be seen as a constrained mode of sublimation of sensual pleasure or kama through subjugation in the service of dharma, which remains as the ultimate goal. Thus, there was a growing tendency towards sanctification of the institution which reached a pinnacle in the Dharmasutras that emerged from 500 CE onwards, through the various smriti texts (Oldenberg, 1892).

However, the injunctions surrounding marriage and domestic life were counterbalanced by an evolving societal force that emerged in the later Vedic period and gained substantial momentum with the rise of Buddhism - the institution of sannyas and ritualized asceticism. The prominence of sannyas within the Hindu tradition notably intensified with the post-Buddhist influence of Sankaracharya, who redefined celibacy as an esteemed path to the ultimate spiritual goal of liberation. While celibacy did not hold a central place in the Vedic ritual corpus, and none of the Vedic sages practiced it strictly, there was nonetheless a marginal segment within early society that viewed ritualistic celibacy as a foundational element for yogic practice. This perspective was later reinforced by the yogic philosophy of Patanjali, which emphasized practices of *samyam* (self-restraint), merging the concepts of *sam* (control) and *yam* (discipline) with an emphasis on sensory and, specifically, sexual restraint. As a result, marriage began to be perceived as both a potential impediment, with its intrinsic sexual component, and as a binding force due to the attachments to family and worldly responsibilities it fostered. This perspective was further exemplified in the life of

Buddha, whose renunciation of His family highlighted a rejection of worldly attachments (*maya*) rather than a primary focus on sexual liberation. To reconcile these tensions, marriage was increasingly conceptualized as a unique form of spiritual journey, designed not merely as a social contract but as a specialized samskara for the spiritual elevation of both partners. Within this framework, marriage was envisioned as a union in which each individual supported the other's journey toward liberation, aligning with the broader Hindu view of human life as a vehicle for karma elimination and an effort to transcend the cycle of rebirth. In theory, Gaudiya Vaisnavism shares substantial ideological ground with these foundational views found in the smriti texts, whereby marriage is recognized as an essential samskara wherein the couple's commitment is ultimately directed toward accountability to the Divine. The institution is thus framed as a collective spiritual journey aimed at liberation, with each partner responsible for nurturing and supporting the other's spiritual growth.

The designation of marriage as a *samskara* rather than a contractual agreement has significant implications within Hinduism, particularly regarding the perceived permanence of the marital bond. Within this framework, the notion of divorce is traditionally incongruent with the spiritual nature of Hindu marriage. Although divorce has been granted legal recognition in modern times, its alignment with the ideological view of marriage found in Hindu texts remains a topic of debate. The same ideology also influences perceptions of widowhood, wherein it is seen as an extension of the marital relationship rather than a dissolution of it. This was the argument that Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagara had to ply during his debate about widow remarriage. Although he quoted from Parasara Smriti[2], he heightened the social necessity of security and appealed to the sympathy of the people more than sastric advocacy. His arguments were also largely propelled by the misfortune of the large number of child-widows who had uncertain futures laid out before them (Vidyasagara, 1864). For adult widows, however, the context differed significantly. As primary spouses, these women retained financial, spiritual, and familial rights even after their husband's death - privileges that could not be easily revoked. This entitlement sometimes had troubling consequences, leading to widow murders disguised as the practice of *sati* to secure property inheritance or family honour. Nevertheless, widowhood often afforded women a heightened position within the family and community, underscoring its dual nature within the Hindu convention. While on one hand, widowhood could impose restrictions, it simultaneously held the potential to elevate a woman's standing as a spiritual compatriot to her deceased husband. This enduring role allowed her to continue their shared spiritual journey independently, reinforcing her

connection to her husband's legacy even in his absence. The interviews conducted with widows substantiated this premise, revealing a distinct pattern: many women assumed a position of guruhood following the passing of their husbands. Even when some widows were initially hesitant to take on the full responsibilities of a guru, they nonetheless expressed a readiness to guide their late husbands' disciples through moral and ethical teachings, effectively adopting the role of siksha gurus. Widowhood thus emerged as a transformative phase, granting these women a unique form of spiritual authority and agency that had often been constrained during their husbands' lifetimes.

The ascetics reside somewhere outside this fold - in a liminal space, positioned on the margins of conventional social structures. Here, they remain fully cognizant of their potential to assume guruhood, a status they consciously opt to forgo, guided by motivations that range from deeply personal convictions to more ideological refusals. This liminality, far from a passive rejection of authority, reflects a critical stance on the institutional expectations and gendered constraints embedded in traditional roles of guruhood. This dynamic positioning serves as both a critique and a reimagining of the pathways to spiritual authority in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, as it diverges from the entrenched expectations of what it means to be a guru within a patriarchal spiritual order. While they embrace spiritual discipline and devotion, these ascetics navigate a complex terrain between self-assertion and self-effacement, casting aside titles that would otherwise confer respect and influence. Their rejection of guruhood raises fundamental questions about whether asceticism must necessarily culminate in leadership, or whether spiritual authenticity can, in fact, flourish in spaces of apparent subordination.

The marital roles, as have been seen above, are guided by the smritis and therefore betrays a possibility of appearing biased against women in certain aspects, like a firm belief in the subordinate role of the women and the fact that the onus of raising the family and keeping it intact and peaceful somehow, almost exclusively, falls upon them. This reveals that despite Chaitanya's universalist orientation and the resistance to Dharmasastra-based sastric strictness in its early stage, there developed a strong Brahminical slant in Gaudiya Vaisnavism in the later centuries. The authoritative texts of Gaudiya Vaisnavism contain seeds of Brahminism, subtly present behind their overt statement of universal humanism. But that is not the purpose of this study, nor would the researcher like to engage with direct textual analysis. On the other hand, the importance of the Brahmin families and the command

that they exercise within the community is clearly noticeable, particularly in Nabadwip. It can be stated here that the rich educational tradition of Nabadwip were also carried out by families of Brahmin pundits, and they continue to exercise great respect in the place and also beyond, which has not been completely curtailed even in the wake of Chaitanya's spiritual movement. Even for non-Brahmin families, respect for Brahmins appears to be an unquestioned ideological makeup. This has been found to be an important determinant factor in ascertaining the social importance of women gurus in this town.

Integrally linked to the question of family and authority is the aspect of livelihood. Just like education, there appears to be two clear divisions when it comes to earning of livelihood: one through employment in the modern sense, that is, through salaried jobs or pensions from salaried jobs which were secured through modern education, and the other, earnings through religious funds. The latter could be further divided into resources based on donations from disciples, incomes through professional performances in religious rituals like kirtan programmes, and finally through ritualized mendicancy which is a time-honoured tradition. For the gurus, especially, there is a distinct hierarchy that is based on the way through which livelihood is earned, and each vouch for some kind of sastric validation. The field interviews reveal a great variety of practices and thought-processes in matters of livelihood of the women practitioners, which have been enumerated and analyzed in a separate section in this chapter.

4.1 Ties that Bind: Marriage as a Root for Spiritual Growth

Marriage, as discovered during the course of the study, acts as a pivotal element in the journeys of the respondents, illuminating the nuanced ways in which personal relationships intersect with their spiritual authority. While it is traditionally viewed as a deeply personal and social institution, it often serves as a critical component in their spiritual evolution, influencing how they are perceived by their followers, as well as shaping their approach to their spiritual duties. Throughout the course of this research, it was found that marriage, both in its traditional form and in its non-orthodox variations, shaped the way these women navigated their roles - balancing the expectations of familial life with the demands of their spiritual practice.

In the cases of the living women gurus interviewed, many of them recount that they underwent traditional Hindu marriage ceremonies, where their union was sanctified through

rituals like the "panigrahana[3]," "laja homa[4]," and "sindur-daan[5]." For these women, their husbands were not merely partners in the domestic sense but also companions who often played a formative role in their spiritual path. As Sudipa Goswami noted, *"My marriage was not just about household responsibilities. It was a union of our spiritual practices. My husband's guidance shaped my own understanding of bhakti."* This perspective was echoed by many other women, including Bharati Goswami, who recalls, *"When we were married, my Gosai (husband) and I made a vow that our lives would be dedicated to Nitai-Gour[6]. For us, marriage was not about material things; it was about deepening our commitment to our faith."* Such narratives suggest that for many women gurus, their marital relationships provided not just emotional support but also spiritual grounding, helping them to traverse the demands of guruhood.

At the same time, this study also reveals that while some women found strength in their marital bonds, others faced challenges in reconciling the stipulations of household duties with their spiritual responsibilities. As Asha Goswami shares, *"There were days when I felt torn between my responsibilities at home and my responsibilities as a guru. My husband was supportive, but society often places a lot of pressure on women to be perfect wives and perfect gurus. It was not always easy to balance both."* This tension was most pronounced in cases where the respondents saw their marital relationships as essential to their spiritual growth, but at the same time, felt the weight of societal expectations. Upasana Goswami, for instance, reflects, *"There is always this question - how can a woman, especially a married woman, be a guru? But for me, my marriage was my training ground. It taught me patience, humility, and the importance of seva (service)."*

Furthermore, for many cases having practiced traditional forms of marriage, the societal expectations surrounding the role of a wife often influenced how they conducted their spiritual roles. In some, their status as married women lent them credibility within their sampradayas, as marriage was viewed as a stabilizing force that affirmed their respectability and moral standing. As Neena Goswami asserts, *"People would sometimes question my authority as a guru because I was a woman, but they respected me because I was married. Being a wife and mother gave me a kind of social legitimacy that I might not have had otherwise."* This perception of marriage was particularly strong in cases where the woman's husband was also involved in spiritual practice, often serving as a diksha guru.

However, this study also reveals alternative forms of union that diverge from the traditional model, particularly among women who practiced the Mala-Chandan ceremony. Rooted in Sahajiya traditions, this form of union emphasizes spiritual equality between partners, contrasting with the hierarchical gender roles often associated with traditional Hindu marriages. In this, the partners are referred to as "sadhan-sangi" and "sadhan-sangini," indicating a relationship of equals who are jointly engaged in spiritual practice. As Gourdasi Vaisnavi explains, *"In Mala-Chandan, there is no hierarchy. Both [husband and wife] are on the same path, seeking the same [spiritual] goal. There is no concept of the husband being superior to the wife or guiding her. Marriage is a form of bhajan [.....] not bound by rituals of the external world."* Remarkably, the case of Nityapriya Goswami, who chose to retain her Brahmin surname after the Mala-Chandan ceremony, reflects a significant tension between individual spiritual identity and societal expectations within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite context. This may be interpreted as a strategic move to align with the existing hierarchies that privilege Brahmin gurus, suggesting that despite the Sahajiya tradition's more egalitarian spiritual values, caste identity remains an influential factor in shaping spiritual leadership. When asked about her decision to keep her surname, Nityapriya responded with a subtle smile and nod, offering no direct explanation, thereby leaving room for interpretation regarding the possible strategic significance of her choice. From a sociological perspective, this case can be analyzed through the lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), which illuminates how different social categories - such as caste, gender, and spiritual authority - interact to shape Nityapriya's experience. Her refusal to adopt her husband's surname reflects a subtle yet profound negotiation between her Brahmin heritage and her new spiritual identity as a sadhan-sangini, suggesting that even within egalitarian religious practices, individuals may resist certain aspects of social conformity while embracing others. Furthermore, her decision to not change her surname can be viewed as a form of resistance against the dominant social structures that seek to impose fixed categories of identity.

Adding yet another layer of complexity to this theme is the posthumous case of Radharani Goswami, who entered into matrimony twice with the same man, Murarimohan Das Babaji, first through a traditional Hindu marriage and later through the Mala-Chandan ceremony, where the latter reflects a shift towards a more egalitarian spiritual partnership, in which both she and her sadhan-sangi were recognized as spiritual companions, transcending the typical constraints of their initial union. Her second marriage, marked by the Sahajiya ritual, represents a liminal space where she stepped outside the rigid boundaries of traditional Hindu

marriage, entering into a spiritual partnership that cuts across the social expectations of a wife. This shift mirrors the transformative potential of religious rituals which often provide individuals with the space to renegotiate their roles and identities (Turner, 1967). Radharani's dual marriages, therefore, highlight the fluidity of spiritual roles in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, where women can move between social expectations and spiritual aspirations without fully abandoning either. Interestingly, Radharani, too, deliberately retained the Goswami surname, despite not being born into a Brahmin family - adding another dimension to the interplay between caste and spiritual authority. According to locals in Nabadwip, upon her migration from Nainital, Radharani consciously adopted the surname Goswami, believing that without this Brahmin identifier, her prominence as a kirtaniya would be compromised. This decision likely reflects her understanding that the symbolic capital associated with a Brahmin surname was crucial for gaining recognition and influence in the community, further prompted by a pragmatic understanding of the fact that it would enhance her chances of maintaining her livelihood through kirtan performances of which she was an addict. Therefore, despite engaging in non-orthodox marital practices like Mala-Chandan, both Nityapriya and Radharani may have felt compelled to maintain or adopt Brahminical markers in order to ensure their societal standing within a tradition that continues to place significant value on caste identity.

The diversity in marital choices among the women ascetics in this study further speaks of the concept of intersectionality, wherein these women navigate gender, spirituality, and societal expectations in complex and varied ways (ibid). Purnima Devi's is a notable case in this context. Having chosen to remain unmarried, she serves as a dedicated *sevadasi*[7] at Nabadwip's Prapanna Ashram, entirely devoting herself to spiritual service without the encumbrances of household life. As she explained during her interview, *"Marriage was never something I considered because my swapnadesh was to serve the Lord."* This choice underscores a common thread among ascetics in various religious traditions, where celibacy is seen as a means of attaining higher spiritual goals, unburdened by familial duties. This kind of lifestyle contrasts with the more conventional choices of the other ascetics that reveal how both conventional familial lives and spiritual roles are successfully navigated. Both Doli Saha and Kalpana Goswami shared that their marriages, while traditional in many respects, allowed them the freedom to pursue their spiritual practices without hindrance. As Doli noted, *"My husband's work in Guwahati keeps him busy, but it also gives me the time and space to focus on Govinda seva."* Kalpana echoed a similar sentiment: *"Our lives are*

ordinary in many ways, but my sadhana is something that my husband respects and supports. He understands that it is important to me."

A critical observation in this context is the difference in how these women are perceived by the community at large. Purnima Devi's celibacy, for instance, is often seen as a marker of higher spiritual attainment, aligning with traditional ascetic ideals that place a premium on renunciation. As a result, she is regarded with a level of reverence that is sometimes not extended to married ascetics. In contrast, Doli and Kalpana, though respected for their spiritual roles and engagements, negotiate the added layer of societal expectations tied to their familial lives. As Kalpana points out, *"Sometimes people wonder how I can be both an ascetic and a wife, but to me, the two are not in conflict. My sadhana is my own, and my marriage is another part of my life."* This remark explicates that marriage and family life do not preclude a deep and meaningful engagement with spirituality, as noted from these cases that challenge the traditional dichotomy between asceticism and domestic life - demonstrating that spiritual growth can occur within a variety of personal and familial contexts.

The institution of marriage, traditionally regarded as a binding social contract governed by rigid patriarchal norms, finds itself redefined in the lives of these women studied. Typically, marriage within Hindu tradition is seen as a life stage that imposes specific duties and obligations, particularly on women - positioning them as caretakers of the household and as subservient to their husbands. However, in the cases studied, a profound transformation of this relationship was observed, where the boundaries between the domestic and the spiritual are fluidly negotiated. This challenges traditional gender roles and opens up new avenues for spiritual expression, where marriage is not necessarily an obstacle to spiritual progress but rather a potential catalyst for it. There appears to be a conscious effort to integrate the expectations of domesticity with the spiritual, thus creating a unique space in which both roles coexist and mutually reinforce each other. By embodying both the role of a spiritual guide and a wife, these women subvert the dichotomy that usually exists between the domestic and the ascetic life in Hindu traditions. In many ways, their lived experiences reflect a form of resistance against normative gender roles, offering a new model of spiritual leadership that is not limited by conventional social roles. This also suggests that gender roles in religious contexts are not immutable but are subject to change based on individual agency and social circumstances. While marriage is often considered a limiting factor for women in

patriarchal societies, the women in this study have successfully transformed marriage into a site of spiritual empowerment. By reframing their marriages as spiritual collaborations, these women reassert their autonomy within the institution of marriage, positioning it as a vehicle for spiritual development rather than a hindrance.

This model of spiritual partnership, however, is not without its tensions. Often, challenges stem from the deeply embedded patriarchal norms that persist, even in cases where a more egalitarian spiritual partnership is aspired to. The husbands' support, or lack thereof, often determines the extent to which these women can assert their spiritual authority within the marriage. In cases where the husband is also involved in spiritual practices, the marital relationship may serve to enhance the woman's spiritual authority, though this may not always hold true. The narratives, thus, offer a powerful critique of the gendered hierarchies that persist within both religious and social institutions, while simultaneously opening up new possibilities for spiritual authority and leadership in Gaudiya Vaisnavism.

4.2 Resilient Blossoms: Widowhood and the Path to Guruhood

In Indian society, widowhood has historically carried deep social, cultural, and spiritual ramifications. A widow often becomes emblematic of loss - not merely of her husband but of her own social identity, which is heavily constructed around the institution of marriage. Rooted in patriarchal norms, a woman's status and value are traditionally linked to her husband, rendering widowhood a form of societal dislocation. The passing of a husband triggers not only personal grief but also a profound shift in her role and identity within the community. In Hindu tradition, particularly, widowhood has been associated with austerity, renunciation, and withdrawal from public life. A widow is expected to adopt a lifestyle marked by simplicity, often seen as a renunciant figure who forfeits the pleasures and pursuits of normal life. Her highest duty, as defined by classical texts like the Dharmasastras, is perceived to be serving her husband; therefore, his death symbolizes the conclusion of her active roles. Particularly in conservative regions, widows were subjected to rigid norms, whereby they were expected to live without adornment, to fast regularly, and to refrain from remarrying. This harsh treatment has been captured by scholars like Lamb (2000), who observed that widows in Hindu society were often relegated to "invisible" roles, largely excluded from mainstream social life. The custom of *sati* - wherein a widow would immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre - was a drastic expression of this marginalization, though its practice is long abolished. Even today, despite social reforms, widows often

occupy a lower status in traditional family hierarchies. Their independence is curbed, and they are often reduced to a shadow of their earlier selves. These constraints are reinforced not only by family but also by religious doctrines that emphasize the "purity" and "sacrifice" of a widow as a pathway to spiritual salvation.

In contemporary times, however, widowhood, while still bearing remnants of these historical stigmas, is being redefined by women who seek to carve out new identities and pathways, particularly in spiritual domains. This shift is evident in various parts of India where widows are stepping into roles of spiritual authority as gurus. While widowhood once represented the end of a woman's agency and autonomy, for some, it has become a moment of spiritual awakening and empowerment. Today, the limitations imposed by widowhood are not only resisted but subverted in ways that challenge conventional social and religious hierarchies.

A notable subset of respondents in this study exemplifies this complex negotiation between tradition and agency. They demonstrate that widowhood, while traditionally seen as a period of decline and retreat, can also serve as an opportunity to emerge as gurus, drawing on their lived experiences of loss to guide others on their spiritual journeys. For example, Umarani Goswami's transition into guruhood after her husband's death in 1998 exemplifies a profound reassertion of her spiritual and social role. Taking on her diksha guru husband's responsibilities, she began initiating new disciples, and to this day, her disciple count stands at around 10-12. Additionally, those who were initiated by her late husband continue to visit her, acknowledging her as their '*guruma*,' a testament to her sustained spiritual presence. In her own words, she recounts, *"After my husband left, I felt as if my world had ended, but then I realized that I had to continue his work. The disciples came to me, and I knew that I had to take on the mantle, not for myself, but for them, because he (her husband) loved all of them as if they were his own children."* Widowhood, for Umarani, therefore, became the impetus for her transformation into a guru, with her role expanding beyond personal loss into one of communal responsibility and spiritual continuity.

Unlike Umarani, Nandarani Dasi's transition into guruhood, however, presents a complex case, where multiple factors beyond widowhood play a role in shaping her spiritual authority and societal acceptance. In this case, Nandarani's Sahajiya identity complicated her acceptance as a guru, she asserts, adding that she is often viewed with suspicion and marginalization by the mainstream Brahmin Vaisnava gurus in Nabadwip. Furthermore, her physical disability which is the result of a tragic accident that claimed the life of her sadhan-

sangi, added another layer of social marginalization. The loss of her right arm not only altered her personal life but also affected how society perceives her ability to fulfil the duties of a guru. In a community where physical wholeness often symbolizes spiritual purity, her disability has become a symbolic barrier to greater acceptance (Lorde, 1984). Having lost her husband nearly forty years ago, Nandarani reflects, *".....being a widow does not mean I cannot serve the Divine."* With only a couple of disciples, her influence as a guru remains marginal compared to other women in similar positions. This raises questions about the extent to which widowhood, even when transformed into a spiritual role, can fully overcome the societal constraints placed upon women, despite being just one of several factors that shapes Nandarani's marginal position in the society. Notwithstanding her desire and decision to initiate more followers, the scale of her following suggests that the societal perception of widows still affects her ability to be fully accepted as a guru.

The case of Nityapriya Goswami, on the other hand, underscores how this life transition of widowhood can lead to a reconfiguration of identity. Following her sadhan-sangi's death almost twenty years ago, she inherited his ashram and stepped into the role of diksha guru, initiating four disciples till date. In this context, her words reflect a dual sense of duty and empowerment, "*.....it was his (her sadhan-sangi's) dream to see more women take up the role of guru. When he passed, I knew that it was up to me to fulfil his vision and continue the teachings I have learned from him and my gurudev."*

What emerges from these accounts is a nuanced understanding of widowhood. While widowhood continues to carry certain social stigmas, most of the cases navigate these constraints while exercising agency to reshape their identities as gurus (Giddens, 1984). They challenge the traditional boundaries of widowhood, using their spiritual knowledge and connection to their husband's/sadhan-sangi's spiritual legacies to build new roles of authority and influence within their sampradayas. This transformation, however, is not solely spiritual. In some cases, economic considerations play a significant role in the transition to guruhood. Social relationships, as Granovetter (1985) noted, often provide the foundation for economic activity. For Dayamayi Vaisnav, who took on the role of siksha guru after her sadhan-sangi's death, financial survival intertwined with spiritual duties. Inheriting her partner's disciples and continuing to guide them ensured a continuity of financial and social support. Disciples often maintain their contributions out of loyalty to their deceased guru and respect for the spiritual lineage, highlighting the transactional nature of such relationships. This dynamic

underscores Homans' (1958) concept of social exchanges, wherein individuals engage in interactions with the expectation of reciprocated benefits.

Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that economic considerations do not uniformly dictate the motivations of all widowed women transitioning into guruhood. The case of Bharati Goswami, who embraced the role of a siksha guru following her husband's demise five years ago, captures this layered complexity. Unlike Dayamayi, Bharati is financially independent, having established a career outside the spiritual domain. This independence affords her the freedom to guide her husband's disciples not from necessity but from a profound commitment to continue his legacy and impart the spiritual wisdom they shared. As she articulates, *"I do not need disciples' donations to survive, [but] I guide them because I believe in the teachings we shared. Around 10-12 of them (disciples) regularly visit me when they miss him (her husband) the most, or under the pretext of gaining a deeper understanding of life. All I can do is provide them with siksha…..[and]…..japer mala to carry on with life."* Similarly, the narrative of Gourdasi Vaisnavi provides additional insights into the varied motivations driving widowed women's claims to spiritual authority. Widowed for over three decades, Gourdasi's reflections suggest that her path to guruhood was not influenced by financial gain or the desire to accumulate a large number of disciples. She mentioned that she had initiated only three disciples, all of whom were women, and her contentment seemed to stem from the strength each of them 'derived from bhakti.' This perspective highlights a departure from the conventional markers of success in guruhood, such as large followings or material wealth. Instead, Gourdasi's focus on a more intimate, spiritually nurturing role underscores the ways in which some widow-gurus may resist the more performative or institutionalized aspects of spiritual authority. Her approach suggests a form of leadership that prioritizes individual transformation over public recognition, yet it also raises questions about how spiritual legitimacy is measured. Is authority validated only by numbers and visibility, or can it also reside in quieter, more personal forms of guidance?

While these narratives illustrate the complex interplay and the assumption of guruhood, the researcher has also attempted to highlight subtle ways through which widowhood can foster spiritual growth without necessitating the role of a guru. This is exemplified in the case of ascetic Mayarani Saha, whose spiritual transformation was deeply intertwined with her widowhood, though it did not lead her to assume the mantle of guru. Mayarani, who had been married to a garment shop owner, experienced a profound change following the death of her

husband. Though the exact year of his demise had blurred with time, she vividly recalls the emotional and spiritual journey that began after his passing. She describes, *"After my husband passed away, it was as if Radha-Madhav guided me towards a deeper understanding of bhakti….."* This sentiment reflects a significant departure from the more structured role of the widow-guru. While widowhood is often seen as a catalyst for a woman to renounce worldly attachments and redirect her focus toward spiritual goals, Mayarani's case highlights how such transformation can occur without the need for public recognition or institutionalized authority. Her spiritual journey, though deeply personal, lacked the outward markers of leadership and visibility that often characterize the path to guruhood. Yet, the common thread in both her narrative and those of widow-gurus is the experience of widowhood as a pivotal moment of transformation.

Ultimately, while widowhood may foster spiritual growth, the forms it takes - whether as a guru or ascetic - are shaped by societal frameworks that continue to impose gendered expectations on women. The act of a widow claiming spiritual authority, whether through taking on disciples or retreating into personal devotion, is not purely a matter of individual agency but a reflection of the social and cultural narratives surrounding widowhood. It is, therefore, critical to question the extent to which this role truly challenges the patriarchal structures that have historically oppressed widows. The agency of these widows is often conditional, constrained by the very expectations that confine women's roles in spiritual spaces. While they are marginalized in many aspects of life, their perceived detachment from worldly concerns - following the death of their husband - can lend them an aura of purity and otherworldliness. This valuation of widowhood implies that women are only empowered insofar as they conform to an ideal of spiritual femininity that upholds traditional notions of purity, sacrifice, and humility. This raises important questions about the nature of agency and autonomy in the context of widow-gurus. While these women certainly exhibit resilience and agency by cruising their way through the cultural constraints of widowhood, their autonomy is far from complete. Their validation often hinges on their ability to perform the role in a way that conforms to existing norms or akin to that of her deceased (spiritual) partners, rather than on any intrinsic spiritual quality they may possess. Thus, while they may have achieved a form of spiritual leadership, this leadership is not free from the constraints of gendered expectations and the performative nature of spiritual authority. From the present study, thus, the researcher has come to the understanding that the sociological insights emerging from the intersection of widowhood and guruhood complicate simplistic empowerment narratives.

While widowhood can be a pathway to spiritual leadership, the conditions under which this occurs are fraught with gendered, caste-based, and performative expectations. The experiences of widow-gurus reveal a form of agency that is always in tension with broader structures of power, both patriarchal and spiritual. Hence, rather than seeing widowhood as a straightforward site of transformation or empowerment, it is crucial to critically engage with the contradictory forces at play, questioning who benefits from these transitions and how much true autonomy is afforded to women within these spiritual spaces.

4.3 Fertile Ground: Ascetics' Potential to Flourish into Gurus

The journey from asceticism to guruhood is highly contingent on a variety of factors, and for women, this path is particularly fraught with institutional and cultural challenges. The deeply entrenched patriarchal norms within Hinduism have relegated many women ascetics to the private sphere, limiting their influence to informal, often unacknowledged roles within spiritual communities. This gendered division is not just a product of historical marginalization but is continuously reinforced by socio-religious institutions that view men as the primary custodians of spiritual knowledge and authority (King, 1993). This marginalization is particularly pronounced in the transition from asceticism to guruhood, where the symbolic capital of being an ascetic does not necessarily translate into recognized spiritual authority for women.

In selecting the four ascetic cases for this study that initially centred around women gurus, the researcher sought to illuminate the nuanced experiences of ascetics who, despite not holding formal roles as diksha gurus or siksha gurus, embody qualities often associated with recognized spiritual leaders. Each of these women presents a distinct narrative, portraying a range of experiences that challenge conventional notions of spiritual authority. Purnima Devi's case, for example, offers a complex view into the tensions between institutional structures and personal aspirations within the spiritual domain. As a resident sevadasi at Nabadwip's Prapanna Ashram, she has dedicated her life to spiritual service. The ashram, established by the visionary Patitpaban Goswami, is unique in Gaudiya Vaisnavism because it represents one of the earliest efforts to champion women's rights and roles within the spiritual tradition. Goswami's progressive vision made room for female spiritual leadership-something rare in Gaudiya Vaisnavism - yet it simultaneously imposed limitations that reflect the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms of religious institutions. This is because even though the head-guru of the ashram is, in fact, a woman, which is emblematic of Goswami's legacy

of gender progressiveness, the structure of the ashram remains deeply hierarchical, and its rules prohibit other women from giving diksha, limiting the potential for leadership to a single figure at the top. This restriction, while intended to preserve a certain spiritual order, has effectively curtailed the aspirations of women like Purnima Devi, who, despite their spiritual dedication and qualifications, are excluded from the highest forms of spiritual authority.

Purnima Devi herself articulates the frustrations of this system. When asked whether she ever wanted to become a guru, her response was succinct yet profound: *"Guru hote ke na chaaye?"* (Who does not want to be a guru?). This rhetorical question speaks volumes about the deeply felt desire for recognition and leadership that exists within her, a desire that is shared by many women who have devoted their lives to spiritual practice. While her ashram may allow her to engage in sadhana and serve as a sevadasi, the possibility of her assuming guruhood is foreclosed by institutional conventions. This tension reflects broader patterns of what Giddens (1984) calls the "duality of structure," wherein institutions both enable and constrain individual agency. On one hand, the ashram has provided Purnima with a space to deepen her spiritual practice and engage in a meaningful way with the religious community; on the other, it has set boundaries that prevent her from stepping into a formal leadership role, revealing the limitations placed on women's agency. Purnima's voice is acknowledged, but only insofar as she remains within the bounds of her prescribed role as a sevadasi.

While Purnima's case reveals the paradox of a system that both empowers and constrains women, the case of Kalpana Goswami illuminates the intricate tensions that arise when personal circumstances and spiritual aspirations collide. As a householder ascetic, Kalpana has garnered a reputation for her scriptural knowledge and spiritual dedication, particularly in leading bhajan and kirtan sessions in and around Nabadwip; yet, she consciously chooses not to pursue guruhood. Her reluctance is not rooted in a lack of spiritual potential but stems from her familial obligations and the time constraints they impose on her life. Her reflections on this dilemma are revealing, *"…..I need to provide for my family. My son is still in college, and my mother is bedridden, relying on me both physically and financially. My husband's income is not enough to support the four of us. Sadhana nourishes my soul, but it does not fill our stomachs."* These words speak to a broader reality for many women in similar circumstances, where the weight of family responsibilities can preclude full immersion in the spiritual life. The case of Kalpana, thus, reflects a more subtle form of constraint, one that is

not necessarily imposed by patriarchal religious structures but by societal expectations of women's roles in the domestic sphere. This aligns with Weber's (1930) concept of 'methodical conduct' - the disciplined and ethical behaviour that characterizes an ascetic life, not just in isolation but within the practical realities of daily existence. In Kalpana's case, her aspiration to become a guru must be balanced against her duties within the family and her responsibilities as a *sadhika*[8], reflecting the tension between personal calling and social obligations.

Furthermore, Ann Oakley's (1974) analysis of women's social roles provides a useful lens through which to understand Kalpana's experience. Oakley emphasizes that women's experiences cannot be fully comprehended without considering the social roles they are expected to fulfil, particularly within the family. In Kalpana's case, her role as a family caregiver intertwines with her spiritual aspirations, creating a set of competing demands that she must navigate. Her decision to prioritize family responsibilities over a formal spiritual role is not simply a personal choice but is reflective of the broader societal expectations that place a disproportionate burden of caregiving on women. The case also resonates with the concept of emotional labour as explored by Hochschild (1983). Women are often expected to manage the emotional needs of those around them, and this emotional labour can take a significant toll on their ability to pursue their own aspirations. In Kalpana's case, the emotional and psychological responsibilities she bears within her family, particularly in relation to that of her aged mother, contribute to her inability to devote the time and energy required for guruhood.

Unlike Purnima and Kalpana, whose aspirations for guruhood are hindered by external circumstances such as institutional barriers or familial obligations, the cases of Mayarani Saha and Doli Saha present a more nuanced resistance to formal spiritual leadership roles. Their conscious decisions to not pursue guruhood are not driven by external constraints but rather reflect an intentional divergence from the conventional path to spiritual authority. Mayarani, for example, offers a distinctive case in which spiritual depth and knowledge do not culminate in the aspiration for guruhood. Bharati Goswami's endorsement of Mayarani as someone who could "effortlessly assume the role of a Gaudiya Vaisnava guru" adds another layer of complexity to her narrative. The recognition of Mayarani's knowledge and capability by her peers signifies that her choice not to take on a formal leadership role is not due to a lack of spiritual merit, but a personal preference for a quieter, more introspective life. This

contrasts with many of the patriarchal narratives surrounding women in Hindu ascetic traditions, where women are often seen as being marginalized or excluded from positions of power due to external barriers. Mayarani's case illustrates that sometimes the decision not to become a guru is a form of empowerment in itself - a conscious rejection of the expectations imposed by society or spiritual institutions. Furthermore, Mayarani's health challenges complicate the picture of guruhood, reminding us that higher levels of spiritual aspirations are often tempered by physical realities. Guruhood, while often idealized as a path of transcendence, is still bound by the material conditions of the body. In Mayarani's case, her physical health acts as a limitation on her ability to engage in the rigorous demands of guruhood, yet it does not diminish her sadhana.

Similarly, Doli's narrative presents a compelling exploration of the dynamics between personal dedication, guruhood, and the decision-making process involved in transitioning from an ascetic to a guru. The absence of obstacles in her psychic progress is notable, particularly when contrasted with the struggles faced by other women in similar contexts. Doli reflects on her spiritual path as being marked by encouragement from her guru, who, prior to demise, expressed a desire for her to assume responsibility for managing his ashram. This acknowledgment from a respected mentor signifies her capabilities and potential as a guru within the sampradaya. Doli, however, remains ambivalent about the title of guru despite embodying many of the symbolic markers of asceticism - most notably, her *jawt* (dreadlocks). Her refusal of this role reveals a deliberate and considered choice rooted in personal convictions rather than a lack of ability or opportunity. Furthermore, her assertion that she finds her dedication to 'Gour-Nitai' to be sufficient, without the need for formal titles, raises critical questions about the nature of spiritual authority and challenges the prevailing assumption that guruhood is universally desired, or that it confers a higher spiritual status.

In many religious traditions, including Gaudiya Vaisnavism, the responsibilities and expectations associated with being a guru can be daunting, particularly for women who may already be negotiating multiple roles within their families and communities. Here, it becomes clear that the ascetics' refusal to pursue formal guruhood can also be viewed as a strategic choice to protect their emotional well-being. The burdens associated with the title of guru often entail a host of responsibilities, including the expectations of discipleship, community leadership, and public scrutiny. For these women, the freedom to define their spiritual paths

without the weight of such expectations allows them to cultivate a more authentic connection to their spirituality. This autonomy is crucial in a context where women's voices have historically been marginalized, as it enables them to carve out spaces of agency and self-determination. It is, however, to be noted that the implications of these women's choices extend beyond their personal spiritual journeys. By redefining their roles outside of the institutional framework of guruhood, they create alternative models of spiritual authority that emphasize inclusivity, authenticity, and emotional resonance. This redefinition is particularly salient in a contemporary context where individuals increasingly seek personalized spiritual experiences that resonate with their lived realities. Yet, one must consider the potential risks inherent in such a rejection of formal roles. Is there a danger that, in prioritizing personal authenticity over institutional recognition, these women might inadvertently reinforce existing power dynamics within their communities? How do their choices impact the spiritual aspirations of other women who may still seek the validation that comes with formal titles? These questions illuminate the complexities of agency and authority, suggesting that while these ascetics may carve out spaces of autonomy, the implications of their choices are multifaceted.

In addressing these questions, it is essential to recognize that the dynamics of spiritual authority are continually evolving. As these ascetics assert their agency and redefine their roles, they contribute to an ongoing negotiation of authority that reflects broader societal changes regarding gender, spirituality, and community. Furthermore, the act of resisting formal guruhood can be seen as a form of resistance against the commodification of spirituality. In contemporary contexts, where spiritual practices are often commercialized and marketed, these ascetics' refusal to align themselves with institutional frameworks highlights a critical stance towards the commercialization of spiritual authority. Their narratives suggest a commitment to preserving the authenticity of spiritual practices, emphasizing the importance of genuine connections over the pursuit of status or recognition. Thus, the fluidity of spiritual authority is underscored by the diverse pathways these women ascetics traverse, revealing that the quest for guruhood is deeply personal and context-dependent.

4.4 Tending Traditions: Adherence to Brahminism

Unlike the traditional Brahmin-dominated religious landscape which, for centuries, upheld strict divisions of caste and authority, Chaitanya's Gaudiya Vaisnava movement emphasized bhakti as a path accessible to all, regardless of caste or social standing. This radical departure

from established norms called into question the exclusivity of Brahminical religious authority. However, despite the movement's progressive ideals, contemporary Nabadwip - Gaudiya Vaisnavism's historical and spiritual heart - still bears the marks of Brahminical influence. This is primarily because caste in India extends beyond a mere system of social stratification; it operates as a deeply embedded cultural framework influencing nearly every aspect of life, including religious practices and beliefs (Srinivas, 1956; Dumont, 1980). Brahmins have long occupied a privileged position within this structure, serving as priests, interpreters of sacred texts, and educators. Their dominance in religious and ritual practices, as well as their control over the transmission of sacred knowledge, has reinforced their authority within Hinduism for centuries. This creates a dual challenge in movements like Gaudiya Vaisnavism: on one hand, it perpetuates a hierarchical structure that privileges Brahmins and excludes others, particularly women and lower-caste individuals; on the other, it raises questions about the authenticity and inclusivity of spiritual movements that purport to democratize spiritual authority.

Speaking of Nabadwip, the resilience of Brahminical structures here is evident in the continued prominence of Brahmin families in spiritual leadership roles. Despite the egalitarian rhetoric of bhakti, which posits devotion as the great equalizer, social realities often reflect the same hierarchical divisions that Chaitanya sought to transcend. While the teachings of Gaudiya Vaisnavism emphasize that bhakti is open to all, regardless of birth or caste, the practical outworking of these teachings in Nabadwip reveals a more complex picture, where Brahmin women, in particular, continue to hold a privileged position as gurus, and where their caste identity significantly influences their recognition and authority within the community. In this light, two cases - one of a woman guru and the other, a woman ascetic - highlight the enduring impact of Brahminical ideology on spiritual practices and community dynamics in Gaudiya Vaisnavite Nabadwip. On the surface, one might expect women practitioners to challenge the male-dominated Brahminical structures that have historically excluded them. However, the adherence of many of the respondents to Brahminical norms suggests a different form of engagement with power.

Max Weber's theory of traditional authority provides a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon. According to Weber (1978), traditional authority is based on the sanctity of age-old customs and the legitimacy of those who inherit positions of power by virtue of their birth. In the case of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, Brahminical authority can be understood as a form

of traditional authority that is deeply embedded in the social and religious fabric of the community. This authority is maintained not only through ritual and theological claims but also through the social structures that uphold the status of Brahmins as the legitimate custodians of religious knowledge and practice. Asha Goswami's affiliation with Brahminical norms, for instance, presents a vibrant case. Her emphasis on the superiority of Brahmin standards and her assertion that only Brahmins can confer diksha to disciples not only reinforce caste-based distinctions but also perpetuate the notion that guruhood is intrinsically tied to lineage. As she states, *"Only those who have been born Brahmins can truly understand the [sacred] texts and scriptures and guide others on the path of bhakti."* Her worldview, which sees caste distinctions as divinely ordained and immutable, not only underlines the persistence of Brahminical authority in contemporary Gaudiya Vaisnavite Nabadwip, but also posits that the tradition of Brahmins offering diksha is not merely a matter of social convention but a sacred duty that is anointed by scripture. *"Diksha is not something that can be offered by just anyone,"* she remarks, *".....only those who are born into the Brahmin varna can carry it out with the purity and authority that it requires."*

Furthermore, Asha's disdain for the inclusive practices of Gaudiya Math, a prominent institution within Gaudiya Vaisnavism founded by Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati[9] in the early 20th century, additionally underscores the tension between traditionalists and reformists in Hinduism. The Gaudiya Math, known for its progressive stance on issues of caste, allows non- Brahmins to assume positions of spiritual authority, a practice that Asha rejects. The notion that non-Brahmins could offer diksha undermines the sanctity of the initiation process and represents a dangerous departure from the time-honoured norms that have governed religious practice for centuries, she opines. She expresses her concerns openly, stating, *"By allowing non-Brahmins to offer diksha, we are diluting the very essence of our traditions. How can someone who is not born into the proper lineage claim to guide others on the path of bhakti? This is not just a matter of tradition - it is a matter of dharma."*

Asha's adherence to these Brahminical values reveals the complex ways in which individuals can internalize and reproduce the very structures of power and exclusion that marginalize them. As a woman in a patriarchal religious tradition, Asha herself occupies a liminal space within the hierarchy of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. Women, particularly in traditional Hinduism, have historically been excluded from the highest tiers of spiritual authority, with leadership roles predominantly reserved for men, especially Brahmin. Yet, instead of challenging the

patriarchal and caste-based structures that have historically marginalized women, Asha reinforces them by upholding the primacy of Brahminical authority. Her case highlights how individuals often become gatekeepers of the very systems that perpetuate the exclusion of many of their compeers.

The case of ascetic Kalpana Goswami, too, offers a similarly complex perspective on Brahminical adherence, though her relationship with Brahminism is articulated in a more philosophical framework. Like Asha, Kalpana upholds caste distinctions and takes pride in her Brahmin status. *"I am a Goswami,"* she often states, emphasizing her Brahminical lineage as a source of both pride and legitimacy. However, she situates her adherence to Brahminism within a Vaisnavite theological framework that emphasizes both the importance of caste and the transcendence of caste distinctions through bhakti. Her oft-quoted statement, *"Shawtoguun-e Brahmin, nawboguun-e Vaisnava"* (a hundred qualities define a Brahmin, while a Vaisnava is revered for just nine qualities), captures this tension. On the one hand, it acknowledges the moral and ethical rigour required to attain Brahminhood, reinforcing the view that Brahmin status is earned through adherence to specific virtues; on the other, her reference to the Vaisnava, who requires only nine qualities, gestures towards a more inclusive vision - one based on bhakti rather than birth.

What unites Asha and Kalpana is the manner in which they both uphold the Nityananda lineage as the foundation of their authority. This lineage, as understood, has become synonymous with Brahminical legitimacy, despite the original egalitarian aims of the Gaudiya Vaisnava movement. While Gaudiya Vaisnavism has produced some women gurus, their authority is often questioned unless they can claim a clear and uncontested lineage. This raises critical questions about the extent to which the inclusivity of Gaudiya Vaisnavism is truly realized in practice. Does the emphasis on bhakti as an open and inclusive path merely mask the persistence of caste hierarchies that continue to privilege Brahmins over others? How do these caste dynamics shape the spiritual experiences and opportunities available to women in this tradition?

These questions are further complicated by the narratives of women like Nityapriya Goswami and the late Radharani Goswami, both of whom retained their Brahminical surname after undergoing significant spiritual rites such as Mala-Chandan. On the surface, the ritual of Mala- Chandan suggests a relinquishment of worldly identities, including caste. However, the deliberate choice to maintain their Brahminical surname after undergoing this transformative

rite illustrates the enduring power of caste within the tradition, especially for women seeking guruhood. Nityapriya's decision to retain her Brahminical surname post-Mala-Chandan reflects a nuanced relationship with her Brahmin identity. Although this study does not probe into the intricacies of the Sahajiya subsect in-depth, the researcher's observations, when questioned about this decision, did suggest a lingering attachment Nityapriya has to her Brahmin heritage. The case of late Radharani Goswami further complicates this dynamic. As mentioned earlier, local narratives suggest that Radharani assumed the Goswami surname after migrating to Nabadwip from Nainital, seemingly to establish herself as a respected kirtaniya. Importantly, even after undergoing Mala-Chandan, she did not relinquish her Goswami surname, indicating a continued connection to her Brahminical identity. Whether this decision was motivated by strategic considerations of aligning herself with the Brahminical lineage to gain legitimacy within a community dominated by Goswami peers or by a deeper connection to Brahminism remains unclear. Unlike Nityapriya's case, where her lineage is a birth-right, Radharani's assumption of the "Goswami" title appears to be a deliberate, socially motivated choice, emphasizing the performative aspects of caste and how it can be manipulated to gain spiritual and social status. However, the lack of clear evidence also points to the importance of questioning and verifying such narratives, as they can often reflect local biases or collective assumptions rather than documented truths.

Thus, within the context of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, which in theory emphasizes the equality of all devotees through bhakti, caste continues to act as a defining feature of religious identity and authority. This raises critical questions about the inclusivity of the tradition in question: If women gurus must assert their Brahminical status to gain recognition and authority within the tradition, what does this say about Gaudiya Vaisnava claims to inclusivity? Are non-Brahmin women inherently disadvantaged in their pursuit of spiritual leadership within this tradition? The contrast between Brahmin and non-Brahmin women gurus is particularly striking when we consider the experiences of cases like Nandarani, Gourdasi, and Dayamayi, who lack the same level of recognition as their Brahmin counterparts. This disparity and their lived experiences highlight the continuing importance of caste in shaping the opportunities and recognition available to women in Gaudiya Vaisnavite Nabadwip. However, it is important to note that while Brahminical identity provides legitimacy, the ability to adopt or retain this identity - as in the case of Radharani - shows that caste can be manipulated and performed in ways that challenge its rigidity. Radharani's decision to assume the Goswami surname after migrating to Nabadwip suggests that caste is not only a matter of birth but can

also be strategically utilized to gain status within a specific social and religious context. This performative aspect of caste complicates the idea that it is purely a rigid system of stratification and suggests that it can be fluid and responsive to individual agency.

Nevertheless, the broader social implications of this caste adherence cannot be ignored. The very idea that bhakti can transcend social hierarchies is challenged, as many practitioners find themselves entangled in the same structures they aspire to escape. The lived realities of those who do not fit into the Brahminical framework expose a different narrative, one where spiritual practice is marked not by equality but by stratification and competition for recognition. Additionally, the concept of "spiritual authenticity" must also be interrogated within this context. In a movement that celebrates personal devotion, the notion that authenticity can be determined by caste lineage or adherence to traditional norms is fundamentally flawed. It is imperative to recognize that authenticity in spiritual practice is deeply personal and varies among individuals. The spiritual journeys of the women in this study reveal a spectrum of experiences that transcend the confines of caste identities. Thus, by privileging individual experiences over inherited identities, Gaudiya Vaisnavism can begin to realize its potential as a genuinely inclusive spiritual tradition.

4.5 Harvesting Sustenance: Livelihood and Spiritual Cultivation

Throughout history, spiritual leaders have often been depicted as individuals who renounce material wealth and detach themselves from worldly concerns in pursuit of higher spiritual goals. This renunciatory ideal has been particularly influential within the Hindu traditions, where figures such as the sannyasi or the ascetic serve as paradigmatic examples of individuals who, through their rejection of material concerns, attain spiritual purity and authority. However, as society has evolved, so too have the practical realities of spiritual life, particularly for women who must navigate not only the demands of their spiritual roles but also the socio- economic structures that shape their daily existence. As such, for many women spiritual leaders, the expectation of complete material detachment is complicated by their roles as caregivers, community leaders, and, in some cases, breadwinners. In patriarchal structures, women are often expected to shoulder the "double burden" of both spiritual and material caregiving, a phenomenon that applies not only in the secular sphere but also within religious communities.

Feminist scholars have long critiqued the notion that women's spiritual work is inherently separate from their economic and domestic roles (McGuire, 2008). As globalization and capitalism continue to permeate even the most sacred spaces, the role of money in maintaining religious institutions has become unavoidable. In this light, local religious practices in Nabadwip, too, have been majorly impacted by the global economy, with the ashrams being sustained through a mixture of traditional offerings, donations, and patronage from both local and global devotees. Despite these economic demands, service to the Divine remains inseparable from service to the people who depend on the gurus for spiritual guidance and material support. While male gurus may more easily assume roles of authority, their women counterparts must often navigate societal norms that expect them to remain within the domestic or caregiving sphere (Mani, 2005). In this sense, the economic responsibilities of women gurus can be seen as an extension of their traditional roles as caretakers, where the act of managing ashrams or collecting donations is framed as an extension of their nurturing role rather than a challenge to patriarchal structures. However, as scholars such as Uma Chakravarti (2003) have pointed out, this framing can also serve to reinforce gender inequality, as women's spiritual and economic labour is often undervalued or rendered invisible.

In the present study, it has been observed that the livelihoods of women gurus are deeply intertwined with their spiritual roles in complex and varied ways. Several distinct categories of livelihoods have been identified in this regard: one category consists of those who are financially independent, either through professional work or pensions. Another group is financially sustained by the support of their disciples. A third category includes cases that rely on madhukari, a traditional practice of gathering offerings from the community, which serves as their primary means of subsistence. Additionally, there are those whose financial stability is rooted in their affluent family backgrounds. It is important to note that the researcher has deliberately focused on the cases of living women gurus in this theme, as their active engagement in guruhood offers a dynamic view of how they negotiate the intersection of livelihood and spirituality. Posthumous cases have been intentionally omitted from this theme, as they do not provide the same level of insight into the ongoing, evolving relationship between economic agency and spiritual authority.

In the category of financial independence, the cases of Bharati Goswami and Neena Goswami stand out. These women represent a departure from the traditional view of gurus as entirely

detached from material concerns, offering a more contemporary model where financial autonomy plays a key role. Bharati's professional life as a Bengali teacher provides her with a stable income, allowing her to pursue her spiritual work without financial dependence on the disciples who visit her. Her case serves as a critical counterpoint to the gendered expectations that typically govern guruhood, where male gurus often enjoy greater economic and institutional support. Similarly, Neena, though retired, maintains financial independence through her pension. As a former teacher, her retirement benefits provide her with a consistent and predictable income, shielding her from the financial uncertainty that often accompanies reliance on disciple donations. While Neena's case differs from Bharati's in that her financial independence is based on past work rather than ongoing professional engagement, the experiences of both these cases reflect broader societal shifts in women's access to formal employment and financial security.

In stark contrast, the experiences of Pratima Goswami, Umarani Goswami and Nityapriya Goswami illuminate the challenges faced by women gurus who rely heavily on the financial support of their disciples and devotees. Their circumstances demonstrate a traditional model of spiritual leadership in which the guru's livelihood is sustained by the generosity and devotion of her followers. Dependence on donations, particularly financial contributions during religious festivals and annual celebrations, is viewed as an expression of reverence and support - a kind of reliance deeply embedded in the cultural and religious practices of Vaisnavism, where the guru-sisya relationship is characterized by mutual dependence - whereby disciples provide material support while the guru offers spiritual guidance. By framing financial dependence within the cultural context of devotion, these cases reinforce the idea that accepting donations can be viewed as an act of humility and a spiritual duty. This is consistent with the notion of symbolic interactionism, which posits that human interactions are shaped by the meanings individuals attach to their roles and relationships (Mead, 1934). In this light, their financial dependence is not merely a reflection of economic vulnerability but rather a manifestation of their commitment to nurturing their disciples' spiritual growth.

However, this symbolic framing also obscures the material realities of their financial dependence, masking the socio-economic inequalities that underpin their guruhood. For instance, Nityapriya emphasizes the difficulties of having to survive on donations received especially during special occasions, stating, *"The months in between can be challenging; we*

rely on the festival times to sustain us." Such a statement reflects not only the intermittent nature of income but also the stress and uncertainty that accompany such financial arrangements. This precarious situation is further compounded by the emotional labour involved in maintaining the guru-sisya relationship. These gurus not only serve as spiritual guides but also shoulder the emotional burdens of their disciples, who may project their aspirations and desires onto them. As Umarani poignantly notes, *"It is not just about money; it is about the connection and the love we share."* While this statement reflects the depth of the spiritual bond, it also illustrates the complexities of their roles as caregivers, where financial contributions are intricately linked to emotional investment.

The experiences of Dayamayi Vaisnav, Gourdasi Vaisnavi, Brinda Das, and Nandarani Dasi further illuminate the third category, that of madhukari - a traditional form of mendicancy within the context of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. Often perceived within Hinduism as a legitimate means of sustenance for gurus and ascetics alike, madhukari symbolizes not merely the act of collecting alms but also embodies the spiritual relationship between the guru and the sisya. The act of giving, from the perspective of devotees, transcends mere financial support; it becomes a spiritual offering, a tangible expression of their commitment to their guru and their shared faith. In this sense, the practice fosters a reciprocal relationship that enhances the bonds of devotion within the community. While the income generated through madhukari is often minimal, most of the cases engaged with this practice report a sense of satisfaction and autonomy in how they manage these resources. This suggests that agency is not solely defined by the amount of financial resources available but can also stem from the control exerted over their usage. Yet, this raises further questions about the sustainability of such a lifestyle. What happens when the flow of alms becomes inconsistent, as evidenced in the experiences of Dayamayi Vaisnav? Reflecting upon the precariousness inherent in such economic arrangements, Dayamayi says, *"There are days when the support flows in abundance, but there are also lean times. It is a struggle to maintain my ashram during those periods."* Underscoring the episodic nature of income, this particular respondent highlights how dependence on community support is fraught with uncertainty, as financial stability hinges on the goodwill of devotees and disciples. This economic peril also perpetuates a cycle of dependency that can potentially limit the agency of these gurus within their sampradayas. Interestingly, the challenges of madhukari are further exacerbated by the stigma associated with this practice among higher-class Gaudiya Vaisnavas, who often perceive it as a mark of spiritual inferiority - thereby reinforcing a hierarchy that privileges certain forms of

spiritual authority over others. Thus, women who choose to rely on madhukari are often left to contend with the dual burdens of economic instability and societal disapproval, as this study reveals.

On the other hand, six cases of living women gurus enjoy a degree of financial stability rooted in their affluent family backgrounds. Asha Goswami, along with her two daughters-in-law are affiliated with Baladev Bari, while Upasana Goswami hails from Madanmohan Bari. Additionally, Sudipa Goswami is linked with Sonar Gouranga Mandir, and Radharani Goswami II belongs to Gour Govinda Mandir. The socio-economic dynamics surrounding these women reveal how economic security along with social legitimacy confer upon them a degree of authority that may elude the less fortunate. Asha's articulation, *"Being part of Baladev Bari is a privilege I do not take lightly,"* not only highlights the advantages conferred by their lineage but also indicates an understanding of the responsibilities that accompany such status. The contrast between these six cases and their economically vulnerable counterparts highlights systemic inequalities that permeate the spiritual domain, whereby their financial security positions them in a hierarchical relationship with other women gurus who face economic precarity. The implications of this stratification extend beyond individual experiences to the community's understanding of guruhood. This reinforces existing power dynamics where the economic status of a guru influences their spiritual authority. Nancy Fraser's (1995) concept of the "politics of recognition" becomes pertinent here, as it elucidates how certain identities and experiences are valued over others. The privilege that affluent women gurus enjoy inadvertently marginalize those who rely on donations and/or madhukari, reinforcing hierarchies based on economic status.

The experiences of women ascetics, on the other hand, often highlight the tension between spiritual aspirations and material needs. While the traditional view of asceticism valorizes detachment from worldly possessions, the reality for these women is that economic survival necessitates engagement with these very possessions they are meant to renounce. As Kalpana Goswami notes, *".....I must balance my sadhana with the need to support my family. How can I truly detach when my family demands my presence, [as well as] when the world demands my presence?"* Kalpana, unlike the other three ascetics who are dependent on family or ashram donations, maintain a degree of financial independence through external employment. A Primary School teacher by profession, her ability to engage in civic duties and participate in community events through kirtans illustrates a model of asceticism that is

not solely defined by renunciation but also by active engagement with the world. This duality poses critical questions about the nature of asceticism and its relationship with economic independence. She herself reflects, *"Sadhana does not necessitate abandoning the world; instead, it can thrive alongside it."* Likewise, Purnima Devi, the celibate ascetic in Prapanna Ashram, actively participates in the livelihood of her ashram community without renouncing her spiritual commitments, further denoting that the boundaries between the sacred and the profane are not always distinct as Durkheim theorized (1915) and instead, can coexist and even enhance one another (Ashdown, 2019). This perspective emphasizes that the lives of contemporary ascetics often blur the lines between spirituality and materiality, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be an ascetic today.

Indeed, the contemporary landscape of spirituality, especially among women, challenges the binary distinction between the sacred and the profane, revealing a much more nuanced and interconnected reality. The expectation for women in spiritual roles to embody a complete detachment from material life is not only unrealistic but also perpetuates an outdated understanding of spirituality. Furthermore, the globalization of spiritual practices and the commodification of spirituality introduce a layer of complexity that has not been adequately addressed in existing literature. As the researcher delved deeper into the economic realities of the respondents, it became evident that their roles cannot be disentangled from the broader economic forces at play. The reliance on donations, offerings, and community support is not merely a reflection of spiritual devotion; it also underscores the transactional nature of guru-sisya relationships in contemporary contexts. Therefore, the challenge of reconceptualizing spiritual authority becomes increasingly evident, for it becomes clear that guruhood or asceticism cannot be reduced to a singular narrative of detachment or renunciation. Instead, a more inclusive framework must acknowledge the interdependence of spiritual, economic, and social dimensions in shaping the identities and experiences of these practitioners.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis presented above, read at tandem with the discussions in the preceding chapter, provides a groundwork on which the spiritual dimensions of guruhood are expected to flower, which will be further elaborated upon in the subsequent section. It sheds light on the critical role of marriage, a key determinant in shaping the respondents' conceptualization of femininity in practice. This examination not only aligns with traditional paradigms but also illuminates the processes of change and negotiation within this domain. Additionally, it offers

valuable insights into the reconfiguration of identity for individuals who undergo the transition into widowhood. The narratives gathered illustrate a common experience of ambivalence, where the liberation associated with widowhood is constantly bargained against the backdrop of societal scrutiny. This duality challenges the monolithic understanding of widowhood as purely liberating or constricting, instead suggesting that it embodies a spectrum of experiences that are shaped by the intersections of gender, spirituality, and social norms.

The third theme explored in this chapter further complicates this understanding by pointing at a critical observation: the potential for ascetics to become gurus is frequently impeded by a pervasive reluctance that does not merely signify individual hesitance. The lack of the scaffolding that a well-known and financially secure family does, both on a social and financial front, increase their challenges. However, their courage for negotiating their space and the reasons they offer for the same also comes across as a revelation. Although not explicit in the narratives gathered, there is a masked acknowledgment of the hierarchies that Brahminism imposes on spiritual authority, besides the patriarchal structures that are incongruent with their identities and roles within the community. This takes us to the fourth theme that reveals a stark tension between the egalitarian ideals of Gaudiya Vaisnavism and the prevailing Brahminical structures. Despite bhakti's emphasis on devotion as a unifying force accessible to all, the persistence of caste-based authority among gurus and ascetics indicates that the rhetoric of inclusivity often clashes with social realities. Such a framework may ironically exclude some of the very individuals the tradition purports to embrace, limiting the transformative potential of bhakti by binding it within rigid social boundaries. In a sociological lens, this powerful yet unspoken qualifier on inherited status is reflective of Weber's notion of traditional authority, where legitimacy is based on lineage rather than individual spiritual insight.

Finally, the theme of livelihood provides a reconceptualization of spiritual authority, essentially acknowledging the socio-economic interdependencies in which women practitioners are embedded. One critical issue here is the implicit bias that still prioritizes men as primary spiritual authorities. Male leaders, often insulated by institutionalized support, are freer to embody the renunciatory ideal. In contrast, women must adopt an "acceptable" blend of spirituality and caretaking, reinforcing the stereotype that their role as nurturers transcends into their spiritual work. By framing economic activity as an extension

of women's traditional roles, patriarchal systems attempt to legitimize this dual burden without addressing the underlying inequalities. The commodification of spirituality in a globalized context further complicates this dynamic. The reliance on donations, especially among economically vulnerable gurus, blurs the line between genuine spiritual support and the transactional aspects of religious offerings. This framework risks reducing spirituality to a performance or service sustained by financial dependency, which can be precarious and undermine autonomy.

Endnotes

[1]Ancient Sanskrit texts that outline domestic rituals and rites of passage for householders. Part of the Vedic literature, these texts provide guidance on marriage, birth, funeral rites, and other essential ceremonies in Hindu family life.

[2]A classical Hindu legal and ethical text attributed to the sage Parasara. This Smriti is notable for its emphasis on the rights and duties of individuals, particularly addressing issues of dharma and social order.

[3]A ritual within Hindu marriage ceremonies symbolizing the "taking of the hand." This act signifies the groom's acceptance of the bride as his life partner, with promises of mutual respect and protection.

[4]A significant Vedic ritual in Hindu weddings, during which puffed rice (laja) is offered to the fire by the bride's brother as a symbol of prosperity and blessings for the couple. It represents a prayer for the bride's well-being and fruitful married life.

[5]The ritual of applying vermillion (sindur) on the bride's forehead, symbolizing her new status as a married woman in Hindu culture.

[6]Reference to Nityananda Prabhu (Nitai) and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (Gour or Gouranga).

[7]A female attendant devoted to performing service (seva) to a deity or temple.

[8]A term used in the context of spiritual practice, referring to a female practitioner or devotee engaged in sadhana.

[9]A prominent Gaudiya Vaisnava spiritual leader and scholar (1874 - 1937), who revitalized and reformed the movement in the early 20th century through establishment of the Gaudiya Math that emphasized the importance of both scriptural study and public outreach to spread Krisna consciousness.

Chapter 5

Flowering of the Sacred: Diksha, Bhakti, Gender

Kalindi puline kadamba vitapi chayasu ratnollasad valli mandape
Ujjvale marakatonmilat pradipalini mukta kudmala guchha hira kusume
Vaidurya sat pallave dhyayami smara keli narma nirataa sri radhika madhavam

(Vrindavan Mahimamrita. Sataka 16.49-50)

By the banks of the Kalindi, beneath the shade of the Kadamba tree,
Where various flowers bloom like jewels,
Sri Radhika with Madhava is engaged in divine play

The scene depicted above where Radha and Krisna engage in playful divine exchanges beneath the Kadamba tree along the banks of the Kalindi[1] epitomizes the profound spiritual symbolism that permeates Vaiṣṇava literature. This imagery conveys the fruition of a deeply rooted, nurtured bond, akin to a tree's journey from a seedling to full bloom, laden with symbolic significance. Krisna is poetically associated with the *atasi* flower, celebrated through the moniker, 'atasipuspasankasam haranupurasovitam,' which accentuates His tender blue complexion. The *keli kadamba* flower is believed to evoke memories of Radha within Him, while the *golaka* flower embodies the very spirit of Gokula[2]. In this allegorical realm, the guru is a symbolic flower - one who enriches, nurtures, and transforms the lives of disciples, guiding them from unawakened states toward enlightenment. Their role in fostering this spiritual awakening is indispensable, particularly in the Indian tradition where initiation (diksha) is intertwined with instruction (siksha).

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krisna extols the guru's essential role in guiding an aspirant on the spiritual path. This reverence is so ingrained in Indian culture that it permeates various arts and knowledge systems beyond spiritual pursuits. In this sense, diksha extends beyond formal induction into a spiritual community, embodying the commencement of a lifelong journey of learning and self-discovery. This is where it separates from the concept of ritualized initiation as understood in the Western tradition. Diksha is not merely a rite of initiation to a community, cult or guild, but at the same time it is also the beginning of a path of learning. Within Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism, the guru who offers diksha is expected to provide comprehensive siksha as well. The tradition, nonetheless, distinguishes between diksha and siksha gurus, albeit often elevating the former category within the hierarchy. This is due to

the belief that the diksha guru not only confers spiritual authority but also shares a portion of their spiritual potency with the disciple, absorbing part of the disciple's karmic burden. Conversely, the disciple is bound to follow the guru's guidance without question. In this context, the guru holds a near-divine status, often articulated in the couplet:

Kṛiṣṇa rusta holey guru rakhibaare pāre,
Guru rusta holey Kṛiṣṇa rakhibaare nāre.

This aphorism signifies that while a guru can appease even an irate Krisna, should the guru be displeased, even the Divine may be unable to intervene. Such expressions underscore the guru's unparalleled significance, positioning her as a primary conduit for divine devotion. In many Vaisnava traditions, the *ahaituki bhakti* (selfless devotion) to one's guru, in fact, serves as a precursor to the ultimate devotion to Kṛisna (Srimad Bhagavatam, 3.29.11-12).

Taking on the mantle of a guru, therefore, demands profound preparation and self-realization. The biographical aspects of this preparedness, in its various aspects, have already been discussed in the previous chapters. In the first theme of the current chapter, the researcher has attempted to get into the actual act, and examine the role of diksha and its associated siksha through its various forms. There will be two parts to it - the diksha, where initiation along with siksha or education will be engaged with, and a second part which will be devoted purely and exclusively to siksha, as encounters with certain interviewees have revealed conscious assumptions of the siksha guru role, providing insights into their pedagogical influence within the spiritual community.

The second theme of this chapter is an extension of the first, where the relationship between the guru and the sisya has been analyzed. This is the most important relationship within any spiritual dispensation, and which introduces a large number of relational complexities - particularly from a sociological standpoint - especially for women who assume the role of guru. The researcher can vouch for the same since she has found that many accepted gender roles are both challenged, as well as adhered to, in the laying out of this relationship. The study thus presents an opportunity to observe how women in leadership navigate responsibilities toward a dependent, often mixed-gender group, rather than a solely female cohort. The guru-sisya relationship, as observed, is multi-layered and polysemic, with the success of the women gurus' social and denominational power often deduced to their skilful management of this crucial relationship.

In the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition, the central axis of the guru-siṣya relationship is often reiterated as *bhakti*. Rooted in the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, particularly its twelfth chapter, *Bhakti Yoga* - this devotional path is presented as the highest means of attaining Krisna. It involves fixing one's mind entirely upon Him - performing all mundane duties with detachment and reserving true attachment solely for the Supreme Godhead. This guiding principle of bhakti informs and shapes all aspects of Gaudiya life. Further, Chaitanya Charitamrita by Krisnadas Kaviraj Goswami reinforces this perspective, elevating *prem* or *bhakti* as the pinnacle of *sadhana* - one that receives Chaitanya's ultimate sanction. However, there is a conflation in this aspect, which states that the devotion of the sisya towards the guru is a mortal preparation for that 'divine bhakti;' unless there is complete surrender to the guru, who is the mediator of liberation, surrender to the Divine is not possible. As such, there is a great emphasis on bhakti within the Gaudiya parlance. Yet, what complicates this entire bhakti-centred relationship between the guru and the sisya is the gender dynamics. When the guru is female, does her gender influence the expression or practice of bhakti - if not in doctrinal terms, perhaps in the disciple's practical experience or societal perception?

This naturally brings to light the pivotal factor of gender dynamics, which is the fulcrum around which this study is balanced for various reasons. Unlike the unchallenged anti-caste egalitarianism enshrined in the philosophy and teachings of Chaitanya and the early Gaudiya lawgivers, the role and position of women within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite fold remain contentious, sparking diverse opinions. The question of whether women can assume the role of guru lacks a universally accepted answer. A significant portion of Gaudiya followers, including some women, maintain that women should not hold the role of guru, citing traditional quotations to support this stance. Instead, women often participate in spiritual growth in supportive roles, commonly as assistants to gurus and sometimes as siksha gurus. This problematic surrounding women's potential for guruhood surfaced frequently in conversations with local residents of Nabadwip.

It goes without saying that this lack of unanimity and the lingering ambiguity regarding gender roles significantly influences how women perceive their roles within their communities, as well as how these roles are acknowledged by others. This complexity extends beyond the women themselves, affecting their husbands, families, and the balance they must maintain between spiritual and familial responsibilities. The interviews reveal that even at the peak of their spiritual involvement, most women gurus cannot set aside what is

traditionally seen as their familial duties - such as raising children, overseeing cooking activities, attending to household members, and preparing for garbhagriha rituals. These roles are not only scripturally endorsed as appropriate for women but are also reinforced by longstanding patriarchal traditions within the Gaudiya community. The varied strategies by which respondents manage to balance these dual spheres - the spiritual and the familial - comprise the final thematic analysis presented in this chapter.

As suggested by the introductory remarks, the gurus need to move from the purely spiritual and esoteric realm, like diksha, to a more worldly condition of maintenance of family. This is the juncture where the path of women gurus become analogous but also diverse from their male counterparts. The question of female subjectivity comes to the foreground in this chapter, which is in a way located at the centre of this thesis, both conceptually and structurally. Even if the route towards guruhood have clear corollaries among spiritual individuals irrespective of gender, their implication and implementation within female subjects become prominent here.

5.1 The Dual Bloom: Diksha and Siksha

It is said that in every spiritual journey, there comes a point when the outer world begins to blur, and what remains is the inner calling - the pull toward something greater, something sacred. It is at this crossroads that a disciple finds themselves, often searching for a guide to help navigate the labyrinth of existence. And it is here, in the presence of the guru, that the journey transforms. What happens next is not just an exchange of wisdom, but the unlocking of a path, a ritual that is as old as time - yet as personal as a whisper. The path transpires in the form of the sacred initiation of diksha, through which a disciple's journey, guided by the guru, ceases to be an external pursuit and becomes an inward unfolding.

Diksha, therefore, is not simply about imparting knowledge or offering instruction, as important as those roles are. Rather, it is about 'transference' - a passing down of spiritual power, blessings, and divine eligibility from the guru to the disciple. This transference is an essential aspect of the Gaudiya Vaisnava epistemological framework, where knowledge is not merely intellectual but spiritual, something that must be received from a qualified master. The guru, through diksha, becomes the medium through which the disciple accesses divine knowledge and grace. In this context, the guru is seen not only as a teacher but as an intermediary between the disciple and the Divine.

There is a tale often recounted in Nabadwip that illustrates the gravity of diksha. A young man, steeped in devotion, once sought out the guidance of a renowned guru, carrying within him a deep yearning to formally embark on the path of bhakti. For years, he had immersed himself in the sacred texts, diligently chanting the names of Krisna, yet an unshakable sense of incompleteness lingered. Upon arriving at the guru's feet, he asked with genuine perplexity, *"I have dedicated myself to Krisna - surrendering to His will. Why, then, do I still feel this void within?"* The guru, with the wisdom of ages, looked upon the young man and offered a knowing smile. *"Your bhakti is sincere,"* he said, "*but it lacks the sanctifying grace that comes through diksha. Without diksha, your bhakti, however earnest, remains like an arrow shot without aim, [and like] an unanchored vessel adrift in the vast ocean. Only through diksha will your relationship with Krisna find its full realization."* The story, though simple in its telling, echoes a common belief among Gaudiya Vaisnavas: that diksha is what anchors a devotee's spiritual practice, giving it legitimacy and purpose. It is this act that confirms a disciple's place within the tradition and grants them the spiritual eligibility to fully participate in the worship of Krisna. It is also believed that the process of diksha purifies not only the disciple but also their karmic baggage, accumulated over lifetimes. The guru, through the power of initiation, takes on a portion of their karmic burden and helps them transcend it through 'divine grace.' In this way, diksha is not merely a symbolic act but a deeply transformative one, with consequences that stretch across multiple lifetimes. The guru is believed to hold the spiritual potency to liberate the disciple from the cycle of birth and death, thus elevating the significance of this ritual far beyond a simple rite of passage.

But what is it that makes the guru capable of giving such a profound gift? The answer lies in the guru's own initiation and spiritual evolution. In Gaudiya Vaisnavism, a guru is someone who has received diksha themselves, thus becoming a part of the sacred lineage of spiritual teachers that trace their origins back to Chaitanya or one of His associates. It is this lineage, or *parampara*, that ensures the authenticity and continuity of the spiritual tradition, without which, the act of giving diksha would lose its divine legitimacy. Furthermore, the authority to give diksha is not arbitrary; it is a spiritual responsibility that requires profound preparation, self-realization, and recognition from one's own guru. As Sudipa Goswami recounts, *"The [Bhagavat] Purana affirms that the guru must be an embodiment of sastra (scriptural knowledge), achara (good conduct), and bhakti (devotion). They must be able to guide the disciple not only through their teachings but also through their example, living a life that mirrors the values and principles of [Gaudiya] Vaisnavism."* This statement establishes the

verity that the authority to give diksha in Gaudiya Vaisnavism is highly revered and most of the women in this study who have attained this role demonstrate that this is not simply a ceremonial act but a powerful, life-altering moment for both the guru and the sisya.

Interestingly, during interviews with diksha gurus, the researcher encountered a significant degree of reticence when discussing the details of the process. None of them divulged specific information about how they conduct diksha or the precise rituals involved. This lack of transparency could stem from a variety of reasons, one of which may be the perception that since the researcher is not initiated into Gaudiya Vaisnavism, she might not be qualified to grasp the full import of these sacred rituals. A comment from Brinda Das' sadhan-sangi illustrates this notion well:

"Tomar diksha hoyeni, tai jiggesh korleo bujhbena. Emon notun manusher kachhe guru-tattwer katha bole ki hobe? Guru-tattwa mon theke bujhte lage." (You have not received diksha, so even if you ask, you will not fully understand. What is the use of speaking about *guru-tattwa* to someone new? *Guru-tattwa* has to be understood from the heart.)

The researcher understood that the secrecy and taciturnity surrounding diksha in Gaudiya Vaisnavism can be linked to its deeper spiritual dimensions, which are beyond the scope of the current investigation. The narratives gathered point to the esoteric nature of the process, which involves layers of spiritual and symbolic significance that go beyond a simple explanation. For those outside the tradition, especially the uninitiated, the understanding of diksha remains incomplete, reflecting a hierarchy of spiritual knowledge that is safeguarded by the initiated. The fact that most of the respondents have given or are giving diksha is, of course, significant; but it also points to the limitations within the tradition itself.

First, the formal authority conferred by diksha is inherently tied to the patriarchal structures of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, which continue to view men as 'the ideal gurus.' In this context, women's ability to give diksha could be seen as both an act of empowerment and an accommodation within a system that has yet to fully embrace gender equality (Eagly and Wood, 1999; 2012). While the concerned respondents in this study have, in most cases, transcended the traditional limitations placed on women gurus, their ability to do so does not necessarily imply a radical transformation of the system as a whole.

Second, the parampara also plays a crucial role in maintaining the sacred knowledge associated with diksha. This study points to the fact that only those who have been initiated

into the lineage are seen as qualified to understand and impart the deeper meanings of diksha. As Asha Goswami expresses, *"Not everyone can give diksha. There is a class distinction here, where both spiritual and lineage-based knowledge are essential."* This statement reflects the lingering Brahminical hierarchy within the Gaudiya tradition, where even today, Brahmins are often considered more legitimate as gurus, especially when it comes to the question of initiation. While Chaitanya was radical in His emphasis on bhakti over varna, in practice, caste distinctions have not entirely disappeared. Many of the respondents established that while women gurus have gained recognition in their spiritual communities, caste continues to play a role in the social dynamics of guruhood. Brahmin women, for instance, find it easier to gain acceptance as diksha gurus than their non-Brahmin counterparts. This complexity of caste and gender intersects with the latent aspects of the diksha ritual - shrouded not only in secrecy but also in socio-religious stratification. While women are assuming roles of spiritual authority, the question of whether they are fully equal participants in the parampara remains an open one - entangled in layers of tradition, secrecy, and social stratification.

The question of siksha adds another layer of complexity to the theme of spiritual authority. Unlike diksha, which is typically a one-time event that binds the disciple to the guru for life, siksha is an ongoing process of spiritual instruction. As Broo (2003) notes, disciples may have several siksha gurus, with the diksha guru often serving as the primary siksha guru. In the present study, Bharati Goswami and Dayamayi Vaisnav, both serving as siksha gurus, offer spiritual guidance to the disciples of their deceased partners, each leading a small group of around 10-12 followers. This raises an important question: is the role of the siksha guru inherently less authoritative than that of the diksha guru, particularly for women? While Bharati and Dayamayi have assumed the role of spiritual guides, their authority appears to be contingent upon their relationships with their deceased husbands, who were the original diksha gurus. This suggests that their spiritual authority, rather than being an independent assertion of their own religious leadership, is in some ways derivative, passed down through the legacy of their husband/sadhan-sangi. Dayamayi's reflections on this issue are particularly illuminating. When asked about the perceived inequality in the tradition, she dismisses it, attributing the selection of gurus to divine will rather than human design. For her, the ability to give siksha is sufficient for women to ascend to the position of guru, even if they are traditionally restricted from giving diksha. However, this raises a critical question: is the restriction on women giving diksha truly a matter of divine will, or is it a social construct

that reinforces patriarchal structures within the tradition? Dayamayi's assertion that there is no inequality in the tradition could be viewed as an internalization of these patriarchal structures, where the limitations placed on women are justified through theological interpretations rather than being critically examined.

Dayamayi's metaphor, *"Daankaan-e hoye diksha, baa kaan-e hoye siksha, aar mostok-e nitey hoye bhek"* (The ear on the right side is utilitarian for diksha, the ear on the left side is functional for siksha, and the head is nifty for taking 'bhek') further complicates this issue. By framing the distinction between diksha and siksha in terms of the body and mind, she suggests that both are necessary for the full spiritual development of the disciple. However, this metaphor also raises important questions about the relationship between gender, body, and authority in the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition. If diksha is associated with the right ear, which purifies the body, and siksha with the left ear, which enchants the mind, then the act of giving diksha becomes linked to a kind of physical authority that is traditionally masculine. This association between the body and authority, particularly in ritual contexts, reinforces the idea that men are better suited for roles that require ritual authority, while women are relegated to more ethereal or instructional roles that are seen as less authoritative.

While Broo (2003) suggests that the roles of diksha and siksha gurus are complementary, the tradition's emphasis on the singularity of the diksha guru raises important questions about power and authority. In practice, the role of the diksha guru is traditionally viewed as the more authoritative of the two, for s/he not only initiates an individual into the Chaitanya tradition but also provides them with the ritual eligibility to worship Krisna (ibid). The fact that one can have several siksha gurus but only one diksha guru further underscores the primacy of the diksha guru in the spiritual hierarchy. This raises a critical question: does the flexibility associated with siksha allow for greater inclusion of women as spiritual leaders, or does it merely reinforce their secondary status within the tradition? In many ways, the role of siksha guru, while accessible to women, seems to function as a compromise within a system that continues to privilege male authority. The researcher's understanding is that, in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, both roles serve distinct, yet interconnected purposes in a devotee's life; however, their dynamics are not purely theological or spiritual; rather, they are also deeply embedded in social, cultural, and gendered frameworks that shape this tradition, particularly within the context of Nabadwip.

5.2 Intertwined Vines: Guru-Sisya Relationship

The relationship a guru shares with sisyas is one that transcends the ordinary boundaries of human connection, for it is not one of mere instruction and learning, rather it is the unlocking of a higher consciousness - a passageway into realms where intellect cannot tread alone. The very essence of this relationship lies in its transformative power, where the disciple approaches the guru with humility, with a readiness to unlearn and to relearn, and the guru, in turn, accepts this sacred responsibility with the understanding that the task is not just to impart wisdom, but to facilitate an inner alchemy.

At the heart of this relationship is the principle of surrender. The disciple must be willing to surrender their ego, their preconceived notions, and their attachments in order to fully receive the guru's teachings. This surrender is not a loss of autonomy but a deepening of it, for in letting go of the superficial self, the disciple begins to tap into the deeper, truer self. The guru, in turn, surrenders to the disciple in their own way, offering not only their knowledge but their very presence as a guiding force. In this way, the guru is equally dependent on the disciple's receptivity. The disciple's faith, devotion, and sincerity act as the fuel for the guru's teachings. In this way, the relationship becomes a two-way street, a flow of energy and wisdom that enriches both parties. The disciple offers their devotion, their open heart, and their willingness to learn, while the guru offers their wisdom, their experience, and their deep love for the Divine.

In the present study, the researcher has, however, noted that the guru's role, especially as evidenced in the cases, goes beyond the conventional understanding of spiritual leadership. The relationship a guru shares with disciples often extends beyond the complex interplay of authority, command, submission and obedience to that of familial ties. This dynamic can be illuminated through the experiences of many of the women gurus interviewed - all of whom have received diksha within the familial context. Mousumi Goswami's initiation by her mother-in-law, Asha Goswami, for instance, exemplifies this intricacy. She reflects, *"Receiving diksha from [my] mother-in-law was not just a personal milestone; it represented the passing of a sacred tradition [within our family],"* thus reinforcing the notion that the guru is not only a teacher but also a matriarchal figure whose influence extends beyond formal instruction. Poignant illustrations of maternal authority in the guru-sisya relationship also point to Neena Goswami's assertion that *"the essence of our parampara is preserved through the diksha I confer upon my sons,"* which again highlights intergenerational

transmission of spiritual knowledge within the guru-sisya relationship. This maternal role redefines the parameters of spiritual leadership, positioning women as vital custodians of spiritual knowledge and practice. By initiating their sons, women gurus like Neena, Asha, Mithu, and Mousumi not only reinforce their own spiritual authority but also challenge the predominantly male-centric narratives often associated with guruhood. The sons, here, are not just passive recipients of diksha; they are active participants in a lineage that honours women's roles in spiritual authority. Hereby, it is important to acknowledge that each of these women is rooted in the Nityananda-Jahnava lineage, which is deeply entrenched in a history that prioritizes devotion and familial bonds, thereby granting these women a credible platform for spiritual leadership. Neena's role as a mother and guru, in particular, intersects uniquely for her initiation practices remain confined to her sons.

It is important to note that although this kind of initiation speaks to the notion of 'circular authority' in the guru-sisya relationship - whereby, unlike conventional hierarchies of gurus wielding unchallenged authority, the familial bond allows for a more nuanced exchange of knowledge - this framework does not limit their role to the family alone. Offering diksha has been found to transcend the boundaries of family, with roles as gurus often extending to those outside of immediate lineage. Most of the women gurus in this study foster disciples whom, they regard as their "bhavaja[3]," extending the same affection and care to them as they do to their biological children. This maternal dimension of the guru-sisya relationship is particularly significant in the context of Sudipa, Neena, Asha, Mithu, Mousumi, Brinda who emphasize that 'the bond between a guru and sisya should mirror the relationship between a mother and her child.' Even though Brinda practices a partnership model of yugal-diksha where, alongside her sadhan-sangi, she shares spiritual responsibilities, her assertion, *"the presence of my guru illuminated my life, and now I make deliberate efforts to treat my disciples as my own children"* encapsulates a shift in how authority is exercised in this relationship. Traditionally, the guru- sisya dynamic is one of reverence and obedience, where the guru commands respect through their spiritual and pedagogical superiority; however, many of the narratives hinted at a more nurturing, egalitarian approach, where the bond is characterized by care and affection rather than strict hierarchy. The various maternal metaphors used by the respondents situate the guru not as an unapproachable figure of authority, but as a caregiver deeply involved in the spiritual and personal well-being of her disciples. This conception of the guru as a spiritual parent is not only symbolic but also

practical, as it frames the guru's role in terms of nurturing, protecting, and guiding their disciples through the vicissitudes of life.

However, it is important to note that not all women gurus conform to the idealized image of the nurturing, maternal guru. Pratima Goswami, for instance, expresses disappointment with her disciples, criticizing their self-centeredness in the face of contemporary modernization. This critique reflects a broader tension within the guru-sisya relationship, where the expectations of the guru may not always align with the behaviour of the disciples. On the other hand, Upasana's approach demonstrates the flexibility and adaptability of this relationship, evident in a poignant piece of advice she offered to one of her husband's disciples at the time of interview. With a gentle yet firm tone, she counselled, *"You must not spend all your time managing the bhog-aarati here every day. These are important, but you need to think about your future as well - focus on your education, prepare for jobs. Dharma and sangsar should go hand in hand."* As the researcher listened to her speak, she was struck by how seamlessly she integrated traditional spiritual duties with modern concerns about career and education. It was clear in that moment how deeply she cared for the holistic well-being of her disciples, advocating for a life that honours both the spiritual and the material, much like the dual responsibilities she herself upholds.

The cases of siksha gurus Bharati Goswami and Dayamayi Vaisnav further illustrate the fluidity and deeper layers of the guru-sisya relationship, where the bond is not limited to ritual initiation but is sustained through continuous teaching and spiritual care. After the passing of her husband, Bharati did not simply retreat into the background; instead, she took on the role of a spiritual educator, providing the disciples of her late husband with the same care, guidance, and instruction that they had previously received. As Bharati herself remarked, "*I continue to offer the guidance they seek, just as he (her late husband) would have. The path is the same, and I am here to help them walk it*." Both this statement and her role emphasize the continuity of spiritual knowledge and care, ensuring that disciples do not feel abandoned after the passing of their original diksha guru, thus making the bond less institutionalized and more relational. As disciples grow in their spiritual practice, the guidance of siksha gurus like Bharati and Dayamayi becomes an essential part of their development, providing them with personalized instruction and care that is often more intimate and immediate than the more formal relationship with a diksha guru. In this sense,

the guru-sisya relationship is not a static or one- time event, but an evolving journey where both diksha and siksha play complementary roles in shaping the spiritual lives of disciples.

The role of a guru, being an extremely central issue in both the theoretical and the practical aspects of spiritual practice in Hinduism, has been a long debated one. In many texts, there are clear directions and injunctions as to who can become a guru along with the qualities that are necessary to become one. Certain reservations among the siksha gurus to assume the role of a diksha guru, the reluctance among certain ascetics to become gurus, and the few voices that strongly advocated only Brahmins to hold this position - all derive from varied textual and denominational traditions. The women gurus who negotiate through the dense and often conflicting textual and denominational system of Gaudiya Vaisnavism which is, by and large, a rigid Brahminical system, exercise a great deal of agency and control over their sisya community and tend to develop a high degree of social capital through an individual establishment of interpersonal bonding. This interpersonal bond is the nucleus that conflates into an extensive community network of which the presence of the guru exists as a transcendental signifier, thus exercising a great deal of agency over the sisyas by subverting traditional gender role of leadership. The Svetasvatara Upanisad emphasizes this importance of the guru-sisya relationship, noting that the disciple's bhakti for the guru should be akin to that of God (Doniger, 2009; 2014). However, the concept of bhakti has been differentially used in various traditions over the ages, tracing its origin to the Bhakti Yoga. In response to Arjuna's query regarding the qualifications of a 'bhakta,' Krisna enumerates several essential qualities that He considers to be essential for a true devotee. The crux of His statements boils down to complete, unconditional surrender to His authority which is attainable through non-attachment to one's worldly actions, which has already been stated earlier in this chapter. It is the same idea that later on influences the role and responsibility of the initiated, coalescing the identity of the bhakta with that of the sisya. In this convergence, the disciple assumes the role of a devotee, and consequently, the guru embodies the role of Godhead manifest. Therefore, bhakti to guru becomes unanimous with devotion to Krisna, affirming the inseparable relationship between the two in the context of spiritual practice.

The irony of the above formulation is that, in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, where Krisna, both as 'the Nirvikalpa Brahma' and the essence of all the *shringar*[4] is imagined as the *Purushottam*, or 'the Supreme Man.' This tension is further exacerbated by the fact that, within this tradition, women are often idealized as the archetypal devotees. The *gopis*, particularly

Radha, are the epitome of surrender and devotion, setting the standard for all bhaktas - male and female alike (Bhattacharya, 1996). Yet, when women become gurus, they must transcend this quintessential role of the devoted female and assume the authoritative position of the guru, which is implicitly male. Sociologically, this can be seen as an extension of broader patriarchal structures where authority and leadership, both spiritual and temporal, have historically been male-dominated. In this sense, the women gurus often face a dual bind: while they are recognized for their spiritual prowess and leadership, their ability to embody the full range of divine attributes is constrained by the deeply entrenched association of the Divine with maleness. This creates a kind of 'gendered ceiling' in their spiritual authority. They can guide disciples, impart wisdom, and embody the virtues of a guru, but the cultural and theological framework positions them in a space where their authority is ultimately derivative - directed either toward Krisna, a male guru, or male lineages of spiritual succession. The Nityananda-Jahnava tradition is a case in point: although Jahnava Devi was a highly revered guru in her times, the bhakti practices within her lineage remain centred on male deities like Krisna and male figures like Chaitanya.

The guru's authority, in such cases, can become fragmented. Although the disciples' devotion may be genuine and profound, it is often rooted in a gendered understanding of the guru's role, where women are seen more as spiritual caregivers than as figures embodying the ultimate divine authority. The maternal love they express toward their disciples, though a powerful force, can sometimes undermine their perceived spiritual authority, reinforcing traditional roles rather than allowing them to fully inhabit the transcendental space of guruhood. Ultimately, the guru-sisya relationship for women in this tradition is a negotiation - between the deep respect and devotion they command as gurus and the limitations imposed on them by a system that still largely equates spiritual authority with maleness.

5.3 Petals of Devotion: Expressions of Bhakti

The ritualistic liturgies in Vaisnavism, particularly those rooted in bhakti, reflect a democratizing force that stands in stark contrast to the more orthodox and hierarchical interpretations of Hinduism, which historically emphasized notions of ritual purity, caste distinctions, and the necessity of adhering to rigid sacrificial rites. In its emphasis on inner devotion over external ritual purity, bhakti offers an alternative spiritual paradigm that subverted the exclusivist norms of Vedic orthodoxy. Particularly through Chaitanya, it was established how the movement embraces a universalist outlook that invites people of all

social strata to participate in the divine dance of devotion. Thus, bhakti's widespread appeal can be attributed to its role in disrupting and reimagining the normative religious practices of Hinduism, fostering a devotional space where the marginalized and the elite, the literate and the illiterate, could all find a shared sense of spiritual purpose.

The fluidity of identity in the context of bhakti allows for the emergence of new social roles and hierarchies in the socio-religious context of Nabadwip. Women here, for example, actively participate in communal worship and engage in practices that seemingly open potential paths to spiritual leadership, asserting their presence in a traditionally male-dominated spiritual landscape. However, history and observations point to the fact that for male gurus, bhakti often involves a combination of scholarly mastery over scriptures, public performance of ritual duties, and the ability to lead disciples in their spiritual journeys. For women, however, the journeys to guruhood are more ambiguous and often constrained by both societal norms and institutional resistance. Moreover, the concept of commitment to faith in the case of women practitioners intersects with the broader Gaudiya Vaisnavite ideals of *seva*. This notion of seva can serve as both a limiting and an enabling factor. On the one hand, it reinforces traditional gender roles, where women's primary religious duty is seen as one of service to male spiritual leaders or to their families. On the other hand, women who excel in their devotional seva may, in certain cases, gain recognition and authority within their religious communities. This duality suggests that while bhakti is theologically egalitarian, its practice is often mediated through patriarchal frameworks that limit the full participation of women in spiritually elevated matters.

Among almost all respondents of this study, exceptional displays of bhakti were noted - whether through ascetic practices, mystical experiences, or acts of public service. One prominent aspect observed across the cases is the practice of *Krisna-katha,* which serves as a significant devotional expression. Through the oral transmission of Krisna's narratives, women gurus not only connect their disciples with the Divine but also frame the practice of bhakti as a collective journey toward spiritual awakening. Emphasizing on this transformative power, Asha Goswami says, *"When we speak of Krisna's leelas, we invite His presence into our hearts. It is through these stories that we can feel His embrace."* This statement establishes that the act of storytelling transcends mere entertainment, and transforms into a ritualistic engagement that cultivates a sense of bhakti and belonging. On a similar note, Pratima Goswami enhances communal engagement during gatherings by recounting the

Govardhan Leela[5]. She notes, *"Sri Krisna lifting the mountain is symbolic of lifting our burdens. When we engage with these tales, we learn to surrender our difficulties to the Divine."* This interpretation is particularly poignant, as in the articulation of this metaphor, the respondent provides her audience with a framework for understanding their struggles in relation to divine intervention. This can, therefore, be seen as a critical aspect of the bhakti tradition, where narratives become a source of comfort and strength in times of adversity.

While the women gurus employ Krisna-katha as a public, collective act of devotion, the ascetics in this study were found to pursue a more solitary, contemplative path. A prominent practice common to both gurus and ascetics, however, is *naam-japa*, or the repetitive chanting of sacred mantras. Unlike Krisna-katha, which often serves to publicly connect disciples with the Divine through narrative transmission, naam-japa is a deeply personal practice that involves the continuous recitation of the holy name - usually the Hare-Krisna mantra - as a means of cultivating a direct, intimate relationship with the Divine. For the gurus, while naam- japa retains its meditative quality, it also serves as an example of disciplined devotion that they often encourage their disciples to follow. Brinda Das, for example, encourages her disciples to maintain personal *japa-malas*[6], emphasizing how *"the beads are not just a tool; they are a reminder of our vows to stay connected to Gour-Nitai."* The statement, thus, expounds that the act of using a japa-mala is an intimate ritual that signifies ongoing bhakti in one's spiritual path. This personalization deepens the relationship between the practitioner and the Divine, as each bead serves as a tactile reminder of their vows and aspirations. From a sociological perspective, this emphasis on personal symbolism highlights the role of material culture in religious practice, where seemingly simple objects like rosary beads can take on significant meaning within the spiritual context.

Ascetic Doli Saha also incorporates *japa* into her daily routine, emphasizing its importance in sustaining spiritual focus. She explains, *"When we chant, we purify our minds and hearts. This is the essence of bhakti."* Her statement frames chanting as a as a mechanism for mental and emotional cleansing, suggesting that the repetitive practice of japa can elevate one's spiritual consciousness. This resonates with psychological theories of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), where repetitive practices can enhance concentration and reduce distractions, allowing practitioners to cultivate a deeper connection with their inner selves and the Divine through a dialogical relationship. Furthermore, Doli's framing of japa as the "essence of

bhakti" highlights its centrality in the devotional life of practitioners, anchoring them amidst the chaos of daily existence.

On the other hand, the act of congregational chanting, or *sankirtan,* is emblematic of the collective nature of bhakti, for the practice transcends individual expression and becomes a powerful medium for communal engagement. Sudipa Goswami, who organizes weekly sankirtan sessions, states, *"In sankirtan, we find strength"* - a phrase that speaks to the psychological and social reinforcement experienced by participants to the practice, suggesting that the act of joining voices in bhakti creates an atmosphere of solidarity and shared purpose. The posthumous guru Radharani Goswami, for instance, garnered profuse recognition for leading sankirtan sessions, with her influence extending beyond local spheres, thereby illustrating the global impact of her devotional and musical contributions. From a sociological perspective, this can be understood through the lens of collective effervescence, a term coined by Durkheim (1915) to describe the heightened emotional experience that individuals feel when participating in a group ritual. In this context, sankirtan fosters an environment where individual insecurities and doubts are temporarily transcended, replaced by a shared sense of purpose and communal energy. However, the practice is not solely a cerebral endeavour, for participants often engage in physical movements and emotional release - embodying a holistic approach to spirituality, where the mind, body, and spirit are engaged in a cohesive act of worship. Ascetic Kalpana Goswami's statement, *"we dance not just in joy but in surrender"* highlights the profound subtleties of bhakti in this regard. Surrendering to the Divine through ecstatic dance signifies a relinquishing of the self, inviting participants to experience a deeper connection with Krisna.

Another remarkable manifestation of bhakti noted among the respondents is their commitment to religious processions and circumambulations. The *Panchakrosh Yatra*[7], for instance, stands out as a significant tradition, illustrating active participation of almost all of the respondents, with the exception of the posthumous case of Dr. Roma Bandopadhyay. In a broader sense, it entails visiting a circuit of five sacred temples, within a specific geographic area, like Nabadwip or Vrindavan, undertaken by devotees as an act of bhakti, penance, and spiritual merit. Additionally, gurus Upasana, Bharati, Nityapriya, and Sudipa enrich their spiritual experiences through distinct forms of pilgrimage, including the *Noydwip Parikrama*[8] undertaken by Nityapriya, the *Nagar Parikrama*[9] led by Bharati, and the *Churashikrosh Yatra*[10] participated in by both Upasana and Sudipa. From a sociological perspective,

participation in such pilgrimages can be understood through the framework of communitas (Turner, 1967), wherein the activity itself becomes a space for the dissolution of social hierarchies - fostering a sense of unity among diverse participants as they collectively set on their endeavours.

However, the dynamics of age and physical capabilities have led some gurus to transition from these rigorous practices. Gurus Umarani, Asha, Pratima, and Gourdasi have expressed their inability to undertake the Panchakrosh Yatra any longer due to the challenges posed by increasing age and physical limitations. Umarani reflects, *"While my heart yearns to go for Panchakrosh [Yatra], my body no longer permits. But I try to express bhakti in other ways in the quiet of my ashram."* This poignant statement reveals the tension between the physical demands of such practices and the enduring nature of spiritual commitment. Despite limitations, bhakti persists, manifesting in alternative forms of spiritual engagement. For instance, while Neena and Sudipa have not yet participated in the Panchakrosh Yatra, Sudipa shares her experience of undertaking the Churashikrosh Yatra in Vrindavan, stating, *"Each step is a journey toward Govinda[11]. In Vrindavan, I felt His presence just as profoundly."* The adaptability of devotion thus becomes particularly relevant in this context, reflecting how bhakti as a dynamic and evolving practice has the power to transcend physical limitations. As Pratima eloquently expresses, *"Devotion does not reside solely in the act of walking; it thrives in the heart's longing for Radha-Govinda[12], whether in motion or stillness,"* highlighting that bhakti transcends mere physical acts and affirms that the spiritual journey encompasses both inner transformation and external practices.

The reading of sacred texts is another essential aspect of bhakti observed during fieldwork. These texts serve as vital sources of wisdom and guidance, reinforcing spiritual teachings and/or knowledge of the respondents. Nityapriya, for instance, emphasizes the importance of daily reading of scripture, stating, *"The Bhagavad Gita is our manual for life. It teaches us how to live with purpose and bhakti."* This systematic approach, to which many of the cases affirmed, reinforces the role of these texts as a foundational element in the cultivation of bhakti that further extends to disciples or peers. Within this scope, Brinda, for example, frequently refers to the Chaitanya Charitamrita during her teachings, asserting, *"These texts are living traditions. Knowing about Chaitanya guide us toward Him and His path"* - a perspective that highlights the dynamic nature of scripture - encouraging disciples to engage actively with the texts rather than passively consuming them. An interesting observation

reveals that Sahajiya gurus like Brinda exhibited a particular inclination toward reading the Chaitanya Charitamrita more than other biographies of Chaitanya - a preference which may be attributed to the text's arcane dimensions that seem to align more closely with the inner spiritual practices valued by the Sahajiya tradition.

The emphasis on reading of sacred texts extends to the ascetics in this study as well. Albeit in various forms, all four ascetics reported to regularly engage with them. One notable exception is Mayarani, who, due to physical limitations that prevent her from sitting and reading, has adapted to using an audio device to listen to recorded scriptures. The first time the researcher visited her, Mayarani was found to be lying in bed, intently listening to an audio recording of the *Prakriti-kanda* from the Brahmavaivarta Purana. This instance illustrates how modern technological tools are being incorporated to preserve and sustain traditional spiritual practices, ensuring continued engagement with sacred literature even when conventional methods are no longer feasible. Bhakti, as thus demonstrated, is not diminished by age or physical decline but rather adapts, continuing to flourish in new forms.

However, not all respondents shared this optimistic view of the continuity of bhakti. Pratima, for example, observed a noticeable decline in the intensity of bhakti among contemporary practitioners, attributing this erosion to the increasing pressures of modernization and the complexities of modern life. She remarks, *"People today are so caught up in material pursuits that they no longer have the same time or inclination for bhakti. It has become secondary to [their] personal ambitions."* Sociologically, this reflects Weber's argument about the disenchantment of the world, where spiritual practices often lose their centrality in the face of rationalization and secularization (Jenkins, 2000). The competing demands of modern life - whether economic, familial, or social - often push spiritual practices to the margins, causing a shift in how bhakti is practiced and perceived.

Siksha guru Bharati provides an important counterpoint by discussing the intrinsic qualities that allow women to connect more easily with the Divine through bhakti. She observes that women possess qualities such as *sajya-shakti* (tolerance), *aatma-sangjam* (restraint), and *sahansheelata* (forbearance), which naturally incline them toward devotional practices. However, she also acknowledges the challenges posed by modern life, noting, *"Today's women often struggle to devote adequate time to garbhagriha rituals like offering 'bhog' and performing 'arati' because they are so consumed by other responsibilities and limitations."* Yet, despite these challenges, Bharati insists that true bhakti must be demonstrated, saying,

"Bhakti is not just a feeling within; it has to be shown, so that others can also become aware of the magnificence of serving 'Nitai-Gour.'" An exemplary case that embodies this notion of collective bhakti is that of the posthumous guru, Dr. Roma Bandyopadhyay, who demonstrated her devotion not only through her personal spiritual practices but also by institutionalizing her commitment. In honour of her guru, Roma established the *Ramdas Mahila Samiti*, which was comprised of forty brahmacharinis and operated within the premises of the Nrisingha Mandir, located at the back of the Samaj Bari Ashram in Nabadwip. As its name suggests, this Samiti was exclusively dedicated to female devotees, with no admission permitted for male participants. Over time, the number of active participants dwindled significantly, largely due to the increasing pressures of domestic responsibilities. Currently, as confirmed by a sevait at Samaj Bari Ashram, the Samiti is practically inactive, with only two or three members remaining.

Thus, even as modern challenges reshape the contours of bhakti, the legacy of gurus like Roma brings to light how it extends beyond personal spirituality to influence and inspire collective participation. In this way, across the respondents, varied and multifaceted expressions of bhakti is observed, each culminating in a single chorus of devotion (Hopkins, 1896), whether through formal liturgies, personal practices, or institutional efforts. These diverse manifestations affirm that bhakti is not a static or singular path, but one that evolves in response to the personal, social, and cultural contexts of each practitioner. However, in many ways, the emancipatory and transformative promise of bhakti is mitigated by the very structures it seeks to subvert. This tension is evident in the way bhakti is practiced and institutionalized. While women gurus in Gaudiya Vaisnavite Nabadwip have achieved a degree of spiritual authority through their devotional practices, their leadership remains circumscribed by larger patriarchal frameworks that continue to shape religious life. For instance, the dual emphasis on seva and bhakti often reinforces traditional gender roles, casting women in roles of service rather than authority. Even in their roles as gurus, they are often expected to embody ideals of care, nurturing, and humility, which are traditionally associated with feminine virtues. In this sense, bhakti can be seen as reinforcing rather than dismantling gendered expectations. This paradox raises critical questions about the nature of social transformation within religious contexts: can bhakti truly serve as a revolutionary force, capable of dismantling entrenched social hierarchies, or does it merely offer a veneer of equality while leaving deeper structures of power intact? The case of the women gurus in this study suggests that the latter may be more accurate, for women's spiritual leadership is

still largely viewed through a gendered lens, where their authority is contingent upon their adherence to traditional feminine ideals of service and humility. Additionally, the women ascetics illustrate a complex array of bhakti expressions, each influenced by a unique interplay of personal, social, cultural, and physical factors, rather than following a singular or uniform trajectory. However, it is crucial to avoid generalizing the manifestations across all ascetics, as individual circumstances can vary widely. Some ascetics find new ways to express their devotion that align with their changing physical capacities, while others may continue to engage actively in communal rituals and public displays of bhakti, resisting the pull of age-related limitations. Bhakti, thus, is being actively reinterpreted and reshaped in ways that reflect practitioners' own experiences and aspirations.

5.4 Thorns and Blooms: Gender Dynamics

Historical and literary analyses demonstrate, and to some extent, the present study, too, corroborates that across diverse religious traditions and cultures, women have persistently been relegated to subordinate positions – a longstanding pattern that has led to the systematic undervaluation and suppression of their spiritual contributions. This trend is evident in many ancient religions, for instance, the Abrahamic traditions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - where male figures dominate sacred texts, priesthoods, and religious leadership. The Hebrew Bible, as a case in point, presents a patriarchal lineage that centres on figures like Abraham, Moses, and David while largely relegating women to supporting roles (Armstrong, 1993). Similarly, the New Testament predominantly features male apostles, often minimizing or overlooking women's contributions - which is further reflected in Islamic teachings that emphasize male prophets and leaders (El Saadawi, 1983). This entrenchment of patriarchal norms within religious frameworks has led to the institutionalization of gender inequality, manifesting in various forms of marginalization and oppression. Sociologically, this phenomenon can be understood through the lens of structural functionalism, which posits that societies maintain order through established norms and institutions (Coser, 1977). In this perspective, the exclusion of women from positions of power is not merely a by-product of tradition but a necessary mechanism for preserving societal cohesion as defined by male-centric values.

The marginalization of women within religious institutions, however, extends beyond theological interpretations; it is also evident in the socio-politico-cultural landscapes that shape these environments. Socialization processes, beginning in childhood, instill beliefs

about gender roles that often prioritize male authority in both religious and secular realms (Dussel, 1985). For instance, girls receive messages that encourage compliance and submission, while boys are socialized to assert dominance and leadership. This dynamic reinforces the notion that men are inherently more suited for positions of power and authority, both in the home and within spiritual communities. In addition, cultural narratives surrounding women in religion often frame them as passive participants rather than active leaders - often reflected in the language used to describe them in religious texts and teachings, where they are frequently portrayed in relation to men - whether as mothers, daughters, or followers - rather than as independent spiritual agents (Armstrong, 1993). Their participation in religious practices in many cultures is, furthermore, constrained by rigid gender norms that dictate acceptable behaviour and roles. Within most Hindu traditions, for example, women face restrictions on participating in rituals, such as entering temples or performing puja, particularly during menstruation (Dussel, 1985). These restrictions are often justified through interpretations of sacred texts that reinforce notions of purity and pollution, further entrenching their subordinate status within spiritual contexts. Even in contemporary times, the persistence of these gender biases remains visible across numerous religious institutions worldwide. While some denominations of Christianity have begun to ordain women as priests, many still uphold doctrines that explicitly prohibit female authority and/or leadership. The Roman Catholic Church exemplifies this exclusion, asserting theological arguments that women cannot serve as priests based on interpretations of Jesus' selection of male apostles (Ruether, 1993). However, despite these significant barriers, many women have found ways to resist and assert their agency, although more often than not, their experiences highlight the tensions between personal agency and systemic oppression. These women report facing significant challenges, such as societal skepticism, familial opposition, and institutional resistance from male counterparts who view their ascendance as a threat to established hierarchies (Swidler, 2001). The posthumous case of Radharani Goswami, for example, demonstrates the complex intersections of gender, power, and narrative control, with her husband's violent response to her spiritual rise exemplifying the extreme ways in which patriarchy can manifest in personal relationships. One of the most disturbing aspects of her life-story is the rumoured incident involving her husband, who was allegedly envious of her increasing fame as a kirtaniya. Local accounts suggest that in an act of extreme violence, he severed the fingers from her right hand, seemingly in an attempt to diminish her rising influence. This act can be understood sociologically as an expression of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987), whereby Radharani's husband, who used to work with the

police, may have felt his position of authority threatened by his wife's spiritual success. The symbolic and literal act of attempting to harm her - whether by cutting her fingers or through other forms of control - was a desperate effort to reclaim dominance in their relationship.

However, like many incidents in the lives of women gurus, this account remains contested. Premananda, the male narrator of Radharani's life, refuted the claim, asserting instead that she had been born with missing fingers. He further mentioned that Radharani and her husband had also embraced *bhek-sannyas*[13] after undergoing Mala-Chandan long after their conventional Hindu marriage. The disjunction between the official narrative of Radharani's life and the local awareness of her suffering highlights the complexities of how women's stories are told and remembered. While Premananda sought to downplay the incident, describing it as an exaggerated or even fabricated account, the community's collective memory told a different story. This tension between the "official" story and the local understanding underscores how patriarchal control extends beyond physical violence to encompass the realm of narrative control. As Foucault (1977) reminds us, *"power is not merely physical but extends into knowledge and discourse,"* in Radharani's case, the control over how her story was told - particularly by male figures - serves as an example of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990), where the suppression of certain truths helps to maintain the social order. By denying or downplaying the violence she experienced, male narrators effectively erased an essential part of her lived experience, ensuring that the patriarchal structures that contributed to her suffering remained invisible in the official account of her life.

Considering community narratives, Radharani's case reflects the structural violence (Galtung, 1969) embedded within patriarchal systems, where women's progress is often met with opposition, not because of any personal failing but because of the threat their success poses to male dominance. From a sociological perspective, her story exemplifies the concept of patriarchal bargaining (Kandiyoti, 1988), where women must navigate oppressive structures in order to achieve some degree of autonomy. While Radharani's spiritual authority afforded her a degree of independence, it also provoked violent resistance from her husband, as discussed. Despite these challenges, her ability to maintain guruhood during her lifetime, even in the face of violence, speaks to the ways in which women continue to resist and negotiate power within these structures. The same applies for Brinda Das and Radharani Goswami II, as well, where their partners' attempts to overshadow their voices highlight the

difficulty women gurus face in asserting their spiritual authority in a space historically dominated by male figures. In sociological terms, this behaviour illustrates the concept of 'mansplaining' - a phenomenon where men dominate conversations or undermine women's contributions in an attempt to reassert control in spaces where female authority might challenge the status quo. A telling moment occurred in the case of Brinda, when, during one interview, she was asked a question about her initiation process. Before she could answer, her sadhan-sangi interjected, offering an explanation on her behalf, "*She follows the tradition exactly as it is meant to be. We both lead the disciples together, as per the yugal-diksha convention. There is no separation in our roles."* His words attempted to frame their spiritual partnership as equal, yet the act of speaking over Brinda highlighted the ongoing struggle for her independent authority. The researcher's personal opinion from extensive fieldworks is that the yugal-diksha tradition, despite being deeply rooted in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, is an institutionalization of patriarchal control, where the presence of a male counterpart is deemed necessary to legitimize a woman's spiritual role. This became clear when Brinda's clandestine initiation of disciples in the absence of her male partner was revealed on the second day of interview. In her own words, she confided in, *"I do what is necessary when he (her sadhan-sangi) is not there. They do not need to know. The disciples come to me for guidance, not to him."* Her actions, though discreet, exemplify her resistance to the societal structures further demonstrating the ways in which women like her employ everyday forms of resistance to assert their authority in a system that marginalizes them. Her subtle form of resistance can also be understood as gender performance (Butler, 1990), where she navigates the expectations of being a woman guru by strategically conforming to or resisting patriarchal norms based on context.

In contrast, Nandarani Dasi's case sheds a different light on the complicated interrelations between spiritual authority and gender dynamics. A key dimension lies in the relentless pressure she faces from the local residents to vacate her ashram in Manipur Ghat, despite her physical impairment. The ashram itself, constructed with financial support from Radharani'r Mandir, from where she received profound spiritual lessons and learned kirtans, stands as a symbol of Nandarani's resilience and spiritual journey. The fact that locals, driven by patriarchal discomfort, leverage her physical vulnerability to discredit her and undermine her authority exemplifies the intersection of gender and disability in this case. Allegations of physical abuse from neighbours, coupled with the ostracism she faces even today, further reflect the societal consequences that often befall women who assert their independence and

authority outside of accepted frameworks. These accusations are symptomatic of the broader discomfort society feels toward women who transgress traditional boundaries, especially when they are perceived as vulnerable.

"The little boys hit me with cricket bats…..[and]…..hurl harsh words at me, she says in a trembling voice, adding*, "Many times, they have taken away my bucket when I go to fetch water from the 'kawl-taula' (water-source). I know they do all this just to make me leave, to drive me away from here. But I will not go anywhere. I will die in my ashram, right here with my 'Radha-Madhav.' No one can take me away from here."*

Nandarani's case is undeniably powerful in this theme, yet it is important to acknowledge that her narrative reflects only one side of the story. While her experiences of abuse offer insight into the societal repercussion women like her face, it remains essential to understand the perspectives of the local community as well, which has not been covered in this study. The researcher was unable to engage in a more balanced investigation since gaining access to local voices proved difficult, as many individuals were reluctant to speak about the matter, either due to fear of social repercussions or a perceived loyalty to their sampradayic values. Additionally, the tensions surrounding Nandarani's position within the community made it challenging to gather unbiased accounts, as many locals held strong opinions that were either intensely negative or protective of her. The researcher, therefore, acknowledges a gap in research that could have offered a more rounded understanding of the complex social fabric in which Nandarani's experiences are situated.

What emerges from these case studies is a reflection on the dialectical relationship between agency and structural constraint, raising critical questions about how women's roles in spirituality are shaped by broader societal expectations, and how, in turn, they challenge and transform these expectations. For these gurus in the present study, the contradictions between their spiritual authority and their subordination within patriarchal structures are often subsumed under narratives that seek to present them as either exceptions to the rule or as figures who have transcended gender inequality through their spiritual achievements. However, this study reveals that these contradictions remain unresolved and continue to shape the lived experiences of these women, where the marginalization they face are not aberrations but are integral to the patriarchal systems within which they operate. The failure to fully acknowledge and address these contradictions perpetuates the structures of oppression that continue to constrain women's spiritual agency. The ongoing negotiation

between public (read patriarchal) expectations and personal agency reveals the resilience of women in these contexts, but it also highlights the persistent barriers that limit their full recognition as gurus. These barriers are not just social but deeply embedded in the theological, ritualistic, and institutional frameworks of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. As such, the journey to guruhood for women is one marked by both spiritual empowerment and continuous resistance to a patriarchal system that remains deeply resistant to change.

On the other hand, the women ascetics in this study appear to exist outside these overt power struggles. In contrast to the women gurus, they do not face the same level of resistance from male counterparts. A critical question arises here: Are these women truly free from patriarchal control, or are they merely navigating it in a different way? The researcher feels that it is possible that their relative invisibility within the religious hierarchy accounts for this absence. If their roles are less public and less threatening to male religious authorities, they may be able to avoid the kinds of power struggles that the women gurus face. This further raises the question of whether their spiritual authority is truly recognized or whether they are simply tolerated because they do not challenge the status quo. The pursuit of asceticism, no doubt, reflects a broader movement toward self-determination, but it also raises pertinent questions about the sustainability of this path for women's spiritual authority, which is beyond the scope of the current investigation.

5.5 Harmonizing Growth: Sangsar and Sadhana

It is no secret that the traditional interpretations of women's archetypal roles are continually reassessed and renegotiated in response to evolving societal norms and aspirations. Central to this discourse is the concept of "stri-dharma," the philosophical underpinnings of which can be traced back to ancient Hindu scriptures, like the Manusmriti, that delineate women's duties as inherently linked to their roles in the family. Such prescriptions not only outline the expected trajectory of women's lives but also reflect a hierarchical view that often diminishes their autonomy, spiritual or otherwise. However, contemporary feminist scholarship critiques these interpretations, advocating how women increasingly assert their presence in public spheres and challenge the traditional confines of domesticity.

The layered dynamics between stri-dharma and spirituality further complicate the narratives surrounding women in Hinduism. For modern women who actively seek to redefine their spiritual engagements, the quest for spiritual fulfilment becomes intertwined with their

domestic duties in relation to husbands, children, and household obligations - often creating a delicate balancing act. This raises several pertinent questions: how do women navigate their spiritual identities within the constraints of societal expectations? Are these traditional frameworks inherently limiting, or can they be transformed to support a more expansive spiritual identity? While some women manage to blend domestic life with spiritual growth, the pressure to conform to prescriptive roles often restricts the space available for self-exploration and religious agency. Therefore, the question remains: can the frameworks of stri-dharma be adapted to empower rather than restrict women, allowing them to fully embody both their domestic and spiritual selves? The researcher has sought to address this complex dynamic through examination of the lived experiences of the respondents in this study, whose journeys offer profound insights into the delicate balance between spiritual devotion and worldly responsibilities.

Siksha guru Bharati Goswami's life, for instance, paints a unique picture that reflects the shifting dynamics of women's roles in contemporary spiritual and domestic spheres. A Bengali school teacher by profession and a siksha guru by calling, she skillfully manages two seemingly distinct worlds - her commitment to academic instruction and the spiritual guidance she offers to her late husband's disciples. Her role as a teacher reflects her engagement with the material world, where intellectual rigour and pedagogical responsibilities dominate her daily routine. However, her professional responsibilities do not detract from her spiritual life; instead, they complement it. In her interview, Bharati explained how her teaching profession actually reinforces her spiritual role, both in the discipline it cultivates and the intellectual growth it fosters. She contends, *"When I teach, I am not just imparting knowledge; I am guiding young minds toward deeper understanding. That, to me, is a form of seva. I do not separate my teaching from my sadhana - both are about nurturing others, whether it is students in the classroom or disciples in [my] ashram."*

For Bharati, spiritual leadership is not an escape from the material world, but a way to engage with it more meaningfully. Her role as a siksha guru, which she assumed after her husband's passing, requires her to lead his disciples in spiritual discourse and practice, continuing the traditions he had established. This role, which many might view as an additional burden on an already full life, is instead seen by Bharati as part of her 'broader dharma' - a calling she cannot, and does not wish to abandon: *"He (her late husband) left me with a [spiritual] responsibility,"* she explains. *"It is not just something I have to do; it is something I feel*

called to do. Every time I sit with the disciples, be it a simple patth-session or just to share an understanding, I feel like I am not just fulfilling his (her late husband's) wishes, but also deepening my own spiritual practice. It is not a responsibility I can take lightly - it is part of my dharma, my sadhana."

In these moments, it becomes clear that for Bharati, the lines between material obligations and spiritual duties blur. A key aspect of her ability to balance these roles lies in her reliance on familial and external support for household management. At her Kutirpara ashram, the researcher observed how Bharati's elderly mother and a male servant took charge of the day-to-day chores, creating the necessary space for her to dedicate herself to her professional and spiritual obligations. This arrangement represents a crucial shift in the understanding of stri-dharma, which, for Bharati, is no longer about personal sacrifice at the altar of domestic life, but a shared responsibility instead. Her reliance on her elderly mother, in particular, symbolizes a form of intergenerational reciprocity, whereby the latter who likely upheld more rigid forms of stri-dharma in her youth, now supports her daughter's expanded spiritual and intellectual roles, thus facilitating a more liberated, yet still grounded, form of household spirituality. Bharati is quick to emphasize the collective nature of her household, *"[My] Mother helps with so much. She knows that I cannot be everywhere at once, so she steps in even at this age. Look, it is not just about managing the house – it is about supporting each other in our different roles."*

Bharati's spiritual duties, thus, are not a peripheral aspect of her life but are central to her identity. She leads spiritual discussions, chants with disciples, and offers guidance - all of which require time, focus, and emotional energy. Yet, she does not view these responsibilities as separate from her material life. Spirituality, for her, is not about retreating from the world, but about engaging with it more deeply and meaningfully. Her roles as a teacher, a daughter, and a guru are not distinct, but interconnected - each informing and enriching the other in profound ways. Yet, it is crucial to note that her success in navigating these roles is not simply a matter of personal agency - it is also deeply embedded within the cultural and familial structures that allow for such flexibility.

Expanding the boundaries of stri-dharma is another fascinating case - that of ascetic Kalpana Goswami. As a school teacher and a Booth Level Officer, Kalpana's professional obligations are undeniably demanding - yet she remains deeply committed to her spiritual practices, demonstrating a remarkable ability to manage multiple roles without compromising any

aspect of her life. Her ability to fluidly transition between her roles as a teacher, caregiver, community worker, and householder ascetic is a reflection of her habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), developed through her socialization into the responsibilities of both sangsar and sadhana. In a broader feminist context, this can be analyzed through the lens of sociologists like Hochschild and Machung (1989), who introduced the concept of the "second shift" to describe the phenomenon where women, after completing their paid work, return home to a second round of unpaid domestic labour. In Kalpana's case, this "second shift" extends into a "third shift" - that of sadhana, which, although may serve as a source of solace and personal fulfilment, adds another layer of responsibility to her already full plate. The expectation that women like Kalpana should seamlessly manage all of these responsibilities speaks to a broader societal tendency to overburden women, especially in religious communities where gender roles are still often rigidly defined.

Nandarani Dasi's approach, though equally integrated, presents a different model of balance. At the heart of her spiritual life is a quiet resilience. Having lost an arm, she continues to manage her household without any external support, simultaneously maintaining her devotion to 'Govinda' through daily rituals and offerings. What makes Nandarani's case remarkable is not the grandeur of her spiritual duties but the simplicity and sincerity with which she performs them. As she explains during a conversation, *"Sometimes, I can only offer a packet of biscuits as bhog, but Govinda does not look at the material; He looks at the bhakti behind it."* This statement encapsulates her entire approach to both spirituality and material obligations - she does not see her physical or material limitations as an impediment to her devotion, but rather as part of the spiritual journey itself.

Nandarani's case is particularly interesting owing to her rejection of self-pity and the way she frames her physical limitations. She does not seek sympathy for her condition but instead finds within it an opportunity to deepen her devotion. *"I do not need both hands to serve Govinda,"* she says with a quiet smile, *"I only need my heart."* Daily life, for her, is an embodied form of sadhana, where every mundane task - whether sweeping the floor, cooking, or cleaning - becomes a sacred offering. As she poignantly describes, *"When I sweep the floor, I am cleaning not just for myself but for Govinda. Every task I do is a service to Him."* This view reveals a deep interconnection between her material duties and spiritual devotion, collapsing the boundaries between these spheres. This perspective is also seen in the narrative of Dayamayi Vaisnav, but her case introduces an additional dimension that defies the

normative trajectory of aging, particularly in a cultural context where elderly women are often marginalized from active roles in both domestic and spiritual domains. At 82, she remains fully engaged in the dual responsibilities of household management and spiritual leadership, serving as a siksha guru to 10-12 disciples of her demised sadhan-sangi. What makes her story particularly insightful is the way in which she negotiates these responsibilities while deliberately distancing herself from the social fabric of the community. Despite the physical limitations that come with age, Dayamayi does not view her bodily constraints as obstacles to her spiritual journey. Instead, her focus shifts to the inner strength that drives her devotion. *"At this age, it is not about strength, it is about willpower,"* she states, capturing the core of her philosophy. On the other hand, the cases of Neena Goswami, Umarani Goswami, Pratima Goswami, and ascetic Mayarani Saha, present a contrast to this kind of balancing act. As these women advance in age, their ability to manage both household and spiritual responsibilities have diminished, leading to a decisive shift in focus toward full-time spiritual engagement. This shift reflects not only a practical response to the physical limitations of aging but also a deeper philosophical and existential transition. As Neena shared during one of the conversations, *"My body no longer allows me to manage sangsar as I once did. But my bhakti has only grown stronger with age."* The movement from balancing both household and spiritual obligations to devoting oneself entirely to spirituality can be seen as a form of adaptation to the realities of aging. In the earlier stages of life, the ability to balance both realms were a reflection of physical vitality and personal agency. However, as these capacities wane, reliance on family members or house-help becomes a pragmatic solution. This dependence allows these women to free themselves from the burdens of domestic responsibilities while continuing their spiritual practices uninterrupted. Dependence on others for the management of household affairs does not signify a loss of agency but rather a reallocation of roles within the family and community structure. It is crucial to understand this dynamic sociologically, particularly in the context of Indian family systems, where intergenerational support plays a significant role. For these women, the shift toward full-time spiritual engagement is made possible by the support of family members or hired help, reflecting a continuity of the traditional family structure, where the elderly are often cared for by younger relatives. This dependency, far from being seen as a limitation, can be interpreted as a natural progression within the life cycle, where responsibilities are passed down to the next generation, allowing the elderly to focus on their spiritual aspirations. What is particularly noteworthy in these cases is how this transition is not seen as a defeat or surrender to aging, but rather as a necessary realignment of focus. The strength of

their bhakti is emphasized, with spirituality taking on an even more central role as their physical capacities decline. The adaptation seen in their lives offers valuable insights into how spirituality evolves in response to the realities of aging, demonstrating that spiritual and material responsibilities are not fixed but fluid, shifting in accordance with the stages of life.

A crucial revelation drawn from this study is that the gurus in the prestigious Baladev Bari, Sonar Gouranga Mandir, Radha Madanmohan Mandir, and Gour Govinda Mandir largely benefit from a structured support system where their disciples manage the domestic affairs. As Sudipa Goswami of the Sonar Gouranga Mandir explains, *"We guide them (disciples) in their bhakti, and in turn, they help us with managing the mandir and paakshala (kitchen)."* This dynamic can be understood through the sociological concept of 'reciprocity,' as articulated by Marcel Mauss (1954) in his theory of gift exchange. In this framework, the relationship between the guru and the sisya is seen as a continuous exchange of services and blessings, where material support from the disciple is reciprocated by spiritual guidance from the guru. This exchange is not merely transactional but deeply symbolic, embodying the idea that spiritual and material realms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing within the context of community life. The disciples' management of household duties enables the guru to focus on her spiritual leadership, while the guru's spiritual authority provides the community with a sense of purpose and direction.

This exchange, however, is not as straightforward as it seems, and the seemingly harmonious division of labour conceals deeper questions about the sociological dynamics at play. The fact that these gurus belong to influential and wealthy families raises questions about whether the disciples' service is motivated purely by spiritual devotion or whether it is shaped by the guru's material and social standing. In contrast, the situation is notably different for Sahajiya gurus like Brinda Das and Gourdasi Vaisnavi, who do not benefit from such extensive material support systems. These women manage both the spiritual and material worlds largely by themselves, relying more on their personal spiritual capacities than on external assistance. For these gurus, guruhood is not facilitated by the delegation of material tasks to others; instead, it is grounded in their ability to balance both realms simultaneously, thus embodying a different kind of spiritual authority. However, the present study does not conclude that such gurus are universally bereft of assistance; rather, the support they receive is often less formalized and less extensive than that which is available to their counterparts in the more prestigious mandirs. The difference lies in the nature of the support systems that are

available to them, as well as the social and material resources they have access to. This pattern, which has been consistently observed throughout the fieldwork, indicates that the degree of support a guru receives may often correlate with her material and social standing, though exceptions certainly exist. Where traditional religious sociology may draw clear lines between the secular and sacred roles of individuals, these women demonstrate a fluidity that is much more in line with modern feminist rethinking of power structures.

What this reveal about women's agency in religious contexts is profound. The respondents in this study do not merely replicate the roles of their male counterparts; instead, they are creating their own forms of authority that are grounded in a gendered experience of life. The ability to manage a household while simultaneously practicing elevated forms of spirituality reflects a hybrid form of agency that operates both within and beyond patriarchal structures. This balancing act can also be seen as an example of Michel de Certeau's (1984) notion of "tactics" versus "strategies." Certeau argues that individuals often engage in "tactics" to manoeuvre within larger power structures, creating space for their own forms of resistance and agency. Instead of outright rejection of domestic roles, these women employ tactical methods to use them as platforms from which to expand their spiritual influence. In other words, by working within the system, they subvert it. Yet, despite this empowerment, questions remain: how far can women gurus push the boundaries of this system without fully breaking free from it? While this thesis sheds light on how the respondents balance these dual roles, unfortunately, it does not fully address the vast intricacies involved, thus signaling toward future investigations.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, the researcher has moved beyond the foundational roots into the *flowering* phase of the spiritual self, where the sacred manifests in practices such as diksha and bhakti, intertwined with sisya community and broader gender dynamics that shape and sustain the essence of guruhood. These aspects, blossoming out of the groundwork established earlier, now reveal how spiritual authority and transformative devotion emerge as a profound culmination of life experiences and choices, forming the vital essence of a respondent's path. While on the one hand, diksha as a transformative rite, is central to spiritual path, yet many of the narratives reveal about the tradition's reluctance to fully include women as diksha gurus, thereby implying an implicit bias. Even the perception of diksha as a 'physical' authority, contrasting with the 'instructional' role of siksha, illustrates a bias where the transmission of

ritual power and authority is reserved predominantly for men, while women, in many cases, are encouraged to assume the less definitive role of guiding spiritual practices. Moreover, the secrecy surrounding diksha can be seen as a gatekeeping mechanism, safeguarding certain aspects of knowledge within a framework that already privileges a select few. The hesitation of respondents to share details, paired with their assertion that such knowledge is accessible only to the initiated, suggests that the tradition upholds not only a religious hierarchy but a form of spiritual elitism.

Interestingly, the tradition also seems to posit women gurus in a terrain where spiritual authority is simultaneously revered and limited by cultural assumptions about gender, as seen in the relationship they share with their sisyas. This study reveals cases of women gurus, who hold the power to guide disciples and embody sacred values, but are nevertheless cast in roles that echo maternal, caregiving figures rather than figures of absolute spiritual sovereignty. This complexity speaks to a 'gendered ceiling,' where the spiritual influence of women gurus is shaped by the tradition's inherent male orientation, often minimizing their potential to embody the fullest extent of divine attributes. Despite their knowledge and leadership, they are not seen as embodiments of transcendence but rather as vessels for wisdom within a framework that retains male authority. In essence, the guru-sisya dynamic for the respondents in this study is a continuous negotiation between reverence and restriction.

However, a transformative force that enables these gurus and ascetics to transcend restrictions is bhakti. The researcher's observations and narratives point to a variety of ritualistic liturgies at play in Nabadwip, particularly rooted in devotional practices,that contrast with more orthodox, hierarchical interpretations of Hinduism. As a matter of fact, it is the fluid identity of bhakti that permits the development of new social roles and hierarchies within Nabadwip's socio-religious context, creating a spiritual space where the marginalized and elite alike, whether literate or illiterate, find a shared purpose. While the contributions of the respondents to spiritual life, through various expressions of bhakti are significant, the sociocultural dynamics at play reveal systemic barriers that often undermine their agency in matters of spirituality. This brings us to the fourth theme in this chapter that unveils cases of women gurus who often endure tensions between spiritual aspiration and systemic oppression - compounded by the hegemonic narratives that dominate religious discourse. Moreover, the contrasting experiences of women ascetics raise fundamental questions about the nature of spiritual authority. While their marginalization may suggest a degree of autonomy from

patriarchal structures, it is imperative to interrogate whether their status reflects genuine spiritual agency or a strategic adaptation to the confines of patriarchal expectations, which is not included in the scope of this research. These have been eternal problems of female agency, and it is not a matter of surprise that the problems of the women in this study have structural affinities with those of professional women from other spheres.

This further points to the last theme discussed in this chapter that calls into attention the juxtaposition of stri-dharma and spirituality. While most of the respondents adeptly merge domestic life with spiritual growth, the pressure to conform to prescribed roles frequently limits opportunities for self-exploration and spiritual agency, as deciphered from field revelations. Even for those who have a support system at disposal, a pertinent question arises: are these relationships rooted in genuine reciprocity, or do they reflect underlying power dynamics influenced by wealth and social status? Answering this question is not feasible due to the complexities and nuances of interpersonal relationships, which require a more extensive, context-specific analysis than this study allows.

Endnotes

[1]Another name for the Jamuna River.

[2]A pastoral village where Lord Krisna spent His early childhood, as described in Hindu texts. Located near Vrindavan, it is celebrated in Krisna lore for His childhood pastimes, including His interactions with cowherd friends and mother Yashoda.

[3]Born of the heart.

[4]The sentiment of romantic love in Indian aesthetics.

[5]The divine pastime (leela) in which Lord Krisna lifts the Govardhan Hill on His little finger to protect the residents of Vrindavan from torrential rains sent by Indra, the god of rain. This story is symbolic of Krisna's role as a protector and his supremacy over nature.

[6]A string of beads used for chanting or reciting mantras, where each bead represents one repetition of a mantra, typically focusing the mind and fostering a meditative state as part of *japa* (repeated chanting).

[7]A religious pilgrimage that involves visiting a circuit of five sacred sites or temples within a specific geographical area, like Nabadwip or Vrindavan. Originating from the Sanskrit words "pancha" (five) and "krosh" (a measure of distance), it is undertaken by devotees as an act of devotion, penance, and spiritual merit.

[8]The term was first used in the book, "Bhakti-ratnakara" by Narahari Chakraborty, referring to a significant circumambulation in Nabadwip. It involves devotees walking around 'the nine islands' surrounding the town and in the process, visiting sacred sites associated with Chaitanya's life and teachings.

[9]Devotional circumambulation of a sacred town or place (here, Nabadwip) mostly accompanied with the singing of Hari-naam along with khol, kartal, and khanjani.

[10]A significant pilgrimage primarily held in Vrindavan, where devotees, on foot, embark on a journey of approximately 84 Kos (a traditional unit of distance, roughly equivalent to 160 kilometres) around the holy town.

[11]A beloved name for Krisna, meaning "Protector of Cows." The name signifies Krisna's close association with pastoral life and His compassionate nature.

[12]Reference to Radha-Krisna.

[13]Here, someone who consciously leaves behind his/her past identity and actively crafts a new one as a Vaisnava devotee.

Chapter 6

The Inverted Tree: From Personal to Social

Shri-bhagavan uvacha

Urdhva-mulam adhah-shakham ashvattham prahur avyayam

Chhandansi yasya parnani yas tam veda sa veda-vit

(The Bhagavad Gita, 15.1)

The Supreme Divine Personality said:
They speak of an eternal *ashvatth* tree with its roots above and branches below.
Its leaves are the Vedic hymns, and one who knows the secret of this tree
Is the knower of the Vedas.

This symbolic tree, with its roots reaching upwards into the Divine and branches extending downward into the world, serves as a profound metaphor within the Vaisnavite tradition. It encapsulates the journey of spiritual growth - both personal and communal - with its inverted form symbolizing the flow of divine wisdom from the source of transcendence to the temporal plane of human engagement. In this verse, the inverted tree suggests that divine insight, originating in the realm of the sacred, extends outward to foster interconnectedness at multiple levels: from personal introspection to the bonds within communities and society at large.

This chapter delves into this inversion, centering on the guru - now in the fullness of her spiritual flowering. It examines how she weaves together her contemplative insights of the sacred triad of Nabadwip, Radha and Krisna, and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu - while extending her influence through community events such as festivals, and her aspirations for the future. Here, the guru's legacy emerges through the philosophical depth she brings to her role and her cultivation of enduring spiritual networks. This analysis ultimately represents a consolidation of her mantle, both in terms of philosophical legacy and the cultivation of enduring spiritual networks. Since the researcher has tried to set this discussion in a way in which the trajectory of recognition moves from self to family, from family to sampradaya, and from sampradaya to the greater society, an attempt has been made to dedicate most of this chapter in unravelling the final link, of which festivals are the most important thread. These are occasions where the guru and her followers transcend the boundaries of their ashram and join the world in a symbiotic space of mutual participation and connection.

Compared to most other major Hindu dispensations, the Vaisnavas accord more importance to the observance of festivals. The Vaisnavite calendar, as discussed in an earlier chapter, is replete with festivals, known as *utsavs, yatras, purnimas*, and others - each carrying its own distinct theological specificities. It is, therefore, unsurprising to find that most major pan-Indian festivals are modifications of some Vaisnava festival or the other, whether it is Janmastami, Holi, or in certain respects, even Diwali.

The appeal of these festivals lies in their inherent egalitarian spirit. Regardless of specific themes or focuses, which this chapter will address in depth, each celebration uniformly aims to foster unity among diverse social groups. The spirit of this unity can be traced back to the universal teachings of Chaitanya, who used festivals as an effective medium to propagate His vision of a casteless and classless convergence of believers - there was, in fact, no better way of a public display of this ideology than to use festivals as a method. Chaitanya's biographies document countless instances where festivals became occasions for Him to reveal His divinity and glory. His participation in the Rath Yatra festival of Puri is one such example, whereby His involvement greatly amplified the festival's popularity throughout eastern India. Similarly, His pilgrimage to Vrindavan inspired the ritualistic observance of various yatras, which have since become vital expressions of devotion within Vaisnavism. These festivals, often celebrated with grandeur, now punctuate Vaisnava life, serving both as collective expressions of faith and as transformative experiences for devotees. Observing these festivals with ritualistic fervour is seen not merely as tradition but as a path to spiritual elevation and ultimately, liberation.

For the guru, festivals are critical occasions that gather disciples in a spirit of shared service and devotion, providing them with a meaningful opportunity to reaffirm their dedication to both her and the sampradaya through active participation. Additionally, they also offer practical benefits by helping to amass resources and support necessary for guru's sustenance. Beyond the internal community, festivals function as a visible affirmation of the guru's role in society - showcasing her spiritual leadership and her ability to foster a community grounded in personal peace, sincere devotion, and communal bonding. Field interviews with the various gurus, however, have unearthed layers of variations within these aspects of commonality. The agency involved is particularly significant; for the gurus, festivals are important junctures to bring their leadership to the fore, put their organizational skills at display, as well as navigate the problems and the competition that exists within the spiritual

field - all of which depends a lot in a successful and populous display of festival observance. Thus, the metaphor of the inverted tree, with its intertwined and branching connections, aptly mirrors the integrated role of festivals within the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition.

One of the core questions posed to the respondents concerned their perception of the site of Nabadwip as the spiritual locus of their activities. Earlier chapters of this thesis delineated how, within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition, Nabadwip assumes an allegorical significance, invested heavily in the teachings of Chaitanya. Revered as the "second Vrindavan," it is seen as the place where Krisna, in His Gouranga avatar, enacted His divine play or leela. Mystically, it is not unusual to consider the corporal self of the *sadhak* as a personal Vrindavan as well, reinforcing the gurus' keen awareness of Nabadwip's significance as their operational and spiritual base. Equally central to their spiritual worldview is the perception of Radha-Krisna, where, in alignment with Gaudiya Vaisnavism's emphasis on *shringar* or *prem rasa*, Radha is venerated as "the supreme devotee," who ultimately merges with Krisna's transcendental Self. Given Chaitanya's embodiment of *Radhabhava*, this theme was deliberately explored in interviews. The findings reveal that interpretations of the Radha-Krisna relationship often reflect individual teachings and experiences, rather than being derived directly from scriptural sources, resulting in notable variations and inconsistencies that are analyzed in this chapter.

Furthermore, the chapter delves into each guru's self-perception and their understanding of their state of being. This question was intentionally reserved for the end. Since Gaudiya Vaisnavism is rooted in Chaitanya's reinterpretation of traditional Vaisnava philosophy, a guru is generally expected to be conversant with His life, philosophy, and the social roles He outlined. However, the findings from this study complicate this expectation. While the gurus show consistent reverence for Chaitanya and His teachings, this does not necessarily imply a thorough engagement with related texts or an in-depth understanding of His philosophy through direct scriptural study. Instead, Vaisnavite knowledge often emerges from a tradition of oral transmission, consolidated and disseminated over generations through verbatim and metaphorical retellings. This reliance on oral tradition presents a dual outcome. On one hand, it has led to an environment of ritualistic repetition, where Gaudiya Vaisnavite life may risk becoming an uncritical adherence to entrenched symbols and practices, sometimes bypassing the deeper personal fulfilment it aims to foster. Conversely, this same tradition has instilled a form of spiritual dynamism, whereby Vaisnavism transcends the confines of textual study to

become a lived philosophy - one that, while largely unquestioned, finds its vitality in the daily enactment of teachings under the guru's guidance.

Finally, this chapter considers the future aspirations of respondents, providing insights into how they navigate the balance between personal desires and communal responsibilities. This exploration into aspirations serves as the concluding thematic focus, rounding out the series of examinations presented in this thesis.

6.1 Branches of Devotion: Festivals as Blossoms of Faith

As mentioned in the opening chapter of this thesis, Nabadwip's spiritual vibrancy is inseparable from its festival calendar. Growing up amidst these sacred celebrations has given the researcher first-hand experience of the significance that these festivals hold in the lives of residents and devotees. Life here is punctuated by moments of heightened spiritual intensity, when the ordinary gives way to the extraordinary and the veil between the Divine and the human appears to thin. At first glance, these moments might seem like seasonal occurrences, familiar rhythms in a town long accustomed to the cycles of religious life. But beneath this surface lies something far more overpowering, a dynamic force that both shapes and is shaped by the very community it seeks to elevate. These celebrations, dedicated to the divine pastimes of Radha and Krisna, are not just events marked on the calendar but living, breathing expressions of bhakti. They offer a momentary but profound connection between the earthly and the Divine, a space where time seems to collapse, and the heart of the devotee is laid bare before the feet of the Supreme. Yet, these moments are not uniformly experienced. They take on different shapes, imbued with varying degrees of intensity and expression, depending on who organizes them, how they are celebrated, and the unique spiritual inclinations of those involved.

Across all the cases in the present study, universal festivals such as Janmastami, Radhastami, Jhulan Yatra, Ful Dol, Dol Purnima, and Annakut emerge as pivotal focal points of spiritual activity, serving as conduits for both individual and communal expressions of faith within the Nabadwip's Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition. It goes without saying that these festivals are not mere rituals, but are vital socio-cultural events that reflect the labyrinthine of spiritual devotion, community identity, and the authoritative roles of women gurus. The celebration of Janmastami, marking the birth of Lord Krisna, is particularly significant. Asha Goswami captures this sentiment, stating, *"Janmastami is not merely a date on the calendar; it is a*

time when the entire town [of Nabadwip] comes alive." Likewise, Radhastami, which honours and commemorates the birth of Radha, typically follows and complements Janmastami festivities by about two weeks. The Jhulan Yatra, in a similar light, is celebrated to herald the arrival of the monsoon season, involving the swinging of the deities of Radha and Krisna on elaborately decorated swings (jhula) that are gently swung by the devotees, thereby creating a tangible connection with nature. Similarly, Ful Dol, that is celebrated to mark the arrival of spring also involves a comparable decoration of deities and temples with abundance of flowers, celebrated with great enthusiasm. Dol Purnima, too, marked by the playful throwing of coloured powders and water that sanctifies the day Krisna first showed His affection for Radha, is celebrated in the spirit of Ful Dol - offering yet another opportunity for collective joy. Notably, this day coincides with Mahaprabhu'r Abirbhab Tithi that is, again, widely observed in Nabadwip as the day Chaitanya is believed to have manifested in this world. Annakut, also known as 'Govardhan Puja,' on the other hand, celebrated the day after Diwali, showcases the communal aspect of gratitude through the offering of a grand feast to the deities, symbolizing collective thankfulness for the harvest. The elaborate mountain of food, or Annakut, devotees concoct to offer Krisna is a symbol of gratitude and devotion, which is then distributed among the community as prosaad. Neena Goswami, in this regard, emphasizes, *"The preparation for Annakut is immense. We usually prepare 108 [food] items for Krisna. It is a display of our bhakti and kritaggata (gratitude), and we invite all to partake in the blessings."* The sheer scale of preparation reflects the deep commitment of devotees to their spiritual practices and highlights the importance of communal engagement in the expression of gratitude. Thus, the vibrancy of such festivals showcases how these can galvanize social solidarity, offering a platform for communal identity and reinforcing the bonds that tie individuals together in shared spiritual pursuits.

Beyond these universal celebrations, each ashram hosts unique annual festivals that underscore the diversity of practices within Nabadwip's spiritual milieu. For instance, Radharani Goswami II leads a week-long celebration of Abhishek and Adhibash at Gour Govinda Mandir during Poush Purnima[1], along with the observances of Jhali Samarpan[2], Parayan[3], Leela Kirtan[4], Choushotti Mohanter Bhog[5], Nagar-sankirtan - culminating with the grand Panchakrosh Yatra on the final day. Umarani Goswami organizes the Madan Gopal-er Utsav every December, which honours forefathers and ancestral spirits, illustrating the importance of lineage in shaping spiritual identity. She explains, *"It is a way to acknowledge our roots and express gratitude for the blessings we have received."* Such celebrations serve

as a poignant reminder of the interconnectedness of past and present, illustrating how spiritual practices are deeply rooted in historical consciousness. Nityananda Troyodoshi, celebrated under the guidance of Bharati Goswami, further emphasizes this. This festival, which commemorates the appearance of Nityananda Prabhu, invites reflection on the qualities of love, compassion, and service. Bharati notes, *"This festival allows us to reflect on the qualities of Nityananda - prem (love), sahanubhuti (compassion), and seva (service). We engage in extensive kirtan, inviting all to join,"* thereby highlighting the participatory nature of the celebration. Likewise, the Baladev Abirbhab Tithi on Jhulan Purnima, celebrated by current women gurus of Baladev Bari, spans five days - centering around the appearance day of Baladev, Krisna's elder brother. Such gatherings not only reinforce group spirit but also serve as platforms for spiritual education, fostering a deeper understanding of the faith's foundational principles. The Gour Mahotsav, celebrated in Mahaprabhu Tol Bari under guru Neena's guidance, is similarly modelled upon a one-day celebration of the paramountcy of Chaitanya and His teachings, usually observed in Damodar maash (November). She asserts, "*This is a time to reflect on His message of universal prem and bhakti. We organize discussions, chanting, and serve prosaad to all."* The integration of discussion and communal meals, as Neena's statement elucidates, reinforces the idea that spirituality is not merely a personal endeavour but is enriched through collective learning and sharing.

A recondite festival encountered during fieldwork was the Sharbat Anusthan at Radha Madanmohan Mandir, led by Upasana Goswami, that focuses on the preparation and distribution of special sweet drinks, symbolizing hospitality and compassion. She states, *"It symbolizes sharing and compassion. We invite all who are thirsty - spiritually and physically - to join in this offering."* The symbolism of thirst - both physical and spiritual - resonates with broader themes of human experience, illustrating how spiritual practices can address the holistic needs of the Vaisnava community. Additionally, the commemoration of spouses by several guru respondents is a significant finding from fieldwork interviews, highlighting a vital aspect of their spiritual practices. Organized by Pratima Goswami, Dayamayi Vaisnava, and Nandarani Dasi in particular, these observances focus on sharing stories, songs, and meals to honour the memory of the deceased. The respondents shared that disciples unfailingly gather for these celebrations, underscoring the notion that personal connections can act as powerful trough for spiritual growth and community cohesion. The legacy of posthumous festivals adds another layer to the spiritual fabric of Nabadwip. At the temple of the late Radharani Goswami, Dol Yatra and Jhulan Yatra continue to thrive, complemented

by the Markandeya Naam Jagya Utsav during Damodar maash. This event involves an immersive journey of holy songs and chanting, extending for an awe-inspiring 264 hours. As Premananda, the narrator, asserts, *"The energy of Ma's (Radharani's) devotion continues to inspire us. We uphold the traditions she established, and we are fortunate that countless bhaktas join us to celebrate her legacy."* In a like manner, the joint commemoration of the death anniversaries of the late Dr. Roma Bandopadhyay and her father, the late Rabindranath Bandopadhyay in the sacred precincts of the Samaj Bari Ashram - where Roma generously bequeathed her home prior to her passing - serves as a testament to preserving the memory of these influential figures. This observance not only reinforces the continuity of spiritual practices but also highlights the role of women as custodians of tradition, ensuring that their contributions remain integral to the communal spiritual identity of Nabadwip.

Most of the festivals discussed above are far from static or ritualistic affairs; instead, they represent dynamic events where spiritual devotion intersects with social leadership. The gurus' ability to organize such large-scale events, often with external assistance, speaks to the social capital they possess - a capital that is not merely economic but also spiritual and relational. The capacity to mobilize resources, gather disciples, and orchestrate such celebrations reflects their leadership in the spiritual domain and underscores the significance of festivals as a medium for the enactment of spiritual power and authority. However, fieldwork and interviews reveal a contrasting experience for the Sahajiya women gurus in this study. This is largely a consequence of the sect's marginal position within the broader Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition, compounded by a smaller disciple base along with nonconformity with mainstream religious practices. As a result, these gurus are unable to organize festivals on the same scale as their more prominent counterparts. For instance, Nandarani, as a Sahajiya guru, poignantly expresses her challenges, stating, *"I have only two disciples who hardly visit me, let alone during festivals. But I still try to observe all the festivals in my ashram with as much bhakti-nishttha (devotional commitment) as possible, with the little help I receive from Radharani'r Mandir."* Likewise, this study reveals that women ascetics choose to limit their festival celebrations to their individual residences, operating within a more intimate sphere of religious practice. While they do observe the key festivals that are universally cherished within Gaudiya Vaisnavism - such as Janmastami, Radhastami, and Annakut - their celebrations are confined to the private realm, where the external spectacle is replaced by a more personal, contemplative devotion. This distinction between the women gurus and ascetics is not merely a matter of scale but also of spiritual

philosophy. The women gurus, through their public celebrations, engage in what Bakhtin describes as 'carnivalisque misalliances[6],' where the festivals become a temporary platform for dissolving the hierarchies that usually define social and religious life. During these festivals, the boundaries between guru and disciple, sacred and mundane, the Divine and human are blurred, creating a space of egalitarian interaction where the spiritual community comes together in shared joy. The festivals, in this sense, are not only about devotion but also about the creation of a communal space where the divisions of everyday life are transcended. For the women gurus, this becomes an opportunity to exercise their leadership and embody the principles of Chaitanya's Achintya Bhed-abhed philosophy, which speaks to the simultaneous unity and difference between the Divine and the human. By organizing and leading these festivals, the women gurus perform a living theology, one that enacts the abstract principles of Gaudiya Vaisnavism in real-world contexts.

However, the women ascetics, by limiting their celebrations to the private sphere, engage in a different form of spiritual practice that does not rely on the public dissolution of hierarchies. Their devotion is more introspective, focused on the internal cultivation of bhakti rather than its external expression. This does not mean that their spiritual authority is diminished, but rather that it operates within a different framework - one that values personal devotion over public leadership. In this way, the women ascetics offer an alternative model of spiritual agency, one that is not dependent on social capital or external networks but is rooted in the autonomy of the self. This model of agency aligns with Giddens' notion of the duality of structure (1984), where individual actions both shape and are shaped by the larger social structures within which they operate. The women ascetics, by choosing to confine their celebrations to the private realm, exercise a form of agency that challenges the dominant modes of spiritual authority in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, offering a more personal, individualized approach to religious practice. Together, these practices hint at underlying complexities of the tradition under study - where the public and private, the collective and the individual, the material and the spiritual are constantly negotiated through the medium of festivals.

6.2 The Sacred Trunk: Grounding in Nabadwip, Radha-Krisna, and Chaitanya

Throughout this research journey, every effort was made to maintain a respectful distance from personal ties to Nabadwip, allowing the study to evolve naturally, free from the sway of personal history. Yet, moments arose when the work itself seemed to invite a deeper resonance, as if calling for a more intimate connection. As established in the opening chapter,

the researcher's connection to Nabadwip dates back to birth. Though not raised in this town, its streets, temples, and *ghats* seemed to echo a call that had resonated for as long as memory allows - likely because the town served as a maternal home for many years. Frequent visits fostered a growing sense of place and belonging, not only through an ancestral link but through a deeply spiritual engagement. Observing how bhakti pulsed the rhythms of daily life in Nabadwip revealed the manner with which people greeted one another with reverence for Radha and Krisna, and the natural turn of conversations toward the teachings of Chaitanya. Over time, a remarkable pattern became evident: the three dimensions - Nabadwip, Radha-Krisna, and Chaitanya - emerged as three branches of the same river, converging and flowing through the lives of all who revered them.

For the respondents in this study, the significance of these three elements is not merely doctrinal; it is visceral, intrinsic, almost woven into their souls - grounded in both historical and metaphysical dimensions. Each element represents an abject avenue of devotion and insight, intertwined with their roles as gurus or ascetics. To nearly all respondents, Nabadwip transcends its geographical reality; it is the site where faith takes form, where devotion becomes tangible, and where every corner and alleyway breathes a connection to the Divine. Conversations with the respondents revealed a shared reverence for Nabadwip that surpasses physical attachment. For these women, Nabadwip embodies a sanctity that feels deeply internalized, as if they carry the town within them. Their identities appear interwoven with the rivers, temples, and festivals of Nabadwip, creating a space where personal faith and the town's spiritual heritage merge inseparably. Nityapriya Goswami, for instance, stands out for her poignant articulation of its sacredness, emphasizing its status as 'the birthplace of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.' She reflects, *"To reside in Nabadwip is a privilege granted to the fortunate,"* a sentiment echoed by many of the cases. However, this reverence is not without contention. Ascetic Purnima Devi highlights a contrasting perspective, noting that Bhakti Binod Thakur identified Mayapur as the birthplace of Chaitanya. She argues that this claim undermines the historical and spiritual significance of Nabadwip, asserting that such a distinction risks overshadowing the deep-rooted connections that practitioners feel towards Nabadwip as the epicentre of their faith. Although many scholarly studies based on extensive analyses of hagiographies and literature conclude that Nabadwip was indeed the birthplace of Chaitanya (Das, 2023), the controversy has still not entirely been put to rest. The town, to many of the respondents like Gourdasi Vasinavi and Doli Saha, is characterized as 'Gupta Vrindavan,' attributing its sanctity to the divine legacy of Naradmuni spreading the gopis'

foot-dust on its soil, thus invoking its mythological significance that binds the town to the eternal love of Radha-Krisna. Highlighting the historical dimension of Nabadwip, Gourdasi further articulates a narrative that traces its significance back to the reign of Maharaja Krisnachandra Roy[7], who initially bestowed the town upon Gopal Bhar[8], referring to it as Kuliyagram. This naming reflects a deep cultural heritage that predates Chaitanya's advent, suggesting a continuum of spiritual significance that permeates the landscape. As Gourdasi notes, *"It was only after the birth of [Chaitanya] Mahaprabhu that the name evolved into 'Nabadwip'....."* This evolution of nomenclature underscores the mesh of history and spirituality in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, as the town's identity becomes inextricably linked to the life and teachings of Chaitanya.

Gurus Umarani Goswami, Sudipa Goswami, as well as ascetics Mayarani Saha and Kalpana Goswami convey a deep affection for Nabadwip, a sentiment that resonates strongly with their spiritual practices. Through their narratives, they articulate a sense of belonging that transcends physical existence - finding in its soil a nurturing ground for their spiritual lives. Sudipa's words, *"Nabadwip is my heart's home, where my bhakti finds its wings,"* encapsulate the essence of how the town fosters a sense of identity and purpose. This connection is not merely emotional; it embodies the principles of place attachment as articulated by sociologists like Relph (1976), who posits that such attachments influence how individuals perceive their existence and relational networks. Likewise, Mayarani's views amplify the spiritual urgency of the location.*"To pass away in Nabadwip is to return to Govinda,"* she believes, framing the town as a gateway to the Divine. This perspective emphasizes the credence in a spiritual geography that extends beyond the physical, suggesting that Nabadwip's sacredness is tied to the promises of liberation and eternal union with the Divine.

Contrasting these positive portrayals, Upasana Goswami and Brinda Das highlight the persistent social constraints within Nabadwip, drawing attention to gender inequalities that often relegate women to secondary roles. Their insights serve as a critical reminder that even in sacred spaces, the socio-cultural dynamics of patriarchy persist. Upasana notes, *"In a place where we should be respected as bhaktas, let alone gurus, we often find ourselves side-lined."* Further complicating the narrative, Pratima and Sudipa Goswami lament the decline in moral values, which they believe leads to shifting dynamics within Nabadwip. Pratima poignantly expresses, *"……these days it [Nabadwip] feels overshadowed by modernity's*

chaos. Bhakti, here, is no longer how it used to be." This view reflects a broader concern for the erosion of traditional values in the face of globalization and societal change, an issue highlighted by sociologist Giddens (1990). Such reflections indicate a collective yearning for the preservation of cultural and spiritual integrity, which, when threatened, galvanizes a renewed commitment to the values and teachings they hold dear.

Mithu Goswami, on the other hand, offers a contradictory perspective: despite societal changes, Nabadwip retains its foundational (Gaudiya) Vaisnava values. Her assertion reflects an understanding of cultural resilience - how deep-rooted spiritual practices can endure and adapt through time. As she puts it, *"It [Nabadwip] is like a river; it changes course but never stops flowing."* On a different note, the perspectives of Asha Goswami, Neena Goswami, and Radharani Goswami, who regard Nabadwip primarily as a recognized spiritual hub without delving deeper into its implications, signal a notable gap in engagement with the town's complexities. The researcher felt that their views reflect a level of acceptance of Nabadwip's status as a spiritual centre without interrogating the socio-cultural dynamics that underlie such a recognition. This reluctance suggests a potential complacency within certain segments of the community, as observed during field visits.

Then there is the divine relationship of Radha and Krisna - a love that is sacred, transcendental, and the very heartbeat of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. To the people of Nabadwip, Radha emerges not only as a divine consort but as 'the supreme devotee,' or *'sarbasreshtho bhakta'* of Krisna. In their view, the path to Krisna's grace is deeply intertwined with embodying the essence of Radha's devotion - *'Radhabhave-bhavito,'* or being absorbed in Radha's mood of pure, selfless surrender. Without this profound alignment with Radha's devotional essence, they believe, a seeker cannot hope to attain the grace of Krisna, the *parampriya* (Supreme Beloved) and *parameshwar* (Supreme Lord). For the devotees in Nabadwip, Radha's prem is, thus, both a guiding light and the ultimate model of bhakti, essential for any true connection with Krisna. Many of the women interviewed shared how this prem sustains their spiritual practice, inspiring them to cultivate the same depth of bhakti in their own lives. However, a common sentiment noted among practitioners point to the recognition that while the love between Radha and Krisna is the ultimate ideal, many feel a chasm between their own spiritual journeys and the transcendental love exemplified by the divine couple. Nityapriya's remark, for instance, illustrates an inherent awareness of spiritual humility: *"I find myself inadequate to articulate the depth of this love; it is a realm I aspire*

to, but feel a distance from." Similarly, ascetic Kalpana's admission of her perceived inability to delve deeply into the leela, further highlights the complexities inherent in discussing divine narratives. *"It feels overwhelming to articulate Their (Radha-Krisna's) stories; the more I know, the less I feel capable of expressing,"* she notes, thus suggesting that the Divine often resides in the ineffable, transcending linguistic representation. Radharani II and Mithu, too, echoed this transcendental perspective, asserting that Radha-Krisna's love encompasses a profound philosophy that exceeds mere words. The former's remark, *"It is not something to be described; it is to be felt, lived, and experienced,"* reflects a significant aspect of mysticism, suggesting that true understanding lies beyond rationality and can only be approached through experiential devotion.

Mousumi's viewpoint further complicates the traditional understanding of Radha and Krisna. She asserts, *"To me, there is no separation between Radha and Krisna. They exist as one, with Radha representing Hladini Shakti contained within Krisna."* This perspective aligns with the philosophical idea of non-dualism, where distinctions between divine entities dissolve into a singular experience of divine love. Ascetic Doli's articulation mirrors Mousumi's views, creating a coherent thematic thread across the narratives. The belief in the dual nature of Krisna among many of the respondents indicates a shared understanding of divine energies, suggesting a common theological foundation among them. A refreshing perspective in this regard is provided by Asha who venerates Goddess Kali as the supreme devotee, or *Param Vaisnavi*, and Lord Shiva as the quintessential Vaisnava, or *Param Vaisnava*. She elaborates on this reverence through narratives of Shiva's participation in the Raash Leela, where He receives the title "Gopeswar" from Krisna Himself - a recognition of His profound devotion and symbolic inclusion within Krisna's divine play. This interpretation indicates a nuanced understanding of divinity, suggesting that the spectrum of devotion in Gaudiya Vaisnavism is broad enough to include other deities, creating a rich polytheistic context. Additionally, Pratima Goswami's characterization of Krisna as 'Param Purush' offers another layer to this analysis. She recounts the meeting of Radha and Krisna at ages five and twelve, respectively, as a pivotal moment, stating, *"Their connection at such tender ages indicates that divine love transcends the constraints of time and space."* This reflects a belief in the eternal nature of divine relationships, suggesting that the love between Radha and Krisna serves as a guiding force throughout their lives, manifesting as an aspirational model.

Despite the strong sentiments expressed by many respondents, a few, such as Upasana, Gourdasi, Neena, Nandarani, Umarani, and Brinda did not elaborate on their perspectives regarding Radha-Krisna. Neena, however, did suggest a symbolic association between Radha- Krisna and Chaitanya and His second wife, Visnupriya. This hint at interconnectedness among divine figures reflects an underlying belief in the cyclical nature of devotion within the tradition, where different relationships inform and enrich one another.

Finally, there is Chaitanya, often viewed as the unifier of Radha-Krisna in human form. Through Him, devotees find a path that feels accessible - a devotion that resonates not only with the gods but with all of humanity. During the researcher's visits to Nabadwip in childhood, tales of Chaitanya's miracles and teachings were a constant presence, shared by family members like sacred heirlooms. Stories of His life and influence were recounted by the researcher's grandmother and others in the community, spoken with an intensity that extended beyond reverence to a palpable sense of familiarity. For the locals, Chaitanya was not merely a distant historical figure; He was perceived as a cherished relative whose memory they lovingly preserved through prayers and rituals. An elderly man once described to the researcher, his voice trembling with emotion, how 'Mahaprabhu'r sankirtan' held the power to cleanse even the deepest sorrows. Though the researcher did not fully grasp the depth of his words at that young age, there was a sense that Chaitanya's influence extended beyond religion - it was something embedded in the hearts of the people, a part of their collective spirit.

Now, revisiting Nabadwip with an analytical perspective, it is clear that while some perceptions have evolved, the core sentiment remains deeply rooted. The locals, the devotees, and even the gurus and ascetics still hold Chaitanya close to their hearts. His teachings continue to inspire practices of naamkirtan and sankirtan in ways that feel deeply personal yet universally resonant. The emphasis on congregational chanting, in fact, recurs in the views of several of the respondents, including Radharani II, Neena, Sudipa, and Kalpana. They see sankirtan as more than just a ritual; it is a way to embody Chaitanya's teachings and ensure that His legacy remains alive. Sudipa adds a deeper, transcendental dimension to this practice, referring to Chaitanya as "Goloker Hari" - the Lord of Goloka, a divine realm beyond the material world. She reflects, *"When we chant, it feels as if we are calling upon [Chaitanya] Mahaprabhu not only here in Nabadwip but in that divine place beyond, where Radha and Krisna dwell."* Her words, thus, illustrate a perspective of sankirtan as a portal to

the sacred, serving as a form of collective effervescence, a concept Durkheim (1915) described as the heightened emotional unity experienced by a community during collective rituals.

The late Radharani Goswami's view of Chaitanya as a living incarnation of Krisna, as described by Premananda, suggests a more traditional and hierarchical perception, where Chaitanya is revered in a manner consistent with Vaisnavism's emphasis on avatars as direct manifestations of divinity. This perspective is crucial, as it represents a continuity of tradition, reinforcing His role as an essential and irreplaceable figure within the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition. In this light, ascetic Doli's suggestion that understanding Chaitanya also involves recognizing the other members of the *Panchatattva* offers a comprehensive view of His legacy, one that situates Him within a larger divine collective. On the other hand, respondents such as Radharani II and ascetic Purnima Devi emphasize the salvific nature of Chaitanya's mission, specifically in the context of the Kaliyug, where He is perceived as a spiritual anchor guiding humanity through the darkness of this age. Their perspective reflects a widely accepted belief among Gaudiya Vaisnavas that Chaitanya's advent was to save humanity from the spiritual decline characteristic of Kaliyug. Such variations are indicative of the interpretive freedom within Gaudiya Vaisnavism, allowing devotees to engage with Chaitanya's teachings in ways that resonate with their individual experiences and spiritual aspirations.

However, not all respondents are engaged with Chaitanya's legacy in the same manner. Nityapriya, for instance, focused exclusively on the importance of Nabadwip as His birthplace. Her silence on Chaitanya's teachings or divine status suggests a localized reverence, where the place itself holds spiritual importance irrespective of doctrinal interpretations. In this regard, Nityapriya's view reflects a form of religiosity centred on sacred geography rather than explicit theological constructs. For her, the sanctity of Nabadwip may outweigh the need for a deeper engagement with Chaitanya's teachings, which aligns with Eliade's (1959) concept of sacred space, where certain locations embody a profound connection to the Divine that transcends the need for doctrinal interpretation. Furthermore, the reluctance of certain respondents, such as Bharati and Dayamayi, to comment on Chaitanya could be interpreted as a sign of reverence or a sense of inadequacy in discussing such a profound figure. Their silence may reflect a cultural norm within Gaudiya Vaisnavism, where silence can signify respect or a recognition of one's limitations in fully

comprehending the Divine. Notably, for almost all of the respondents, Chaitanya's teachings are best understood through lived experience and ritual participation rather than abstract philosophical inquiry. The apparent lack of awareness of the Achintya Bhed-abhed philosophy among them suggests that Chaitanya's practical teachings hold greater resonance than complex philosophical doctrines, highlighting a preference for experiential and accessible spirituality over esoteric theology.

Understanding the perspectives of the respondents on each of these aspects is essential not only because they are critical elements of Gaudiya Vaisnavism but because each one offers a different dimension of meaning and insight into their spiritual lives. Although the researcher is well-acquainted with this triad, she approached this part of the study with fresh curiosity. Anticipating familiar themes, she expected respondents to describe Nabadwip as sacred, Radha and Krisna as the ultimate symbols of divine love, and Chaitanya as the revered avatar of bhakti. However, the aim was to go beyond the doctrines and rituals, seeking to reveal the distinct reflections each guru and ascetic brought to these themes, shaped by their personal experiences, challenges, and insights. Each response added a unique inflection, a slightly different emphasis, illuminating how the same belief system could be lived and interpreted in diverse, deeply personal ways.

Ultimately, the researcher found that these women were not simply recounting well-worn stories or repeating traditional teachings - they were revealing how each of these aspects had been lived, questioned, and deepened through the contours of their lives. What was most striking was how these familiar elements - the town, the deities, the teacher - were both constant and evolving. These women infused new meanings to them, adapting them to their lives and passing them on in ways that would continue to inspire others. Even though the researcher could anticipate their answers, she listened, not just to what they said but to how they said it. In every word, there was something alive, something distinctly their own - a reflection of their experiences, emotions, and the weight of their beliefs.

6.3 Flowers of Aspiration: Envisioning Spiritual Futures

The future is often imagined as a space of possibility, a canvas upon which individuals project their hopes, desires, and aspirations. Yet, within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition, the very notion of 'future' takes on a more elusive character, where the temporal world is perceived as fleeting and illusory. To the followers of Chaitanya, time is not linear but

cyclical, bound in the eternal rhythm of birth, death, and rebirth. Within this framework, life is seen not as a journey toward worldly accomplishments or personal milestones, but as a pilgrimage toward spiritual liberation - toward the 'joyous companionship' of the Divine, as embodied in the devotion to Radha and Krisna. Chaitanya's teachings emphasize surrender, non-attachment, and a dissolution of the self into divine love. The ego, with its attachments to the material world and the illusion of future gains, must ultimately be relinquished in favour of devotion to Krisna.

It is in this tension - between the traditional Gaudiya Vaisnavite rejection of worldly concerns and the inevitable human tendency to envision one's future - that the theme of future aspirations of women gurus and ascetics in Nabadwip emerges. The very idea of 'aspiration,' when viewed through the lens of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, becomes a paradox. On one hand, the women gurus and ascetics in this study articulate a commitment to spiritual growth and devotion in the coming years, yet their aspirations remain subtly tempered by the Vaisnavite principle of non- attachment. Theirs is not a future built upon the pursuit of material success or personal glory, but rather a continuation of their spiritual journey, a quiet dedication to the practices that anchor their lives in bhakti.

This apparent paradox is further deepened when the personal narratives of the women in question were examined. From their perspectives, future aspirations are inseparable from their roles as spiritual guides, as custodians of a religious tradition that demands both inner devotion and outward leadership. Yet, as the interviews and fieldwork reveal, the future, for these women, is less a horizon of new possibilities and more a space for deepening their existing spiritual commitments. They do not seek to change the world, but rather to maintain their connection to the Divine, to refine their practice of bhakti, and, in some cases, to pass on their spiritual legacy to the next generation. This delicate balancing act between personal aspiration and spiritual surrender lies at the heart of their narratives.

In exploring these themes during fieldwork, it became evident that a marked divergence exists in the ways women gurus and ascetics envision their future paths. With the exception of Upasana Goswami, all of them shared similar aspirations centred around deepening their spiritual practices and seeking closer communion with the Divine. Upasana, in contrast, deviates from this normative path, expressing, *"Too much of all this [spiritual practices] can derail one's direction. Children nowadays should focus on education, on career, not just on serving God alone. That is why I have sent my daughter to Kolkata to study*

Architecture…..[pauses]…..if at all, she returns, I will have many things to learn from her about changing times, things that are more important than 'dharma,' things that one must learn to survive in these days," voicing her concern that excessive devotion might overshadow the broader life goals she holds. While the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition traditionally idealizes full surrender to spiritual practice, Upasana's hesitation reflects a balanced self-perception, one that values worldly goals alongside religious commitment. This balance hints at the dynamic between individual disposition and the internalized cultural schema that shapes spiritual life in Gaudiya Vaisnavism.

In contrast, the majority of women gurus in this study expressed a shared desire to embrace deeper devotion and relinquish their worldly responsibilities as they enter later stages of life. Fourteen of the living women gurus explicitly conveyed their intent to transition into a period of "joyous companionship of God," signaling a collective commitment to bhakti, where the ultimate goal is spiritual union through devotion. Asha Goswami's words capture this sentiment: *"I wish to dedicate all my energy and time to sebapuja,"* referring to the daily acts of service to her deity that she envisions filling her final years. Her aspiration represents a broader trend among these women, wherein the demands of social roles and responsibilities give way to an intensified focus on divine service, marking a shift from societal engagement to personal spiritual fulfilment. Furthermore, many women gurus, like Umarani Goswami, have made practical adjustments due to advancing age, stepping back from the responsibilities of offering diksha because of physical limitations. Mousumi Goswami echoes this sentiment, stating her intention to stop giving diksha upon reaching 60, thus choosing personal spiritual growth over the demands of initiating new disciples. Although this decision may, quite ostensibly, appear to contradict the active duties of a guru, it aligns with the Vaisnavite belief that true fulfilment lies in surrendering oneself fully to the Divine.

The theme of legacy, however, remains a recurring concern for several of the women gurus, emphasizing their commitment to ensure the continuity of their spiritual work even as they contemplate personal detachment. For instance, Nandarani Dasi and Gourdasi Vaisnavi expressed their desire to find suitable successors, underlining the importance of carrying forward their spiritual teachings. Nandarani's aspiration to pass on her legacy becomes all the more significant given her situation, where she manages an ashram with limited support, relying on the help of the Radharani'r Mandir, particularly for festival observances. Reflecting on the uncertainty of life and her own sense of duty, Nandarani shares, *"I lost him*

(her sadhan- sangi) far too soon. Neither of us could have imagined it would end so abruptly, but no one can predict fate. Still, Radha-Madhav has kept me going, guiding me to uphold the practices he and I cultivated in our brief time together. I have tried my best to continue, though I have only two disciples of my own. But I wonder - who will carry on what I have taught once I am gone? I long for others to join me in Radha-Madhav's worship, yet here in this place, I worry it may never come to be."

Nandarani's reflection serves as an embodiment of Giddens' (1991) concept of "ontological security," where ritual practices help individuals find a sense of stability and continuity amidst life's unpredictabilities. The loss of her sadhan-sangi represents a significant rupture in her spiritual life, yet her ongoing dedication to 'Radha-Madhav's' practices serves to anchor her through a period of relational and existential insecurity. Gourdasi, on the other hand, aspires to construct a temple for her deity, Gopal, but admits that financial constraints pose significant obstacles. *"I want to build a temple where devotees can come and worship Gopal, but the funds are hard to come by,"* she laments. Her efforts to create a permanent space for worship, nonetheless, reflect a nuanced understanding of bhakti as not only a personal journey but also a communal inheritance, blending the intimate relationship with the deity with a desire to provide a space for future generations to continue this devotional practice.

The four women ascetics in this study expressed parallel aspirations, echoing the sentiments of their guru counterparts. Their futures, too, are envisaged as a time for deepening their spiritual practices, often in the solitude of their homes or ashrams. Kalpana Goswami spoke of her wish to dedicate herself entirely to religious observances after retirement, while Mayarani Saha poignantly remarks, "*Bakijibon-ta [Chaitanya] Mahaprabhu'r charanei kaatate chai*" (I desire to spend the rest of my life under the majesty of Mahaprabhu). These women's aspirations reflect a shared understanding of the significance of personal spiritual growth in the final stages of life, highlighting their commitment to the ideals of the tradition. This alignment between the aspirations of women gurus and ascetics underscores the fluidity between these two roles within Gaudiya Vaisnavism. While the distinction between guru and ascetic is often marked by the presence or absence of discipleship, their future aspirations reveal a common trajectory toward spiritual immersion. The sociological concept of liminality, as articulated by Victor Turner (1967), offers a useful framework for understanding this fluidity. As these women move closer to their personal spiritual goals, the

boundaries between their roles become less distinct, reflecting a shared journey toward divine union.

However, it is also crucial to consider that the notion of future aspirations within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition is complex. Gaudiya Vaisnavism, particularly in its Chaitanyaite form, places a strong emphasis on the ideal of surrender - *sharanagati* - whereby, Chaitanya propagated the idea that human life finds its highest purpose not through individual will or accomplishment, but through the complete surrender of the self to divine love. This surrender, however, does not mean a passive disengagement from life's duties. Instead, it requires an active, loving submission to the will of Krisna, through which the devotee seeks not to impose personal desires on the future but to flow within the current of divine will. The very act of surrendering is considered liberating because it frees the devotee from the burdens of personal ambition, allowing them to live fully in the present moment of divine connection. The projection of future aspirations, in this sense, appears to contradict the very ethos of non-attachment advocated by Chaitanya. The tension between imagining a future and adhering to the Vaisnavite ideal of surrender creates a space of ambiguity for these women, where the articulation of future goals must be tempered by an awareness of the fleeting nature of material existence. The reflections of the respondents, in this regard, reveal both adherence to this spiritual framework and a subtle negotiation with the practicalities of their roles. Unlike the male gurus, whose positions are often secured by institutional and cultural norms, these women face additional challenges, such as balancing family responsibilities or overcoming gendered barriers within the religious community. As a result, their visions of the future are often infused with both spiritual aspirations and considerations of how to sustain their current positions within the community.

Concluding Remarks

With regard to the themes discussed in this chapter, the researcher had a close encounter with the respondents, where social matters like the organization of festivals, scholastic matters like their understanding of key theological issues of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, and intimately personal matters like questions of their future were discussed. Here too, the results have been a mix of pre-existing support structures and resilience from those who lack it. Regarding festivals, it was observed that while the public celebrations led by women gurus reflect an active engagement with community dynamics and social capital, the more private, introspective practices of the ascetic-respondents illuminate an alternative model of

spirituality. Additionally, the gurus frequently hold unique observances not found among the ascetics - a difference that is evident, as they reside in ashrams and are conventionally obligated to perform these rituals. The duality, however, suggests that the richness of spiritual life in Nabadwip is not merely defined by the spectacle of public festivals but also by the quiet resilience of private devotion. As such, the festivals become a microcosm for examining broader social structures, revealing how the intersection of gender, authority, and spirituality operates within the framework of Gaudiya Vaisnavism.

The present study was also geared towards understanding the relationship of residents in Nabadwip to the agency and the importance that women gurus and ascetics within the Vaisnavite structure take. It was from this point that the researcher questioned respondents on the importance of Nabadwip in their lives and what, by and large, they understand Nabadwip to be. The responses made it clear that this point is integrally related to the question of migration that has already been discussed in a previous chapter. The gurus can be divided among those who have been long-time residents of Nabadwip either by birth or through marriage into houses that were long established in Nabadwip, and those who have migrated to Nabadwip from other places and established ashrams there. However, despite these differences, there were no significant changes in their understanding of the town. All of them consider Nabadwip as an important centre of learning, viewing it primarily through a received continuum of denominational tradition rather than by deeply engaging with its literature. Terms like 'Gupta Vrindavan' show that almost all the denominations over the ages have consciously developed and constructed Nabadwip as a kind of sacred space with some kind of symbolic value that aids in the spiritual practice of Vaisnavism.

The same symbolic value is also extended to the figures of Radha, Krisna, and Chaitanya. The fact that although most of the respondents are more devoted to the practical aspect of guruhood, rather than a kind of theoretical and esoteric understanding of it, proves that their understanding of Radha and Krisna is also denominationally conditioned. They are more devoted to a particular subset of rites and rituals that need to be carried out in honour of Radha and Krisna rather than delving into the philosophy of Radha and Krisna per se. However, this practice is also supported by the view that practice in itself leads to some kind of philosophical insight. And the same goes for Chaitanya as well: responses show that it is not necessarily a deep understanding of key Chaitanya philosophical tenets like Achintya Bhed-abhed that informs their devotion towards Chaitanya, rather Chaitanya works as a kind

of sampradaya-based signifier, very much like Radha, Krisna, and Nabadwip itself, who needs to be revered. It is the practice of reverence that, over a long period of time, is expected to lead to some kind of liberation, for which an understanding of Chaitanya's philosophy is not very necessary. From a sociological perspective, this can be understood through several factors: these women gurus may have been socialized and trained within a religious tradition that emphasizes practical aspects of spirituality over theoretical nuances, facing pressure to fulfil traditional roles as spiritual guides rather than delving into abstract philosophical discourses. Additionally, they may tailor their teachings to suit the needs of their audience, prioritizing accessible guidance over complex doctrines, while institutional structures and norms may also influence their focus areas, favouring teachings that contribute to community cohesion rather than theoretical debates.

Very few of the respondents are actually aware of Chaitanya-based philosophical, historical, or autobiographical texts. Mostly, it is a subset of narratives that they have received more through an oral tradition which they deeply believe in. What they are very good at or adept at, on the other hand, is mastering a ration of ritualistic practices which they carry on daily and the 'mantra-japa' which they pass on through the initiation process, supported by an understanding that this, perhaps after some point of time, leads to liberation or oneness with Krisna through the very practice itself. It also shows a kind of continuum between the gurus and the ascetics in their understanding of 'the three branches of the river,' which, in turn, sustains the denominational continuity across generations of practitioners - gurus and ascetics alike.

Finally, the last theme in this chapter hints at the possibility that the future aspirations of the women gurus and ascetics do not reveal simply a commitment to bhakti but a complex negotiation of identity, agency, and devotion in a religious framework that traditionally minimizes worldly ambition. By envisioning future paths aligned with spiritual dedication rather than secular success, they try to navigate a paradoxical space where the very notion of aspiration must be reinterpreted through the lens of religious duty rather than personal ambition. The aspirations - tempered by age, health, and an awareness of life's impermanence- thus suggest a pragmatic adaptation of Gaudiya Vaisnava ideals. For them, imagining a future does not signify a linear progression toward achievement but rather a deepening of established spiritual commitments. In this, the Vaisnavite ideal of sharanagati is

subtly redefined, not as a static end but as a lifelong journey of internal growth and community stewardship.

The chapter began by evoking the image of an inverted tree, a metaphor that guides us through the progression from the planting of a seed to the tree's growth, flowering, and fruition. However, the yogic texts assert that once the root is well established and the seed grows into a big and fruitful tree, it inverts. The root then goes up and bears branches, fruits and leaves below. The researcher has tried to convert this entire mystical allegory into a sociological frame, whereby the seed was the guru's childhood and early days, the growth a development into the spiritual path through diverse conditions - the times of trials and tribulations. The confidence gained during this period and the institutional affiliations attained therein provide the backdrop against which the next part unfolds, which is the flowering of the self into guruhood. In this chapter, we see, how the flowering and fruitful tree, then creates a network of social relationship through knowledge, activities, festivals culminating into end-of-life desires. In this sense, perhaps the final decision that they deliver of leading a future life on a spiritual line is perhaps not surprising at the least. Beyond all practical considerations, there remains a kind of success in maintaining a line of continuity which we call a 'sampradaya,' that has sustained itself in the face of all odds.

Endnotes

[1]"Abhishek" refers to the holy bath of the deity; "Adhibash" means adornment of the deity with flowers, sandalwood paste, etc.

[2]On the auspicious full-moon day of the Bengali month of Poush, Gour Govinda Mandir of Nabadwip orchestrates a magnificent ceremony, honouring nine sacred temples in the town. The list includes Dhameshwar Mahaprabhu Mandir, Nitai Bari, Bhajan Kutir, Haritala Mandir, Advaita Prabhu's Mandir, Baladev Akhra, among others. The event commences with a grand procession that usually begins at 10 in the morning.

[3]A five-day event in Poush organized by the Gour Govinda Mandir. It features continuous chanting sessions, where devotees recite Sanskrit slokas from the Bhagavad Gita, Chaitanya Bhagavata, and Chaitanya Charitamrita every morning from 7 to 9.

[4]Singing of prayers accompanied by drums and cymbals that spans for four days in Poush. The time, span, and methods of observance may vary from temple to temple.

[5]Preparation of 191 vegetarian dishes by the Gour Govinda Mandir that are offered as bhog to the *parishad* (council) of Chaitanya. Although the ways of observing this festival may vary across temples, it is usually observed on the first day of lunar fortnight that comes after the full-moon day of Poush.

[6]A concept developed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his work *Rabelais and His World (1984)*, where he describes the subversive nature of carnival. In carnivalesque settings, traditional boundaries are broken, and unlikely or mismatched pairings occur, symbolizing a temporary suspension of social hierarchies. These misalliances, whether between classes, genders, or sacred and profane, celebrate the liberation from societal norms and the blending of opposites.

[7]An 18th century king of Nadia in Bengal, greatly celebrated for his patronage of arts and culture.

[8]Court jester in the court of Maharaja Krisnachandra Roy.

Chapter 7

Final Reflections and Future Pathways

Considering all sides of the argument, this study suggests that the theoretical premises of Gaudiya Vaisnavism and the value system that underpins them may not always be fully articulated or explicit among the respondents interviewed in the field. It appears that this limited articulation of what might be termed a 'clear theoretical understanding' may be influenced by various factors. Firstly, there is an absence of direct textual resource that can be accorded to Chaitanya Himself, for His literary output regarding Gaudiya Vaisnavite philosophy is minimal, opening up the way for numerous and varied secondary literatures on the subject. The only work that is attributed to Him is 'Siksastaka' which consists of eight verses that can be found in Chaitanya Charitamrita. To quote Susil Kumar Maitra, "Just as we know of Socrates and his teachings not from his writings, but through the writings of disciples like Plato, so also we know of Sri Chaitanya's philosophy through his disciples" (Maitra, 1941: 275). Secondly, the Gaudiya Vaisnavite movement, with its emphasis on prem and bhakti, attracted a wide array of followers from diverse backgrounds and communities at its wake. This inclusive approach drew individuals from socially and economically disadvantaged groups as well, who brought along their own world-views, customs, and ideological dispositions. The diversity among the followers, including the gurus, led to significant intermingling and exchange of ideas throughout the evolution of the movement. This interaction created a dynamic environment where different beliefs and practices coexisted, sometimes merging and at other times retaining their distinctiveness, thereby resulting in a syncretism so enormous that it is presently impossible to discern and discover any degree of 'original purity' that exists among their practices and belief systems vis-à-vis the theoretical rigour of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. Baul, Aaul, Nera, Sahajiya, Kartabhaja, Sahebdhani, Balarami, are some of the groups that emerged from this eclectic mix. Thirdly, a large share of the Gaudiya Vaisnavite texts was written in Sanskrit. From the latter half of the 18th and early 19th centuries, Bengal witnessed a steady decline in Sanskrit studies, while books written in vernacular, particularly in 'Bangla,' grew to ascendance through colonial prioritization of vernacular education over seats of traditional knowledge based on Sanskrit. This naturally brought in an abundance of translational agency, with subjective responses to the original Gaudiya texts. Here, it is mention-worthy that the textual basis of Vaisnava practice has two origins: the first includes a tradition written mostly in Sanskrit and predating

Chaitanya's emergence. It comprises of Pancharatra texts, which venerate Visnu as the chief deity, and the Srikula tradition of tantra[1], which primarily worships Lakshmi in the form of "Sodashi" or "Lalita," which later on conflates in the embodiment of Radha; the second is the textual tradition that emerged from the biographies of Chaitanya, giving rise to an independent form of Gaudiya philosophy. Although the Pancharatra and Srikula traditions laid down the foundation of a Vaisnava way of life, yet they differed in their approach to religious authority and inclusivity. The former strictly limited the right to confer diksha to male Brahmins, reinforcing a conventional framework of religious hierarchy, while the latter took a more egalitarian stance - affirming that the role of guru could be held regardless of gender or Brahminical status. But the real textual problematic was complicated through the subjective positions assumed by the biographers of Chaitanya. Each of them presented Chaitanya in a light coloured by personal theological position, denominational condition, as well as ideological stance on various issues. Lochan Das - an associate of Chaitanya and the author of Chaitanya Mangala, Vrindavan Das - the author of the highly revered Chaitanya Bhagavata, and Krisnadas Kaviraj Goswami - the author of Chaitanya Charitamrita, were some of His main biographers. Within this context, Chaitanya Charitamrita opens itself to esoteric interpretations to which the other biographies are mostly resistant. Consequently, each denomination developed its own canon from within this textual network and felt it both comforting and befitting to restrict themselves within their preferred set of canonical texts. This restriction attained greater textual determinacy through the agency of the guru or the guru-parampara[2] as a whole, which reiterated the same textual lore to the disciples. This research reveals a clear resistance to move outside the textual and instructional paradigm that the guru determines best for the spiritual awakening and well-being of the followers. The justification is that since the guru has loved and understood Chaitanya in a given way, that way needs to be unquestionably followed. In fact, in most denominations, there is a clear injunction against too much of inquiry into multiple methods for they create distraction among disciples in their mystical oneness with Krisna and the world through Chaitanya. It is, therefore, both safe and best to select a singular way and stick to it rather than getting entrapped into multiple traditions and textual utterances. Therefore, original deviations become static and settled through generational reiterations. These factors, according to the researcher, account for deviations within the various gurus and their ashrams from the original textual tenets of Gaudiya Vaisnavism.

The question of guru is not a static but a dynamic one. The word is found in the early part of the Vedas and has endeared a lifetime of many millennia with its usage still current and multifaceted. Truly, it has been a free-floating signifier in both diachronic and synchronic terms. Its signification has not only evolved over time but has also encompassed multiple interpretations coexisting within any given period. The meaning with which it is used by the denominations studied for this research needs to be specified despite its resistance towards such categorical specifications. But even as this is being written, certain sociological changes in the profile of the sampradayas might be at play, which in turn can influence the profiling of guru - both as a signifier as well as an individual role carried out within a specific sociological context. So, for the sake of methodological rigour, some specification is necessary. From this research, it can be safely deduced that throughout the development of the 'guru' signification and 'guruhood' as a chosen way of life within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite fold, some women carry out diksha ceremonies, while others do not. This too can be explained in both scriptural and sociological terms. Ignoring the minute differences in detail, it is commonly agreed that a deliverer or officiator of diksha becomes the spiritual guide of that individual. This is a crucial element of spiritual praxis, because it puts into application the theoretical aspect of religious theory. This diksha, thus, is a liminal event rite with a presupposed power to transform the initiate, and therefore, there is a degree of secrecy and mysticism attached to it. It is the power towards the 'exercise' of this liminal rite which has been found to be a cornerstone of the entire 'guru' enterprise deciding almost all other factors due to the high symbolic weight attached to it. It must be noted that the symbolic elements in religious practices extend beyond identity formation, encompassing everything from religious icons to the language used in spiritual teachings, and even impacting the economy surrounding these practices. This is where the accumulated symbolic capital finds its expression, and is believed to bring about a transformative 'liminality' in a guru (here, woman guru). The "capital" in this religious context includes not only textual knowledge of the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition but also spiritual praxis, or 'sadhana.' A guru's ability to harness this capital and share it effectively is key to her success and authority within the community. However, since this liminality is liminal in the sense that it both hides and reveals - that is, it sets the status of an individual in society based on her power to conduct a ceremony while the ceremony itself remains ritualistically secret, this has to be bolstered and supported through other 'communitas' rites and rituals. The communitas, on the other hand, is ensured by the large number of rituals that are held throughout the year by these gurus. Guru-respondents stated that their disciples come over from different places, often far-off, to

join in the various festivals that are conducted by them. This provides the community with a sense of unity and connectivity. The fact that most disciples also extend financial support to the guru and her ashram during festivals shows how the symbolic capital gets transformed into financial capital. This is a direct response to the first objective in this study. It can be safely deduced that the women gurus have turned themselves into a significant tour de force in the spiritual landscape of Nabadwip. The journey has been neither an easy one, nor a monolithic one. They have entered the field in different ways, having different life histories, different backgrounds and castes, and different familial and social support systems to sustain them.

For example, if we consider the case of diksha, some gurus from prominent Brahminical lineages often acquire the right through inheritance, typically passed down through family ties or by birth-right, while others attain it through expertise and caste status. For non-Brahmins, however, the right to offer diksha had to be attained through certain symbolic modes, like marriage or Mala-Chandan to a diksha guru. Operating outside the Brahminical fold of highly sophisticated and structured religious dispensation are some women gurus aligned to a feminine mystique (Friedan, 1963). However, the mystique that arises here is determined by an intersectional subjectivity as well. Indian intersectional studies prominently take into account the caste factor, and particularly in understanding phenomena that operate within spiritual traditions, we can only ignore it at our own peril. Bringing in intersectionality becomes an obvious choice because of the great differences that lie within the functional paradigms of gurus among Gaudiya Vaisnavite families and those who operate in a more humble way with a more 'sahajiya' orientation. Sahajiya practice often adopted an anti-Brahminical stance, generally attracting followers from socially and economically marginalized groups. Over time, however, this practice, or at least part of it, have merged with mainstream Gaudiya practice - sometimes, it retains certain aspects of early signs, while at others, it changes a lot at a structural level even while keeping surface semiotics intact - including certain dresses, decorations and also relationships. This change, however, as far as has been found out, is becoming more and more unidirectional. There is a great pull factor operating from the Gaudiya school as it exists today. This is perhaps because of the economic affluence and socio-political power that the adherents exercise in the society at large, with a rise in Brahminical ideology in the present day, or possibly because of the fact that the entry of global capital within the villages themselves have changed the class and caste dynamics in preference of a righteous and affluent section of society resulting in an ascendance of their

morality. This is a general observation about the quiet surrender of Bengal's esoteric communities within the fold of big institutionalized religious groups, and the Sahajiyas seem to be no exception.

In continuation to the first objective, it can, therefore, be seen that the women gurus are acutely conscious of their position both within the community at a micro level and also the fact that this space is operative within the geographical and allegorical space of Nabadwip. The influential families have been long settled in Nabadwip and the women gurus who belong to these, either through marriage or direct lineage, are aware of their privileged Brahminical position and negotiate that with a high degree of individual agency, often assuming significant leadership position. Even the gurus who have less disciples, and comparatively lower cultural capital, as well as the ascetics who stay away from guruhood either by choice or by compulsion, are acutely aware of their standing in the spiritual and social environment of Nabadwip, as well as the necessity of residing there for the maintenance of their spiritual role. A similar consciousness regarding the micro level of national politics is also observed, as is their eagerness to renegotiate and refashion their role within that context.

Historically, the rise of Hindu nationalism in the latter half of the 19th century unleashed a wave of Vedantic gurus in Bengal to replace the system of family kula-gurus and Sahajiya sadhan- gurus who were earlier present. These gurus, generally from educated middle-class and upper- middle class families, were well versed in scriptures and wrote and read fluently in Bengali and often in English. Many of them had a previous life of government jobs with families of own, but their lives took a dramatic turn towards spirituality after some watershed life-events. Typically, they learnt yogic and Vedantic knowledge from some hermit who belonged to the Dasanami sampradaya. Eventually, they became sanyasi-gurus who built ashrams, thereby attracting a great section of the Bengali middle-class educated urban constituency, who found in them a comforting reformist alternative to the Brahma movement. The researcher's surmise is that many of the ashram organizational structures of these institutions came to be mimicked by the smaller Sahajiya Vaisnava sampradayas as well. It was a case of cultural mimicry that has given rise to two dichotomies: firstly, there has been notable differences between the orientations and practice systems of different sampradayas within the Vaisnava community itself, and secondly, some of the guru ashrams have become

inseparable from non-Vaisnavite new-age guru ashrams in practice and prosperity, separating them from other Vaisnava communities.

As much as gathered from fieldwork, these diverse and innovative influences have seamlessly blended into the practices of the women gurus interviewed, shaping the instructions and lifestyles they recommend to their devotees. This is in accordance with the second objective of the present research. Through the detailed and protracted interviews that have been recorded in this study, the researcher has attempted to discern the theological perspectives that inform the activities of these women gurus**.** However, it has also been observed simultaneously that the theological cannot be dissociated from the social, since the theological factors have been acutely influenced by factors of social change as well. Often, the question of guru - Brahmin or otherwise, Gaudiya or otherwise - reveals the inability or lack of intention for some to become or present themselves as 'gurus.' This is when they assume the status of moral guides called 'siksha gurus,' delivering advice and knowledge but at the same time keeping themselves distanced from the central liminal activity of the diksha. Labelling oneself as a siksha guru shows a resistance to assume the place of a 'pati,' which, somehow, is informed by an innate sense of identifying the feminine role to that of unquestioned surrender. Close examination reveals that the subsidiary gender role assigned to the women in this context is so deeply embedded in their ideological framework that there is a noticeable inability to sensitize them on this issue. Despite repeated attempts to highlight the inequality in gender dynamics, there appears to be little awareness or understanding within the subject regarding the worth of the question, which may be the result of prolonged denominational conditioning that cannot be easily questioned, or that erases the possibility of questioning itself. While their faith and practices settle them to a particular nonchalance to deal with the vagaries of life, they blind them to the innate patriarchy at work behind the structural appropriations initiated through these practices. Patriarchy operates strongly but invisibly through all religious systems through the gender roles that it ascertains for women. The inability of women to understand this system is what has been found to be restrictive in the long run, and exploitative at an individual level. As a result, the structured patriarchy that permeates the ashram environment does not resonate as a matter for discussion, and those within the system perceive any challenge to this structure as impertinent or contrary to their spiritual goals and structured lifestyle. While the patriarchal ideology is operative, preference of social role over the liminal role cannot be overlooked. Besides having an innate sense of inadequacy, it also seems to be a practical decision taken from an understanding that

guruhood implies inviting responsibilities out of one's comfort domain which can be an impediment in spiritual development. Often, it is more a matter of maintaining a denominational status quo. But for siksha gurus who cannot/do not completely participate in the liminality, which is an important part of ritualistic life and the symbolic transaction, they often satisfy themselves with what can be designated as a 'social role' for the gurus.

With respect to the third objective that was based on personal journeys, spiritual practices, views on lineage and discipleship, social roles, challenges, and leadership approaches**,** the present study revealed that there is no set precondition regarding the social and familial situations through which a woman guru can emerge. Some of them come of families where their spiritual aspirations found more supportive environments for nourishment, whereas others assumed the role from situations which were extremely unpredictable with little prior indications that this spiritual path and community role can be perpetrated. Despite this diversity in backgrounds, a strong undercurrent of Brahminical ideas is noticeable. Families already embedded in the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition, often Brahmins, tend to have a higher number of disciples as compared to those who are non-Brahmins, thus reinforcing a sense of hierarchy that almost all participants seemed to be aware of. Resultantly, many of the respondents in this research not only maintained but duly emphasized their Brahminical lineage through retention and/or assumption of surnames (here, Goswami), as well as textual references extolling Brahminical virtues. A distinct pull towards Brahminism was observed existing among the women gurus, which was an extension of common social belief in the society at large to which the respondents were party. Interestingly, at almost all levels, a high degree of symbolic interaction is found at play in the formation of the 'self' of these women gurus, which account for the great degree of diversity in the individual and social orientations of these individuals.

The 'me' factor, representing social conformity and adherence to Gaudiya Vaisnava norms, remains relatively constant, while the 'I' factor, denoting personal creativity and response, creates a spectrum of individual orientations and responses. This leads to varied approaches to spiritual leadership among women gurus, even within the same overarching religious tradition. Though comparatively more structured than the 'I' factor, the 'me' factor itself is not monolithic as different system coalesce and contribute in this aspect as well. These factors interact with the 'I' factors that are guided by family backgrounds, their economic condition and choice of career as a guru (often at the behest or in conjunction with other

economic choices, like school teacher or a kirtan singer). So, the various differences in the experiences and belief systems of the respondents reveal how the changing 'I' factor within a constant 'me' factor of any community setting can lead to diverse interactionist scenarios - to which the responses of the women gurus of this study attest. The entire dialectics that operate within each guru, among the 'I' and 'me' factors of their persona, bring us to a negative dialectic that is operative both within and without the persona of the guru (Adorno, 1973). Or, it can be surmised that 'the within' and 'the without' are not clearly defined to engage in a clear dialectic at all. It is not only varied and complex, but it is also porous and polysemic in a Bakhtinian sense[3]. Their embodied realities unfold as an ongoing dialectic, shaped by the narratives they receive and those they actively construct through agential volition.

Regarding the fourth objective, it can be confessed that this study began as an exploration of women gurus but soon expanded to include women ascetics in the familial fold so as to assess the likelihood of them becoming gurus in the future. These ascetics choose not to assume guruhood, likely due to concerns about disrupting the accepted order. Despite differences in their spiritual positions, denominational statuses, or nomenclature changes, the researcher felt that certain aspects united them - not only with each other but with the general plight of women across different traditions. What prompted the researcher to consider these women for the study was the fact that they lead material lives much like any other commoner, despite being highly spiritual in nature. This dual existence highlights the unique intersection of the personal and the spiritual in their lives, for religion cannot be separated from the material circumstances in which specific instances of religious imagination and behaviour arise and to which they respond (Orsi 1997, pp 6-7, cited from Starling 2019, p 12). There are intimate connections between gender, affect, and bodily experience when constituting religious identity and forms of authority (Zubko 2014; Bedi 2022; Langenberg 2022). However, these women forego the role and responsibility of the guru because it implies an attachment of a certain kind as well as a bondage which they can consider to be detrimental to their path of spirituality. Their decision to remain householder/ashram ascetics is not due to an unwillingness to become gurus but a preference for personal engagement with their faith practices. However, this conscious decision does not necessarily signal an inherent unwillingness to don the mantle of the guru. Instead, the desire to be a guru is surpassed by a concern to commit oneself to the set of responsibilities that come with it. This study reveals that the unstated cause of this reluctance is an understanding of the fact that the plight of being a woman in the spiritual path is not necessarily smoothened by being a guru. On the

other hand, it can increase one's engagement in negotiating the challenges that come in the way of spiritual practice. The decision to remain an ascetic is, therefore, determined by factors of compulsion, although it takes the form of agential decision towards non-attachment. Therefore, it can be concluded, irrespective of being a guru or an ascetic, the conditions of women spiritual practitioners within the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition are determined by forces of patriarchy with which the individual subject enter into strategic negotiations. However, it must also be declared here that the conditions of agency and female subjectivity of the women ascetics were not structurally different from the gurus. Of course, there is the issue of volition of offering diksha and being at the helm of a community, but those are more theological niceties than sociological questions. The negotiation of women's space within a spiritual fold and the challenges that needed to be supplant for a respectful and free living were summarily the same for them, more or less.

Thus, while operating in a traditionally patriarchal context, whether it be a diksha guru or a siksha guru, or ascetics, the women have internalized the ideological foundations of their community's beliefs and practices, which were often overtly patriarchal. This has led to a situation where there was a mismatch in the understanding of agency as well, as has already been discussed. From a purely sociological and academic position, the researcher arrived at a response to the fifth and final objective, which is also the final objective of the research as well, whereby she has tried to gain an understanding of the extent of agency exercised and the negotiation of gender roles by Gaudiya Vaisnavite women gurus and ascetics. It was found that this is highly determined by the relative position of the women within an already recognized spiritual legacy or outside of it. From the previous objectives, it has been established that there is no one way in which the question of agency of these women can be understood, just as there is no universal pattern to their life histories. Similarly, it can also be surmised that their negotiation with patriarchy is also determined by their consciousness of their relative position in the spiritual cultural capital within the semiotic space of Nabadwip. This was a small surprise because it was observed that patriarchy and Brahminism is rampant within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite fold which theoretically bases itself on the egalitarian message of Chaitanya. The present study was ameliorated by the observation that even at the face of such rampant patriarchy, women gurus and ascetics still find unique ways to challenge and subvert these constraints, leveraging their specific intersectional identities. However, the big surprise that was sprung by the research findings is the discovery that the woman guru's ability to subvert patriarchal norms and exercise agency does not always align with her

financial or social status. Some economically privileged women gurus may seem to possess significant power and autonomy; however, their internalization of patriarchal ideologies often results in less resistance to traditional norms, indicating that economic privilege does not always equate to greater agency. Conversely, other women gurus, despite facing financial hardship and lower social standing, demonstrate a remarkable capacity to maintain and exert control over their resources, from collecting and managing them to deciding how to use them. This indicates a higher degree of agency and independence, suggesting that the ability to subvert patriarchal structures and exercise spiritual authority can emerge from positions of relative social and economic disadvantage.

In conclusion, it can be conjectured that religious observances in practice are manifest forms of socio-economic realities, which are dynamic and continuously evolving - affecting the position of women. This brings to a response to the final part of the fifth and final objective where an attempt has been made to consider the broader implications of the research findings for understanding women's roles in spiritual authority per se. By examining Gaudiya Vaisnavism as a grand narrative in operation, we see that it intersects with the personal lives and decisions of individual women. Feminist discourse has established that the personal is political (Hanisch, 1970), and this study reveals that grand religious systems are often influenced by personal decisions shaped by concerns about family, economy, and immediate society. The study of women gurus is particularly relevant because it demonstrates that beyond the dynamics within and between denominations and communities, there are intricate interactions between personal and religious lives. This is where women gurus seem to create their uniqueness vis-à-vis their male counterparts within an identical system. Despite their specific intersectionality with spiritual imperatives, their condition blurs the lines between the personal and the political. Although they may not engage in conventional political activities tied to state power and governance, the spiritual denominations within which they function maintain established power dynamics. Maneuvering within these dynamics becomes an inherently political act, transforming their spatial negotiations for selfhood into acts of political significance. In this framework, the spiritual realm conflates with the personal. Decisions made by or for these women are often prompted by considerations of personal responsibilities - to family, community, a husband, or a guru encountered in a dream. Thus, the feminine mystique is also a form of feminine politique, operating unconsciously. This study, therefore, underscores the complex interplay between the personal and the political in

the lives of women spiritual practitioners, highlighting how their unique positions within religious systems are shaped by and further shape broader socio-economic realities.

It is, however, imperative that a single study cannot encompass the understanding of the lives and sociological roles of Gaudiya Vaisnavite women gurus in totality. Although this research has attempted to redress a research gap in religious studies, feminist studies as well as sociology by focusing on a narrow group within a defined geographical space, it opens up many questions that can be attempted by future researchers to complete the picture. This is particularly significant because many allied disciplines within the social sciences are taking a distinctive spatial turn, through which locational specificity of studies are highlighted and treated as a significant modifier of experiences. Therefore, methodologically, this study creates opportunities for exploration across multiple areas. First and foremost, the formation of a sampradaya is intrinsically linked to the guru-sisya relationship, where the identity of the guru is both influenced by and deeply rooted in sisyas who receive and embody the teachings. A future study that investigates Gaudiya Vaisnavism from the disciples' perspectives could illuminate critical aspects of the tradition's functional dynamics. The increased interest in spiritual life, as observed through heightened participation in festivals, calls for an inquiry into the backgrounds and motivations of individuals drawn to this path. Such research could explore the factors influencing disciples' selection of gurus, their expectations, and the experiential dimensions of their engagement. A study of this nature would serve as a complementary perspective, enriching the present research by providing a fuller picture of Gaudiya Vaisnavism from the recipients' viewpoint.

Second, this study has not taken into account the contents of the textual tradition that inform and shape Gaudiya Vaisnavism or its Sahajiya dispensation. Studies on the philosophy of Gaudiya Vaisnavism abound, but the gurus' personal understandings of these texts, and the factors that guide the choice of certain scriptures over others, present a rich avenue for future exploration. Investigating texts authored by contemporary gurus would offer insights into how classical Gaudiya philosophy and practices are adapted to current contexts, thus revealing how these teachings are reinterpreted and applied within modern frameworks.

Third, the current study included posthumous accounts of women gurus from their male disciples, offering a singular perspective. However, a comprehensive, comparative analysis of male and female gurus within Gaudiya Vaisnavism could elucidate the nuanced gender dynamics in spiritual leadership. Examining differences in leadership styles, societal

expectations, and gender-specific challenges - such as biases and the balancing of familial duties - could provide a critical understanding of how gender shapes both opportunities and obstacles within the tradition. Incorporating case studies and personal narratives from both men and women gurus would further deepen this understanding.

Finally, a comprehensive, interdisciplinary study on the evolution of ascetic practices could reveal shifting understandings of spirituality, gender, and religious authority within Gaudiya Vaisnavism and related traditions. Traditionally, asceticism emphasized renunciation and spiritual discipline, but contemporary practices reflect a broader spectrum of spiritual engagements, ranging from strict monasticism to household-based spiritual practices. For women, asceticism intersects with gendered expectations, shaping how they approach and experience spirituality, which may or may not culminate in guruhood. Analyzing the transformation of ascetic ideals in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, as well as other traditions, would offer valuable insights into the adaptive and evolving nature of religious practices and the intersections of gender and spiritual authority over time.

Endnotes

[1]A Sakta lineage emphasizing on the worship of Devi, primarily Goddess Lakshmi, alongside Her forms like Lalita Tripurasundari. For more, refer to *Brooks, D.R. (1992). Auspicious Wisdom: Texts and Traditions of Srividya Sakta Tantrism in South India. State University of New York Press.*

[2]Traditional lineage of spiritual masters in Indian religions, wherein knowledge, practices, and spiritual authority are transmitted from guru to disciple, thus maintaining and preserving the teachings and integrity of spiritual traditions across generations.

[3]Comes from the concept of "polysemy" by Mikhail Bakhtin, who proposed that language and meaning are inherently dialogic and shaped by social interaction, thereby reflecting multiple voices and perspectives. For details, refer to *Bakhtin, M.M. (1981). The dialogic imagination: Four essays (M. Holoquist, Ed.; C. Emerson & M. Holoquist, Trans.). University of Texas Press.*

Annexure I

Respondents' Profile

Name	Age	Place of Interview	Municipality Ward Number	Latitudinal & Longitudinal Extent
Asha Goswami	75	Baladev Bari, Gantala Road	9	23°24'42.08" N 88°22'19.34" E
Mousumi Goswami	43			
Mithu Goswami	40			
Radharani Goswami	Posthumous case	Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mission, Rani'r Ghat (also known as Radharani'r Mandir)	8	23°24'42.5" N 88° 22' 34.11" E
Bharati Goswami	56	Banke Bihari Sebakunja, Kutirpara	1	23°24'46.77" N 88°22'15.99" E
Gourdasi Vaisnavi	65	Santi Ashray, Dandapanitala Ghatchora	22	23°24'15.34"N 88°22'23.7"E
Umarani Goswami	75	Banshbagan, Boro Akhra	9	23°24'51.61" N 88°22'34.62" E
Upasana Goswami	46	Radha Madanmohan Mandir, Brajananda Goswami Road	9	23°24'43.9" N 88°22'22.14" E
Nityapriya Goswami	67	Shyamsundar Sebakunja, Nimainagar	7	23°25'15.28" N 88°22'26.31" E
Dayamayi Vaisnav	82	Nitai-Gour Ashram, Dandapanitala Ghat	22	23°23'17.73"N 88°22'21.52"E
Radharani Goswami II	43	Gour Govinda Mandir, Mahaprabhu Para	3	23°24'44.97"N 88°22'8.65"E
Neena Goswami	79	Mahaprabhu Tolbari, Poramatala Road	9	23°24'41.06" N 88°22'12.77" E
Pratima Goswami	66	Nitai-Gour Sangha Ashram, Boro Akhra, Turapara Lane	9	23°24'49.47"N 88°22'20.45"E
Sudipa Goswami	62	Sonar Gouranga Mandir, Sribas Angan	10	23°24'29.45" N 88°22'17.11" E
Nandarani Dasi	57	Manipur Ghat, Bastabnagar Colony	18	23°23'40.43" N 88°22'3.16" E
Brinda Das	45	Nitai-Gour Sebashram, Kargilpara	18	23°23'40.40" N 88°22'9.17" E
Dr. Roma Bandopadhyay	Posthumous case	Samaj Bari Ashram, Sribas Angan	13	23°24'23.32"N 88°22'18.24"E
Mayarani Saha	80	Near Samaj Bari Ashram, Sribas Angan	11	23°24'30.02" N 88°22'19.34" E
Purnima Devi	48	Sreeguru Prapanna Ashram, Dakshin Bangapara	12	23° 24' 19.41" N 88° 22' 11.68" E
Doli Saha	56	Banshbagan, Turapara Lane	9	23°24'52.84"N 88°22'23.7"E
Kalpana Goswami	55	Jatiya Vidyalaya Para, Second Lane	21	23°25'23.68" N 88°22'28.07" E

N.B. The names of the respondents have not been arranged alphabetically; rather, they are listed in the sequence in which the researcher conducted the interviews.

Annexure II

Sample Interview Schedule

Section 1: Socio-Demographic Profile

1.1 Name:

1.2 Age:

1.3 Caste:

- Unreserved
- SC
- ST
- OBC-A
- OBC-B

1.4 Marital Status:

- Single
- Married
- Separated
- Divorced
- Widowed

1.5 Name of Gotra:

1.6 Name of Spouse (if applicable):

1.7 Number of Children (if applicable):

- One
- Two
- Three
- Four
- > Four

1.8 Family Member Count:

1.9 Educational Qualification: o Primary

- Secondary
- Higher Secondary
- Graduation
- Post-graduation
- Others

1.10 Annual Income:

- Below 50,000
- 50,000 – 1 Lac
- 1 Lac – 1.5 Lac
- 1.5 Lac – 2 Lac
- Lac – 2.5 Lac
- 2.5 Lac – 3 Lac
- Above 3 Lac

Section 2: Childhood and Early Life Experiences

2.1 Could you please share your place of birth and date of your birth, as well as any significant details about your birth that you consider important?

2.2 What cultural and religious traditions were prevalent in your place of origin, and how did they influence your early upbringing?

2.3 Were there any family traditions that played a role in your early spiritual development and education?

2.4 Can you describe any pivotal moments or experiences during your childhood or adolescence that sparked your interest in spirituality?

2.5 Did you have any early mentors or spiritual guides who influenced your spiritual journey, and if so, how did they shape your beliefs and practices?

2.6 How did your family and immediate community react to your growing interest in spirituality?

2.7 Were there any particular challenges or obstacles you faced during your early years that tested your commitment to your spiritual path?

2.8 What role did education play in your early life, and how did it intersect with your spiritual pursuits?

2.9 Can you share any anecdotes or stories from your childhood or youth that reflect the development of your spiritual identity?

2.10 In retrospect, how do you think your early life experiences and background contributed to your unique approach to spiritual leadership as a woman guru/woman ascetic in Nabadwip?

Section 3: Significance of Nabadwip

3.1 What significance does Nabadwip hold in the context of your spiritual journey and the broader Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition?

3.2 Can you share some historical background about Nabadwip and its role as the hub of Gaudiya Vaisnavism?

3.3 Are there any specific landmarks or sacred sites within Nabadwip that hold special importance in Gaudiya Vaisnavism, and could you explain their significance?

3.4 Can you describe any annual festivals or events in Nabadwip that are of particular importance to the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition?

3.5 Have there been any challenges or changes in the way Nabadwip is perceived or utilized as a spiritual centre in recent years, and how have you adapted to them as a woman guru/woman ascetic?

3.6 How has the socio-cultural environment of Nabadwip shaped the development of women gurus like yourself (in case of a guru), and your predecessors?

3.7 What role does Nabadwip play in preserving and passing on the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition to future generations?

3.8 How do you envision the future of Nabadwip and its role in the continued growth of the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition, especially for women practitioners?

Section 4: Significance of the Scholarship of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu

4.1 How would you describe Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's role as a scholar and spiritual leader in the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition?

4.2 Can you provide insights into the foundational texts and teachings of Chaitanya that have influenced your spiritual journey?

4.3 In what ways do Chaitanya's teachings inspire your devotion to Lord Krisna and your connection with Radha-Krisna devotion?

4.4 Can you share specific teachings or stories from Chaitanya's life that have guided your spiritual journey as a woman guru/woman ascetic?

4.5 Chaitanya emphasized the importance of 'sankirtan.' How does this practice resonate with your own spiritual path?

4.6 Chaitanya is known for the concept of "rasa," or the experience of divine love. How do you interpret and experience this concept in your practice?

4.7 How has Chaitanya's philosophy of "Achintya Bhed-abhed" influenced your understanding of the Divine?

4.8 Chaitanya is often associated with the divine play of Radha and Krisna. How does this divine play inspire your devotion and practices?

4.9 Chaitanya's life was marked by ecstatic devotion. Can you share your own experiences with ecstatic devotion and how it has shaped your spiritual path?

4.10 In what ways do Chaitanya's teachings address the role of women as gurus and ascetics within the Gaudiya Vaisnavite tradition?

4.11 Can you describe any specific rituals or practices that you follow in honour of Chaitanya's teachings?

4.12 How has the historical context of Nabadwip as the birthplace of Chaitanya influenced the interpretation and continuation of His teachings by women gurus and ascetics?

4.13 Chaitanya's message emphasizes the importance of spreading the message of divine love. How do you actively engage in this mission as a woman guru/woman ascetic?

4.14 How do you view the relationship between Chaitanya's teachings and the empowerment of women in the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition?

4.15 Can you describe any challenges or unique perspectives that arise from being a woman guru/woman ascetic in the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition in relation to Chaitanya's philosophy and teachings?

4.16 Can you share examples of how you incorporate the principles of renunciation and detachment into your ascetic lifestyle in alignment with Chaitanya's philosophy and teachings?

4.17 How do you envision the future of Gaudiya Vaisnava women gurus and ascetics, and how will Chaitanya's scholarship continue to guide this path?

4.18 Finally, what personal messages or insights would you like to convey to future generations of Gaudiya Vaisnava women practitioners, inspired by the legacy of Chaitanya?

Section 5: Understanding of Bhakti and Prem

5.1 Can you share your personal interpretation of 'bhakti?'

5.2 How does the concept of 'prem' play a central role in your understanding of bhakti, and how do you cultivate and express this love in your spiritual practice?

5.3 In Gaudiya Vaisnavism, the love between Radha and Krisna is a central theme. How do you relate to and draw inspiration from their divine love story in your own spiritual journey?

5.4 Can you explain the significance of sankirtan as a means to cultivate and express bhakti and prem within the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition?

5.5 How do you view the guru-sisya relationship as a conduit for transmitting and nurturing bhakti and prem?

5.6 As a woman guru/ascetic within the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition, how do you navigate and transcend social or gender roles to fully experience and express bhakti and prem?

5.7 Finally, what insights or advice would you offer to individuals aspiring to deepen their understandings of bhakti and prem within the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition?

Section 6: Understanding of Guruhood and Significance of Guru

6.1 How do you define the role of a guru in the context of Gaudiya Vaisnavism and what qualities do you believe are essential for a guru to possess?

6.2 Can you describe your personal journey in seeking and recognizing your own guru, and how has this relationship influenced your spiritual growth?

6.3 In your experience as woman guru/woman ascetic, how do you navigate the gender dynamics and social expectations related to guruhood within the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition?

6.4 Chaitanya had close relationships with His disciples. How do you view the guru-sisya relationship as a means of transmitting spiritual wisdom and devotion?

6.5 As woman guru/woman ascetic, how do you address and transcend societal expectations and challenges while fulfilling your spiritual role?

Section 6A: Challenges faced by Women Gurus

6A.1 In the context of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, what unique challenges do women gurus face in comparison to their male counterparts?

6A.2 How do societal expectations and traditional gender roles intersect with the role of a woman guru in your experience?

6A.3 Can you share instances or anecdotes that illustrate the challenges and obstacles you have encountered as a woman guru within the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition?

6A.4 How do you navigate and transcend these challenges while fulfilling your role as a spiritual guide?

6A.5 Do you perceive any shifts or changes in the recognition and acceptance of women gurus within the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition over time?

6A.6 How do you believe the presence and leadership of women gurus contribute to the diversity and inclusivity of this tradition?

6A.7 Are there particular teachings or aspects of Gaudiya Vaisnavism that empower and uplift women practitioners and leaders?

6A.8 As a woman guru, how do you address and reconcile traditional gender dynamics while maintaining your authority within the tradition?

6A.9 Have you observed differences in the expectations and responsibilities placed on women gurus compared to male gurus, and how do you manage these expectations?

6A.10 Can you share your insights on the significance of having women gurus as role models and guides for other women practitioners within Gaudiya Vaisnavism?

6A.11 Do you offer 'diksha?' Either yes/no, how comfortable do you think devotees are in being initiated by a woman guru in this tradition?

6A.12 The guru is often seen as a spiritual guide who leads the disciple toward a deeper connection with the Divine. How do you fulfil this role in your own teachings and interactions with your disciples/followers?

6A.13 How do you envision the future role and position of women gurus in the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition, and what changes do you hope to see?

6A.14 Finally, what advice or words of encouragement would you offer to aspiring women gurus and ascetic women seeking spiritual leadership within Gaudiya Vaisnavism?

Section 6B: Challenges faced by Women Ascetics

6B.1 As a Gaudiya Vaisnava ascetic woman, could you share some insights into how you manage and balance your sangsar with your sadhana?

6B.2 What are the specific daily routines and practices that allow you to maintain equilibrium between your household duties and your spiritual journey?

6B.3 How do you perceive the significance of carrying out both domestic responsibilities and your spiritual responsibilities as an ascetic woman within the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition?

6B.4 Can you provide examples of any challenges you have encountered while balancing these roles, and how you have addressed them?

6B.5 How do your family and immediate community view your dual roles and have their perceptions evolved over time?

6B.6 In your opinion, how does the practice of bhakti and your spiritual connection enhance your ability to fulfil your domestic responsibilities?

6B.7 What lessons or insights have you gained from your unique experience of balancing domestic life and spiritual aspirations, and how do they contribute to your spiritual growth?

6B.8 The Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition places a strong emphasis on studying Vaisnava scriptures. How do you engage with these texts and their spiritual messages in your daily life?

6B.9 Have you ever considered the possibility of attaining guruhood within the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition, and if so, what motivates this aspiration?

6B.10 If yes, do you feel you possess the qualities essential to become a guru within the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition?

6B.11 If no, what are the challenges or doubts you have encountered regarding your potential to become a guru, and if so, how have you addressed them?

6B.12 How do you envision the role of women as gurus within the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition, and what impact do you believe it would have on the tradition as a whole?

6B.13 How do you think your experiences and insights as an ascetic woman could uniquely contribute to your effectiveness as a guru?

6B.14 Finally, what are your long-term goals and vision for your spiritual journey, especially in terms of potentially serving as a guru and furthering the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition?

Section 7: General Questions

7.1 Can you describe any specific rituals or practices or theological or scriptural perspectives associated with women gurus in Gaudiya Vaisnavism?

7.2 Have you encountered any historical or contemporary examples of prominent women gurus in this tradition? If so, can you elaborate on their contributions?

7.3 What is the significance of lineage and tradition in the recognition of women gurus in Gaudiya Vaisnavism?

7.4 How does the presence of women gurus affect the spiritual and emotional well-being of female disciples?

7.5 Are there any specific challenges or opportunities for women gurus when interacting with their male counterparts or male disciples?

7.6 How important do you believe is the agency of males in relation to spirituality (both in the domestic space and the public space)?

7.7 Do you believe that women gurus can bring unique perspectives or insights to the spiritual teachings of Gaudiya Vaisnavism?

7.8 Can you share your views on how women gurus can contribute to the preservation and evolution of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, as well as to broader ideas of gender equality and empowerment?

N.B. Although the researcher initially approached the study using this schedule, it was soon realized that the complexities inherent in intensive case study rendered this approach overly rigid and insufficient for capturing the fluid dynamics of the field. Interviews frequently took unexpected directions, extending beyond the limits of the original schedule. The preliminary schedule is included here for the sake of transparency.

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