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Buddhist Sanskrit Literature of Nepal

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Review of *Buddhist Sanskrit Literature of Nepal*

Santosh K. Gupta^{*}

Buddhist Sanskrit Literature of Nepal. By Shanker Thapa. Seoul:
Minjoksa Publishing Company, 2005, 194 pages, ISBN:
8970096582 (paper).

As the birthplace of the historical Buddha and one of the main centers of Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, Nepal has long drawn the attention of eminent Buddhist scholars around the world. This Himalayan Kingdom not only played an important role in the expansion of Buddhism but also in the preservation of various ancient Buddhist traditions and texts. Mahāyāna / Vajrayāna texts preserved in Nepal—many of which are available nowhere else in the world—are of immense significance to the study and development of Buddhism. Until the mid-nineteenth century, however, these texts were relatively neglected, and virtually unknown to the outside world. Native Buddhist scholars, especially the Newars, have become involved in translation and publication of Buddhist apocrypha and other classical texts only very recently. This area thus needs more attention and proper scholarly mooring to bring out the true picture of the se significant Buddhist texts.

Dr. Shanker Thapa, Associate Professor in the Department of History at Tribhuvan University in Nepal has published a book titled *Buddhist Sanskrit Literature of Nepal*. This book is an important guide for those interested in Mahāyāna / Vajrayāna Buddhism in Nepal. Dr. Thapa aims to fill a gap in Buddhist history by providing information on specific Sanskrit texts in their

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historical context as well as a general list of catalogues published on these texts.

The author traces the historical roots of manuscript writing, covering an extended period of Nepal's history from the seventh to the seventeenth century. This period attests to a pragmatic approach in Sanskrit manuscript writing in Nepal. The aims of writing and the date of copying are mentioned in each text in the form of colophon s. The manuscripts are remarkably diverse in nature and cover various subject matters such as Buddhist philosophy, *sūtra*, *avadāna jātaka*, *pūja vidhi*, *mantra*, *dhāraṇī*, rituals, eulogy, commentary, art and architecture, painting, renovation and so on. Beside individual collections, Buddhist texts are preserved in the National Archives of Nepal, *Asa Saphu Kuthi* (Kathmandu), and in various libraries and *vihāra*. At present, Nepal's National Archive has a collection of some 175,000 microfilms of such texts.

This book provides an overview of some historical aspects of Buddhist tradition in Nepal by focusing particularly on the Buddhist literary tradition and its impact on lay society. Buddhism already existed in the Himalayan region before the Ashokan period. During the course of time, Vajrayāna Buddhism became a dominant form of Buddhism in Nepal. It continued to grow throughout the medieval period, as Nepal became the main center for Buddhist learning and scholarly activities after the Muslim invasions in India. Eminent Indian monks from great Indian Universities such as Nālanda, Somapuri and Vikramśīla fled to Nepal, bringing along a large number of Sanskrit texts, which were soon massively copied by Nepalese Buddhists.

The tradition of copying texts was regarded as an act of merit among Nepalese Buddhists, and this was the main reason that Nepal came to have such a huge collection of Buddhist manuscripts. Ordinary (lay) Buddhists purchased those texts and used them for religious purposes. Most are written in Sanskrit, using Newari, Ranjana, Bhujimol and Devanāgarī scripts. The manuscripts, written on palm leaves and collected in birch bark folios, are preserved intact and are in surprisingly good condition. The copiers were either Newars or Brahmins, given their use of scripts that belonged to

the literate class of that time. Lay people as well as royalty, including some Nepalese kings, took a keen interest in copying manuscripts.

The author discusses the contribution of Newar scholars to the development of Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts in Nepal. After the fourteenth century, Newar scholars did not continue the study and dissemination of tantric doctrine and practice and consequently the once highly-developed Newar scholastic tradition gradually declined. However, Nepal continued to play an intermediary role in the propagation of Buddhism between India and Tibet throughout the medieval period. For Tibetan monks, in particular, Nepal remained a sacred place of Buddhist learning for several centuries.

In the third chapter, the author explores the present location of Nepalese manuscripts, which are dispersed among various countries around the world. Nepalese manuscripts can be found in the collections of the Oriental Institute at Baroda, India, those of Tokyo, Taisho and Kyoto Universities of Japan, the British Museum, British Library, Oxford and Cambridge Universities and the Royal Asiatic Society of London in the United Kingdom, the Bibliothèque Nationale and Guimet Museum in Paris, France, the German Oriental Society at Halle, University of Berlin, Germany, and the University of St. Petersburg, Russia.

Dr. Thapa also deals with some of the prominent scholars who played important roles in the collection of Nepalese manuscripts. The first Westerner to take a keen interest in the collection of Nepalese manuscripts, eventually procuring hundreds of volumes, was a Briton named Brian Hodgson, who discovered a number of previously unknown Sanskrit Buddhist manuscripts and proceeded to distribute his collections to centers in India and Europe. (p. 35) Cecil Bendall, a prominent archaeologist who played an important role in a joint expedition organized by the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1889-90, tried not only to collect Nepalese manuscripts but also to study their historical, archaeological, and literary aspects. (p. 41) He procured several important texts such as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, *Karandavyuha Sūtra*, *Lalitavistara Sūtra*, *Pañcaraksa Sūtra*, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra* and *Vasudhārā Dhāraṇī*. Thereafter, many other

scholars visited Nepal for manuscript collection, including William Kirkpatrick, A. F. R. Hoernle, H. H. Wilson, Daniel Wright, and Ekai Kawaguchi. Dr. Thapa notes that individual foreign collectors collected manuscripts from the laity, while some also received manuscripts from the royal court of Nepal as gifts. In particular, Premier Chandra Shumsher presented several volumes of Buddhist manuscripts to Ekai Kawaguchi. His collection is now deposited in the Tokyo University Library.

Chapter four deals with the published catalogues of Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts of Nepal, giving detailed information about manuscripts housed both within Nepal and in British and other European countries. These descriptive catalogues provide information about the author, type of paper used, script, number of lines in a folio, size of the folio, and so on. This section also includes some prominent names such as Rajendra Lal Mitra, Rahul Sankrityayan, Hari Prasad Shastri and E. B. Cowell, who have written about Nepalese manuscripts. The appendix includes a huge list of manuscripts divided into nine parts, which is very helpful for researchers.

In short, *Buddhist Sanskrit Literature of Nepal*, is a scholarly, well-written work that serves as a valuable resource for enthusiasts of Mahayana/Vajrayana Buddhism in general and researchers of Sanskrit Buddhist manuscripts in particular. Dr. Shanker Thapa deserves thanks for producing such a valuable book.