

***The Epic of the Buddha: His Life and Teachings.* By Chittadhar Hṛdaya. Translated by Todd T. Lewis and Subarna Man Tuladhar. Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2019. 448 pages. \$24.95 (paperback), ISBN 9781611806199.**

Samuel M. Grimes
Fairfield University

The Epic of the Buddha: His Life and Teachings is the third (and final) incarnation of Todd T. Lewis and Subarna Man Tuladhar's translation of Chittadhar Hṛdaya's epic Newar poem, *Sugata Saurabha*. The Shambhala print, produced only in paperback, makes the Nepalese Buddhist masterpiece available to the widest possible audience. The translators make clear that this was the wish of the late poet, who authored the poem from prison while the religion expressed in the work and printing in the language in which he authored it were both outlawed.

The first incarnation of Lewis and Tuladhar's translation was a 2007 publication by the Harvard Oriental Series. This version contains the entirety of the original Newar poem, with the corresponding English translation on the facing pages. The English translation of the Harvard version was made to favor literalness over style, with the intended audience being those competent in both Newar and English who could use the English translation as an aid to reading the Newar directly. This is the only publication by the Harvard Oriental Series to date that includes a Newar text. The 2007 version contains a nearly-one-page introduction by Lewis, with several subsections detailing the poet, Newar Buddhism, and the context of the poem's composition.

This 2007 version was followed up in 2010 by an Oxford University Press printing that does not include the Newar original. It features a significantly changed English translation, favoring style over literalness. The intended audience for this volume is expanded to include scholars of Buddhism who may not have proficiency with Newar. The 2010 printing received both the Toshihide Numata Book Award in Buddhism and the Khyentse Foundation Prize for Outstanding Translation. The bulk of the 2007 introduction is in this version, but it has been moved to a part 2 following the translation, and the subsections are now standalone chapters. Some changes were made to the

text of these chapters, but for the most part they remain unchanged from the 2007 printing.

The 2019 Shambhala book is divided into two sections.¹ Following a brief introduction that provides a biography of the poet and his context, the English translation of the *Sugata Saurabha* is given as “part 1.” “Part 2” is a series of short chapters by Lewis that provide further context on a variety of subjects, including Newar Buddhism, the Rana regime the poet lived through, and the Sanskrit poetry tradition, to name a few. These chapters are unchanged from 2010 printing. It is not only the mastery of the Newar language and Sanskrit metrical schemes that led the translators to describe the poet as “a genius who can stand with such luminaries as Rabindranath Tagore, Haruki Murakami, or Lu Xun as one of the greatest writers of modern Asia” (p. viii); the circumstances under which such a marvelous and erudite work was penned were dire.

In Nepal in the first half of the twentieth century, Buddhism was practiced and studied under threat of persecution.² Despite this, Newar Buddhist publishing luminaries still produced work during this period. For example, Nishthananda Bajracharya smuggled in a

1. The layout of the 2010 Oxford University Press printing is the same as the 2019 Shambhala printing. A minor difference is that the OUP version restarts chapter numeration in part 2, whereas the Shambhala version does not, beginning part 2 with chapter 20. The OUP version has footnotes, whereas the Shambhala version has endnotes.

2. In 1846, with the help of Queen Rajya Lakshmi, the upstart courtier Jung Bahadur summoned several of his rivals to a yard in the Kathmandu palace where they were massacred. To legitimize his position, Jung Bahadur took the dynastic name “Rana” to signal a (dubious) connection to an ancient Gorkha family. For the next century Jung Bahadur and his descendants ruled Nepal under an authoritarian regime, reducing the king to a figurehead, and stamping out any perceived challenges. In their paranoia, the Ranas banned Buddhism itself in the early twentieth century, expelling a handful of Nepalese monks from the country in 1926 and closing the borders to Tibetan monastics. Newar, the language of the Kathmandu Valley, was deemed subversive around the same time, with the Ranas insisting all official and unofficial publications be made in the Gorkhali (now Nepali) language. Anyone who gave off even a whiff of “subversion” to the authoritarian regime was liable to be imprisoned or executed. Indeed, on one occasion several Newar cultural organizers were executed.

wooden printing press with moveable type piece-by-piece from India, which he used to surreptitiously publish his Nepal Bhāsā rendition of the *Lalitavistara-sūtra*. He created the work to individual order, and it was distributed secretly to whomever requested a copy. The threatening environment maintained by the Ranas engendered in the Newar Buddhist population a yearning for the most familiar Buddhist story—the life of Śākyamuni, Sarvārthasiddhi in most Newar tellings.

Chittadhar Hr̥daya composed *Sugata Saurabha* in the 1940s while he was imprisoned by the oppressive Rana regime for publishing an allegedly “subversive” poem (p. 4). In this environment, he wrote the poem on tiny slips of paper in his prison cell that he passed along to his sister when she came to visit him. In this painstaking way, he composed roughly seven full pages (seventy stanzas) a month during his five-year incarceration (p. 379n13). Each portion of the work had to be composed with only the poet’s memory of the complete stanzas that were already with his sister.

Although Newar Buddhism is known for being the only form of the wider religion that still preserves the Sanskritic Vajrayāna tradition that disappeared elsewhere in South Asia (or anywhere else), it also maintains a strong Mahāyānist character that commonly manifests in the form of storytelling. The tales from *jātakas* and *avadānas* are publicly recited by renowned storytellers, as is the life of the Buddha himself. Among the merchant class, the Urāy, of which Chittadhar was a member, the Mahāyāna *sans* Vajrayāna version of Newar Buddhism prevailed.

Part 2 of the book is several short chapters (chapters 20–27) by Lewis contextualizing the poem and Chittadhar’s place in Newar Buddhism. “The Life of the Buddha: Previous Accounts in the Buddhist Textual Tradition” notes texts from which Chittadhar was able to draw for his poem, including the *Lalitavistara-sūtra*, the *Mahāvastu*, Aśvaghōṣa’s *Buddhacarita*, and sources in the Pāli Canon. In “The Kāvya Sanskrit Poetry Tradition and the Indian Aesthetic Tradition,” Lewis locates the Newar *Sugata Saurabha* within the Indic poetic galaxy. Chittadhar regarded his poem as a *mahākāvya* and loaded the work with Sanskritic poetic conventions. He heavily employs embellishing and ornamental details (*alaṃkāra*) to increase the aesthetic beauty of the poem, he writes Newar lines employing a whopping twenty-five different Sanskrit meters, and he manages to employ all ten traditional aesthetic sentiments (*rasas*), plus an unconventional eleventh

rasa (*vātsalya*, paternal fondness). Lewis makes clear that the poet intentionally created his work to locate it within the great tradition of South Asian aesthetic composition, which this chapter demonstrates in a simple flourish.

“The Nepalese Context and Newar Cultural Traditions” gives the reader a brief overview of the modern history of Nepal, especially highlighting the authoritarian Rana regime and the place of the Newar people during the period of its rule. There is also a summary of the poetic tradition in the Nepal Bhāsā language. “Domestication of Newar Traditions in *Sugata Saurabha* as Those of the Ancient Shākya” demonstrates how Chittardhar was able to place the historical Buddha directly within a Newar context by asserting a commonly held Newar Buddhist tradition, namely, that the members of the Buddhist Śākya caste are descendants of the Śākya tribe into which Śākyamuni was born. The effect of this in the poem is, however, not so much about contemporary Nepalese politics, but rather a means through which Chittadhar can celebrate Newar culture and depict Sarvārthasiddhi’s hometown as an idealized, urban Newar paradise. The employment of so many common Newar cultural items, festivals, and tropes allows the poet to bridge the gap between the ancient Śākya and the modern Newars and place the former in a context that is immediately familiar to the latter. Far from being an archaic rendering of an ancient tale, the kingdom in *Sugata Saurabha* fits gracefully into a modern Newar city.

“The Modern Confluence of Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley: Reformist Theravāda and Traditional Mahāyāna” provides a brief history of Buddhist modernism and details the entry of modernist-inflected Theravāda into the Kathmandu Valley around the time that Chittadhar produced *Sugata Saurabha*. “Buddhist Doctrinal Emphases and Exposition” explores the range of Chittadhar’s textual sources (primarily Pāli ones, a direct result of the aforementioned entry of Theravāda into the Kathmandu Valley) and his perspective as a member of the merchant Urāy caste. Lewis emphasizes the poet’s skill in presenting teachings on Dharma, coming from the lips of the Buddha, in rich poetic language, employing the same rhyming schemes and metrical mastery found throughout the entire work. The result is an explication on the Dharma in a graceful flow of lyric and musical-sounding Newar. “The Spell of Idealizations and the Revitalization of Newar Civilization” highlights Chittadhar’s depiction of the Buddha living through a “golden age” (p. 369). As Lewis details earlier in part

2, Chittadhar was not living in such a golden age. In this final chapter, the potential cultural, political, and nationalist motivations of the poet are highlighted.

In the ethnohistorical context of mid-twentieth-century Nepal, Chittadhar Hṛdaya in *Sugata Saurabha* responds to the Kathmandu Newar Buddhist middle- and upper-class situation: a sense of geographic and political encirclement; Newar disunity, with some, mostly Buddhists, bitter and unreconciled to the new order, while another large subsection of the urban elite, mostly Newar Hindus, were serving as key figures in state bureaucracy; public schools teaching only Nepali, as many children were abandoning Newari language and culture; state repression of literary activities; Buddhists struggling against forces seeking “national unification” via Hindu laws, high-caste bureaucracy, and Brahmanical ritual; Pahari cultural dominance at the expense of Buddhism and indigenous legal systems; the decline of Newar Buddhist institutions and the traditional priestly (*vajrācārya*) elite. (p. 369)

The medium of poetry allows Chittadhar to present an idealized vision of what Newar culture could be, had it not been under the thumb of centuries of oppressive regimes, first the Gorkha Shahs who overthrew the Nepalese Malla dynasty, then the autocratic Ranas. Lewis closes the book to mark that Chittadhar’s vision, “A Utopian Vision for Nepal” (p. 377), was one centered around compassion, not one separating the Newars from the rest of the nation. Rather, the poet spent his life pushing for a more harmonious state but never advocated for the violence or political upheaval that plagued Nepal during the twentieth century. *Sugata Saurabha* is Chittadhar’s idealized vision of a kingdom and nation that champions “greater social unity, the foundation for hard work, and the means to national prosperity” (p. 378).

No collection of English-language Buddhist literature will be complete without Lewis and Tuladhar’s translation of Chittadhar Hṛdaya’s *Sugata Saurabha*. This poem, appearing in three separate printings by the same translators, tells a story familiar to all Buddhists but from the perspective of one of the most marginalized voices and groups within twentieth-century Buddhism. A curiosity surrounding the esoteric Newar forms of Buddhism has grown in recent decades (in no small way thanks to the work of scholars like Lewis) all over the Buddhist world. Chittadhar’s epic poem provides a wonderful point of access directly into the popular, devotional stratum of Newar Buddhism. Practitioners will especially be drawn to this familiar story that provides a lens into

an unfamiliar, but ancient, Newar Buddhist tradition. The poem could be kept on the nightstand to be studied chapter by chapter or read alongside other classic tellings of the life of Sarvārthasiddhi.

The book has great utility in the classroom as well. Vignettes and chapters from the translation itself can supplement other readings on the life of the Buddha. *Sugata Saurabha* has a place among the classics of this story, including the *Lalitavistara* and *Buddhacarita*. The poem may also be located within world literature generally, and Nepalese literature in particular, as an example of cultural revitalization efforts as a direct response to oppressive political regimes. The supplemental chapters of part 2 provide short and simple explanations of several topics that can both introduce the reader unfamiliar with Newar Buddhism and/or Nepalese history to both topics, as well as accompany other reading materials for courses on Newar Buddhism, Nepal, marginalized voices, Buddhist modernism, twentieth-century Asian literature, and similar subjects. To reiterate: no collection of English-language Buddhist literature will be complete without Lewis and Tuladhar's award-winning translation of Chittadhar Hṛdaya's masterful *Sugata Saurabha*.