

# INTERVENTIONS

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## **In the Light of the Padas: Exploring Sexuality as a Means of Spiritual Transcendence**

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**Abstract:** The Caryāpadas are a collection of mystical poems, songs of realization in the Vajrayāna and Sahājiya traditions of Buddhism from the esoteric traditions in Assam, Bengal, Bihar and Odisha. Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī refers to Vaiṣṇava poetry and often focusses on the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa legend. The term Padāvalī literally means - "gathering of songs" and often reflects an earthly view of divine love. Essentially, both Caryāpadas and Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī, with slightly varying metaphors and imagery, centre on the theme of love and sexuality. Exploring sexuality by transcending social norms is a common theme in the songs of both Caryāpadas and Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī. This paper explores how both Caryāpadas and Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī share a similar purpose, flavour, target audience, and quite possibly the same route. Both follow the trend of conveying the esoteric message prevalent in the form of music or the metaphor of 'abhisamayā', i.e., the realization one achieves because of the union of prajñā (wisdom) and upāya (method)). This becomes relevant as we study the rich heritage of greater Bengal, where Buddhist Sahajiyā and Vaiṣṇava traditions flourished. Though these traditions have been largely wiped out due to several socio-political and cultural factors, the legacy of the Caryāpadas and Sahajiyā Sādhana continue in the later emerging Vaiṣṇava Padāvalīs and the Bhakti tradition. This paper draws from primary sources like the *Caryācaryāviṇṣcāya*, Sri Kṛṣṇa Kīrtan, and *Gītagovinda*, to study the nature of the padas, i.e., short votive verses; it also investigates the works of analysis and criticism by several English and Bengali scholars and their various perspectives on the subject. Secondary sources based on Tibetan Buddhist traditions, and the greater sphere of bhakti poetry and music have also been consulted. The paper explores how the Padas have evolved, and how there has always been a strong sense of connection between the earlier Caryāpadas and the later Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī. This research attempts to unravel how the two traditions share a similar, if not mostly the same outlook on sexuality as a method of comprehending the union of matter with spirit. Sahajānanda as explored in the Caryāpadas, or Rādhābhāva as in the Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī, and the associated musical traditions have fostered a deep, meaningful connection between the Hindu and Buddhist traditions in greater Bengal. The two traditions forge a similar path of spirituality to this date.

**Keywords:** *Caryāpadas, Vaiṣṇava Padāvalīs, Esoteric lore, Sahajiyā traditions, non-normative sexuality, abhisamayā, cultural history of greater Bengal.*

## Introduction

The Cāryapada is a collection of mystical poems, songs of realization in the Vajrayāna tradition of Buddhism in Assam, Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha. It was written between the eighth and twelfth centuries in late Apabhramśa period and represents the formative stage of the new Indo-Aryan languages. This was a period when the northeastern Prakrit languages had not differentiated into later forms, or they were just about getting differentiated. A palm-leaf manuscript of the Caryāpada was rediscovered in the early twentieth century by Haraprasad Shastri at the Nepal Royal Court Library. The Caryāpada was also preserved in the Tibetan Buddhist canon. (Per 2010: Introduction). The term “Caryā” means practice. The Caryāpadas are short verses that speak about esoteric practices in a metaphorical way, with heavy usage of imagery associated with forests, hunts, marginal women, and sexuality.

The Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī movement refers to a period in medieval Bengali literature from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, marked by an efflorescence of Vaiṣṇava poetry often focusing on the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa legend. The term “padāvalī” literally means -"gathering of songs," where the word “pada” refers to a short verse, usually lyrical in nature; and “valī” which refers to the plural or a ‘collection of’. However, an alternate reading suggests that the root source of the term *padāvalī* is *padāvarika*, which literally means an adornment of the foot, and is commonly used to refer to an anklet. The consecutive derivation of padāvāri from padāvarika and padāvalī from padāvāri indicates the significance attributed to women’s jewelry in the tradition. The entire collection of verses so named is reminiscent of the tinkling of Rādhā’s anklets.

Padāvalī poetry reflects an earthly view of divine love, which has its roots in the Agam poetry of Tamil Sangam literature, spanning from approximately 600 BC to 300 AD., and extending into early medieval Telugu (Nannayya, Annamayya) and Kannada literatures (Dasa Sahitya). The poetic themes spread rapidly as part of the religious Bhakti movement that proposed an intensely personal form of devotion, following the philosophy of Rāmāṇuja, opposing cast distinctions and other Brahminical measures implicit in the theism of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya. The movement spread and attained a pan-Indian status during the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries. The accompanying literary movements were marked by a shift from the classical language of Sanskrit to the local languages (Apabhramśa) or derivatives, e.g., the literary language of brajabuli adopted by Vidyāpati in the fourteenth century and Govindadāsa Kavirāja. (Sen 1957, Introduction).

## **Caitanya and Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal**

Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal received a tremendous boost from Śrī Caitanya (1486–1533), whose intense spiritualism inspired many and sparked a movement across various regions of India. An intense utterance of the divine's name and singing of the devotional songs which often led to a trance-like state, were central to the path of bhakti. Caitanya himself wrote a few songs on the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa theme, and certainly encouraged the composition of new songs. (Goswami 1557/2006: Mukhabandha).

Towards the end of the eleventh century, the Mongol invasion of the Middle East led to numerous subsequent mass migrations and a significant shift in population, resulting in a widespread chaos. This led to a significant influx of settlers in various parts of India, including the lower Ganga Delta plains. The settlers brought with them new cultures and new practices, and they also targeted the powerful and the wealthy. As the previously existing power structures fell apart, the Tantric adepts found themselves lacking the stable patronage from the new power structures of the society. The arrival of Islam had mostly replaced the existing power structure with a new stronghold. It became very difficult for the adepts to practice Tantra openly, because that would render them vulnerable to the new power structures and the common folk as well. In a scenario like this, part of this religious practice retreated inside the forests and the charnel grounds, while part of the same hid from plain sight. Some of the female adepts put on the façade of socially conforming housewives, willingly entering the patriarchal framework of marriage to create a barrier between their practices and the rest of the world. Instead of the archetypal female adept figure of the time of the Caryāpadas, a new figure emerged- Rādhā. Her semi-mythical characterization and deification ensured the women practitioners the desirable privacy and secrecy from public view.

The difference that one discerns between the previous tradition of the Caryāpadas and the later Vaiṣṇava practices is that the Caryāpadas is not vocal about any sexual ethics or morality. Social convention is largely absent in the texts, and the guidelines are laid down with an emphasis on how to attain greater spiritual power and, ultimately, spiritual liberation. Vaiṣṇava Padāvalīs emphasize nurturing love and compassionate kindness, and an adept who transgresses this aspect of the practice no longer belongs to Vṛndāvan.

## **Style Shift due to Invasions**

This clear distinction between the tone of the Caryāpadas and that of the Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī can be traced back to the shifting economic, political, and social structures with the influx of settlers like the Turks, Pathans, Persians, Afghans, and others, and the establishment of the new power structures. When the flourishing community of adepts fell apart with the decline of the previous power structures, most adepts were forced to adapt to the situation by taking on the guise of wandering ascetics, relying on support from common households in the form of alms. While they carried the heart of the esoteric discipline with them, they had to devise a way to make the essence of their vocation relatable to the common people of the society. This gave rise to the narrative of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, set in the spiritual arcadia as well as the possible utopia evolving into the symbolical idea of the paradise of the Vṛndāvan. Rādhā is the keeper of the ethical standards, and she is the one who holds the key to Vṛndāvan and decides who gets to stay in there and who does not. Vṛndāvan here, of course refers to a nostalgic idea of the time of innocence, set in an egalitarian social framework, or possible futuristic vision of paradise, or symbolizing a paradisaal-sacred space where anyone other than Rādhā or Kṛṣṇa has no other identity than a Gopī. Thus, in these trying circumstances, with the adepts forced to part ways from their previous organizational set up so patronized by the wealthy, who either took to the streets, or retreated into the forests, there emerged a new trend. The figure of Rādhā evolved as a highly revered guardian of the practice. This was in a sharp contrast to the nameless archetypal figure of the female adept in the Caryāpadas, who is often portrayed as being exploited and objectified. With the collapse of the masculine hierarchy implied by Caryāpada literature, women lost both their marginalized status and the protection that came with it. This made it mandatory for women to stand up for themselves. It also gave them more agency to speak and step into action, and they assumed the role of the protectors of communities.

This discussion about the paradigm shift is to foreground one aspect, - female sexuality indispensable to the discipline of Tantra. So, it is important to understand how with the changing structure of society from the time of the Caryā to that of the Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī, the position of women and their sexuality as a means of attaining spiritual liberation evolves to fit into the narrative and trends of the time. It is also equally important to explore how the figure of Rādhā, the keeper of the core of the practice and the guardian of the secret Vrindavan emerge from the figure of the female adept as described in the Caryāpadas. The word ‘Caryā’ literally means ‘of practice.’ The songs of the Caryāpadas hint at Tantric practices of the Sahajiyā Buddhist traditions, albeit in symbolical language, and carefully curated to conceal the tāntric essence (Das 1997:25). The earliest of the Caryāpadas don't speak explicitly about sexual practice. Rather, the focus remains

on “Anuttara tattwa,” or the concept of transcendence, as observed from the Padas written by the earlier masters like Kukkurīpā and Luipā. The later Padas, particularly the ones written by a master like Guṇḍarīpā, become heavily laden with sexual imagery beyond the social constraints of marriage. (Das 1997:22-25). A close and careful review of the Caryāpadas reveals a lot of sexual wordplay and metaphors, some of which offer invaluable insights into the spiritual practices. Metaphorically, such wordplay and vivid imagery represent the Bodhicitta as a woman belonging to the fringes of mainstream society, who has freed herself from the layers of ego and is spiritually at a different level from the masses. The women mentioned in the Caryāpada, have no name nor any solid identity. They are archetypal beings that live on the margins of the society, and act as the guide and keeper of the esoteric lore. They are the mistresses of the discipline, and only by complete submission to them, can one seek to be part of the esoteric practices. (Das 1997: 96-98)

### **Esoteric Practices and Caryāpadas**

It must be kept in mind that the Caryāpadas are completely esoteric texts, and the practice of the Caryā involved the use of mantras, maṇḍalas, and hidden vījas along with a variety of other unorthodox practices like partaking of mind-altering substances, particularly during sexual yoga. (Das 1997:100-103) This demanded the guidance of a very skilled adept, who would act as a guru to a new initiate, and help him/her navigate the territory of the heavily guarded esoteric lore. (Das 1997: 66-68) It is seen that while in some cases, the gurus were male adepts, in most of the cases the gurus themselves were the women living on the edges of the society, and their practices were unorthodox. Emphasis has been laid time and again upon the fact that conventional society, ethicality, or morality has no place in the folds of the esoteric practices. (Das 1997: 97) The body becomes the basis of all practices, because it acts as the tangible reflection of the outer universe within. (Das 1997: 49)

While B. L. Suzuki argues that the heart of the Caryāpadas is choosing Bodhisattvacarya, i.e., the action of the Bodhisattva, over Nirvāṇa, or spiritual liberation for the self (Suzuki 1938: 23), the Caryāpadas by themselves do not speak of Bodhisattvacarya at all. The concept of Bodhisattvahood lies in the awakening of the Bodhicitta, or the enlightened mind, and the subsequent conscious choice of pushing back one’s own Nirvāṇa and willingly staying in the wheel of saṃsāra for the sake of helping other sentient beings (Flanagan 2011: 107) The Caryāpadas do list several ways through which one can attain Bodhicitta, but after that, there is a desire to detach

oneself from the wheel of saṃsāra. In this regard, one may refer to the pada composed by Tentanapāda, which talks about starving the ego in solitary existence. The pada refers to a female cow in the shed who is infertile, and will therefore bear no progeny. This has been interpreted as the fading of all attachment in this lifetime, and the assurance that there will be no more births for the adept. (Das 1997: 64) In another pada composed by Bhūsukupāda, the restless mind has been compared to a mouse, whose movement keeps the wheel of saṃsāra moving. Only if this ‘mouse’ is slain can the moving wheel of samsara stop. (Das 1997: 61) While one finds in the Caryāpadas the method of attainment of the Bodhicitta by the union between wisdom and compassion manifested through the physical union of the adepts, there is no significant mention of prioritizing compassion for other sentient beings over one’s personal mokṣa (Das 1997: 48-49).

Another very important, but also very disturbing aspect of the Caryāpadas, particularly the later ones, is the recurring theme of violence against the female figure. Bhūsukupāda, in one of his padas, depicts a scene of a hunt. The hunter persistently hunts the doe, and the doe’s own flesh is her enemy, because it makes her desirable to the hunter. (Das 1997: 61) It is possible for one to analyze the doe as a material being and the hunter as attachment. Negative passions like greed and anger, owe their source to a material body. The flesh symbolizes the ego attached to the material self. The fault of the woman or the doe is simply because she is a fleshly being and hence an object of desire for the male gaze of the hunter. This violent imagery of a doe being hunted invokes the imagery of exploitation of a woman who has not transcended her notion of the self yet.

The Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī, however, see the union of the male and female adept, i.e., Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, as not simply just the union of wisdom and compassion, but the union of materiality and consciousness, as found in the pada composed by Govindadāsa Kavirāja. (Sen 1957: 2) Transgression of social norms plays a very important role in Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī and it comes with the conventional illegitimacy of the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. The openness with which this relationship is depicted, is paired with Rādhā’s deep spiritual love for Kṛṣṇa and this sanctifies the relationship despite its unconventional nature. (Sen 1957: 8)

### **Popularity of Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa worship**

The Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa yugala mūrti, however, becomes popular only after the rise of Śrī Caitanya into prominence. His rise was followed by the origination and circulation of the lore that he was a combined manifestation of both Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. (Sen 1957: 8). The transgressive nature of the Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa love stories made it slightly inconvenient for social structures to assimilate or

appreciate the Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa lore. Rūpa Goswāmī, who was a courtier at Sultan Hussain Shah's court, and later became a renouncer following the ideals of Śrī Caitanya, played an important role in presenting the metaphorical and metaphysical dimensions of the lore, rather than the practice-oriented version of the same in his famous compositions, *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* and *Ujjwalañīlamanī*.

The pre-Caitanya era of Vaiṣṇava practices begins to recede to the peripheral rural communities, while philosophical and metaphorical aspects of the lore form the basis of the popular formats of Vaiṣṇavism, like the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. (Sen 1957: 10). The emergence of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu at this juncture in the history of Vaiṣṇava practices in Bengal, and broadly in India, marks a watershed moment. Śrī Caitanya's movement was mainly aimed to offer those people a place and a sense of belonging who had previously been outcasted and ostracized for their servitude to and for their interaction with the Muslim rulers and landowners. This brought a huge number of estranged Hindu people under the wing of the nascent Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava association and it became popular among the masses. One of the integral features of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition was to look upon Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu as a dual manifestation of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in the same body. Thus, the concept of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa as two separate entities were replaced by the idea that Rādhā is an archetype, - a state of a fully realized being, embodying Kṛṣṇa within herself. In *Śrī Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, the author, Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja explicitly calls Rādhā as the “ānandāṁśe hlādinī, sadāṁśe sandhinī, cidāṁśe samvit” which refers to Rādhā being the energy of pleasure in the portion of bliss, the existence of expanding energy in the eternal portion, and the complete faculty of knowledge and wisdom in the cognizant portion. Her existence is indispensable to the existence of Kṛṣṇa himself. (Goswami, 1557/2006: 21). The later esoteric texts, such as the *Rādhā Tantra* depict Rādhā (or Rādhikā) as an emanation of the supreme mother goddess Tripura Sundarī, someone who was born by the goddess's grace to guide Kṛṣṇa on the path of becoming whom he aspired to be. (Mukhopadhyay, 1876: 29)

## **Conclusion**

Thus, whether created as a two-dimensional figure to act as a gatekeeper of the core values and practices of the esoteric circle, or an archetype created for the female adepts and practitioners to embody, it can be safely said that Rādhā emerges as a child of collective consciousness in order to act as the guardian who holds the key to the door of realization. She presides over the act of union of the material with the metaphysical, which leads a sentient being to transcend their state of unrealized being. Rādhā is a gatekeeper as well as a legislator of love and sexuality in the oeuvre

of the Vaiṣṇava practices. Unlike the marginal women like the Ḍombī or Caṇḍālī of the era of the Caryāpadas, there is no forcing or exploiting of Rādhā to achieve enlightenment - her favour must be earned before all else. It is through her compassion that the practitioner is guided into the path of self-realization.

It can be inferred, while sexual union continues to be the focal point of practice throughout the age of the Caryāpadas to the age of the Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī, both preceding and succeeding Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu, the approach to the two spiritual paths has altered significantly. The Caryāpadas speak of sex simply as a means to an end, in order to transcend the material self. But in the Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī, one can see that the discipline has evolved to the point where sexuality becomes distant from the material body and is manifested in the form of devotion to the divine, particularly as the '*Madhura-bhāva*'. This change in perspective and approach speaks volumes about the changing human society and the evolving social dynamics across the centuries, from the era of the Caryāpadas to the era of the Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī. The central aspect of the continuously evolving narrative or the dynamics of the same has always rested in the statuses of and the roles played by the female adepts and practitioners.

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