

The Road to Nowhere: A Selection of Writings 1966 -  
1977. 1979. Kamal P. Malla. 255 pages. The Sajha  
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All the roads seem lately to lead to Kathmandu. In 1971 a British book came out entitled Road to Kathmandu (Macmillan). A certain French film company made a movie called "Road to Kathmandu". A fleet of buses carrying overland tourists arrives in this capital city from Europe each fall and the company which runs them is christened Kathmandu, Inc., N.Y. A group of young Japanese pop singers and musicians performed recently at the Dashrath Stadium; one of their songs was about coming together with, and belonging to Kathmandu.

But, once in Kathmandu, the road seems to come to a sudden end. Kathmandu is the end of all roads. It is the end specially for those who live here, the locals, the Nepalis. For them there is no Buddha, butterflies and hashish in Kathmandu, nor a levitating Dalai Lama. Kathmandu is most certainly not where the sun rises. For them there is (but) only the frustration and boredom of living in a country where everything fails. An elitist Nepal's psyche is wounded by his share of guilt in this general failure. The Road to Nowhere sums up Malla's guilt, his personal comments about and involvement with the system. The collection of writings represents his impatience with the modern institutions of Nepal. Some of the writings are of interest as specimens of rare confession coming from the inside.

The Road to Nowhere is a collection of 20 articles written over the period of a decade between 1966 and 1977. Written in different genres, they cover a wide range of interests - educational planning, university, teaching, linguistics, personalities, journalism, autobiography, culture, the intelligentsia, literature, and book reviews. The 'marginal commentaries' (author's Prepace) go deeper; they become the voice of disenchantment of a present-day Nepali with the intellectual history of modern Nepal as it evolved through such post-1950 institutions as the Royal Nepal Academy, Tribhuvan University, the Rising Nepal, the National Education System Plan, the intelligentsia and several personalities.

Although written at different times, Malla's critical sense gives the collection a semblance of unity. Malla assumes throughout these articles the role of an 'intellectual', an intellectual of his own fashioning, the assessing-evaluating intellectual. He becomes his own here, the proto-elite, the representative of an 'articulate class of intellectuals who are willing to fill in the critical-evaluative role' (p. 199). The creator is bent on fulfilling his own prophecy, in a society like ours, the excruciating function, the raison d'etre of intellectuals seems to be 'to tell truth to power' (p.234). Malla fulfills that role with courage, insight, and incisiveness.

In "Kathmandu Your Kathmandu" (pp. 211-222) Malla says 'somewhere between the municipal area of Kathmandu and its adjoining outskirts lies the fatal border between the purity of man before the fall and his depravity since he ate the forbidden fruit.' This in a sense defines the

world the critical-evaluator himself inhabits. It is his vantage point - the fatal border that lies between the erstwhile bathrooms and present-day university classrooms, between the "Communications for Development" loudly proclaimed by the Rising Nepal and the realities that cause the sinking breaths of the Thakali woman, between the "Education for Development" and the mock entrance and qualifying examinations of Tribhuvan University, between the sacred societies of men of letters that a usual academy is and the sordid mausoleum where petrified mediocrity reigns as in the Royal Nepal Academy.

Split thus between the sacred and the sordid, Malla is an idealist whose idealism is doomed to failure. His search, 'the nomadic forays' as he calls it in the Preface, leads him nowhere; the pattern of dream and disenchantment thus takes another toll. The search for character is one motif that runs throughout the body of this collection. The search, characterized by passion, bitterness, satire, humour and cynicism, becomes essentially a search for identity of the modern Nepali amidst the vagaries of a nation in transition.

Tribhuvan University, that massive educational institution of present-day Nepal, is the beginning of the end, the beginning of the road to nowhere. Malla started teaching the same year as the university was founded (1959). He joined the Faculty of English soon after and became a Professor and later a Rector. The very first question that occurs to him is : 'what kind of university is it going to be?' (p.10). The articles on the vicissitudes of the university reflect Malla's concern with a moral question, viz., whether Tribhuvan University has or will

develop a 'distinct image of its own' (p.11) in reference to the concept of a university that has a character, or an environment, like the British universities, for example, which 'are not characterless institutions' (p.5), where even the hall of residence has a character (p. 254), and unlike the L.S. College of India, 'a physically hostile environment where there was nothing aesthetically stimulating' (p. 250). Malla is haunted by the idea of character; he would passionately like Tribhuvan University to have a character much in the same way as the Prince in Henry James' The Golden Gowl wished for his wife to have it; 'He expected her, desired her, to have a character, his wife should have it, and he wasn't afraid of her having too much'. But Tribhuvan University turns out to be a characterless institution; the faculty a 'shifting crowd', and marked distinctly by 'amorphous characterlessness' (p. 12). More recently, the University with its 78 campuses presents only a 'substandard educational environment' (p. 95), an 'environment fit only for breeding substandard citizens' (p. 96), where 'teaching is maily a means of livelihood rather than a way of life' (p. 194).

It is not just the university system which has failed. All other institutions of modern Nepal evolved over these three decades have also failed in the same way.

The National Education System Plan that evolved in the seventies, of which Mall was an insider if not one of architects, comes equally under his attack. He calls it 'Krushev's proverbial troika' (p. 69), and 'the most institutionalized of illogic' (p. 69). One notices a certain staleness of imagery when Malla calls education in Nepal 'something like Frankenstein's mechanical monster' (p.68),

but the critique is all pervasive, 'our educational establishment is a malicious form of cancer with which our body-politic is increasingly threatened' (p. 70). Notice also the clinical angle which is habitual to Malla's critical sense.

The Royal Nepal Academy is another milestone in the journey down the road to nowhere. Malla's sketch of the Academy, in spite of its initial hint of a visit to the mausoleum, actually has the tempo of Gulliver's voyage to Laputa. The present-day great Academy of Projectors in Lagado replaces its mathematics of calculations by the confusion over 'wild projects' (p. 61), member-projectors groping 'in the dark labyrinth of its sub-committees, the endless strings of their meetins .....'(p. 63). The very first encounter with the structure of the Academy building reminds the author of quadrangular bathrooms - the remnant of scatology from Gulliver's accident at the palace in Lilliput..

Equally, the Rising Nepal, the big national daily, lacks not only a character of its own; it also reflects our own lack of character by shamelessly exhibiting that 'we do not know where to break an English word and yet continue to run a daily' (p. 19). There are two apocalyptic moments in this short review of the three years in the life of the Rising Nepal. The first occurs when the author violently juxtaposes the experience of reading the Rising Nepal and of watching the wrinkled breasts of a Thakali woman (p. 18). The second happens when the only big English daily is proclaimed as the institutionalizer of 'Jyapu English' (p. 20).

In Nepal, there is no middle class, and much less a thinking middle class. In this sense, Malla is right when he presents his anatomy of the 'intellectuals' of Nepal as 'a class of white-collared proletariat who work, not for wages, but for salaries of different scales' (p. 199). The bare subsistence-level salary the civil servant receives is not meant for turning him into a thinking animal but for keeping him from starving, busy all his life putting him hand to his mouth. The rise of the middle class in Nepal is only a myth; it is only the rise of individuals who have betrayed the nation, of those who chose to 'make themselves' in the inevitable choice between 'making themselves' and 'remaking society', Malla's assessment of the intelligentsia of Nepal as lacking in 'character and distinction, integrity and effort' (p. 204) is deep and soul-searching.

Finally, Malla comes to ask in "The Cultural Identity of Nepal" (pp. 223-235) the most relevant and the final question: What does being a Nepali mean? However, the author fails to come up with any answer. The attempted answer loses itself in the rhetoric of history and culture.

One also starts to notice that not only the answers but also the questions gradually lose themselves. There seems to be an end to the seeking, to the travelling of the road and the end is pathetic. I think this happens in "Nepal: A Resume" (pp. 236-242) significantly, the last to be written in the collection (1977). In this short resume, the questioning spirit, the 'holy curiosity' seems to have come to an end; the quest dissipates into a meek compromise with the eating of the apple. While Malla could still manage to laugh at 'the beatitude of an

exploitationless state' (p. 204) in "The Intellectuals in Nepalese Society" (1970), he ends this resume with a ritualistic bravado on the theme of the release of 'the mainspring of development'. This essay seems rightly to mark what the author calls 'the end of the nomadic phase in the author's life' (Preface).

One may agree or disagree with Malla's assessment of the post-1950 institutions and people of Nepal. Malla's assessment is devastating, at times unscrupulous, such as in his comment on Verma's personal patience with earning for himself three degrees of Master of Arts. It is rare for our people or intellectuals to speak out, rarer for those within the institutions themselves to do so. However, Malla's detached critical sense has the effect at times of sounding too clinically remote. It feels as if the author enjoys as aesthetics the act of making statements, of piling pronouncement upon pronouncement, all chiselled and hammered to their utmost perfection. It is one thing, indeed aesthetically quite satisfying, to stand outside and condemn the system. It is quite another to justify the ethics of the act. The crucial problem that arises then is: how does one reconcile the ethics and the aesthetics of such an act in the context of Nepal? Does the scholar-aesthete eschew all his moral responsibilities by becoming merely a distant observer, isolating or even alienating himself from the duties for which he may be held accountable? Does an intellectual Nepali's role in Nepal end as soon as the critical perspective is achieved? At the same time, one feels strongly sympathetic towards the criticisms that Malla brings to bear upon the crucial issues in the national development. Malla uses the English language as a tool for incision

into the nation's arteries with remarkable mastery of precision. The medium suits the stance - the language which is neither Newari, the mother tongue, nor Nepali, the national language, but English, the language of the outsider, the profit of which lies in that one knows 'how to curse'.

Ramesh Shrestha