

## Book Review

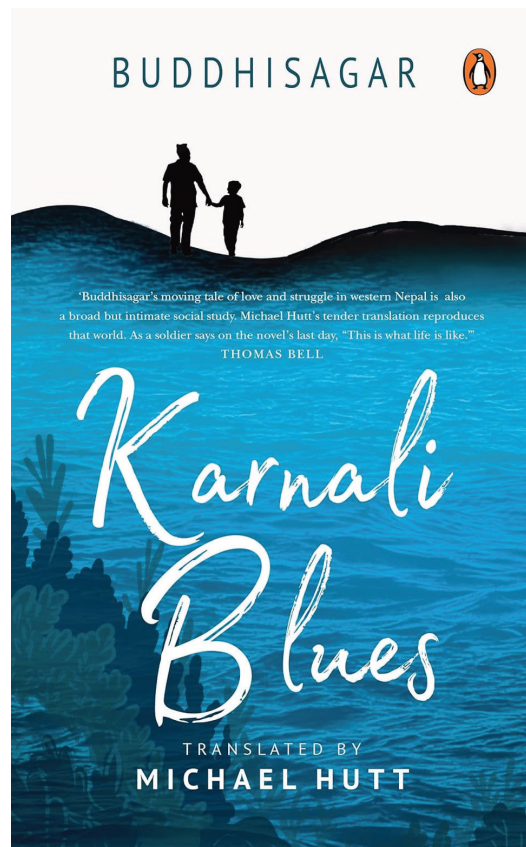
### Review of *Karnali Blues* by Buddhisagar, translated by Michael Hutt

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Buddhisagar's *Karnali Blues* is a deeply emotional work which portrays the inner life of a rural Nepali family. The novel narrates the story of a young boy, Brisha Bahadur, growing up against the backdrop of love, financial problems, changing culture, and political unrest. The story is narrated through a series of flashbacks from a hospital bed, and it weaves the personal memories of Brisha with the collective struggle of the community. The story covers various aspects of the socio-cultural, the poetic, and the realistic to narrate a regional identity that has not been noticeably represented in Nepali literature for a long time.

The novel revolves around Brisha, a young man on a trip to visit his father, who was seriously ill at Kohalpur Teaching Hospital. While he takes care of his father, the memories of his birth during the Dasai festival, his childhood adventures in Madera and Katesé, the family's moving to Kalikot and the socio-economic changes that have affected their lives are revealed. The flashback allows the voice to speak quite clearly to the audience, presenting a fragmented version of Brisha's feelings, places, and people that are the factors that shape his journey and the changes in his concept of family, responsibility, and loss.

*Karnali Blues* directly contrasts a lot of contemporary Nepali literature, which is highly focused on Kathmandu's urban modernity, as it re-positions the literary lens towards Nepal's periphery. A rural perspective is not just the novel's setting but the usual characteristic of the book itself. Buddhisagar's attention to village life knowingly offers a counter-narrative to the prevailing literary trends, thus exposing the intricate realities of the people who are frequently left out of the national discourse. His characters are simple natives managing their daily problems with dignity, humor, and resilience. By concentrating on Karnali, a place often stereotyped as a region of backwardness or that is difficult to reach, Buddhisagar characterises the rural through a realistic representation that is lived and felt. This change in point of view is crucial

for a representation of Nepali cultural and geographic diversity that is more inclusive.

One important aspect of the novel is how it shows the relationship between the father and the son. Harsha Bahadur, Brisha's father, is shown as a good-hearted man who is very decisive and whose stoicism is no less than the family's anchor. His place as a self-educated "doctor" in Katesé is a metaphor for the rural healthcare crisis in Nepal. This trust in the local practitioners of medicine shows the condition of the public health system in the neglected Karnali region, where "all the indicators of health status in Karnali province are noticeably low as compared to other provinces as well as the national figure" (Poudel et al. 2019, 40).

Land insecurity appears to be a sharp issue deeply entangled in the story. Harsha faces a serious problem with his unregistered land. The conversation between Harsha and his wife captures the risk involved with unregulated rural land tenure and the constant threat of displacement. Such conversation has a low-key political undertone, pointing toward the tension between customary patterns of survival and state power. The novel thereby refers to structural issues of documentation, property rights, and citizenship that constantly affect the everyday lives of rural people. In *Karnali Blues*, land is not merely a physical landscape; it becomes a space of conflict between memory, hard labor, and legality. This reflects a broader national dilemma, where "the legal issues intact with informal settlement remain unsolved as the current land administration system of the country deals with the formal or statutory land tenure system only" (Shrestha et al. 2021, 2).

Migration, a pervasive aspect of South Asian literature, is handled particularly lyrically in the text. Brisha's trip to Kathmandu is a metaphor for the idealistic promise of new possibilities and the pain of loss. Brisha's family migrates from Madera to Katesé and Kalikot for economic necessity, land insecurity, and aspirations for a better life. Therefore, migration is not handled here as an act of emancipation but of economic necessity that reverses the social order,

thereby revealing more ingrained structural inequities. The problem is compounded when contrasted with the family's declining economic circumstance and the erosion of social solidarity in their natal town. Buddhisagar captures the dislocation and guilt of migration, where hopes for betterment are irretrievably marked by the pain of departure.

Aside from its aesthetic value, *Karnali Blues* is significant in the global awareness of Nepali literature. Instead of trying to contextualize its significance to international readers, it demands them to become involved in its unique rhythms. The book is concerned with the politics of place, language, and remembrance, with an engaging narrative about actual life and cultural continuity. To this end, *Karnali Blues* assists the reader in gaining a better understanding of Nepali identity and contributes to the increasing number of translated South Asian regional literature.

Michael Hutt's translation is significant due to its accuracy in reflecting the cultural specificity of the original. He continues using Nepali terms such as "Jamara Khola" and "Kalikot," thus, instead of making the novel linguistically one-dimensional for the English-speaking audience, he has preserved the linguistic texture of the book. For instance, when the villagers address Harsha Bahadur with "Doctor Saap" (p. 21), Hutt justifiably keeps it in its original form; thus, the cultural nuances are still there. The metaphor of a mole on the sole of Brisha's foot "He has a mole on the sole of his foot, so he will have to walk a lot, but he won't go off anywhere and leave us" (p. 2) might puzzle English readers without the cultural context that gives it its weight. These moments, while minor, highlight the broader challenges of translating culturally embedded expressions.

Buddhisagar's *Karnali Blues* is a beautiful narrative judiciously translated by Michael Hutt. *Karnali Blues* is a personal memoir of love and loss and an engaging inquiry into spatiality, memory, and social exclusion. Buddhisagar's tribute to the people of Karnali is pertinent to current discourses

and timeless. The translation manages to vividly depict the world of Karnali, its rivers, its landscapes, and its families. It also makes these voices accessible to native audiences in South Asia studies, migration, gender, post-conflict fiction, and global audiences in general.

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## Response from Michael Hutt

I translated *Karnali Blues* purely and simply because I loved it when I first read it in 2010, and wanted to share the experience of reading it with readers who did not know Nepali. I hoped they would include not only foreign friends of Nepal, but also readers with only the vaguest idea of what or where Nepal is. It is surely not necessary to be an expert on Nepal to engage with Nepali writing; after all, you do not need to be an expert on Colombia to appreciate the works of Gabriel García Márquez. And *Karnali Blues* is a work of literature, not an ‘explanatory ethnographic text dolled up as literary fiction’ (Jackson 2024: 202). In both of its contexts (the literature of the Nepali language, and the literature of the wider world) it springs from a place that is deemed to be marginal. But it is also in a central place emotionally: *Karnali Blues* tells us how it actually *felt* to be a son, a boy, a youth, in a particular place at a particular moment of history.

I am very grateful to Prayash Gupta for his kind review. I think he could have been much more critical, however. Translating this text required me to make a lot of quite difficult choices, many of which could have gone in several different ways. For instance, what should I do with the many kinship terms Buddhisagar uses to refer to characters in his story, and which they use to address and refer to each other? To what extent should I translate words that have no direct equivalents in English, and to what extent should I simply reproduce the Nepali terms? If I opt for the latter, should I explain their meaning in footnotes or an appended glossary, as I did in some of my earlier translations, or should I abandon the reader to the tender mercies of AI and Google? How should I represent the fact in my translation that in many places the book’s characters speak not in standard Nepali but in a strongly accented local dialect, or in Tharu, a completely different language? Should I faithfully represent the author’s writing style, which often presents the narrative as a succession of very short sentences, or link them together into longer

sentences in the English translation? And so on, and so on...

Nepali readers of literature fall into three main categories: (a) readers who read literature only in a language or languages of Nepal; (b) readers who read in both a language of Nepal and English; (c) readers who read only in English. Our attempt to ‘perturb’ the ‘settled economy’ of this literary system (Ganguly 2024) by making this novel known and accessible to readers of ‘world literature’ more generally has so far met with only limited success. The vast majority of sales have been in Nepal, and feedback suggests that most buyers have been Nepalis who like to read in English. We are of course most grateful to these readers, but we would love to extend the novel’s reach beyond Nepal and South Asia. If there is a publisher out there who would like to help us do so, we would be glad to hear from them.

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## Response from Buddhisagar

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to *HIMALAYA: The Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* for publishing such a thoughtful review of *Karnali Blues*, and to the reviewer, Prayash Gupta, for engaging so deeply with the text.

As an author, it is profoundly rewarding to see one's work read with such care and sensitivity. The review highlights themes that are very close to my heart—the father-son relationship, the uncertainties of land and livelihood, the experiences of migration, and the complex realities of rural life. Reading the review felt like returning to my

own characters and their world through a new perspective.

I am humbled by the attention given not only to the story but also to the cultural and social contexts that shape it. Such reflections affirm for me the purpose of writing: to create spaces where personal memory meets collective experience, and where readers and critics bring their own insights to the text.

I am grateful to the journal for providing a platform where Nepali literature can be discussed in dialogue with wider South Asian and global conversations.