

# Avadānas and Jātakas in the Newar Tradition of the Kathmandu Valley: Ritual Performances of Mahāyāna Buddhist Narratives

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## Abstract

Among all the Sanskrit story narratives available in the vast archive of textual collections in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, certain Buddhist tales among them found special provenance in the Mahāyāna culture of the Newars, the indigenous inhabitants of this surviving oasis of later Indic Hindu-Buddhist civilization. This paper will examine how two stories, the *Sṅgabheri Avadāna* and the *Siṃhalasārthabāhu Avadāna*, have been domesticated into the local religious field and adopted with special meaning for subgroups in the local society. The former recounts the consecutive, linked lives of a husband and wife, in a story of karmic retribution and reunion, a narrative that has a role in contemporary Buddhist widow mourning rites at the major stūpa in Nepal, Svayambhu. The latter, among the most popular *jātaka* narratives in the Buddhist world, relates the fate of a group of Buddhist merchants who are shipwrecked and captured by cannibalistic demonesses; in Nepal, this story was transposed into a tale of trans-Himalayan conflict, and its central figure is regarded as a hometown hero. Until today, a three-day festival procession of him circumnavigates the city of Kathmandu. This paper will explore these local domestications of Buddhist stories and analyze how these traditional celebrations have changed in the context of the shifting regional and political landscape of Nepal and the region.

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Among all the Sanskrit story narratives available in the vast archive of textual collections in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, certain Buddhist tales among them found special provenance in the Mahāyāna culture of the Newars, the indigenous inhabitants of this surviving oasis of later Indic Hindu-Buddhist civilization. Although they speak a Tibeto-Burmese language, Newars preserve the many strands of culture characteristic of later Indic Buddhism.

In a community whose living Buddhist traditions trace its origins back at least 1500 years, and where later traditions of Vajrayāna Buddhism have been woven into a rich fabric of Mahāyāna Buddhism, it is still the case today that *jātaka* and *avadāna* narratives remain central to Newar Buddhists. This paper examines the prominent stories that have been domesticated into the local religious field and adopted with special meaning for subgroups in the local society. I have defined ‘domestication’ as the dialectical process by which a religious tradition is adapted to a region’s or ethnic group’s socio-economic and cultural life.<sup>1</sup> While ‘Great traditions’ supply a clear spiritual direction to followers who are close to the charismatic founders, including norms of orthodox adaptation and missionizing, religious traditions’ historical survival is related—often paradoxically—to their being ‘multivocalic’ so that later devotees have a large spectrum of doctrine, situational instructions, and exemplary folktales to draw on. The study of ‘religious domestication’ seeks to demonstrate the underlying reasons for selectivity from the whole as the tradition evolves in specific places and times to the ‘logic of the locality’ (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Kathmandu's great story teller and pandit Badri Bajracharya at a 2013 gathering, with an image at right from the *Mañicuda Jātaka* he is recounting.

The most popular domesticated stories of a locality have engendered the community's familiarity such that

retelling the myths takes on the function of communion rather than communication. People listen to the stories not merely to learn something new (communication) but to relive, together, through ritual and collective retelling, the stories that they already know, stories about themselves (communion).

Buddhists, like many religious people, are story *dwellers* as well as story tellers.<sup>2</sup> A once-widespread tradition in Nepal had Buddhist pandits tell these narratives nightly every year throughout the Buddhist holy monsoon month of *Gumlā*, attracting hundreds to gather in neighborhood centers across the urban landscape (Figure 2).

Now these tales are moving into local comic book and lithographic renderings, joining the older cultural media of hanging paintings and frescoes that have long graced monasteries and patrons' homes.

After introducing the context and surveying the major stories still told in Nepal, I will focus on two important *avadānas*, the *Sṛṅgabheri Avadāna* and the *Siṃhalasārthabāhu Avadāna*, to chart how Newar Buddhist have long dwelt in these tales related long ago, according to tradition, by the Buddha.

### *I. Narratives in Newar Buddhist Tradition*

We begin with a brief survey of the stories and the media in which they are found, mindful of the audience. It is clear that Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley was in the mainstream of the tradition in ancient, pre-Islamic South Asia. Stories mentioned by the Chinese pilgrims are among those domesticated in the mid-montane Himalayan geography, just as they were in Khotan, Gandhara, and Bihar.

As centrally-visible as the great Buddhist monastics were in the elite cultures of South Asia, many also participated in South Asia's folk traditions. An early text identifies 'the folklorist'



Figure 2. *Gumlā* gathering to hear Buddhist narratives in 1981 in a northern Kathmandu neighborhood.<sup>111</sup>

(*tiraścakathika*) as one of six monastic specializations. Indeed, their participation was key to the success of Buddhism as a distinctive religious movement. Buddhist folklorists, like Jains and others, adopted and adapted elements of the folk traditions around them and connected them to their own system of religious reflection and meaning. As I-Tsing remarked in 690 C.E.:

The object of composing *jātakas* in verse is to teach the doctrine of universal salvation in a beautiful style, agreeable to the popular and attractive to readers.<sup>3</sup>

As time went on, and by 1192 when most Indian monasteries were abandoned or in ruins, Nepal became a great textual repository, where scholars, tantric teachers, scribes, and artists preserved and elaborated on the culture of late Indic Mahāyāna Buddhism. Unlike in the lower Gangetic plain, Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley was never extinguished, and its vast material culture – in texts, icons, architecture, sacred sites, and its distinctive Mahāyāna rituals and festivals – endures until the present day. Prominent among this cultural inventory are traditional narratives and paintings of the great scenes from them. Newar Buddhist tradition shares some similarities with Nyingma Tibetan Buddhism, although on the popular level, Buddhists in Nepal like Buddhists everywhere are concerned with making merit and performing rituals for both this life's material blessings and better next-life rebirth.

For at least the last 500 years and likely earlier, the stories in the Sanskrit collections were translated into the linguistic vernacular, just as they were transposed into the local geography, and then transmitted in local culture through paintings in a variety of display forms, from the vertical *paubha* (Tib. *tanka*) and on long horizontal multi-tier paintings, to the frescoes painted on monasteries and private homes. Tens of thousands of *paubha* paintings are extant in art museums and private collections, executed on silk or paper, with the artists using natural pigments and conforming to Indic iconographic norms. The greatest among them could paint in various styles to supply patrons wishing works in local, Tibetan, or Sino-Tibetan styles.<sup>4</sup>

Among the hundreds of tales in the monastic libraries, a dozen or so gained prominence, and then a few became identified with local landmarks in the Kathmandu Valley and associated with local ritual traditions. Perhaps the most famous tale is the *Mahāsattva Rāj Kumār Jātaka*, the story of the bodhisattva giving his life to save a starving tigress and her cubs. Local Newar tradition has it that the bodhisattva's sacrifice was made near a cliff in an hour or so walk from the city of Dhulikhel, east of and just outside of the Kathmandu Valley proper (Figure 3).

So central is this story to Newar Buddhist identity that it has continued to be retold, retranslated, and repainted right into the modern era (Figure 4).

Another prominent rebirth story domesticated in Nepal is the *Mañicūda Jātaka*. It is the story of the bodhisattva who gives up a birthmark jewel embedded into his head to make a medicine that saves a distant people from an epidemic, losing his life in making this sacrifice. The place renowned for being the location of this extraordinarily compassionate act is an upper slope on Shipo-cho (Nepali: Shivapuri), one of the four mountains that define the Kathmandu Valley located to the north. Like the Mahāsattva Rāj Kumār site, it has a pond and hillock that are places of pilgrimage rituals and by Newar Buddhists, and this story is also depicted in local art (Figure 5).

Interestingly, what is doubtless the most popular *jātaka* narrative in the Buddhist world, the *Vishvāntara Jātaka*, does not have this embeddedness in Newar life or space, though it has been depicted in a few instances in local public art.

The two stories of interest in the remainder of this paper are strongly present in local Newar Buddhism: one is connected with regional geography and the trans-regional trade between Kathmandu and Tibet, the *Sīnhalasārthabāhu Avadāna*.

The second, the *Sṛṅgabheri Avadāna*, has been connected with Buddhist widow mourning rites at one of the Kathmandu Valley's major *stūpas*, Svayambhū. We will start with the latter.

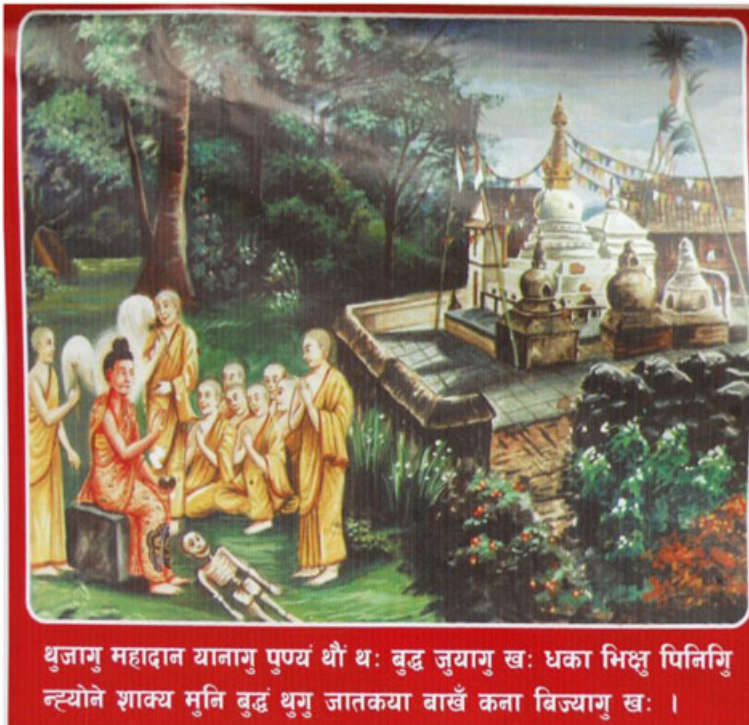


Figure 3. Lithograph showing the Buddha recounting a former incarnation in which he sacrificed his life to prevent a starving tigress from devouring her cubs. The current pilgrimage site with its *stūpas* is shown at the right.

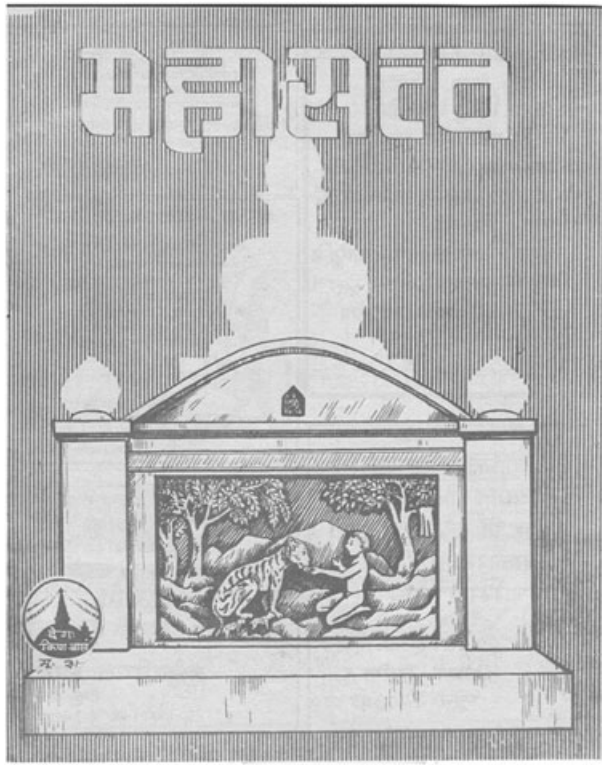


Figure 4. A recent locally-published comic book showing the bodhisattva's self-sacrifice to the tigress.



Figure 5. A modern painting on a Newar Buddhist house. Shown is the pivotal moment in the *Manicuda Jātaka*, when the bodhisattva offers to donate a gem embedded in his head to save distant peoples, dying as a result.

## II. The *Sṛṅgabheri Avadāna*: Spouses and *Stūpas*

The *Sṛṅgabheri Avadāna* recounts the consecutive, linked lives of a husband and wife, in a story of karmic retribution and reunion, a narrative that has a role in contemporary Buddhist widow mourning rites at the major *stūpa* in Nepal, Svayambhū.

### THE TALE RETOLD

Once there was a king named Simhaketu who ruled the city of Śaṣipattana. The King there had no consideration for the lives of other living beings and every day visited the forest to hunt. With his bow and arrow, he killed many different wild birds and beasts such as deer, tigers, and bears. Unable to bear the daily sight of her husband taking the lives of wild birds and beasts in the forest, Queen Surakṣanī said to her husband one day,

‘O my Lord! I must make an urgent request: Please give up hunting the wild birds and beasts in the forest. Listen! The demerit of taking the lives of living beings will subject you to great suffering in future births.

[She quoted verses:]

*Ahimsā* is the best among knowledges,  
The greatest of all teachings.  
*Ahimsā* is the best among virtues,  
The greatest of all meditations.

[Surakṣanī continued:] If men say they earnestly seek salvation, they should be non-violent in body, speech and mind, toward all living beings. O my Lord! If you so wish, you may pronounce the names of the Triratna seeking refuge, worship a *caitya* while saying prayers and circumambulating, give liberally to the *bhikṣus*, the brahmans, *ācāryas*, and show compassion to many suffering ones. By so doing, your happiness here and in the hereafter will be assured.’

Hearing this, the king replied,

‘Darling! What are you saying? Don’t you know that a son born in a *kṣatriya* family can take his pleasure in hunting wild birds and beasts in the forest?’

Having discerned the king’s attitude, the queen still tried her best to change his mind but could not stop him from hunting in the forest. After a certain time, the king passed away and Surakṣanī was so upset at his death that she immolated herself on her husband’s funeral pyre.

His wicked hunting of the wild birds and beasts in the forest caused the king to be consigned to purgatory and afterwards be reincarnated as a buffalo in the same city of Śaṣipattana. But Queen Surakṣanī as a result of her meritorious deeds, including sparing the lives of living beings and being chaste and faithful to her husband, was reincarnated as a woman in a certain brahman family in the same city of Śaṣipattana.

The brahman couple became very glad when she was born to them. They celebrated the name-giving ceremony of the baby girl in accordance with their custom. The name of Rūpavati [‘Beautiful One’] was given to the child because she was very beautiful. The baby was brought up with proper care and gradually grew up like a lotus in a pond. When Rūpavati became a

mature girl, her father gave her the job of tending a buffalo in the forest. Rūpavati every day tended her buffalo, cleaned his shed, and took great care of him.

Because Rūpavati was beautiful, many people came to propose marriage. Her parents discussed this and eventually broached the subject,

‘O Rūpavati! Now you have come of age. People have come to us asking for you in marriage. Do you want to marry?’

The daughter answered her parents,

‘Dear Father and Mother, I do not want to be married. Please do not insist on it. I prefer staying unmarried and devoting myself to you here. I will not marry.’

Hearing this, the parents gave up the idea of giving their only daughter in marriage and she remained at home.

One day Rūpavati was in the forest as usual tending her buffalo. While she was sitting under a tree looking at the many-hued blossoms, listening to the sweet birdsongs, and smelling many colorful sweet-scented flowers, a bodhisattva named Suparaga, emanating brilliant light from his body, descended from the sky and stood before her. He said,

‘O Rūpavati! The buffalo you are tending was your husband in a previous birth. In his former existence, he hunted many birds and beasts in the forest. As a result of this, he is now reborn as a buffalo. For his past wicked deeds, the buffalo will be killed and devoured by the birds and beasts of the forest. Rūpavati! If you wish to assist the husband of your previous birth to attain a good destiny, collect the mortal remains of the buffalo after it is killed and devoured, then deposit them inside a sand caitya. One of the two horns of the buffalo may be used for offering water to the caitya and the other horn may be used as a trumpet at the time of circumambulating it.’

Having said this to Rūpavati, Suparaga Bodhisattva disappeared miraculously. Then Rūpavati also remembered the facts of her previous birth and took even greater care of the buffalo by taking it to the forest and feeding it nutritious grasses.

One day as usual, Rūpavati was sitting under a tree while tending her buffalo. After eating grass nearby, the buffalo wandered off to drink water from a stream in the forest. In an instant, tigers and lions attacked the buffalo and tortured it to death. Then they and bears, vultures, and other birds devoured its flesh, leaving only bones and the two horns behind.

[At just this same time] Rūpavati heard a strange sound made by the buffalo, and it did not come back as usual from the stream. Very much agitated, she went to the stream looking for the buffalo but did not find it. Instead, she saw only the dead animal’s bones and two horns left behind. At the sight of the buffalo’s bones and horns, Rūpavati wept. Taking them affectionately in her arms, she said to herself,

‘What bodhisattva Suparaga prophesied has come true.’

She then returned home crying and related to her parents all that had happened to her in the forest that day. Upon hearing Rūpavati’s story, her parents comforted her, saying,

‘Enough, enough! Do not mourn the death of one buffalo very much. We will buy another.’ ...

Then Rūpavati went again to the streamside, collected all the pieces of bone, and buried them in a sand *caitya*, all as advised by Suparaga Bodhisattva. She next used one of the two horns of the buffalo for offering water to the *caitya* and the other for playing while circumambulating and performing a *pañcopacāra pūjā*. She worshipped the *caitya* in this way daily. One day during her *caitya* worship, while Rūpavati was offering water with one of the horns and blowing the other, a bejeweled *caitya* appeared in the sky emitting radiant light in all directions. She was surprised and with folded hands looked skyward in great reverence.

Then the *caitya* that appeared in the sky descended to the earth and merged into the sand *caitya* in which the bones of the buffalo were buried. When the bejeweled *caitya* did so, the sand *caitya* was absorbed into it. Because of the presence of the *caitya* there, stone walls and other masonry constructions came into sight by themselves around the *caitya* to make a high-walled courtyard. Doorways and festoons also appeared, just as plants possessing different flowers and fruits started growing all around. This is not all. From the horn of the buffalo that was used for blowing, a person emerged from it, a young man. At that sight of the individual springing from the horn, Rūpavati became very surprised and said,

‘Who are you and where did you come from?’

He replied, ‘How could you not recognize me,

O faithful woman! You liberated your husband through your conjugal fidelity and pious charitable acts. O Rūpavati! I have been able to come out of the horn, liberated on this day. It is all due to your accumulation of *karman*. Do you not know that in our former existences I was the king of this city and you were my queen Surakṣanī. Although you tried to prevent me from going to the forest to hunt birds and beasts, I insisted upon doing so. As a result of these wicked deeds, I was consigned to purgatory, subjected to great suffering. Ultimately I was reborn as a buffalo. Now I am liberated through your pious meritorious *caitya* worship accompanied by buffalo horn playing.’

Upon hearing this, Rūpavati, said,

‘Oh! How fortunate I have been! As a result of the pious act of this *caitya* worship I have been able to end the separation and rejoin my husband.’

Jubilant, they both circumambulated the *caitya*. Then the person emanating from the horn chanted the goddess Tara’s name and remained seated before the *caitya*. He recited prayers from a holy text while blowing on the horn. The whole of Śaṣipattana city echoed with the sound produced by the horn. Once the citizens heard the pleasant sound of the horn, they gathered there. All who assembled around the *caitya* were taken aback to see Rūpavati seated beside a handsome person, and so they asked her who he was. At that time, Rūpavati related the whole story of how Suparaga Bodhisattva had prophesied these events, how they had lived in their previous births as King Simhaketu and Queen Surakṣani in Śaṣipattana, and what had happened due to the sand *caitya*.

The people assembled there were gladdened after hearing this and realized that the person emanating from the horn and the brahman lady were formerly their king and queen. Both of them were taken to the city in an elaborate, joyful procession. Then the person emanating from the horn was given the name of Bhadra Śṅga and was enthroned as king. Then King Bhadra Śṅga and Queen Rūpavati ruled over the city of Śaṣipattana happily. One day, King Bhadra Śṅga invited the citizens to his palace to tell them the story of how his queen delivered him



from his sufferings in purgatory by her pious and charitable devotional actions and how he eventually succeeded in ascending to the throne of Śaṣipattana for the well-being of the people. King Bhadra Śṅga and Queen Rūpavati lived happily for many years. King Bhadra Śṅga made it widely known to his countrymen how his wife delivered him from his sufferings in purgatory. He preached and propagated the significance and sanctity of *caitya* worship and reigned happily over the country. This is what was told to Prince Puṣpaketu by Vipāsvī Buddha (Figure 6).



#### LIVING THE TEXT'S PROMISE: STŪPA RITUALS DURING MOURNING

The modern Newar *pandit* in his introduction to the printed texts asserts that the old custom was for devotees to venerate all stupas in the Kathmandu Valley with buffalo horn-playing processions for two full months each year, the midsummer *Gumlā* and the fall *Kachalā*. The Buddhist community in the former capital Bhaktapur, in fact, still does organize morning musical processions led by devotees blowing buffalo horns who visit all *stūpas* within the town during the monsoon holy month called *Gumlā*. Today, the *avadāna*-related horn-blowing practice in Kathmandu is sponsored mainly by families in the first year of mourning and usually by widows. The regular performance of this *caitya* veneration is now done by a special *vihāra goṣṭhī* located at Svayambhū (Figure 7).

A team of young men from the Śākya caste sangha circumambulate the Svayambhū *stūpa* complex each morning during *Gumlā*. Their performance is usually contracted by mourning families at the start of the month. It seems likely that some Buddhists in Patan participate in the Mataya Festival in connection with this text.

Newar Buddhists have been influenced by the text in other, optional observances. Like the heroine in the story, Newar devotees also mold sand *caityas* at riverside confluences called *fīrthas* to make merit, most commonly as part of *śrāddha pūjās* that feed and transfer merit to the



Figure 6. Scene from a long 17th century hanging painting from the Kathmandu Valley illustrating the magical appearance of the virtuous Rūpavati's former husband in a buffalo horn, after she performed a ritual in front of a Buddhist *stūpa*. A short caption strip can be seen below the figures, explaining the action.



Figure 7. The *bajan* blowing on buffalo horns, circumambulating the Svayambhū *stūpa* during *Gumlā* at the behest of mourning families.

recently dead. Although modern families making these postmortem *caityas* may not articulate the relationship, this widespread practice doubtless reflects the *Sṛṅgabheri Avadāna*'s textual influences.

Our text has an explicit connection with the custom of *upāsakas* fashioning clay *caityas* using special molds. Several Newar Buddhist collective rituals called *vratas* require manufacturing many of these diminutive images. The *avadāna* is linked to some versions of the popular *lakṣacaitya vrata*: as the title implies, families mold a hundred thousand (*lakṣa-*) or more miniature *caityas* over a given period and celebrate the completion with a special ritual (*vrata*) that includes the reading of the *Sṛṅgabheri Avadāna*. When a 19th century Newar pandit in fact composed an appendix to a local copy of the classical narrative *Buddhacarita* composed by the ancient writer Aśvagoṣa, he added this story and the ritual, confirming that this association between text and ritual practice likely has a long local history (Cowell 1969: 199).

### III. Merchants, Loyalty to Spouses, and Group Ritual: The *Siṃhalasārthabāhu Avadāna*

The elective affinity between Buddhism and merchants is an essential element in the history of this faith, with prominent members of this ancient Indic caste recorded as the first converts, supporters, and the patrons who built the material culture of Buddhism. Monastic networks and trade routes are congruent in Buddhist history, with a host of synergies benefiting both communities in myriad ways. Here again, Newar Buddhism is in this ancient and medieval matrix: just as the Kathmandu Valley's soils supported the material surpluses that allowed for extraordinary cultural endeavor, it was also the Valley's place in the trans-Himalayan caravan routes that allowed this *entrepot* to become a center of great material and cultural wealth.

In the central trans-Himalayan region by the time of our text's early local redactions (1400 C.E.), this ancient relationship between merchants and Buddhism endured. Highland

salt, gold, silver, musk, and yak tails were valuable commodities in the plains, and a wide variety of diaspora trade networks existed to exchange products for them. In the Kathmandu Valley and environs, the dominant merchants were Newar Buddhists. The *Siṃhalasārthabāhu Avadāna* is one told by and directed toward their community.

The *Siṃhalasārthabāhu Avadāna* is also a widely-known narrative in the Buddhist world. Its Sanskrit and Pali recensions relate the fate of a group of ocean-crossing Buddhist merchants who are shipwrecked and captured by cannibalistic demonesses, one or some of whom escape by riding on the back of a flying horse, their safe return home due to the karma of their Buddhist devotion and the wiles of the bodhisattva. In Nepal, this story was transposed into a tale of trans-Himalayan conflict: the ocean becomes the Tsangpo River<sup>5</sup> on the Tibetan plateau, the horse is the incarnation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, and its central figure, the lead merchant, is regarded as a hometown hero (Figure 8).

#### THE TALE OF SEX AND VIOLENCE RETOLD

##### Section A

The tale opens by introducing a wealthy family with a history of long-distance trade. Although the parents want their only son to live off of the great largess created by past success, he has other plans, arguing against complacency by stating his need to make more money for *dāna*. Gaining their reluctant permission, Siṃhala assembles a 500-man caravan and sets off overland. The only event reported en route is that members of the party damage a *caitya*, to the consternation of the leader who vows to make repairs later. Eventually they reach a great 'sea,' which the Newari text glosses as the Brahmaputra River, where they take a ferry but are overtaken by a storm and are shipwrecked, barely escaping with their lives.

Once ashore, they are greeted by an equal number of what appear to be beautiful young women, but who are, unbeknownst to them, flesh-eating *rākṣasīs* ('demonesses'). In this



Figure 8. The hanging horizontal painting illustrating the *Siṃhalasārthabāhu Avadāna*.

country called Ratnapura, they are treated as lords whom the alluring consorts wine, dine, and eventually seduce. Says the leader of the *rākṣasī*:

O Masters, how great is our fortune.... We have lived alone in the country called Ratnapura and we also have come here seeking virile men, since we are now fully mature and beautiful. By our good luck we have found you... Please come to our Ratnapura and make love to us ... in all the different ways.

This is all to the merchants' great collective delight, and only after seven days, the text notes, do they finally go to sleep. Awakened from his slumber, leader *Siṃhala* is addressed by *Avalokiteśvara* from a lamp and told the truth about the traders' lovers. To allay his disbelief, *Siṃhala* is told to look inside a high-walled fortress outside the city and he sees the horrifying sight of earlier traders who are imprisoned and slowly being cannibalized by the *rākṣasīs*. *Siṃhala* talks to the inmates, then returns and receives further instructions from the *bodhisattva* (Figure 9).

Next day, he assembles his men surreptitiously. The caravan leader elicits numerous opinions and all report feeling elated about their present fortunes. Six speeches are quoted in the text.<sup>6</sup> Great consternation greets *Siṃhala*'s report regarding the true identity of their young objects of affection. He also informs them of *Avalokiteśvara*'s instruction for salvation: to go to a sandy shore of the *Brahmaputra*, meet a divine horse there, and follow its instructions exactly.

The day comes and they all slip away to meet the horse named *Varahaka* who instructs them:

'O five hundred merchants, if you have the wish to go across the river, I will send you across. Until you reach the other side, you must remember the *Tīratna* and not look back. If you obey this, I will deliver all of you to the other side.'

They hold on and take off. But the *rākṣasīs* quickly discover their flight, assume their horrific forms, then fly behind their former paramours, seeking their return: Flying up close to them, the *rākṣasīs* made lamentations as to elicit sympathy ...[and] create the illusion of enchantment and love. From behind them, they cried,



Figure 9. Scene from a displayed long horizontal painting showing the hero *Siṃhala* listening to the voice from a wick lamp.

'O Masters! Where are you going? Are you leaving us with youthful figures, whose longings you have satisfied in Ratnapura? Where are you going? Why are you disgracing us? What misery! O Masters! Why are you going, abandoning your royal robes and sensual pleasures, forgetting the virtues of heaven-like Ratnapura, forsaking our love? O Husbands, Beloved Ones, Lords of Life! Being unable to subdue the longing for enjoyment and the various ways of sex, we have followed after you. Let us accompany you to your country. If you will not do so, then just look back a little, show us just a little glimpse of your faces. How can you abandon our love and not give us even a glimpse of your faces? We will be helpless! Because of you, we will die! We never thought that you could be so cruel!'

They cried on and on with these and other love-inducing words, speaking to them as they followed [behind] in the sky.

Eventually, all but Siṃhala look back, fall off, and are eaten alive. The text comments that the bad karma from their earlier damaging of the *caitya* was also involved in this catastrophe. Set down on the other shore, the now-solitary Siṃhala thanks Avalokiteśvara, having been informed that his safety was ensured by the past performance of a popular Mahāyāna ritual, the *aṣṭamī vrata*. After he receives a sword, a prediction of his future, and a special *darśan* of the departing bodhisattva, Siṃhala sets off for home (Figure 10).

## Section B

The *rākṣasīs* force the demoness paramour of Siṃhala to pursue him. She creates an apparitional child who resembles Siṃhala and approaches a caravan she meets, concocting a story of Siṃhala abandoning her after they were married and later shipwrecked. She takes refuge in them, expressing Buddhist devotions and persuades them to confront the hero.

Once Siṃhala tells them his experience, they flee in terror. Siṃhala finally reaches home, to his parents' great relief. But soon the *rākṣasī* arrives, telling the same tale to a gathering crowd. Struck by her beauty and moved by the sight of her son, they demand that the caravan leader's



Figure 10. Scene from the displayed horizontal painting showing the merchants who cannot resist the enticements of their former demoness-lovers, falling from the flying horse (embodied Avalokiteśvara).

father force his son to live up to his paternal responsibilities and admit her into the house. They make their case for compassionate forgiveness:

‘Having married this woman who seems to be a heavenly nymph, a blameless woman, why did you abandon her in the forest? Even if blameworthy, forgive her. Welcome this princess who has a son and please keep her inside our home.’

Convinced of his son’s guilt, the father counsels:

‘O Son, all women are *rākṣasīs*. Therefore, after forgiving her faults, you must love her.’

But *Siṃhala* refuses and angrily gives an ultimatum: if she is admitted to the house, he will depart. The parents, of course, side with their son and throw her out.

The same scene then unfolds at the king’s palace, where the *rākṣasī* has repeated her story and taken refuge. Called before the king, *Siṃhala* again hears strong advice,

‘All women are *rākṣasīs*! Forgive them and love them.’

Having himself been ‘caught by lust’, the king also proposes, ‘If you do not really like her, then turn her over to me.’ The king disbelieves the caravan leader’s disavowals and takes in the alluring woman along with her child.

Several days later, vultures are seen circling the royal palace and *Siṃhala* leads the citizenry in discovering that all the inhabitants had been devoured by *rākṣasīs*, who flee back to their homeland (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Scene showing the *rākṣasīs* fleeing *Siṃhala* after murdering everyone in the palace. Here, as throughout the long horizontal painting, a lower panel provides captions.



Figure 12. Simhala subduing the demonesses, forgoing capital punishment to banish them to a distant land.

### Section C

The citizens meet and elect Simhala king. He establishes a just and prosperous society centered on refuge in the Triratna and marked by the regular observance of the *aṣṭamī vrata*. Eventually, he organizes an army that returns to Ratnapura and routs the *rākṣasīs* after a fierce battle (Figure 12). Once the *rākṣasīs* surrender, Simhala responds to their pitiful confessions that elicit his guarded compassion. He does not execute any but makes each take an oath to go to a far-away forest and never return. He then converts Ratnapura to Buddhism, introduces the *vrata* and social reforms, and finally returns to his home land, where his citizens

‘cultivated virtuous minds, served the Triratna, found both pleasure and happiness’.



#### LIVING IN THE WORLD OF THE TEXT

The domestication of the *Siṃhalasārthabāhu* narrative textual tradition was pan-Himalayan. Tibetan ferries on the Brahmaputra to this day bear the bow decoration of Varahaka, the flying horse, and a *stūpa* in Lhasa is connected in local lore with the tale.

The tradition took special elaborateness in the merchant community of Kathmandu. The hero of the story is regarded as a bodhisattva, and a large gilded image of him is enshrined in one of Kathmandu’s oldest Buddhist monastic temples (Vikramaśīla Mahāvihāra), dating back to the 11th century.<sup>7</sup> A visit to this shrine was felt to be propitious before commencing the one-month overland journey to Tibet. This bodhisattva is also worshiped in the yearly monastery festival. For this, an image of Dīpankara Buddha associated with the hero (who bows before the fixed Simhala shrine before the proceedings set out) is carried in a three-day procession around the city, accompanied by a gold-inscribed *Prajñāpāramitā* text housed in a palanquin. This entourage, accompanied by musicians and *goṣṭhī* members, visits many neighborhoods, especially those where Tibetan traders predominate (Figure 13).

The narrative’s special and repeated endorsement of the *aṣṭamī vrata*, also called the *uposatha vrata*, legitimates and supports Newar Buddhists performing this half-day ritual usually performed on the eighth lunar days each month (*aṣṭamī*), usually in family or neighborhood groups.

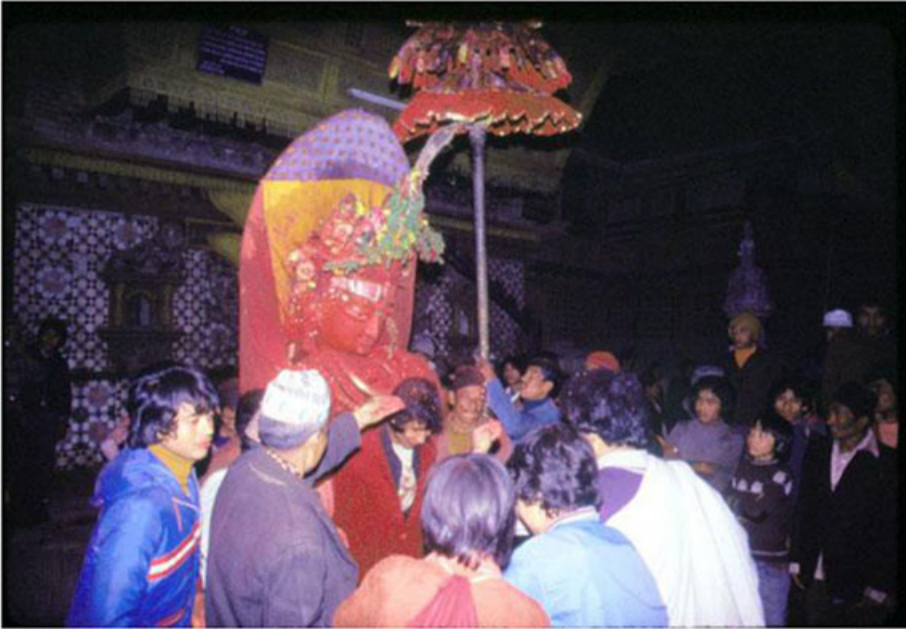


Figure 13. The image carried in a procession associated with the hero of the *Siṃhalasārthabāhu Avadāna*.

Other contextual factors are also at work in making this text so prominent in local Newar Buddhist culture. The men who traded in Lhasa went for years at a time, and some married Tibetan wives, most of whom were younger women. So while the outspoken anti-female assertions in the text can be seen as part of the standard Buddhist monastic condemnation of females on male spirituality, in the families left behind in Kathmandu, and especially for the spouses separated from their Lhasa-trader husbands, the resonance would go deeper: the dangerous *rakṣasī*-s could be identified with the Tibetan second wives, to whom loyalty by the husbands could eat away profits as well as affection. As this story's messages about gender attitudes, ethnic relations, and kin ties would take more space than allotted to unpack, they cannot be delved into here.<sup>8</sup>

#### IV. Conclusions

Texts have contexts of composition and reception, and narratives that are important in history became embedded in communities whose elders and literati told and retold them, painted them on canvas and monastery walls, and whose musicians wove them into song. This paper has explored the record of narrative depiction in the various religious art forms of the Kathmandu Valley, examined the record of *avadānas* told in public story telling sessions over the last decades, and related these traditions to the recent history of change in the Newar Buddhist community. A few final observations can be made as a conclusion.

##### 1. NARRATIVES ARE A GENRE WITHOUT FIRM BOUNDARIES

In Newar tradition, Buddhist narratives are found woven into many textual genres, not simply those identified as '*avadāna*', or '*jātaka*'. They are also part of vernacular ritual texts written for Buddhist monk-priests, guidebooks for their ritual performances that include an interlude of storytelling as part of many devotional, merit-making rites. So there are also narratives in texts



that are found inserted as the genre of *vrata-kathā* and *dhāraṇī-kathā*, in both cases serving to provide testimonials about the positive results others have received from performing the ritual or reciting the mantra formulae, respectively. When stories have been deeply incorporated into a Buddhist community, there are multiple vernacular textual recensions of the tale that adapt it to particular historical moments. In the case of storytelling done live before the public, there is yet another level of domestication of the story: a chance to weave in current local, regional, or world events. What the Newar narratives indicate to a scholar familiar with a text's context is that just because a text is in an archive, or a painting on a wall, does not automatically allow a historian to draw conclusions about its importance in a community, or how it was read/heard. This has to be demonstrated, not assumed just due to its mere presence. An awareness of the living Newar tradition makes such a simplistic historical assumption problematical.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. LOCAL ETHNIC IDENTITY/CONNECTION WITH BUDDHA SHĀKYAMUNI

In late antiquity across South Asia, peoples sought to find connections to the Buddha that ennobled their ethnic/geographical identities and augmented the power of a polity's devotion. This was done with the medium of Buddha's relics *and* with stories. The former produced across the Buddhist world place-specific narratives of discovering relics, transferring them, and building monuments for them.

When there was no epigraphic or canonical textual record for having the Buddha visit a place outside the Gangetic holy land, some Buddhist communities have recounted stories of his supernatural visits, which are well-documented, for example, in Sri Lanka and Burma. Another clear alternative to this was to find connections through the pre-enlightenment, bodhisattva incarnations of the future Buddha, and here the vast *avadāna* and *jātaka* literature offered many rebirths and so many lineages of possible earlier life residences. This linkage with the Buddha and his earlier incarnations is visible in Nepalese tradition in a variety of ways dating back to the earliest records of the Valley.<sup>10</sup> In preparing this paper, in fact, I found that a Newar Buddhist web page<sup>11</sup> last year posted some text that follows this same need with the following assertion:

As per the Nepalese Jātaka sources of the Buddha and ancient Nepalese texts, the existence of Simhalaśārthabāhu, Mañichuda Hill and Namo Buddha Stūpa in Kathmandu Valley indicates that Lord Śakyamuni was not only born in Nepal and even visited Kathmandu Valley in person during his life time, but that he took birth in Nepal as a bodhisattva in his at least three previous births as Simhalaśārthabāhu, King Mañicuda, and Prince Mahāsattvarājkuṃār.

Newar Buddhists are indeed still 'story dwellers'.

## 3. CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS AS PART OF MERIT-MAKING RITUALS, CAITYA CONSTRUCTIONS

Buddhist narratives have a central position in the ongoing practice of Buddhism for householders. If 95% of Buddhists past and present were householders with families living in the world, their concern was not immediately the quest for nirvāṇa; it was for making merit and securing the life's blessings in this world and the next. All of the stories from Nepal highlighted in this article have led the Newar Buddhist community to take part in rituals at *stūpas* and in monasteries, go on pilgrimage and build permanent and temporary monuments, all supporting the experts in the Newar Buddhist *sangha*, ritualists and storytellers, with material donations. Buddhist narratives, in short, are central to the perpetuation of the tradition. While the complex, domesticated culture of popular narratives in Newar tradition may seem far removed from the imagined settings of ancient Indic Buddhist communities, it is my suggestion that the logic

of localization and the lure of ethnic identification with Śakyamuni and his earlier incarnations have been a potent force in the history of Buddhist narrative, in both the past and today.

### Short Biography

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis 2000, page 12.

<sup>2</sup> Darrell Fasching, *World Religions Today*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 17.

<sup>3</sup> J. Takakasu, trans., *A Record of the Buddhist Religion* [London: Clarendon, 1896], p. 163.

<sup>4</sup> The tradition continues today with patrons from farther locales, including the tourist market.

<sup>5</sup> In the plains and in Indic culture areas, it is referred to as the Brahmaputra River (as in our story).

<sup>6</sup> For example: 'To have had the chance to enjoy sex and such lovemaking, etc. How fortunate we are to have been so divinely blessed! We have no desire at all to leave this, our own great fortune, and again go back.' Another said, 'Oh leader, my beloved wife, having put on different jewels and ornaments, honored me happily and allowed me such delightful sexual dalliance with her.' And another, 'O Brave One! By the fruit of what punya have we enjoyed the pleasures of these tender-bodied ones? We have certainly lived here happily and with the greatest respect. Such kinds of pleasure, even for those kings living in the Three Realms, must be rare. Again, in the Amaravati heaven, even with Indrayanī does Indra rarely obtain such pleasure.... For this reason, if we were to return to Jambudvīpa, we would not obtain such pleasures. We will stay here forever and do not want to return.'

<sup>7</sup> This monastery in the northern suburbs of the old city is associated with Atiśa, the great master who left the eponymous monastery in India to teach and translate in Tibet.

<sup>8</sup> A more complete discussion of these issues is found in Todd Lewis, 'Newar-Tibetan Trade and the Domestication of the *Simhalasārthabāhu Avadāna*,' *History of Religions* 33 (2), 1993, 135–160.

<sup>9</sup> In other words, just because a book is in the stacks of the monastery library doesn't mean that it was read widely in the community or was ever in the minds of the typical local Buddhist.

<sup>10</sup> Kings of the Valley in 500 C.E. claimed the royal lineage of 'Licchavi,' one famous in the Buddha's life; Buddhist monks in the Kathmandu Valley have used the surname 'Śākya' implicitly claiming descent from and kinship with the Buddha's kinsmen. The stories make a similar claim.

<sup>11</sup> Spellings amended to conform with those used in this paper. [http://www.cbmnepal.org/introduction\\_charumati\\_stupa.php](http://www.cbmnepal.org/introduction_charumati_stupa.php), accessed on June 21, 2013.

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