‘Locating Viṣṇupriyā in the Tradition’: Women, Devotion, and Bengali Vaiṣṇavism in Colonial Times

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Abstract: This article tries to map the gender element in Bengali Vaiṣṇavism by focusing on the evolution of the image of Viṣṇupriyā, Caitanya’s second wife, as it progressed from the pre-colonial hagiographic tradition to the novel theorization of Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā dual worship in the colonial period. It explores the varied ways in which certain segments of educated Bengali intelligentsia actively involved in reassessing Vaiṣṇavism in colonial times disseminated the idea that Viṣṇupriyā was not just a symbol of unwavering devotion, of resolute penance, and (after Caitanya’s death) of ideal widowhood, but also deserved to be worshiped by Bengalis along with Caitanya as a divine couple. The article contends that while the ways of biographic imaging of Viṣṇupriyā reveals the fissures and frictions within the colonial Vaiṣṇava reform process, it also highlights various continuities with pre-colonial strands of Vaiṣṇava thought.

Keywords: Bengal; Vaiṣṇava; colonial; gender; women; Śrīkanṣa; gaura nāgara vāda; Viṣṇupriyā

1. Introduction

Bengali Vaiṣṇavism evolved as a heterogeneous and plural religious tradition that drew its primary, although not exclusive, inspiration from the medieval bhakti saint ŚrīKrṣṇa Caitanya (1486–1533), also known locally as Viśvāmbhar, Nimāi, Gaura, and Gaurāṅga. Over the course of the last half a millennium or so, Bengali Vaiṣṇavism has emerged and sustained itself as one of the most popular religious strands within Bengal beside the mélange of Śaiva–Śakti–Tāntrika belief systems. Yet, the exact ways in which female saints, female believers, and feminity as a whole have been conceptualized within the theology, belief, ritual performance, and praxis of Bengali Vaiṣṇavism suffers from lacuna and is an area that warrants historiographical attention.¹ There exists ample historical data in pāṇḍa or temple servitor records and the colonial archives to show that large numbers of Bengali women from the medieval period onwards adhered to Vaiṣṇava rituals, participated in festivities, went on pilgrimages and even relocated to Vṛndāvana in north India to spend their widowed lives. However, despite this almost ubiquitous historical presence, academic study on female saints, personalities,

¹ The role and position of women in the evolution and functioning of religious cults and traditions across the world has been a fruitful area of research under the genre of gender and feminist history. Over the course of the last half a century or so, there have been fascinating studies on several aspects of gender and its intermeshing within varied religious traditions of South Asia. Some scholars have tried to explore the role of goddesses and women broadly within the Hindu tradition (Wadley 1977; Leslie 1992; Patton 2002; Khandelwal 2004; Pinchtman 2007; Pauwels 2008; and Bose 2010) and on some distinct institutions such as the devadāsī system of temple-based female servitude (Kersenboom-Story 1987). Others have done focused research on the emergence of female voices within the early medieval South Asian bhakti outpourings such as by Andal and Akka Mahādevi, and also in the medieval devotional movements of North India by the Varkari sanātakaśāstris of Maharashtra and by Mirabai (Kamaliah 1977; Dubeja 1999; Ramaswamy 2000; Hawley 2012; and Daukes 2014). Women mystics and Sufi shrines in India have been studied by others (Pemberton 2010). In the colonial period, several women-centric guru cults began to proliferate, and these have been studied at some length by researchers (Hallstrom 1999; Warrier 2005).
and believers in general within the Gauḍiya Vaishnava movement has, barring a few exceptions, been conspicuous by its absence (Brezezinski 1996, pp. 59–86; Chakrabarti 2002, pp. 85–95; Manring 2005, pp. 193–219; Ray 2014, pp. 285–303; and Bandyopadhyay 2015).²

This paper explores one facet of the gender element in Bengali Vaishnavism by mapping the ways in which Viṣṇupriyā, Caitanya’s second wife, was viewed over the course of several centuries from the early modern to the modern period. I attempt to look at how she figures in some of the early modern hagiographies of the tradition and the multiple ways in which her life was constructed through numerous padas (poems), Sanskrit stotras or eulogies, journalistic essays, theatrical plays, biographies, rituals, and icon-making by educated bhadrakal intellectuals in colonial Bengal. The idea that the last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed the resurgence of a reformist spirit among educated Bengali Vaiṣṇavas who reassessed the regional Vaiṣṇava legacy in new ways has gained importance among recent scholars (Yati Maharaj 1980; Fuller 2003; Dey 2015; Bhatia 2017; and Sardella and Wong 2020). It seems that manuscript collection drives across rural Bengali households in the late nineteenth century led to the ‘discovery’ of hitherto-unknown Vaiṣṇava manuscripts, as well as new versions of known manuscripts, and their subsequent publication by the printing presses began to satiate readers’ reading appetites. Academic as well as religious interest among a large section of Bengali Hindu middle classes led to an ever-increasing printing drive that involved the publication of periodicals, books, lithographic paintings, etc. Within this literary public space, the dissemination of religious literature, especially through Vaishnava hagiographies and biographies of almost all major and minor personalities connected to the on Bengali Vaiṣṇava tradition, attained a sense of urgency (Dey 2015, pp. 113–93). The modes through which images of Viṣṇupriyā were circulated in the public domain in colonial Bengal included the specifically modernist instruments of print and literary journalism³ on the one hand, and the urban performative stage where dramas were staged, on the other. On the whole, there seems to have been a broad transition of Viṣṇupriyā from an incidental and scattered mention in the hagiographical corpus of the early modern era to a much more nuanced and sympathetic concern for her worth within the tradition by the Bengali Vaishnava propagators of the colonial era. Building upon the information available in pre-colonial source materials, these modern biographies on Viṣṇupriyā began to connect, collate, and expand her life-story as a pious woman imbued with divinity. Some even went to the extent of consecrating yugal-murtis or idols of Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā as a deity-couple, thereby propagating her worship along with Caitanya as a divine pair and as His eternal counterpart. By the mid 1930s, Viṣṇupriyā made it to the pages of a book on ideal women of India—alongside the devotional bhakti proponent Mirābāi (1498–1556), the eighteenth century Maratha Queen Āhilyābāi Holkar (1725–95), and the nineteenth century Bengali zamindari scion Rāni Raśmoni (1793–1861)—for her exemplary dedication (Mukhopadhyay 1935, pp. 11–25). A similar historicizing impulse can be seen in another twentieth century work which tried to construct a historical chronology for Viṣṇupriyā where none existed within the sacred literature⁴.

What contributed to this increased currency and prominence of Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā conjugal worship at the cusp of the twentieth century? What does this reveal about the nature of the colonial

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² For instance, we are yet to read a sustained research on how Bengali Vaiṣṇava personalities like Caitanya and his disciples interacted with women or how women were portrayed within Vaiṣṇava scriptures and hagiographical literature in the same way as gender has been studied in other major religious traditions. Such studies have been done with regard to other religious traditions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (Harris 1984; Heger 2014; Jardim 2014).

³ It is curious to note that several Vaiṣṇava journals carried feminine appellations such as Śrī Viṣṇupriyā Patrikā, Vaiṣṇava Saṅgīti, Vaiṣṇava Sevākā, Sujān Tōṣāni, Śrī Śrī Viṣṇupriyā–Gaurāṅga, etc., which not only reflected traditional notions of Vaiṣṇava humility and selfless service towards the Vaiṣṇava community, but also tried to conform to Gauḍiya Vaiṣṇava theological principles of Rāgāṅga bhakti, according to which devotees adopt a feminine love relation to god as the highest form of divine adoration (Dey 2020b, p. 32).

⁴ The Vaiṣṇava Dīgḍarsīti, which tried to construct a historical chronology of lives and events within the Bengali Vaiṣṇava tradition in the early twentieth century, mentioned 1496 as the year of Viṣṇupriyā’s birth. Viṣṇupriyā was considered as Satyabhama in Śrī Kṛṣṇa Līlā, and her father Sanātana Miśra was King Satrājit during Brajakīla. In a similar manner it placed 1505 as the date her marriage to Caitanya and 1510 as the date of his sannyāsa (Adhikari 1925, pp. 29, 37, 48).
Vaiṣṇava legacy? By looking at Viṣṇupriyā in the backdrop of the colonial Vaiṣṇava reform process, I try to engage, albeit in a tentative and tangential manner, with the vexed yet enmeshed dynamics of gender, sexuality, love, and affection within the Bengali Vaiṣṇava movement. Through an exposition of the Śrīkhanda and the Bāghnāpādā traditions in the early modern era, the second section will show how these heterodox schools of thought within Bengali Vaiṣṇavism conceptualized devotion to Caitanya and the ways in which their theological imaginings diverged from the mainstream. The third section will discuss the early images about Viṣṇupriyā as it emerged in the pre-colonial sacred biographical literature, including those put forward by members of the Śrīkhanda group. The fourth section contextualizes the emergence of Viṣṇupriyā as a biographical subject in the colonial times in the midst of varied controversial debates within Bengali Vaiṣṇava traditions. Contemporary discourses regarding the supposed degeneration of Vaiṣṇava society as a result of the infusion of slack sexual mores will also be mapped. The final section probes the modes and processes through which yugal-arcanā, or the worship of Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā as a deity couple, was theorized by Haridās Gosvāmī, the most vociferous proponent of this ideal will be analyzed. This section will identify the ways in which pre-colonial notions were altered, remolded, and recast in a colonial milieu.

Scholarly reassessments of Vaiṣṇava traditions during colonial times have generally been analyzed from binary standpoints; between western-educated/modernist versus traditionalist prisms (Fuller 2005), and between conservative Gauḍīya versus devotional nationalistic perspectives (Bhatia 2017). Drawing upon and expanding existing research that seeks to problematize reassessments of Vaiṣṇavism as a coming together of bhadrakān concerns that substantiated and validated pre-colonial conservative Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava normativity (Wong 2018; Dey 2020a), I contend, although from a slightly different perspective, that prioritizing the Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā image in the public sphere in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal by some proponents such as Haridās Gosvāmī was a deeply contested process. It not only provided scope for the deification of a historical persona alongside Caitanya, but apparently, also raised uncomfortable ethical and doctrinal challenges to normative Vaiṣṇava perspectives by reifying and selectively revitalizing patently non-conformist perspectives, especially those belonging to the Śrīkhanda and Bāghnāpādā schools from pre-colonial times. The Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā hypothesis of the colonial era also brought to the fore many unresolved controversies from the pre-colonial times. These controversies—for instance, the long-standing schism over the doctrinal primacy of Svākhyā versus Parākhyā love, or questions pertaining to the extent of predominance to be accorded to Caitanya’s divine personality (which in turn was connected to schisms regarding the legitimacy of Gauramantra or an independent ritual basis for Caitanya for purposes of initiation)—had been simmering for centuries within the layers of the tradition. One may contend that these old issues gripped Bengali Vaiṣṇava followers of the colonial period in new ways and led to formulations being put forward in a new garb and for a new time. It is relevant to bring the history of such debates, discordant voices, and ruptures within the academic ambit for a deeper understanding of the transformative tendencies within Bengali Vaiṣṇava traditions in colonial times.

2. Vaiṣṇava Theology, Hagiographies, and Diverse Imaginings of Devotional Love: Śrīkhanda and Bāghnāpādā Schools

Bengali Vaiṣṇava culture as it emerged over the course of the early modern period was a surprisingly literate culture with a vast array of theological scriptures, ritual treatises, sacred biographies, and numerous verse compositions (paṭadas) for use in congregational kirtana songs. Texts were initially produced mostly in Bengali and Sanskrit in Bengal by local disciples of Caitanya or his acolytes such as Vṛndāvana Dās, Jayānanda, Locana Dās, Kavi-kārnapūra, and Muṭāri Gupta among others. In the sixteenth century, numerous theological and ritual texts in Sanskrit and Brajābhāṣā (a mixed variant spoken in the Braja region of Mathura-Vṛndāvana) began to be written in Vṛndāvana by the group of six Gosvāmīs—Sanātana, Rupa, Ḵva, Raghuñāth Bhaṭṭa, Gopāl Bhaṭṭa, and Raghuñāth Dās. Indeed, the distribution and copying of manuscripts formed an indispensable element of its history, and its scriptures are replete with examples of what may be called a culture of literacy. Cultures of literacy
and circulation of texts and ideas were quite developed even in the pre-print era in different parts of Islamicate South Asia (Pollock 2006 and Ganeri 2011). Pollock contends that the ‘distribution of scholarly works demonstrates unequivocally that as late as the early eighteenth century, in the disciplines where Sanskrit intellectuals continued to maintain control, old networks of vast circulation and readership were as yet intact’ (Pollock 2001, p. 413). Perhaps, the case was not very different for the copying and circulation of Vaiśṇava manuscripts written in middle Bengali or Brajabhāṣā. Scholars have identified in this proclivity towards manuscript publication and transmission of texts in pre-colonial times an attempt at community cohesion whereby a loosely integrated Vaiśṇava society aspired to acquire standardization with regard to theology and rituals (O’Connell 2000). Tony Stewart has convincingly demonstrated how the Caitanya Caritāmṛta of Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāja became a model form—the ‘final word’, so to say—for binding the community of believers (Stewart 1999, p. 53). The fact that very little textual variation exists in the extant copies of this text across India shows that Vaiśṇava textual transmission was of an unusually high order. As Vaiśṇava texts were written, copied, and circulated among groups across Eastern and Northern India, some texts like the Caitanya Caritāmṛta acquired centrality within the tradition.5

Pre-modern cultures of literacy, however, did not offer the means or perhaps access to produce texts by anyone and everyone.6 While the existence of an entrenched societal hierarchy meant that Brahmins retained a privileged access to literacy, it was not an entirely closed system.7 Even when manuscripts were written by individuals, their circulation and acceptance by others within the tradition depended on a high level of authorial competence. Such competence derived not merely from one’s literary and linguistic skills, but also upon one’s aesthetic knowledge and appropriate theological grounding, what may be termed as a sort of religious weltanschauung. It was a combination of these qualities that enabled a text to attain legitimate status among territorially scattered groups of Gaudiyā Vaiśṇavas. There are several instances when texts written by disciples were rejected by others for their supposed ‘incorrect’ interpretation.

Bengali Vaiśṇavism accords primacy to the idea of passionate devotion. In the scale of devotion, an elaborate schema of five successive stages was worked out by Vaiśṇava theologians—beginning with śānta (quiet meditation), through the dāśya, sākhyā, and vāsīaltya, or the emotional realisation of servant, friend, and parent, respectively, until with ever-deepening feeling one is swept into a passionate ardour of mādhurya or loving sweetness of passion for the lover. The bhāva or devotional moods exhibited by Caitanya were ‘entextualized’ by biographers in diverse ways, and these were later formalised by the Vṛndāvana Gosvāmīs. Kṛṣṇadās’s achievement was that he rearranged the attitudes from, what Tony Stewart states, ‘a horizontal continuum of equally possible forms of divinity to a graded hierarchy of preferred forms’ (Stewart 2010, p. 102), that gave importance to mādhurya bhāva or mood of passionate love as the highest form of god realization.8 Kṛṣṇadās’s hypothesis of Caitanya as an androgynous synthesis of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa made the mādhurya element the ‘hierarchically dominant’ frame of reference for later theologians to imitate (Stewart 2010, p. 181). As recent researches about other theologians such as Kavi-karnapura show, the rasa of love—the rasa of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa—is

5 Tony Stewart considers that the Caitanya Caritāmṛta became almost like a ‘charter document’ of the Vaiśṇavas and became a ‘tool for organizing the community’. This was because the book ‘recognizes by name the major lineages central to the emerging group, identifies the biographies of Caitanya that were to be followed, provides synopses of the key Sanskrit works of Rupa and Jiva Goswamins and others in the Vaiśṇava community . . . , and outlines the basis for all levels of ritual practice’.

6 Indeed, the author of a Vaiśnavite work titled Nabarañhatattva Nirāpāna by Narottam Dās instructs in a couplet that the manuscript is to be kept locked up, away from the prying eyes of the uninitiated: ‘Let none but your disciples see this book, Hide it away and guard it as preciously as your life’ (Bhattacharya 1981, p. 26).

7 Even among the six Gosvāmī theologians at Vṛndāvana Rādhunāth Dās was a kayastha who hailed from a rich landholding zamindari family of Saptagram in the Hooghly district of Bengal.

8 The Caitanya Caritāmṛta unequivocally states that madhuryabha or the supreme emotion is the quintessence of prema or love (CC Madhya līlā, 8). However, it was also quick to distinguish that love and lust are completely different: ‘The signs of kama and prema are different, as iron and gold are different in their true natures. Desire, love for satisfaction of one’s own senses—this is called kama. But the desire for the satisfaction of the senses of Kṛṣṇa—this has the name prema’ (CC Adi. 4.140–141).
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one of the most devotional moods, ‘which is awakened in the devotee upon contemplating God’s non-worldly worldly play’ (Lutjeharms 2018, p. 176). The idea of embodiment is regarded as critical within various bhakti traditions (Prentiss 1999; Holdrege 2015; Hardy 1983). Vīraha bhakti in particular, is regarded by Friedhelm Hardy as an ‘aesthetic-erotic-ecstatic mysticism of separation’ (Hardy 1983, pp. 36–43). Within Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava traditions, there exists a distinction between prakāṭī līlā (manifest play) where gopīs of Vṛndāvana lament the agony of separation from Kṛṣṇa and the aprakāṭ or nitya līlā (un-manifest but eternal play) which allows them to eternally remain united with Kṛṣṇa as expressions of his hladini-sakti. This allowed theologians such as Jīva Gosvāmi in his Bhātikirāsāmṛtasindhu and Ujjvalanilamāni to pattern Gauḍīya devotion through the visualization of an eternal embodiment in vīrahas (idols), parikaras (servants), līlās (sports), and dhāmas (sacred abodes) (De 1961, pp. 166–224; Holdrege 2015). A fuller exposition of the intricacies of rasa and stages of devotion within Bengali Vaiṣṇava theology is beyond the scope of the present paper.

In terms of belief and faith, there existed a variety of alternatives among the varied segments of Caitanya’s followers, ranging from the Gaura nāgara vādīs (who worshipped Caitanya in the spirit of the Gopi’s love for Kṛṣṇa) propagated by Narahari Sarkār and his disciple Locana Dās of Śrīkhandā in the Burdwan District of Bengal; the Gaurapāramya vādīs (belief in the divinity of Caitanya as the supreme godhead) propagated by Gadādhar; the Vṛndāvana Gosvāmi tradition of Kṛṣṇa pāramya vāda (belief in the supreme godhead of Kṛṣṇa) (Kennedy 1925, pp. 149–52; Majumdar 1959, pp. 178–79; Sanyal 1985 and Stewart 2010, pp. 99–105) and the Sahajāya Vaiṣṇava notions of physical sexo-yogic union (Dasgupta 1946, pp. 113–46; Dimock 1966, pp. 1–40). Among these, the strand represented by Narahari Sarkār, an elder contemporary of Caitanya (who became a leader in his own right) who worshipped Caitanya as a nāgara or paramour of the women of Navadvīpa and was regarded by the group as a personification of Madhumati (one among the eight primary associates of Rādhā) (Thākur 1954, pp. 99–101). This perspective came to be known by the interchangeable terms gaura nāgara vāda and nadiyā nāgara vāda, while the attitude itself was referred to as gaura nāgara bhāva and nadiyā nāgarī bhāva, and the proponents of this view were termed gaura nāgara vādī and nadiyā nāgara vādī. Narahari composed a large number of songs in which the libidinous conduct of the ladies of Navadvīpa at the sight of Caitanya is highlighted (Thākur 1954, pp. 51–61). In the Mādiyā Khaṇḍa of his Caitanya maṅgala, Locana Dās elaborated the physical attributes of Caitanya in an explicit form and also portrayed the intense desires that it aroused among the women of Nadiya:

‘Who churned that nectar to make the butter out of which was fashioned Lord Gaura’s body? Who kneaded and strained the nectar of the worlds to fashion the love Lord Gaura feels? Who, mixing together the yogurt of infatuation and the nectar of love, fashioned Lord Gaura’s pair of eyes? Who, gathering the sweetest honey, formed milked Lord Gaura’s golden complexion? Who, gathering together the froth of the sweet liquid, fashioned Lord Gaura’s limbs? Who anointed Gaura’s face with the paste of amorous playfulness? Unable to see His face, I weep. Who didn’t draw on Gaura’s forehead the rainbow with sandalwood paste? All married women, whether ugly or beautiful, yearned to touch Gaura’s form. They adorned the temple of their love with jewels. Seeing Gaura’s playful pastimes, these women, overcome with desire, weep. They cannot always gaze on Him, even from the corners of their eyes, yet their eyes flutter like birds to see
Gaura. Understanding their thirst to gaze at Him and fulfil their desires graceful Gaura walks very slowly. Even women of respectable households flee from their homes, the lame run and even Rogers and offenders sing Gaura’s glories. Rolling on the ground everyone weeps, no one is able to stay peaceful and composed. Gaura’s glories have unlimited sweetness! Some run out to see Him; others embrace each other in the bliss of spiritual love, while others dance and laugh in wild abandon. Attracted by the breeze bearing the fragrance of Gaura’s form women of respectable families encourage all to rush to see Him! The women of Nadvapura as they gaze at Gaura’s moon-like face streaming with tears. Their hearts became filled with love, with hairs of their bodies erect and their hearts always thinking about Gaura.’ (Dās 1892, pp. 168–69)9

The Śrīkhanda group was an intensely devotional body of believers who believed in according more prominence to Navadiva than Vṛndavana and to Caitanya than Kṛṣṇa within their narratives. This Śrīkhanda school seems to have been quite a large body consisting of members such as Jagadananda Panḍit, Kāśi Mśra, Raghuṇandana (son of Narahari Sarkār’s elder brother Mukundadās), Locana Dās, Purusottama, Vāṣu Ghosh, Gaddādhār Panḍit, Gaddādhār Dās, Sivānanda Sen, and Kavikarnāpūra (Chakrabarti 1985, p. 191).10 The suggestion that Kavikarnāpūra was part of the Śrīkhanda group, since in his Gaurāgaṉḍodeśādṛṭīkā he listed his father Sivānanda Sen in between Narahari Sarkār and Mukundadās (father of Raghuṇandana), has recently been contested. It is suggested that although Kavikarnāpūra may have had sympathies to Narahari’s views early in his life, he ‘does not refer often to Narahari and the Śrīkhanda group, and his drama does not contain any descriptions of Gaddādhāra and Caitanya’s love nor any passages in which he depicts Caitanya as the object of amorous love’ (Lutjeharms 2018, p. 54). Texts written by their adherents in the colonial period such as Śrīkhanda Pracīna Vaiṣṇava by Gaurunānanda Ṭhākur reaffirm that Caitanya invested Narahari Sarkār with the authority to spread the faith in the Śrīkhanda region (Ṭhākur 1954, pp. 25–26). It is regarded that Narahari and his brother Mukunda also joined enounced the members of the Śrīkhanda group to follow certain ethical ideas such as looking upon every man as a friend, reform of sinners by acts of kindness, repudiation of vanity, egoism, and ambition, the practice of austerity, simplicity and non-violence, etc (Ṭhākur 1954, pp. 25–26). However, the libidinous exposition of Caitanya’s godhead that was espoused by Narahari Sarkār was increasingly disapproved of by both Advaita and Nityānanda, and it seems that it was not followed in the same manner or intensity by Narahari’s followers such as Ciranjīva Sen. But that did not stop the Śrīkhanda Vaiṣṇavas from spreading their gaura nāgara vādī ideal in the rural belt of Burdwan region in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Ṭhākur 1954; Chakrabarti 1985, pp. 198–200).11 As Tony Stewart points out, the gaura nāgara vādī ideal would prove to be one of the very few instances in the early history of the movement that open conflict was recorded, and it

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9 Amiṣā matīṣā kebhā, naḥāni tuḥi gō, taḥāte gātī Gorā dehā / Jagāt chaniṣā kebhā, raṣa niṅgariche ko, ek kāla sudhūr sudhē // annaṁgēr daṭṭhī, premēr saṁjana diya, kebhā pāṭiṣṭhe ṛṇkhi ḍutt / taḥāte adhik maṭha, lāhu lahu kathā go, hāṣyāt balaye guṣṭ ḍutt // akhandā piṭāsa dhārā, ke nā aṅtīla go, soṅār hara ni līka cīni / se cīni māḍājā kebhā, pheeṛi tuṭīlā go, hēna bāsō Gorā-aiṅga khanī // Bhijāri bhatīṣā kebhā, gā khanī maṭīṣā go, cāhā maṭīṣā mukh khanī // līliyāna bhatīṣā kebhā, cīt sīṁhanā kāla, aparāṭha premēr baḷali / sakal pāṭiṁnātām cārdhe, bhakalas aṅkha kānde, kara pada pāṭher gaṇidhe // kudāṭi nakhe chatā jagāt alā kaila go, ṛṇkhi pāṭhā janumer āndhe // eṁo niṅgida Gorā, kothāv dekhī na nātī, aparāṭh premēr bhandhe / Puruṣā prakṛti bhābe, kānḍiṣā akulā go, nāḍī kecumāne mon bāṅdhī // sakal rāser rase vilāsa hṛdayā khanī, ke nā gātīla ranja diya / madan bhatīṣā kebhā, badan gātīla go, bīnu bhābe mo mulu kānḍiṣā // īndre dhanukhānī, Gorār kapyālā go ke nā dīla candānārē ḍēkā / kāriṁpā surūṭa jāta, kāler kāmīntī go, ēsī hāt kari cāte pāṭha // niṅger mandir kānde, nāṅra ṛṭāna diya go, gadālāa bāda anurāṅge / līliyā niṅgoṅkharā, bhāble ābeśe go, alaṣaḷa jār jār gāye // kuḷātāḷi kāḷā chāre, pūṅga ṛṭāṅgā bhare, gūṇā gāye āsura pāṇḍa / dhālīṭyā lotāyāṅi kānde, kehā shir nāhi bāṅdhī // Gorāgāmā amīṣā akhandā / dhātore dhātore bali, premāntāne kolākuli, kehā nāce atāja atāja lāśe // sūśilā kāler bahu, se bale sakte jāu, Gorā-aiṅga-rajet bāṭāše //.

10 Narahari, a member of the vaidyā (physician) caste by birth, strongly advocated that Gaddādhāra and Caitanya represented the female and the male principle of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, respectively. This view contained within it homoerotic proclivities and became the kernel of a small sub-sector known as the Gādā-Gaurāṅga sect (Chakrabarti 1985, pp. 190–91).

11 In particular, Jñānavā Devi, Nityānanda’s second wife, was on working terms with Narahari Sarkār, Mukunda, and Raghuṇandana, and the sixteenth chapter of the Prema-vilāsa states that she met them after returning to Bengal from Vṛndāvana (Dās 1891, pp. 130–31). It was on her suggestions that Srinivas Acarya was sent to Vṛndāvana.
would simmer quietly only to bubble up at critical junctures later in the tradition’s history, never fully resolved’ (Stewart 2010, p. 151).

Another major Vaiṣṇava center came up in the late sixteenth century in Bāghnāpādā area of Kalna in Burdwan district of Bengal. It was set up by Rāmachandra, the grandson of Vamśīvadana Chattopadhyay and foster-child of Jāhnava, and thus shared a special relation with a line of the Nityānanda branch. As Ramakanta Chakrabarti contends, they developed a distinct theology which was linked to the ideas of the Vṛndāvana Gosvāmīs, but was at the same time aligned with a Tantrika-Sahajīyā overtone (Chakrabarti 1985, p. 257). The legends and theology of the Bāghnāpādā Vaiṣṇavas are elaborated in two apocryphal works known as the Muralti vilāsa of Rājballabh Gosvāmī and Vamśī Sikṣā of Premadās Misra (Gosvāmī 1961 and Premadās Misra n.d.). According to the Vamśī Sikṣā, which is divided into four ullāsas or segments, Caitanya teaches Vamśīvadana the secrets of Rasarāja worship. It states that Caitanya had an antaraṅga (secret) form of devotion apart from the bāhiraṅga (external) prescriptions for the general public (Gosvāmī 1993, pp. 477–92).

The core of the rasarāja concept regards Krṣṇa as the supreme God who is the fount of all rasas. This internal worship consists of devotion towards the Rasarāja Krṣṇa who is sat-cid-ānanda (in eternal bliss), whereby he eternally savors his pleasures with Ṛadhā and the other gopīs who are His eternal wives (Chakrabarti 1985, pp. 257–74). Ṛadhā being Krṣṇa’s hālādīnt-sakti (the power which makes Krṣṇa relish pleasure) manifests the elements of kampa (tremors of love), asru (tears of love), pulaka (thrust of love), stambha (depths of love), asphutavacana (whispers of love), unmād (madness), and the like. As spelt out in the third ullaśa, Caitanya describes himself as Rasarāja Krṣṇa (Chakrabarti 1985, p. 270) and one who realizes this Rasarāja nature of Krṣṇa is the real Rasika. While some scholars have denounced these texts as later forgeries due to their numerous historical inconsistencies and Sahajīyā nature (Majumdar 1959, pp. 468–77), others contend that these were, in all probability, lineage-based interpretations of the theories propagated in the Caitanya Caritāmṛta (Gosvāmī 1993, p. 481; Chakrabarti 1985, pp. 266–67). While Rasarāja is a widely prevalent concept among the Sahajīyās and Bāuls of Bengal (Das 1992) and the language and vocabulary of the Vamśī Sikṣā, especially its reference to puruṣa-prakṛti (Male and the female principles) and linga-yoni (male and the female reproductive organs) does seem to manifest a Tantrika/Sahajīyā symbolism, Ramakanta Chakrabarti opines that the use of the Rasarāja concept in the Vamśī Sikṣā probably signified an attempt towards acculturation and accommodation of certain select Sahajīyā concepts within the Gaudīya Vaiṣṇava theology by a particular Vaiṣṇava circle (Chakrabarti 1985, p. 274). In the eighteenth century, Vaiṣṇava Sahajīyā theories were further developed in texts such as Ākīncana Dās’s Vivarta-vilāsa (Gosvāmī 1993, pp. 497–520).

Over the course of the early modern period, several texts beginning with Krṣṇadās Kāvīrāja’s Caitanya Caritāmṛta and later by Narahari Chakrabarti’s Bhakti-ratnakar and Nityānanda Dās’ Narottama vilāsa, a standard form of Bengali Vaiṣṇavism—a ‘brahmanically-aligned Vaiṣṇava normativity’ (Wong 2018, p. 57) that was anti-Sahajīyā in outlook had come to be established. However, other interpretations, especially those of a Sahajīyā variety, remained in circulation despite their apparent marginalization from mainstream Bengali Vaiṣṇava currents. As Tony Stewart has shown, even with Krṣṇadās’s strong guiding hand, ‘some later theories did survive and follow their own line of development, producing results that Krṣṇadās probably never envisioned’ (Stewart 2010, p. 59). Contrary to colonial accounts of the Bengali Vaiṣṇava tradition that emphasise the diminishing importance of gosvāmī leadership in the post-Bhakti-ratnakar period (e.g., Kennedy 1925, pp. 76–77), there is evidence of a number of gosvāmī shrpats or centres with large popular followings until well into the colonial period. Referencing the cases of Śrīkhaṇḍa and Bāghnāpādā, Bhata concludes: ‘It seems obvious that some of these shrpats flourished, gained disciples, ran schools, and became rich centres of Vaishnava doctrine and practice,

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12 Bāhiraṅgabhāve harekṛṣṇa rām nām / pracīrīlā jagumājye Gaurarogadālām // Antaraṅgabhāve antaraṅga bhaktagan. / Rasarāj-upāsana karīlā arpane //.
by the mid-to late nineteenth century’ (Bhatia 2017, p. 74). Let us now turn to the ways in which Viṣṇupriyā was portrayed within the hagiographical literature of early modern Bengal.

3. Women and Vaiṣṇavism: Viṣṇupriyā in Pre-Colonial Contexts

In the history of the Vaiṣṇava movement in Bengal, the followers of Caitanya were mostly married householders (such as Advaita, Nityānanda, most of the Gopālas, and Śrīnivāsa Acārya, among others), and their preaching led numerous men and women to become natural followers of the tradition in vast swathes of rural Bengal from the sixteenth century onwards. However, there were also several adherents (such as the six Gosvāmī theologians at Vṛndavana—namely, Sanātana, Rupa, Jiva, Ṛghunāth Bhaṭṭa, Gopāl Bhaṭṭa, and Ṛghunāth Dās—along with Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāja, Narottama Dās, and others), who adhered to the ascetic ideal.13 Theoretically at least, the Vaiṣṇava tradition does not valorize or discount one’s marital status as a precondition for one’s spiritual quest nor does it consider one’s gender or social identity as a handicap in the path to salvation. Kṛṣṇa-bhakti alone is considered as the *sine qua non* for a devotee. There is indeed no explicit mention in the scriptures debarring women from taking up harinām, and the graphic descriptions of congregational *sankṛtanas*, fairs, festivities (*mahotsavas*), and pilgrimages in the works of the medieval Vaiṣṇava hagiographers often show women participating in them with full vigor.

Within the hagiographic literature, however, we seldom come across individual women, apart from a few notable exceptions, aspiring for or attaining independent worth as female gurus within the tradition. However, there were many who indeed attained immense privilege and acclaim as Vaiṣṇava gurus in their own right. In this context, the most deserving names are those of Gangā Devī (daughter of Nityānanda and wife of a Brahman named Mādhavācāryā who spread Vaiṣṇavism in parts of Bengal); Sītā Devī (wife of Advaita Acāryā who rallied with her son Acyuta to provide leadership to the Advaita disciplic lineage at Shantipur in Nadiya and later became the subject of two texts, *Sītācaritra* by Viṣṇudās Ācāryā and *Sītāgunḍakadamba* by Lokenath Dās); Jāhnāvā Devī (daughter of Suryadās Sarkhel and Nityānanda’s second wife); Hemlatā Thākurāni (daughter of Śrīnīvāsa Acāryā); and Mādhavī Devī (sister of the Odiya Vaiṣṇava Śīkhī Māhitī). Among these personalities, Jāhnāvā Devī perhaps went on to achieve the greatest fame as a leader of the sect for some time, and organized the crucial gatherings known as the Kheturā Māhotsavas. There were also some women poets among the early modern Bengali *padavali* writers such as Rāmi, Rasamoyī Dāsī, Dukhiṇī, Indumukhi, Sīvā Sahacarī, and Mādhavi Dāsī (Banerjee 1994) who achieved some amount of distinction.

On the basis of a comparative survey of varied Bengali Vaiṣṇava scriptural/hagiographic narratives, Uma Bandyopadhyay suggests that noteworthy female Vaiṣṇavas in India numbered around sixty-nine, ninety-six, seventeen, ten, and thirty in the fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and the nineteenth-twentieth century, respectively (Bandyopadhyay 2015).14 As far as Caitanya’s interactions with women are concerned, Amiya Sen contends that ‘Caitanya related to women in various ways, depending upon their age or social standing’ and while he didn’t have inhibitions intermixing with older women (such as Mālinī Devī or Sītā Devī) or young girls of Navadvīpa, he maintained a self-conscious distance from adult women, especially after his ascetic vows (Sen 2019, pp. 141–42). Caitanya’s reluctance to speak to or even meet women after his ascetic vows is indeed harped upon by the standard hagiographies. This may be illustrated by referring to specific textual examples. For instance, Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāja in chapter two of the *Antyā Līlā* of his *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* mentions

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13 Bimanbihari Majumdar estimates that almost fifty-four ascetics are mentioned in the hagiographies (Majumdar 1959, p. 568). The ascetic ideal itself is an extremely durable and resilient one within Indian traditions right from the Vedic times (Kaelber 1989; Olivelle 1992; Bronkhorst 1998; and Olson 2015).

14 This statement, however, needs to be qualified by the fact that the mere mention of a female member in the textual sources, whether as mother, wife, sister, daughter, or relative or friend of an important male Vaiṣṇava does not automatically elevate her into a worthy initiated Vaiṣṇava.
how Caitanya chastised his ardent disciple Choto (Junior) Haridās for begging premium quality rice from Mādhavī Devī (sister of Śikhi Māhītī) at Puri.¹⁵ Caitanya remained inflexible on the point of punishment and did not relent despite the requests of his other disciples that finally led the forlorn Choto Haridās to give up his life at Prayag (modern Varanasi). Kṛṣṇadās extols this incident as an exemplary episode that ‘led his disciples to give up conversation with women, even in their dreams’ (Sen 2002, pp. 170–71).¹⁶ Again, in chapter twelve of the Antya Līlā of the Caitanya Caritāmṛta, Kṛṣṇadās mentions that when Paramēśvara Dās, a sweetmeat seller and a childhood acquaintance of Caitanya came to meet him at Puri along with his wife, Caitanya felt hesitant, although he did not express it openly out of love for his friend (Sen 2002, pp. 213–14).

However, several other sacred biographies show that Caitanya had not completely shunned his interactions with women. For instance, the SanṆñyāśa Khaṇḍa Chapter XV sloka 20 of Jayānanda’s Caitanya māṅgala depicts that Caitanya had food at Advaita’s household at Shantipur that was served by Sīṭa Devī and other women of the family even after renunciation (Jayānanda 1971, pp. 141–42). Again, in the Utkala Khaṇḍa Chapter IX sloka 14–15, Jayānanda states that when Caitanya went to Cuttack, he bestowed his own garland to Candrakalā, the chief queen of King Pratāparudra Devā, and instructed her to recite the name of Hari (Jayānanda 1971, p. 153).¹⁷ The editors of Jayānanda’s Caitanya māṅgala contend that ‘such descriptions were responsible for the loss of popularity of this book among the orthodox Vaiśṇavas’ (Jayānanda 1971, p. xxxvi). While it is evident that Caitanya usually avoided direct interactions with women as an ascetic, a complete textual censorship of his interactions or conversations with women, it seems to be in hindsight, more a reflection of the conservative mindset of the hagiographers of the post-Caitanya period than a historical attitude of the Lord himself.

Among Caitanya’s two wives, his first wife Laksīmipriyā, who is identified with Rukmiṇī in the Gauraganoddesādīpīka (Brezezinski 1996, p. 64), died young due to a snakebite at Navadvīpa while Caitanya was touring his ancestral home in Sylhet (modern Bangladesh). Jayānanda, in his Caitanya māṅgala, described details of Caitanya’s marriage with LaksĪmiprīyā as well her exquisite cooking abilities (Nadiya Khaṇḍa 34, 45, 46, 54–62). However, nothing more is said about her by the biographers than that she was a devoted wife who fulfilled her household duties and on one occasion cooked for a large group of monks who were invited for lunch at their house (Caitanya Bhāgavata Ādi.14.14–19). Viṣṇupriyā, as Caitanya’s second wife, is given more importance in the hagiographies, as she was the one who saw his renunciation into an ascetic. She is mentioned in a wide variety of hagiographic texts such as Murārī Gupta’s Kṛṣṇa Caitanya Caritāmṛta (or simply Murārī Gupta’s Karcha), Vṛndāvana Dās’ Caitanya Bhāgavata, Locana Dās’ Caitanya māṅgala, Jayānanda’s Caitanya māṅgala, and Īśāna Nāgara’s Advaita Prakāśa among others.

Viṣṇupriyā is regarded as Bhūṣaktī (Mother Earth) and Satyabhāmā (consort of Kṛṣṇa) in her previous lives (Bandyopadhyay 2015, p. 248). Even in Kavīkaraṇḍūra’s Gauraganoddesādīpīka (Sloka 47), Viṣṇupriyā is considered as the daughter of Mahāmāyī Devī and the Vaiśṇava devotee Sanātān Miśra, who in his previous birth was King Satrājīt (Kavīkaraṇḍūra 1922). The sources explicitly mention that Viṣṇupriyā’s birth was celebrated with pomp and eclat. Vṛndāvana Dās, for instance, in sloka 44-45 of the fifteenth chapter of the Ādi Khaṇḍa portion of his Caitanya Bhāgavata states that Viṣṇupriyā was a param sucaritā (extremely well-mannered) and a personification of Lākṣmī and Jaganmātā (Earth Goddess) (Das 1984, p. 319). He further mentions in sloka 46 that from her childhood, Viṣṇupriyā used to daily bathe twice or thrice in the River Ganga and always expressed devotion towards her parents and Lord Vishnu. The Padakalpataru contains numerous verses explaining Viṣṇupriyā’s progress into a

¹⁵ Prabhu kahe zaiyāri käre prakrīti-sambhāsaśekhitē nā pāri āmi tāhār badan āy.
¹⁶ Mahāpṛabhū kṛpyāśilhu ke pāre bujhītojina bhaṭke daṇḍa kare dhārma bhūjāte āy dekhi trāś upajāli sab bhūktāgate / svapo na chārīla sabre stīr-sambhāsaśte. What is even more striking is the fact that the elderly ascetic Mādhavī Devī was counted along with Rāya Rāmānanda, Svarūpa Gosvāmī, and Śikhī Māhītī as the three and a half followers of Rādhārāṇī by no less a person than Kṛṣṇadās Kavīraja (Chapter II Antya Līlā sloka 104–5).
¹⁷ Rājār sateśa stīr pradahana Candrakalā / Gauracandra dilā āy galār divaṇa mālā / Harināma dilā āy tāre Caitanya Gosāin / Nīlāchale galā rātre uddeshya nā pāti āy.
teenager when she made a positive impression on Caitanya’s mother, Śacī Devī.  

Śacī Devī, on her part, had been concerned about the future of her son, especially after Lakṣmī Devī’s death. Mūrārī Gupta, in the thirteenth and fourteenth svarga (chapters) of the first prakrama (segment) of his Kṛṣṇa Caitanya Caritāmṛta, details Viṣṇupriyā’s marriage with Caitanya. Jayānanda’s Caitanya maṅgala too, described the details of the marriage ceremony (Nadiya Khaṇḍa 63 to 66). Locana Dās in the Adi Khaṇḍa segment of his Caitanya maṅgala described the exuberant physical beauty of Viṣṇupriyā on the day of her marriage with the words that she ‘reflected a golden hue and glowed like lightening’. 

Both Vṛṇḍāvana Dās and Locana Dās refer to the elaborate rituals and festivities that followed the marriage. Vṛṇḍāvana Dās goes to the extent of stating that even the gods like Brahma expressed their approval by ‘showering flowers on the couple’. However, Caitanya’s journey to Gayā and his gradual spiritual turn after his return to Navaḍvīpa led him to lose interest in worldly affairs. Among the biographers, only Locana Dās in the Caitanya maṅgala (Madhya Khaṇḍa) describes the couple as having spent the last night of their married life together on the same bed.

Almost none of the early modern hagiographers mention anything substantial about Viṣṇupriyā after Gaurāṅga took his ascetic vows, barely a year or so after his second marriage. She is described as a distraught young bride who silently remained devoted to her lost husband. Jayānanda refers to her mental agony on hearing Caitanya’s desire to take up renunciation (Caitanya maṅgala, Vairagya Khaṇḍa 13, 14, 15, and 22) and later the deep distress felt by both Śacī and Viṣṇupriyā after Caitanya’s renunciation (Caitanya maṅgala, Saṁnyāsa Khaṇḍa 9 and 12). Most texts mention that Caitanya enquired, respected, and even met his mother Śacī Devī after taking up saṁnyāsa, but he did not for once mention the name of Viṣṇupriyā. Kavi-karnapura’s Caitanya-candrodaya-nataka contends that Caitanya taught true renunciation to the world by renouncing the external world as well as the inner world of desires. The early medieval texts, however, are as important for what they state as for their silences. It is worth remembering that Kṛṣṇadās Kāvirāja’s magnum opus Caitanya Caritāmṛta (CC 1.16.23) mentions Viṣṇupriyā only in one passing reference (Stewart 2010, p. 159). For the Vṛṇḍāvana Gosvāmīs, theological teachings about Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa were far more important than any analysis of Caitanya’s pre-ascetic marital relations. As Gaudīya theologians began to place increased importance on Caitanya as the personification of Rādhā’s mood (bhāva) and luster (dyuti), the role of Viṣṇupriyā as a feminine consort almost receded from the theological (although not historical) sense. Bengali hagiographers like Vṛṇḍāvana Dās, on the other hand, mention them as the ‘main āsrayas or vessels of emotion in dramatizations of his life, which traditionally end with his renunciation, Nīmat–Saṁnyāsa’ (Brezezinski 1996, pp. 64–65).

However, the idea of Caitanya’s preeminence as a god unto Himself—Gauraparamayavada, literally meaning the Supremacy of the Golden One—and not just as an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa, also found ready acceptance within segments of Bengali Vaiṣṇava imagination (Stewart 2010, pp. 57–58). They tried to frame Caitanya as a Svayam Bhagavān or one who contained within himself all possible forms of divinity (Stewart 2010, p. 86). Some devotee disciples such as Gaddādhār and Narahari Sārkār even conceived themselves as Gopīs in relation to Caitanya. There was also a parallel development of the

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18 Chapter fifteen of the Adi Khaṇḍa of the Caitanya Bhāgavata contains detailed references to Śacī meeting and being impressed with Viṣṇupriyā during her daily journeys to the bathing ghat in Navaḍvīpa and finally through the mediation of the matchmaker Kāsināth Miśra arranged for Gaurāṅga’s marriage proposal to Viṣṇupriyā’s father Sanātana Miśra (Das 1984, pp. 312–32).


20 Bimanbihari Majumdar considers that Locana Dās based this interpretation on an Oriya poet Mādhava’s text Caitanya vālāsa, and this fact was also supposedly testified to be true by Vṛṇḍāvana Dās from his mother Narayani Devī, who was present in Caitanya’s house on the night prior to his samnyāsa. Majumdar, however, does not accept this suggestion to be true (Majumdar 1959, pp. 275–77).

21 In Act One of this work, Kali yuga foretells that ‘He (Caitanya) will marry his beloved wife, the unparalleled Viṣṇupriyā, a portion of [the goddess] Bihārī, and to reveal the teachings of renunciation he will abandon her, while he is still very young’ (Lutjeharms 2016, p. 107).
idea that Caitanya was a paramour par excellence just like Kṛṣṇa (Nadīya nāgarī bhava). In fact, most of the depictions of Viṣṇupriyā that exist in medieval Vaiṣṇava literature originate from the hands of those belonging to the Nadīya nāgarī bhava tradition cultivated at Śrīkhanda, a town to the North West of Navadvīpa in Burdwan district of Bengal. As Tony Stewart has pointed out, this ‘ascendency was worshipped as such by his followers during his lifetime. With the attainment of deeper roots by Vaiṣṇavaism, Viṣṇupriyā was the subject of at least thirty-four (Gupta 2009, pp. 284–87). The Bhakti-ratnakāra pp. 13–14). In fact, numerous padas or verses were dedicated to specific emotions of Viṣṇupriyā prayer dedicated to Gauracandra paralleling those of Rādhā for Kṛṣṇa, for instance, viraha and winter apart from twelve-monthly viraha of Viṣṇupriyā and also verses on the specific emotions expressed by Caitanya (Ray 1897). Pada composers also expounded on the natural elements of Caitanya’s glory as a cloud, as a river, the construction of a marketplace, as a tree, and also as the condensed form of all avatars. However, as Jan Brezezinski correctly surmises, the gaura nāgarā vātīdās never attempted to pattern their devotion to Caitanya in the way of Viṣṇupriyā, although there is a deity of Viṣṇupriyā that is worshipped at Śrīkhanda (Brezezinski 1996, C8.8). In the years following Caitanya’s saṃśya, Viṣṇupriyā led a pious life of service to her aged mother-in-law and became an ideal widow, although it does not seem that she took an active leadership role. Nonetheless, she continued to be a silent source of religious aura and living place of pilgrimage during that time.24 Jagadānandās’ Advaita Prakāśa describes that Viṣṇupriyā adhered to the ideal

22 Prakāśarūpeṇa niṣṇupriyādhī Samīmāṃśaīdyā niṣṇy hi mūrtinī Vaiḍūya tasyaṇv śitiṣā eṣa Kṛṣṇaḥ sa Laksmaṇīrāhu ca niṣṇye prabhuṇā/.
23 These included a very detailed explanation of varied attitudes or states such as chintā-daśa or worried-condition, jāgaran-daśa or awake-condition, Udīneg-daśa or anxious-condition, prātyrdaśa or frantic babbling condition, vyāsita-daśa or afflicted condition, unmūla-daśa or maddened condition, mohu-daśa or enthralled condition, Bhucaśita or overflow of emotion, sanriddhotmaṃ sanbhog or heightened sexual condition, sanreddhotmaṃ sanbhog or explosions of rasa, and so on. They also composed verses on the moods of Caitanya during various periods of the day from early morning (pratīkāl-nilā), afternoon (madhyāṅguka-nilā), evening (āṣtanikālita-tritī), and night (raitra-nilā and rātri-nilā) (Ray 1897, Vol. 3, contents). For an in-depth analysis of various rasas and their categories within Vaiṣṇava theology see (Das 2000, pp. 179–309).
24 Bhakti-ratnakār (Chapter 4) refers to Śrīnivāsa Ācārya’s visit to Viṣṇupriyā at Navadvīpa on his way to Vṛndāvana (Chakrabarti 1888, pp. 121–48).
of strict austerity: Rising early each morning before daybreak with Śacī and bathing in the river Ganga, remaining indoors the entire day. Devotees would never see her face except when she came to eat, and no one heard her speak. Viṣṇupriyā adhered to a strict diet and ate only the remnants of Śacī’s food, and spent all her time absorbed in rapt repetition of the Holy Name while looking at the image of Caitanya. Viṣṇupriyā took the path of austerity designated by Caitanya with utmost seriousness—placing a grain of rice in the clay pot after each completion of the sixteen names of Kṛṣṇa and, later cooking and consuming only those grains (Brezezinski 1996). It is relevant that some later histories of the movement, such as the Murali Vilasa (fourth chapter), refers to Viṣṇupriyā’s close relations with Nityānanda’s second wife Jāhnava Devī and her importance played a role in the adoption of Rāmachandra as a foster-child by Jāhnava. Viṣṇupriyā is also regarded to have inaugurated the worship of a Caitanya image around which numerous legends arose.26

Almost nothing is known about when Viṣṇupriyā left her mortal body, although there are suggestions that she ultimately merged in the idol of Caitanya at Navadvīpa (Sarbadhikary 2015, p. 57) as early as 1573 (Bhattacharya 2001, p. 388) or as late as 1589 CE (Maitra 1960, p. 141). It is believed that Caitanya’s image and footwear worshipped by Viṣṇupriyā have come down through the family lineage of her brother Jádvācārya or the latter’s son Mādhava Miśra in present day Navadvīpa at the Dhameshwar Mahaprabhu temple27, which was recognized in 2006–7 as a heritage building and continues to form an essential place of pilgrimage for devout Vaiṣṇavas (Maitra 1960, pp. 143–44; Sarbadhikary 2015, p. 58). There are other temples dedicated to Viṣṇupriyā in Navadvīpa too that encode a sacred spatial topography to the town.

4. Vaiṣṇavas, Women’s Issues, and Sacred Biographies: Retrieving Viṣṇupriyā in Colonial Times

Bengali Vaiṣṇavas actively participated in the process of public propagation of religiosity with the onset of the new technology of print. A substantial number of printed texts from the early nineteenth century publishing complex of Bāṭalā in North Calcutta were reprints of manuscripts and mostly Vaiṣṇava in content.28 Over the course of the nineteenth century, the cheap availability of printed Vaiṣṇava devotional literature had a positive impact on the dissemination of Vaiṣṇava texts and ideas. Print also seems to have enabled an integration of sacred communities through new networks of readership (Fuller 2003; Bhatia 2017, pp. 124–60; Dey 2020b). Networks of readership gave visible expression to a middle-class Bengali public sphere, reiterating the link between education, service (cikri), and cultural production (Ghosh 2006; Mitra 2009). Print facilitated the emergence of new forms of individuality through new literary genres such as autobiographies, biographies, journals, and novels.29 Scholars contend that as India entered the colonial phase, pre-colonial hagiographical traditions began to be ‘supplemented, and to some extent supplanted, by a new form of biography, in which greater attention was given to complexity of character and personal motivation, to specific places and events, and to their role in shaping and explaining individual lives’, but at the same time,

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25 This image is repeated in Chapter five of the Prema-vilasa by Nityānanda Dās, in the Bhakti-ratnakar of Narahari Kaviraj, (4.48–52), and the Vamsī sīkṣā of Premadās Misra.
26 The Vamsī Sīkṣā, which is a history of the Gosvāmīs of Bāghnāpāḍa, mentions that after Caitanya’s renunciation, Viṣṇupriyā had abandoned food and drink until He appeared to her (and Vamsīvadān Thākur) in a dream, telling her to have an image of himself carved in the margosa tree under which Śacī had sat to suckle him (Premadās Misra n.d., pp. 161–62).
27 The Dhameshwar temple received patronage from Manipur King Bhagyachandra and later from Guruprasad Ray, the Bhagyakul zamindar of Dhaka in the nineteenth century (Bhattacharya 2001, pp. 387–91; Sarbadhikary 2015, pp. 57–59).
28 The catalogue of Bengali books published by Reverend James Long in 1835 shows that the number of Bengali titles in print was only 20 in 1820, and 50 in 1852, but the number moved up to 322 in 1857 with 6,56,370 copies (Long 1855, pp. 100–2). By 1825–26 there were around forty presses in operation in Calcuta alone. He listed that among Bengali books a considerable number related to Vaiṣṇava issues.
29 Literary biographies have had a longer and more visible presence in Indian literary traditions, beginning probably with the Haraścīrīta of Bānabhāṭṭa in the seventh century; the Rāmacīrīta of Sandhyākārmandi in the eleventh/twelfth century; and the Periyapurāṇam (a Tamil compendium of Saiva poet saints) attributed to Cekkīlar in the twelfth century. Around the same time, a parallel tradition of Indian Islamic hagiographies, including compilations of conversations of Sufi saints and Piras, began to be written in Arabic and Persian.
‘modernity did not replace traditional life histories so much as recast them’ (Arnold and Blackburn 2004, p. 8). It was in this historical context that sacred biographies about members of the entire Vaishnava hagiographical personae, including Vişnupriyā, began to circulate in the Bengali literary sphere.

There exists quite a large corpus of poems composed on Viṣṇupriyā in the periodicals of the colonial period.30 A number of plays were also written specifically about her, such as Śiśir Kumār Ghosh’s Nimāī Samnāsā (1899), Matīlal Ray’s Nimāī-Samnāsā Gitābhīnay (1912), Kaliprasanna Vidyārātna’s Nimāī Samnāsā Gitābhīnay (1931), and Yogeschranda Caudhuri’s Śrī Śrī Viṣṇupriyā (1931). We also find the composition of stotras (Sanskrit eulogies or hymns) in her memory coined as Viṣṇupriyā stotram (Sarkār 1914, pp. 1–4). The biographies on her in the colonial period, such as Rāsiromoha Vidyābhūṣan’s Gaura-Viṣṇupriyā (Vidyabhūṣan 1917); Vaikuntahanāth De’s Viṣṇupriyā Caritamṛta (1917); Viṣṇupriyā by Niradāsundari Dāsi (1913); and Vidhubhūṣan Sarkār’s Viṣṇupriyā (in two volumes in 1915 and 1926, respectively) not only encode her life in vernacular narratives, but also attempt to expand and fill in greater factual details within the episodic vignettes about Viṣṇupriyā’s life as provided by the medieval hagiographers. While Niradāsundari Dāsi, a Vaiṣṇava widow from East Bengal, found personal empathy within the pathos experienced by Viṣṇupriyā, other writers tried to put forward Viṣṇupriyā as a biographic subject with vivid details. Although such literary liberty verged on the margins of biographic fiction, nevertheless, they are important to us, for they reveal the strategies and methods adopted by bhadralok writers of the colonial period to imbue a new sacred imagery for Caitanya’s ‘Priyājī, as Viṣṇupriyā was affectionately referred to by them.31 She was referred to as the ‘Divine Consort’ of Caitanya and as ‘the principal personage in Gaura Leela’. She was also referred to as the ‘perfect embodiment of womanhood and the highest ideal of all womanly attributes and devotional feeling’ (Sarkār 1926, preface). A versified narrative in 1917 entitled Viṣṇupriyā Caritamṛta by Vaikuntahanāth De contended that ‘Śrī Śrī Viṣṇupriyā is Śrī Caitanya’s Svākhyā Mahāṭī (own legitimate wife). She had been incarnated in this world in order to propagate the māhātmāya (greatness) of the ideal of patibhrātya dharma (devotion to one’s husband)’ (De 1917, preface). Furthermore, the Amrita Bāzār Patrikā gave the opinion in 1926 that:

‘We are charmed to see … that Sree Vishnupriyā, the representative of all the beings, went through most unbearable but self-imposed suffering and pangs of separation from her Lord only for the salvation of humankind. It thrills every heart, purifies every soul, ennobles every spirit and translates man to the Supreme region of love which is the “Sumnum Bonum” of human life’ (Sarkār 1926, Preface).

One of the trends visible in this period is to emphasize the Nadadvipaśiśita—denoting the first phase of his life at Navadvipa—as a foundational phase of Caitanya’s life. This phase ended with his ascetic renunciation or Nimāī-Samnāsā, which was portrayed as an emotional watershed—a ‘soteriology of loss’ according to a recent scholar (Bhatia 2017, p. 3)—not just for his immediate family (Śaćī and Viṣṇupriyā); but also his followers at Navadvipa, and by extension, for the people of Bengal. This prioritization can be seen couched within a vivid sentimental and affective narrative set in placein the 1890s with Śiśir Kumār Ghosh’s multi-volume Amiṣṭa Nimāī Carit, Lord Gaurāṅga, Or Salvation for All and his play Nimāī-Samnāsā. The latter reproduced the heart-wrenching sorrow that Viṣṇupriyā and Śaći experienced as a result of Caitanya’s renunciation (Ghosh 1899). From this perspective, an imaginative and idealistic conflation was made, from individual viraha (love in separation) into viraha for the entire collective Bengali nation, and was expressed by several authors in the early twentieth century imploring Caitanya to return once more to Bengal. Conversely, they also pleaded Bengali


31 It seems that the term priya as the suffix within Viṣṇupriyā’s name and the Bengali term priya that refers to someone dear, beloved, or favorite seems to have been deployed consciously by bhadralok writers to emphasize this loving relationship between Caitanya and Viṣṇupriyā.
readers to accept Caitanya as their prāner prabhu (God of their hearts). There was also a trend to regard Caitanya as a son of the soil (gharer chele and gharer thākur) and infuse an incipient nationalist spirit among Bengalis to regard him as their natural choice.32

Interest in Viṣṇupriyā was generated particularly by the nationalist-cum-Vaiṣṇava devotee Śiśir Kumār Ghosh (1840–1911) and a small group of writers attached to him—including Haridās Gosvāmī, Haridās Dās, and Rasikmohan Vidyābhusan, among others—who wanted to memorialize Caitanya in the image of a Bengali householder and not merely as a worshipper of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa or the ascetic Gaurāṅga (Bhatia 2017, pp. 124–60). Incidentally, Binodini Dāsi (1863–1941), a jāl-Vaiṣṇava courtesan, scaled great heights on the Bengali stage and even received blessings from Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahamsa (1836–1886), the revered saint of Dakshineshwar, for her emotional portrayal of Caitanya in Girish Chandra Ghosh’s play Caitanya lilā in 1884. A particularly poignant poem advocating the worship of the sacred duo of Caitanya and Viṣṇupriyā was christened as ‘Yugal Milan’ (Meeting of two lovers) and was published in the Viṣṇupriyā Patrikā in 189833.

‘Today, Gauracandra sat on a bejewelled throne, [along with] our prosperous Viṣṇupriyā on his left; Priyaji’s face is like the full moon
Her heart is brimming with happiness and a smile on her lips;
With devotees encircling them while singing praises for Gaura, Gadādhar and Narahari are fanning the couple with fly-whisks;
Some are embalming the couple with fragrant sandalwood paste, All devotees are adrift in a flood of bliss; Some are adorning the couple with garlands of jasmine, Nityānanda Prabhu is holding an umbrella over their heads;
Mother Śacī is floating in a sea of happiness, and she is blessing the couple with rice and durbā grass;
With Gaurāṅga, whose appearance is beyond compare, Viṣṇupriyā on his left, whose beauty I can’t describe;
Today, Gaura-Viṣṇupriyā are meeting as a couple (yugal-milana), [O devotees] make your lives successful by perceiving this wonder!34

As the poem suggests, readers were being encouraged to view the reunion of Caitanya and Viṣṇupriyā along with Śacī and other principal disciples as if to commemorate the eternal aura of the divine bond.35

In this period, many older debates within Bengali Vaiṣṇavism that had remained unresolved during the pre-colonial era resurfaced in the colonial period and were played out in a far wider arena of the print-based public sphere and in front of a far bigger reader-based audience. Many of these strands had a direct bearing on the Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā worship that will be dealt with in the next section. One such debate pertained to the doctrinal primacy of Svākiya versus Parākiya love (Sen 2019,

32 (Bipin Bihārī Sarkār Bhaktiratna 1916).
34 Āj, basilen Gauracandra ratra-siśhāsane / Viṣṇupriyā dhāni mor basilen bāme / Priyājīr mukha jena pārīnām śāli / hrōdye nā dhare sukha mukhe mrduhaši / bhaktaganā gheri gheri gorgōga gāy / Gadādhar Narahari cāmara dhulī / sugandhi candana keha day dtiha aṅgī / bhāsilen bhaktaganā sukhera taraṅgī / mālā mālā keha day ḍaṅga lele / Nityānanda Prabhu chatra dhiarā mālāhā / Šacīmatā bhāsilen sukkhera śāgare / dhāye deko day dhurā mukhāmā / āke āke Gosvāmī cāma na ḍuṅga / Gaurāṅga pūjana keha day tūlā / Nityānanda Prabhuchatra dhulī / Viṣṇupriyā Patrikā, 8.4, p. 145.
35 Another poem mentioned how Caitanya sent a sari gifted to him by the King of Orissa, Pratāprudra Deva on the occasion of Nandotsav to Viṣṇupriyā through the hands of his trusted disciple Svarupa Dāmodar. ‘Prabhu-prerita Sari’, Viṣṇupriyā Patrikā, 8.7, 1898, p. 289.
Was Kṛṣṇa married to the gopīs of Vṛndāvana or not? What sort of relation existed between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa? Without delving into the details, it may be surmised, that Rupa and Sanātana forwarded the parakṣyā doctrine of the Bhāgavat Purāṇa regarding the dalliances of the cowherd Kṛṣṇa with the milkmaids of Vṛndāvana. Their nephew Jīva apparently favored the svakṣyā view, possibly following discourses among the Vaishnavas of other orders at Vṛndāvana. In divergent versions of this narrative (Burton 2000, pp. 101–15), it seems that the parakṣyā perspective grew stronger under the guidance of men like Visvanāth Cakravarthi and Baladeva Vidyabhūṣan. Despite two public contestations at Jaipur in 1719 and 1723, these issues were discussed without any fruitful outcome. The Jaipur king, Maharaja Jai Singh II, finally sent his emissary Kṛṣṇadeva Sārvabhauma to establish the svakṣyā doctrine in Bengal. However, he was defeated in a debate with Rādhāmohan Ṭhākur. The Gosvāmis of Vṛndāvana had established that aesthetic pleasure and passionate devotion could be derived more effectively, not from within relations of marital love, but from love outside or beyond such relations. The Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa legend achieved tremendous regional and vernacular variations both within and outside Bengal (Beck 2005)—a further analysis of which lies beyond the scope of the present paper. In the early nineteenth century, Bengali folk cultural deities such as Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa underwent a ‘domestication’ process, whereby they were de-sacralized and profanized by a host of culture-producers such as painters, singers, performers, and dancers within the family kinship-based social milieu of Bengal in the early colonial period (Banerjee 2002, p. 90).

The Svākṣyā–Parakṣyā debate and its fallout on societal morals was an issue of great interest even in the nineteenth century. To early Christian missionaries, such ‘immorality’ was unbecoming of a religious tradition.36 Many colonial commentators opined that the Vaiṣṇava choice of Rādhā’s love for Kṛṣṇa as an object of devotion represents an apparent contravention of ideas of ‘chastity and fidelity of Indian womanhood’ (Kennedy 1925, pp. 108–9).37 Notions of obscenity circulating among educated middle class Bengalis in colonial times (Banerjee 1987) assumed importance among Vaiṣṇava reformers too, to sanitize their tradition from the slur of immorality (Dey 2015; Wong 2018). The idea of ‘religious decline’ in the sense of loss of zeal and character among Vaiṣṇavas and the penetration of lust (kāmukata) within the tradition were internalized to a great extent. As one periodical in 1926 mentioned:

‘The scriptures prescribe very strict rules of conduct for ascetics regarding association with women. They are to be shunned entirely by the body (deha), the senses (indriya), the mind (man) and also the intellect (buddhi). The way in which Caitanya adhered to this prescription of asceticism is without parallel in the annals of human history. He was so cautious that he avoided using the word strī and instead referred to them as Prakṛti. Women devotees did not have the right to come in front of him- let alone converse with them; they could only look at him from afar and offer their obeisance.’38

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36 In a rather dismissive tone, Reverend William Ward (1769–1823) of Serampore depicted Kṛṣṇa’s wanton revelry, sexual excesses, and immorality. Even his childhood pranks came up for severe castigation as ‘deliberate acts of falsehood and theft’. He considered the ‘distinguishing vice’ of the Vaiṣṇavas to be ‘impurity, as might be expected from the character of Krishna, their favourite deity, and from the obscene nature of the festivals held in his honour’ (Ward 1815, pp. 302–3).

37 Kennedy stereotypes the fact in the following words: ‘That something, which in the Hindu wife and mother is looked upon with the utmost abhorrence, should be chosen as the most fitting representation of religion, is, to say the least, a strange procedure. The explanation turns upon the place of marriage in Hindu society. Rarely, if ever, is it a romantic attachment, the result of love’s free play, for matches are arranged by the elders and the young people concerned are only passive agents. After marriage, whether love develops or not, the whole round of wifely duties and devotion are enjoined upon the woman by sacred law. Therefore, says the Vaiṣṇava apologist, the love of the wife can hardly serve as the symbol of unfettered devotion. Whereas the Hindu woman who gives herself to romantic love outside the marriage relation risks her all (sic). She gives everything that makes the life worthwhile in the abandonment of her devotion. Thus, she becomes the most fitting symbol of the soul’s search after God. Radhika is the supreme symbol of this passionate love’ (Kennedy 1925, p. 109).

38 This is mentioned by Gopiballabh Biswas. 1926. ‘Srīmanmahaprabhu o Varn. a´ sram Dharma’, Sonar Gaurā˙nga, 3.11: 653–59. In his Saśajan Tośani, Kedarnath Datta castigated the non-Vaiṣṇava behaviour of adopting the ascetic guise (kāchēkesh dāhāra) as exemplified by sects such as the Kapindri, Churādhāri, and Atibadi. Their attempts to personify divinity represented the worst form of moral corruption (Dey 2020b, p. 38).
Various nineteenth century discourses had been negatively stereotyping the Vaisnava society as a refuge for illicit women and portraying gosvami leaders as active participants in this illegitimate exercise. The empirical data supplied by the Decennial census conducted by the British from 1872 onwards, which regularly returned higher numbers of female Vaisnavas than males, furthered the notion of Vaisnava society as a class dedicated to sexual impropriety. This gender imbalance was explained variously by colonial ethnographers. Some like W.W. Hunter considered that couples in love against their families’ wishes, destitute lower caste elderly women without social support, and men seeking ‘concubinage’ joined the ranks (Hunter 1877, pp. 55–58). James Austin Bourdillon, who prepared the Bengal section of the Census of 1881, put the Vaisnava strength in the province at 262,638 males and 305,394 females, attributing the high presence of females as a result of the unrestricted entry of prostitutes (Bourdillon 1883, p. 139). Such views were reiterated by successive Census observers such as C.J. O’Donnell in 1891 and Edward Gait in 1901. Others, like Melville Kennedy, almost echoed the official view that most women of this trade took to Vaisnavism in order to hide their caste status. He saw some social justification that ‘much of the vairagi life of the Vaisnavis (female ascetics) is really a system of widow remarriage without the recognition of society’ (Kennedy 1925, p. 172).

However, everything was not grim about the tradition. Certain alternate positive images of Vaisnava women also circulated in colonial discourses. They were regarded as transmitters of a literary culture in pre-colonial and early colonial times, almost as a precursor to and anticipating the idea of women’s education in colonial times. One author in the early twentieth century stated that ‘They (women) were not merely the gainers from the stimulation to education,...but there also seems to have been in this Vaisnavism an embryonic recognition of the inherent dignity and worth of women’s personality which must be called distinctive’ (Kennedy 1925, p. 85). It seems that education became a mark of this sect right from the initial spread of the movement and remained so till at least the early nineteenth century. William Adam’s Second Report on vernacular education in Bengal for 1835–38 mentions that the only exception to the almost universal illiteracy among females in Bengal is to be found among the mendicant Vaisnavas, who could read and write and regularly instructed their daughters. Adam stated that Vaisnavas were the ‘only religious body of whom, as a sect, the practice is characteristic’ (Basu 1941, p. 189).

Modernist organizations such as the Gaudiya Math usually veered clear of engaging directly with gender issues. However, some institutions such as Priyanath Nandi’s SrIrKrsna Caitanyaatattva Pracarinti Sabha in the early twentieth century had taken the cue from the Brhmo movement in allowing women participation in its institutional proceedings albeit with separate seating arrangements. In fact, Nandi’s wife Pramadasundari Krsnadasi of the Kumartuli Mitra family was an initiated disciple of Madhusudan Gosvami, the sebait (priest) of the Radharaman Jiu temple of Vrndavana and an active member of the institution till her untimely death in 1920 (Dey 2020a, p. 63).

There was another debate relating to the extent of precedence to be accorded to Caitanya’s avatari personality, which was in turn connected to schisms regarding the legitimacy of Gauramantra or an independent ritual basis for Vaisnava initiation (Majumdar 1959, pp. 435–40). The issue had simmered on for centuries, with the Srkhand group legitimizing its practice while other groups considered it an anathema. This debate assumed importance within public debates from the late-nineteenth century onwards when Siir Kumr Ghosh’s Visnupriya Patrik from Calcutta took a favourable view while the Caitanyamatabodhini Patrika from Vrndavana castigated such innovation. Members of the traditional Advaita lineage of Shantipur such as Nilaman Gosvami contended that only the sanctioned ten-syllable Gopalamantra was legitimate for initiation. Members of this lineage went on to issue vyavasthapatras (religious circulars) condemning the Gauramantra and the spurious texts (including

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39 Kaliprasanna Singha’s Hutum Pynicar Naks states that Sonagachi, the prostitute quarters of Calcutta, were under the jurisdiction of one Vaisnava Ma Gosain of Simla locality in North Calcutta (Nag 1991, p. 96).
the Advaita Prakāśa), which propagated it as a blasphemy. Many contemporary journals such as the Viṣṇupriyā Patrikā of Śiśir Kumār Ghosh propagated this viewpoint (Dāsya 1898).

These debates had deep implications for the Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā dual worship program, as innovations in modes of worship were usually sneered upon by mainstream Viṣṇava lineages.

5. Prioritizing Yugal-arcanā: Haridās Gosvāmī and Deification of Viṣṇupriyā in Colonial Times

The stitching together of new narratives on Viṣṇupriyā by biographers of the colonial period not only allowed her to emerge as a biographic subject—imbued with a sacred aura, a divine personality, and as a true companion of Caitanya but some of them also put forward a new theological perspective of Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā as a yugal-arcanā (divinely incarnated couple), who needed a separate mode of worship (yugal bhajan or yugal arcanā). Just as Laksāmī-Nārāyaṇ, Sītā-Rāma, Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, and others are worshiped in their yugalasvarūpa or couple form, similarly Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā are worthy of dual worship. One biographer even posited that just as Rāma had made Sītā suffer in the tretāyuga, Kṛṣṇa did the same to Rādhā in the Dvāparayuga, similarly Caitanya made Viṣṇupriyā suffer in the Kaliyuga, thereby drawing a spiritual equivalence among the three divine pairs (Sarkār 1915, Preface). Haridās Gosvāmī asserts that although generations of Viṣṇava writers have produced literature about Caitanya, they have not written anything about Viṣṇupriyā, apart from describing her marriage and Caitanya’s didactic lectures to her on the virtues of asceticism immediately prior to his samānyāsa. He contends that just as Caitanya’s intense devotion to Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa was to teach people the spiritual techniques to savor the feelings of divine love, Viṣṇupriyā’s intense pangs of viraha (separation and longing) for Caitanya contained within it the essence for enabling a devotee’s hitārtha (welfare), āsvādan (tasting/experiencing), and bhajansādhanāsārtha (teaching the ways of sādhanā or worship). Thus, Haridās contended that Viṣṇupriyā’s laments, too, qualified to be treated as divine līlā (Gosvāmī 1914). In effect, the new mode of worship propagated by some in the colonial period hinged on the larger question of autonomy of worship within Viṣṇava circles. Were new ways of innovative worship to be permitted?

Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā worship does seem to have attained considerable prevalence in the second and third decades of the twentieth century (Gosvāmī 1914). In a series of articles, the periodical Visvabandhu in 1919 relates the visits of its editor Vidhubhusān Sarkār to different places of East Bengal and Tripura and the setting up of Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā icons at those places.40 The biographical compilation of Haridās Gosvāmī refers to several tours conducted by him in East Bengal where he cites instances of Viṣṇava devotees accepting Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā worship and even public celebrations commemorating the marriage ceremony of Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā icons (Gosvāmī 1963, pp. 191–210). In a passionate appeal to his readers intended to promote the efficacies of such worship in a section titled Upadesa šatak in his journal Viṣṇupriyā-Gaurāṅga, Haridās stated:

‘Viṣṇupriyā, who dwells in the heart of Gaurāṅga, is the divine potency of the Lord; She is also the supreme goddess . . . she is the essence of pure, selfless and transcendental devotion. If you want to witness the personification of devotion then meditate upon the image of Viṣṇupriyā. She is the goddess of the domestic establishment for all Viṣṇava householders—their LaksāmīDevi. Worshipping her daily along with Gaurāṅga will ensure that your home will be safe from all problems—your residence will emerge as a centre of devotion and be prosperous like the establishment of Laksāmī’ (Gosvāmī 1926, p. 11)41

40 ‘Chūṭir Ānanda’, Visvabandhu, 1, 1919, pp. 117–55. ‘Jhulān o Janmāśāṁhitār Ānanda’, Visvabandhu, 1, 1919, pp. 367–84 and pp. 433–44. There are several temples dedicated to Viṣṇupriyā–Gaurāṅga at Navadvīpa, at Sambalpur in Orissa, a Śrī Viṣṇupriyā Gaurāṅga sevashram at Rādhākund in Vṛndāvana, and at Rishra in Howrah district. Today, Viṣṇupriyā is also the name of a halt station near Navadvīpa in the Katwa-Howrah train line.

41 Śrī Śrī Gaurabakṣa-caliśini Viṣṇupriyā devī Śrī Gaurāngapatraha svarūpa sakti; tinio parametucini. . . tinio paramābhakti svarūpini. Yadi bhākta-deveśr śrīmatī dekhite cāu – Śrī Śrī Viṣṇupriyā devīr śrīmatīr dhyan karīra. Tini grīhī Gaurabakṣa Viṣṇavar ghyāhāīstāt
The connection of Viṣṇupriyā with Laxmi is significant since the latter was identified within Hindu Bengali culture with notions of abundance, wealth, beauty, and prosperity (Chakrabarty 1993, p. 7). One must keep in mind that notions of domesticity, conjugality, and love were undergoing a transformation in the colonial environment. In an era when companionate marriages among Bengali Hindu bhadralok were becoming more relevant and prescriptive texts regarding the ideals of the housewife and about desirable forms of marriage and domestic life were circulated in the printed domain, the idea of conjugal worship seemed fitting. Conjugal life still hinged on uninhibited patriarchy—the husband is god on earth, the lord and master to whom the wife must offer unquestioning bhakti’ (Raychaudhuri 2000, p. 352). Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar’s (1820–1891) crusade to rehabilitate widows through scriptural and modern legal sanction in the mid-nineteenth century had also brought to the fore the plight of the Hindu widows. Although no direct connections can be drawn with these historical facts, the value systems contingent to such a context probably had an impact on the formulations of Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā worship.

Haridās Gosvāmī was one of the most vocal ideologues who promoted the Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā hypothesis. He was born in 1867 in the village of Dogachia in Nadia district of Bengal in a Brahmin family. Many of his family members, including his father, were kathaks or professional narrators of mythological/scriptural traditions who originally hailed from Panch Khand village near Dhaka Dakshin in Śylhet District of Bangladesh. His father was employed as a kathak in the aristocratic household of the Pal Chaudhuri zamindars of Ranaghat in Nadia district. In most of his works, Haridās refers to his lineage from the medieval pada composer Dvija Balarāmdās’ family at Dogachia in Nadia. He took an active role in the literary propagation of Vaṣṇavism and published a large number of works related to the Caitanya heritage, including, Gaura-Gītākā (1912), Bāṅgalir Thākur Śrī Gaurangā (1914), Nītāi-Gaura Śrīvīgraha Līlā Kāhīni (1922), Mahāprabhur Navadvīpa-līlā (1917), Mahāprabhur Nilācālalīlā (1923), and Saṃcīlīpī Gītī (1925). There was also a set of biographies on Viṣṇupriyā, namely, Viṣṇupriyā Carita (1913), Viṣṇupriyā Sahasra-nām stotra (1922), Viṣṇupriyā Maṅgal (1933), and Gambhīṛtā Śrī Viṣṇupriyā (1933), and a single work on Laksāmīpriyā, Caitanya’s first wife, titled Laksāmīpriyā Carita (1915). For some years from 1926 on, he also edited the monthly devotional journal Viṣṇupriyā Gaurangā.

It seems that Haridās Gosvāmī was quite an eclectic Vaṣṇava who tried to consciously cultivate his connections with a variety of Vaṣṇava sripats and individuals. Haridās also attended the virahotsav or death anniversary celebrations of Narahari Sarkar Śrīkhand at Navadwīpa in 1926, where he interacted with Rakhālānanda and Gaurangā Thākur and other members of the group including Visvesvar Bābājī, the author of Rasarāj Gaurangā Seabhatra. He mentions that ‘By the kṛṣṇa (grace) of the Thākurs’ of the Śrīkhand group one can receive dārāṇ and visualize the sweet rasarāj image of Nādiyināgar kiśora Gaurangā’ (Gosvāmī 1963, p. 233). It is significant that in this context, Haridās mentions that ‘I am not sure whether anyone from the group opposing Gaurāṅga’s nāgarī bhāva was present or not. But if one of their members were present then he would surely have realized the mahān prabhāb (significance), māhātmya (glory) and the cītākārsak (enthralling) nature of Narahari Sarkār’s songs. If
by following his [Narahari’s] bhajan path one has to go to hell even that would signify attainment of supreme approbation!’ (Gosvāmī 1963, p. 237). He even advised the critics opposing the Śrīkhanda group in the public literary sphere to attain salvation by visiting Śrīkhanda in person and witnessing the purity of their path. Thus, Haridās was full of praise for the nāgari bhāva emotion and tried to justify its greatness within the contemporary Vaiṣṇava public sphere.

It is significant that inspite of propagating the virtues of nādīya nāgari bhāva, Haridās couched his views within parameters of sexual morality that had become the norm of bhadrakāla responses in the colonial period. In his Viṣṇupriyā- Gaurāṅga journal he stated:

‘I have said before that keeping illicit woman-partners by devotees of Gaura, whether they are vairagis (ascetics) or grhīs (householders), is a sign of fake Vaiṣṇavism. Many educated Vaiṣṇavas have already become cautious about its pitfalls. They are realizing that the poison which they had consumed from sādhu-vēst pakhāndis (counterfeit gurus) have led them far away from Mahaprabhu’s true path of visuddha (pure) Vaiṣṇava teachings. They are extremely sad and ashamed that the fallen gurus who keep the company of illicit women have been the cause for a decline of their own religiosity. It is indeed depressing that so many shameless sīṣya-vyārasāgūṣ (disciple-businessmen), householder-guru-gosains, marketers of idols and fake religious leaders have converted the pure Vaiṣṇava religion desired by Mahaprabhu into a business. But such men will never be able to fully stop their illicit relations with women since their religious-business is intimately connected with it’ (Gosvāmī 1963, p. 357)

The essential crux of the theological paradigm designated as Viṣṇupriyā tattva by Haridās Gosvāmī was that there existed parallels between Viṣṇupriyā’s Gambhīra līlā at Navadvīpa with Caitanya’s Gambhīra līlā or activities as exhibited at the place of his residence at Kāsi Mīśra’s house in Puri (Gosvāmī 1914; Gosvāmī 1933, Preface; Vyakaranatīrtha 1932, pp. 1–15). As Caitanya’s preachings at Puri were intended to teach devotees specific aspects of Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa bhakti, in a similar manner, it was an urgent necessity to unveil the teachings of Viṣṇupriyā at Navadvīpa for the general welfare of all living beings (Gosvāmī 1933, Preface). He contended that Viṣṇupriyā is the iberan (external garment) while Caitanya is the mīla tattva (fundamental theory), and both are equally important for worship by devotees. He pleaded with his readers to accord Viṣṇupriyā her rightful place within Vaiṣṇava worship. She was not only bhaktisvarūpa and embodied the hlādini-sakti of Caitanya, but also personified dāṣya-bhāva (devotion through service) towards him. In a surprising reversal of svākiyā-parakīyā duality, Haridās contended that since Caitanya represented the conjoined form of Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa, it is Viṣṇupriyā alone, being his hlādini-sakti (the lord’s divine pleasure potency), who can bring pleasure and happiness to him. In this framework, Viṣṇupriyā enjoyed complete theological equivalence with Rādhā: ‘Just as Caitanya and Nityānanda were Kṛṣṇa and Balarama respectively, so was Viṣṇupriyā an incarnation of Rādhā’. Gosvāmī asserted that if Navadātpadhta (the abode of Navadvīpa), the Navadvīpa parikara (associates of Caitanya at Navadvīpa), and the Navadvīpalā (the divine sports at Navadvīpa) were to be regarded as nitya (eternal), as they are formulated within Gaudīya theology, then factually speaking, it should be equally impossible to deny not just the eternal presence of Viṣṇupriyā in Navadvīpa, but also the validity of Caitanya’s worship in the emotion of mādhurya bhāva. In a direct defense of Nādīya nāgari bhāva tendencies, Gosvāmī raised the question: ‘Who is there to stop one if he feels kamini bhāva (physical attraction) towards the Rasarāja Caitanya (who is in a constant state of erotic bliss)?’ (Gosvāmī 1933, Preface). Responding to the challenge of those who questioned how Caitanya could, being in Svākiyā bhāva as the husband of Viṣṇupriyā, be conceived and worshipped in the mood of mādhurya bhāva (blissful emotion) by a devotee, Haridās countered that from a devotee’s perspective, the adoption of a Rāgānugā bhāva (inwardly generated passion)—that is the highest form of devotion—never seeks to establish the devotee’s personal relation with the lord even in a parakīyā paradigm (whereby spiritual experiences are savored by the devotee as an unmarried feminine lover of the Divinity). It only prescribes one to adopt the attitude of a sakhi or a manijari (a form of worship where the devotee assumes the mood of a female servant of the gopīs) and assist in the līlā (celestial sport) of the divine couple. If this is the case, then obviously in a svākiyā paradigm (whereby spiritual
experiences are savored by the devotee as a married feminine lover of the Divinity) the devotee should adopt the same attitude of a sakhi (friend) of Visnupriya in assisting the eternal satisfaction of Caitanya and Visnupriya (Gosvami 1933, preface). This represented a radical alteration of theological perspectives prescribed by the Vrndavana Gosvamis. In effect, Haridasa tried to approximate his formulations to the essence of the Gaura–Visnupriya relationship as an eternal bond much like the timeless union of Radha–Krishna. As Tony Stewart points out, the followers of the Gaura–Visnupriya lila portray the relation as ‘healthy and socially acceptable’, one that promoted ‘an ideal of love that did not undercut social mores’ (Stewart 2010, p. 160). In fact, with time the entire paraphernalia of Radha with her aśtasakhiś (Eight primary friends) and sixty-four vaisnavasahajīya circuits (Dasgupta 1946, pp. 113–46). Many of the terminologies and concepts used by Haridasa to the level of a Goddess. Some usages, such as those about Visnupriya’s glowing body color, even paralleled Caitanya’s description as Gauranga. However, by its very nature, the Gaura–Visnupriya hypothesis violated the basic tenets of the seemingly illicit affairs of Krishna as developed by generations of Vaisnava theologians. It remained marginalized within Bengali Vaisnava discourses since it contained within it a contradictory potential—it could be subverted for passionate ends of physical fulfillment that the tradition despised, and at the same time, it was theologically inferior to the Parakīya conception (Stewart 2010, p. 160). Haridasa Gosvami tried his best to circumvent both these possibilities by trying to synthesize a sanitized notion of Nadiya nāgarī bhāva whereby the eternal svakīya relation between Caitanya and Visnupriya was projected as a correlate of the eternal relation of Radha–Krishna. He attempted to insert and prioritize the Gaura–Visnupriya tattva within the theological frame of Vaisnavism, keeping all other parameters intact. However, the very innovativeness of this motley formulation itself became the reason for its lack of popular appeal among the wider Vaisnava community. It appears that the new version of yugal-arcanā or yugal-bhujan of Gaura–Visnupriya (Gosvami 1914; Vyakaranāntartha 1932, pp. 1–15) veered rather close to esoteric conceptions of yugal-sādhanā that were already well established within Vaisnava–Sahajīya circuits (Dasgupta 1946, pp. 113–46). Many of the terminologies and concepts used by Haridasa Gosvami directly alluded to Nadiya nāgarī bhāva tendencies in pre-colonial Vaisnavism. Thus, the Gaura–Visnupriya theorization was vigorously contested and denounced by conservative quarters.44

44 Apparently, a spate of articles were published in different journals such as Śūrī, Ānanda-bāzār, and Hitahāṣi by men such as Vaikunthnath De, Rādhāballabh Caudhuri, and Manindracandra Nandi, the zamindar of Saida in Nadia and the patron of the Śrī Gauranga Senaka journal. Śūrī raised the alarm that “Is it not a sin and a crime to preach such immorality about Caitanya in the name of religion and religious practice?” For instance, Yogendracandra Deb, the editor of the Śrī Śrī Gauranga published from Comilla in East Bengal, led a concerted backlash against the ‘fabricated’ narrative of the nādyā Gaura nāgarī bhāva attempts in 1926 (Deb 1926, pp. 665–82). Deb felt compelled to take a stand as he contended that many educated Bengalis in their simplicity were being duped by the apparently ‘sweet’ views
Interestingly, in hindsight, it seems that the argument for a national devotional culture through the Viṣṇupriyā Patrikā by Śiśir Kumār Ghosh among others was not merely an exposition of a modernist regional cultural expression as some historians would like to frame it (Bhatia 2009, pp. 225–91). It also played a crucial role in allowing contemporary relatively marginal proponents to voice their own opinions. Ideologically, for instance, some contributors to the Viṣṇupriyā Patrikā, such as Haridās Gosvāmi and Jāgatbandhu Bhadra, were clearly non-mainstream in their approach. Bhadra’s Vaiṣṇava anthology Gaurapadatarangini is a classic expression of diverse shades of poetical writings including Sahajiyā themes. Haridās Gosvāmi himself had high regard for Śiśir Kumār Ghosh, as his biography shows, and it is quite revealing that Ghosh was considered by him as ‘a believer of viśuddha (pure) Nadīya nāgara bhatā’. After Ghosh’s death in 1911, Gosvāmi decided to continue the former’s unfinished work and even dreamt of Ghosh’s soul entering into his body (Gosvāmi 1963, pp. 174–75). Marginal and non-conformist views also found an expression in the pages of some other periodicals such as Vaiṣṇava Sangini.45

It is difficult to document exactly when the Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā dual worship program lost relevance in the twentieth century but there is reason to believe that it could not emerge as a spontaneously accepted popular notion. Although, there may be found some Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā temples in certain parts of Bengal even today, they do not enjoy much prominence within the tradition. In all probability, the spread of Gaudīya Math and other affiliate monastic establishments in the twentieth century gradually squeezed out from the mainstream such divergent alternate imaginings.46 It should be noted, however, that women perform a critical element in the religious activities and seva of institutionalised Vaiṣṇava temples—they take part in ritual fasts, prepare and serve food for the deity which is partaken later as prasad, lead women’s congregational devotional singing, and so on and so forth. This has been documented for the Radharaman Temple in Vrndāvana in the modern period (Case 2000, pp. 45–62).

In the audiences’ quest to ‘see divinity’, Viṣṇupriyā still plays a crucial role in the astaṇa līlā or the eight day performances dedicated to Caitanya organized by members of the patron family of the Radharaman Temple (Case 2000, pp. 111–50). It is also true that līlāktīta players across rural Bengal still sing the Caitanya līlā episodes that feature Viṣṇupriyā during specific times of the year. Given the fact that Vaiṣṇava conceptions across various layers of beliefs are superfly mobile—a goswami’s or babaji’s sense of Vrndāvana travels with him in his imagination; a sahajiyā’s sense of place travels of this group. The crux of the arguments posited by his journal was as follows: First, they argued that the new version was distorting established ritual practices of worshipping Caitanya, Advaita, and Krṣṇa. They specifically objected to the statement ascribed to Haridās Gosvāmi that Bengali Vaiṣṇavas regarded both Krṣṇa and Caitanya as complete godheads (Sanyam Bhagavan). Secondly, they objected to Haridās Gosvāmi’s contention that ‘A hundred thousand Rādhās were not equal to one Viṣṇupriyā. A hundred thousand Rādhā-bhāva condenses to create the basis for Viṣṇupriyā tatvam.’ The third objection was against Haridās Gosvāmi’s acceptance of the view about Caitanya’s deliverance of prostitutes such as Satyabhāma referred to in the apocryphal text Gobindādāser Kadchā. They severely castigated Gosvāmi for claiming that the Vaiṣṇava hagiographers have shown that Stakṣiṣa and Parakṣiṣa bhāyas are seen in the case of both Gaurāṅga as well as Keśa. Lastly, they criticized the supposedly immoral bearing of Haridās Gosvāmi’s celebration of the mahālīlā (glory) of Parakṣiṣa practice among Sahajiyās and Kisorībhujana among others at Navadvīpa (Deb 1926, pp. 665–82). Similar views were expressed by other conservative writers as well.

45 It is incidentally important in this connection to note that Śiśir Kumar Ghosh and his family members were proponents of occult beliefs in mesmerism, clairvoyance, and séances, and experimented with techniques to communicate with the world of the dead (Bhatia 2020). For instance, in the article Ṭīmūr parakṣiṣa prabhā in the Viṣṇupriyā Patrikā of 1898 (vol. 8:1 pp. 41–48), the issue of transmigration of souls into the bodies of other living persons was discussed in the context of members of the Brajālīla entering the bodies of their devotees.

46 Thus, in the Vaiṣṇava Sangini in 1912, we find Gauruṅgānānanda Ṭhākur, who published the text Śrīkhander Prācitā Vaṇīśaṇa, contributing a poem titled Gaura Kalanikini (Unchaste women for Gaura), and in the same vein Haridās Gosvāmi wrote Pirti Mathiṃi (The Glory of Love).
with her in her body; an ISKCON devotee experiences the pleasures of serving Vrindavan wherever she renders her devotional service; and all Bengali Vaishnavas experience Vrindavan’s spiritual/sonic bliss in the sites of their musical performances’ (Sarbadhikary 2015, p. 216)—it is evident that devotee imaginations regarding Vaishnava personalities would also be similarly complex and varied. Ascetic institutional establishments such as the Gaudhya Math, however, usually do not directly engage with women’s issues or provide avenues for female asceticism of the type visible, for instance, in other modern Hindu orders such as the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission (which is the female counterpart of the Ramakrishna Mission). But modern Vaishnava maths such as the Caitanya Saraswat Math, among others, do celebrate the appearance Days (tithis) of several pious Vaishnava women, including Śrī Viṣṇupriyā, in their ritual calendar.48

6. Conclusions

The entanglements of a sentiment of love and devotion within Bengali Vaishnavism led to a number of significant fallouts, some of which were perhaps unintended, within various layers of opinions, both within as well as outside the tradition in the colonial era. For most middle-class Bengali Vaishnava bhadralk sympathizers, Caitanya came to represent a humanist quotient reflective of the flexibility and liberalism inherent within Bengali culture. For scholars of literature, the Vaishnava celebration of love and the humanist spirit in the literary domain of the early modern period was portrayed as the most fruitful and constructive phase in the constitution of the Bengali language and literature (Sen 1896, pp. 147–219).49 There were also dissidents who harbored suspicions that the spread of Vaishnavism in Bengal and its dominant stress on love and emotion historically engendered effeminacy within Bengali society that did not augur well for its political future. For instance, the noted historian Sir Jadunath Sarkar contended that ‘by its exaltation of pacifism and patient suffering . . . it [Vaishnavism] sapped the martial instinct of the [Bengali] race and made the people too soft to conduct national defense’ (Sarkar 1943, p. 222). In the backdrop of this fractured receptivity regarding the legacy of the tradition as a whole, it is only to be expected that notions about Viṣṇupriyā would also necessarily remain contested.

In sum, it is difficult to draw a simplistic connection that increased prominence to writing biographies of women associated with Caitanya by educated bhadralk writers in the age of religious reformism during colonial times automatically led to a greater urgency to women’s issues within the Bengali Vaishnava movement. At the same time, it is a testament to the elasticity and flexibility of the Vaishnava tradition that newer images regarding Viṣṇupriyā could still be expounded and even eulogized by some sections in colonial times. As the preceding discussion has revealed, the Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā sacred biographic image-building exercise was ultimately critiqued by some contemporaries as a deliberate deviation from mainstream Vaishnava theological perspectives. For them, such an ideal essentially meant pandering to pre-colonial sectarian and divisive agendas—a selective revitalization of gaura nāgara vādī perspectives—that needed to be shunned. I have tried to provide a glimpse of these supposedly marginal viewpoints that usually remain lost from mainstream academic discourses. Alternate frames of perceiving a divine pair in Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā, in a sense, largely came to symbolize the pathos, emotionalism, and national culture of the Bengali people. At this level, the emphasis on Viṣṇupriyā, as Caitanya’s eternal counterpart, helped to recast and filter her image from the rather fleeting presence within the pre-colonial hagiographical literature to a celebration of new modernist bhadralk sensibilities of divine conjugality. At yet another level, Viṣṇupriyā also came to

49 The blurb of a relatively recent fictionalized historical novel on Caitanya has this to say regarding the legacy of the era: ‘Early modernity in India had its origin in the fifteenth-sixteenth century. At least in Bengal, many features of an urban/civil culture can be witnessed during the Caitanya era. If one removes the colonial lens, one may clearly witness the early modern glory of Gaura-banga (Bengal). An urban spirit, trading prosperity, a desire to travel, an attempt of the regional to merge with the national, social mobility of the middle and lower classes, and increasing participation of the masses in a caste-less manner in social movements—many such elements combined to inaugurate a form of pre-colonial modernity during Caitanya’s time.’ (Mitra 2012; front cover blurb).
personify and validate traditionalist notions of self-less devotion and faithfulness to her mother-in-law and her lost husband; of resolute patience, perseverance, and penance in the name of religion; and of ideal widowhood (after Caitanya’s demise). Thus, the colonial era threw up a mélange of possibilities in imaging Viṣṇupriyā, most of which could not finally find approbation from mainstream Vaiṣṇava traditions. Nevertheless, it enables us to fruitfully explore an interesting aspect within the relatively under-trodden field of women and gender studies within Bengali Vaiṣṇava traditions.

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