

A frog chasing a serpent: The deciphering of the Caryapadas and the Troubadours of modern Bengal
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The Caryāpadas (before 13th century A.D.) are considered the earliest material composed in the eastern dialects of New Indo-Aryan. These songs deal with Buddhist tantric practices including sexual intercourse. However, an esoteric code language (*sandhābhāṣā*) is adopted in these songs for the purpose of hiding the sexual contents from those not initiated. In order to decipher this code, two clues are available to us: one is the Sanskrit commentary written by Munidatta in the 13th century. The other clue is the “Baul songs”, or the oral literature of the Bauls, the mystic minstrels of modern Bengal. The code language of the Caryāpadas and the Bauls’ symbolic way of expression show such striking affinity, that we are obliged to conclude that the Caryāpadas and the Bauls belong to the same oral tradition. Therefore the knowledge of the Bauls’ oral literature can often offer useful keys to elucidate the code language of the ancient text of the Caryapadas. In addition, we have abundant data on the Bauls’ ritual practices in relationship to their oral literature, provided by anthropologists’ field work. Utilizing them, we come drastically closer to the hidden nucleus of the Caryāpadas, and grasp their concrete meaning far better than ever.

Intriguingly, the results of the analysis deduced by the utilization of the Bauls’ data does not always match with Munidatta’s interpretations. This might suggest that Munidatta did not comprehend the original text completely. We have to weigh the two: Munidatta’s commentary, or a secondary source, but written in a time not distant from the original text, vs. the Bauls’ oral literature, or a living, primary source, although distant by nearly a thousand years from the Caryāpadas.

In this paper, I will select samples from the Caryāpadas which would conspicuously represent this problem. One is Song Nr.33, a kind of riddle with a paradoxical expression “a frog chasing a serpent”, which has been discussed by Shashibhushan Dasgupta, in his “Obscure Cults”. Parallels are found not only in the Baul songs, but also in Kabir, the medieval Awadhi poet’s works. In the same manner, we could discover the meaning of one through another symbolic expression typical to the Caryāpadas and the Bauls, such as “tree” (Song Nr.1), “boat” (Nr.8), “river” (Nr.5), “the body-lute” (Nr.17) and so on. Thus, I try to pioneer a new level of interpretation of the Caryāpadas.