

Sugata Saurabha. An Epic Poem from Nepal on the Life of the Buddha by Chittadhar Hṛdaya.

Translation by Todd T. Lewis & Subarna Man Tuladhar; Introduction and Part II by Todd T. Lewis.

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Sugata Saurabha. An Epic Poem from Nepal on the Life of the Buddha by Chittadhar Hṛdaya.

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Reviewed by Ingemar Grandin

This is a review of three works. The first is the Harvard edition, brought out some years ago, where Todd T. Lewis and Subarna Man Tuladhar have translated Chittadhar Hṛdaya's *Sugata saurabha* into English and commented on this text in a lengthy introduction of about 100 pages, and in which the original Newari text is rendered in the devanāgarī script. The second work is a new edition of this book, published by Oxford, which includes the translation (slightly revised) but not the Newari text, and in which the introduction has been reedited and reworked into a short introduction alongside a series of thematic essays. The third work, of course, is Hṛdaya's text itself.

Hṛdaya's text presents the Buddha's life-story in the form of a narrative poem. Hṛdaya pulled together Newari literature, the Indic tradition of *kāvya* poetry, and the literature on the Buddha in order to create an epic poem. *Sugata saurabha* thus belongs to the literary or the religious rather than the scholarly body of literature.

But, as the translators point out, Hṛdaya's method is to fill in content from his own culture where his Buddhist sources are silent. And with this, *Sugata saurabha* can be read as an ethnography of sorts of Newar civilisation. Hṛdaya presents this civilisation in terms of its religious festivals, its rituals, its ceremonies of birth and marriage, of the agriculture,

trade and artisanship underlying its economy, and of the urban character of its domestic life, the details of architecture, clothing, jewellery, foods, tools, utensils. The translators offer the reader an illuminating discussion on this aspect of *Sugata saurabha* (Oxford: 354–58; Harvard: xlv–xlix), including a useful table where Hṛdaya’s presentations of the different details of Newar culture are indexed. For a reader wanting to find out what Hṛdaya has to say about ‘clothes and jewellery’, ‘Newar urban life’, ‘rituals’ and so on, it will be easy to find the relevant pages.

While the Buddha’s renunciation is the major theme of Hṛdaya’s story, a strong undercurrent is a celebration of the materiality of life. There is not necessarily a contradiction here—it is precisely this rich life that Prince Siddhārtha chooses to leave. The texture of urban culture, the beauty of natural scenery, agriculture and foods, the long list of presents given at a wedding, the wares that shop-keepers display, the many forms of music, the skilful telling of the story in the text itself—all of this communicates a strong sense of ‘joy for life’ in the material world, in line with Lewis’s personal impression of the poet (Harvard: i). And this presentation is also in accord with Hṛdaya’s own community of Newar Buddhist laymen, who see *nirvāṇa* as a distant possibility to be achieved only after a long series of rebirths (Lewis 1996: 250) rather than from renunciation of life in this world.

The Newar community of merchant Buddhist laymen is one with which both translators are intimately familiar—Tuladhar belongs to this community himself, while Lewis has been conducting research among them since the 1980s. And as noted by the translators in their comments (Oxford: 377–8; Harvard: xlvii–lii), *Sugata saurabha* is ‘a biography of the Buddha from a merchant Upāsaka’s [devout layman] perspective’. Merchants are given a prominent position in the book, both in the description of urban life and as followers and patrons of the Buddha. One could even say that other groups, such as farmers, are somewhat ‘otherised’ by Hṛdaya:

Quarrels at home were rare and festive occasions frequent, even in the farmers’ huts (Quoted from Oxford: 38, cf. Harvard: 23)

Farmers are observed from some distance, their faces reddened by rice-beer and liquor, the men sweating from their heavy work, the women

exposing their calves to public view while working the soil.

It is clear, however, that in accordance with Newar civilisation, the farmers also live inside towns. In one vivid scene, the poet relates how farmers come from their different neighbourhoods (*tvāḥ*)—just as they would do from a Newar town such as Kathmandu—to work in the fields. The following scene is on the occasion of the ‘summer ploughing ceremony’, a standard story in biographies of the Buddha:

Taken to the field were sturdy and shapely oxen of different colors for plowing (Oxford: 76, Harvard: 65)

Yet this sits uneasily within a Newar setting. Newars—in most of their settlements—famously maintain a ‘taboo’ on ploughing and would see it as sinful to have a pair of oxen draw a plough (see Webster 1981 for more information). It is interesting to watch how Hṛdaya works his way around this problem. When describing the actual work, he says nothing about any ploughing taking place. Instead we observe men turning over the soil with their ‘digging hoes’ (*kū*), which is standard Newar practice.

The most graphic scenes in *Sugata saurabha* are those which the poet fills with details from Newar life: birth, marriage and festivals. Another scene with similar ethnographic richness is a dispute over water in Hṛdaya’s chapter 16. Here the Buddha’s own tribesmen, the Śākya and their neighbours, prepare for war over the scant water available for irrigation when the river dries up for lack of rain at the time of rice-transplantation. One would think that the poet’s sources would be similarly dry here: Newars have not been involved in warfare since their homeland was conquered by outsiders in 1769. Tuladhar and Lewis (Harvard: xciii; not in Oxford) suggest that the ‘scene of men coming out of their houses with swords recalls the Newar Mohani festival and its khadga yātra [sic; sword festival]’ and that at this point, Hṛdaya wants to counter the prevailing picture of Newars as non-martial (Oxford: 386; Harvard: lxxix).

Another possible source of inspiration for this depiction might be the ritual fights between lower and upper Kathmandu that are still in living memory among Toffin’s (1984: 201) and van den Hoek’s (2004: 12) informants. These fights, rather like the dispute over water, took place in the river bed, at the end of the dry season, just before the beginning of rice-growing, and would occur between close neighbours. The poet

describes how armed men march out into streets that echo with rāga *Mālakośa* as played on trumpets that, as we learn (from Harvard: 290), are called *bherī*. I have three comments here.

First, we know from Tingey's work (1994: 105) that these trumpets play only at most three different notes and hence they are used for 'idiosyncratic fanfares', not for melodies. Might this suggest that the poet, for once, is less well-informed here? Second, *bherī* trumpets do not belong to the Newar instrumentarium and consequently they fall outside of the poet's area of expertise. Instead, they were part of Shah army music, played by the Damāi caste of musicians (Tingey 1994: 31f). Third, instead of using the Shah conqueror's music for this martial scene, Hṛdaya could have employed the purely Newar *dhimaybājā*, whose thundering drums and crashing cymbals, according to Hṛdaya's associate, the Newar scholar Thakur Lal Manandhar, were employed precisely as war music (see Grandin 2011: 102). All in all, might this not suggest that the poet wanted to mark war as *non*-Newar rather than reclaiming martial qualities for the Newars? Such an interpretation would fit well with Lewis's (1996: 247) own observations on pacifism and the 'precept against violence' among Newars.

As 'a kind of cultural encyclopedia of Kathmandu Valley civilization' (Oxford: 356), *Sugata saurabha* is especially rich when it comes to music. Hṛdaya knew this field well, as witnessed by his *Nepali music* (Hridaya 1957), a short but pioneering text which was extensively quoted by the first Western scholar to study Newar music, A. A. Baké (ms.). In this text, Hṛdaya points out that rāgas as encountered in Newar music have 'our own stamp and colour, though the names of the ragas and raginis remained the same' (1957: 3) and are thus different from what is found in India. It is interesting to note, therefore, the way in which Hṛdaya cites the melodic content of raga *Mālakośa*: *re, pa, totāḥ ṣaḍaj, madhyam, ni, dha, ga byākaṃ komal* (Harvard: 291) which is to say that the second (*re*) and fifth (*pa*) notes of the scale are omitted, whereas the third (*ga*), the sixth (*dha*) and the seventh (*ni*) are all flat (*komal*). Similarly, the poet cites raga *Gauḍaśāraṅg* thus: *śuddha svarayā nāp gabaleṃ tivra madhyam* (Harvard: 42). This means that in this rāga, the fourth (*ma*) is sometimes natural, sometimes sharp, whereas the rest of the pitches are non-altered. It is in precisely this form that we encounter these two rāgas in compilations of contemporary Hindusthani practice, such as Kaufmann (1968), or indeed on the Internet.

A little surprisingly, then (and though *rāgas* such as *Basanta* and *Byāṃcali* that do have Newar ‘stamp and colour’ are mentioned by name in the work), in the passages where the poet presents specific melodic content this is not that of ‘Newar’ *rāgas* but that of contemporary ‘Indian’ *rāgas*!

That this is so is not evident from the English text, where the two passages quoted above are rendered in a less technical way (‘All the soft and low notes in the musical scale’ for *Mālakośa* on p. 291, ‘Appropriate notes, shrill and medium’ for *Gauḍaśāraṅg* on p. 42). On the topic of the technical details of music, I might add another comment. *Gujarāti* (Harvard: 42 and 108; Oxford: 55 and 116) is translated as ‘wooden flutes’ and ‘wind instruments’, while *rasan* (Harvard: 42 and 89; Oxford: 55) is given as ‘wind instrument’. To be more specific, these are both different sizes of oboes (Baké ms.: 17, Hoerbürger 1975: 72; photo of *rośam muhālī* in Darnal 2061: 88–89).

But these are ultimately just tiny details that in fact testify to the sheer complexity of the work undertaken by Lewis and Tuladhar. To do true justice to their achievement, a full team of reviewers would be required. My review here has primarily read *Sugata saurabha* as a reflection of and on Newar civilisation. And in this context, the book—in either of its editions—is a rich experience for the reader, made even more rewarding by the commentaries and footnotes provided in the translations. For a student of any aspect of Newar life, this is truly a canonical work; and I am certain that a review of the book from the perspective of Himalayan or South Asian literature, or of Buddhist studies would reach a similar conclusion.

As Lewis and Tuladhar point out, the complicated language of Hṛdaya’s original text would make *Sugata saurabha* tough reading for most speakers of Newari. So let me finally suggest the possibility of a South Asian edition of this book, incorporating as in the Harvard edition the original text in the devanāgarī script, and including the notes and comments as presented in the Oxford edition. This would be a fitting tribute and much in the spirit of Hṛdaya, the cultural activist who offered ‘body, mind, wealth’ (Harvard: xxiii, Oxford: 9) in the service of the Newar civilisation.

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