

Kamal P. Malla. 2015. *From Literature to Culture: Selected Writings on Nepalese Studies, 1980–2010*. Kathmandu: Social Science Baha and Himal Books.

Kamal Prakash Malla is a well-known Nepali academic who has been writing in English for the last half century. As a teacher of English he taught at the Tribhuvan University (TU) for four decades. Malla worked as a Rector at TU for a few years in the 1970s and was also involved with the controversial National Education System Plan. Malla was also involved in the setting up of the Linguistics Department at TU and was the founding president of the Linguistic Society of Nepal. This book is a collection of his previously published writings from 1980 to 2010. Although covering the three decades around the turn of the century, the publishers have also included some earlier articles, including Malla's famous article on "The Intellectual in Nepalese Society" published in 1970. Among the thirty four articles compiled in this volume, nine are actually book reviews, including a review article on the Nepali historian Dilli Raman Regmi. The articles in this volume are evidence of the breadth of Malla's interests. They cover, apart from English language teaching and education, history, culture and archaeology. There is even an article on the complexities of translation. As a teacher of English, Malla expresses his frustration at the teaching of English literature in Nepal where university students do not even have basic command over the English language. Malla points to the enormous waste of time and resources given that even after studying English for a decade at the school and college levels, students do not have good command over the language. The issues raised by Malla in this volume, such as whether higher education should be "free" and accessible to all, have salience even today.

Despite his position as a Professor of English literature and linguistics, it is his interest in history, including prehistory, and culture that form the main thrust of this book. Malla's interest in history can be gauged from the fact that he co-edited (with the late Dhanavajra Vajracharya) the facsimile edition of the famous medieval Nepal or Kathmandu Valley text *Gopālarājavamśāvalī*. The introduction he wrote to this medieval chronicle has been included in this compilation. Malla's "battles" with the historian Nayaraj Pant *et al.* and the *Samśodhan-manḍal* are part of Nepali academic folklore. This volume provides readers with Malla's side of the story. Malla's position has often been contrary to "mainstream" Nepali Hindu historians and has been criticized or just been plain ignored by the latter. Unlike other Hindu historians, Malla delves into the "linguistic archaeology" of the Kathmandu Valley to show how words belonging to Tibeto-Burman languages predate Indo-Aryan arrivals. Malla's position can in some ways be compared to the distinguished Indian historian Romila Thapar. Thapar has shown how non-Sanskrit words (e.g., non-Sanskrit *ghoḍā*/Sanskrit *aśwa*; non-Sanskrit *nadī*/Sanskrit *sindhu*) are proof of non-Indo-Aryan speakers inhabiting the South Asian sub-continent prior to the arrival of "Aryans." Thapar has been vilified by the Hindu Right for pointing out Aryans as not being "indigenous" to South Asia. Nepal's "nationalist" historians are not immune from portraying a distorted version of Nepali history. An example that can be pointed out in this regard is the fourth-century Allahabad inscription of emperor Samudragupta. The inscription, Nepali historians like to say, is evidence that Nepal existed as it does today in its present size and form even thousands of years ago. It would of course be more correct to say that the writer of the inscription only knew of the Nepal or Kathmandu Valley with its literate and "advanced" civilization and did not know of any other place in the Nepal hills worthy of mentioning in the inscription. Malla himself has pointed to the geographical distribution of the about 200 extant Licchavi inscriptions, which show that the Licchavi kingdom did not extend beyond Nuwakot in the west, Dumja in the east, Chapaligaon in the north and Tistung-Palung in the south.

Malla argues for the Tibeto-Burman roots of the word Nepal. Unlike Nepali Hindu historians who say that the word Nepal is derived from the "sage" *Ne*, Malla points to the Tibeto-Burman roots *nhyet* (cattle) and *pā* (man) for the origin of the word Nepal. Referring to his own community the indigenous Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, Malla points to recent findings based on DNA analysis how "the deep ancestors" of the Newars

came from the plains of the Yellow River in China about 10,000 years ago, bringing with them the Neolithic culture of wet rice cultivation without traction. Although 43 percent of Newar “gene pool” is East-Asian and 10 percent Central Asian, South Asia, too, has contributed 25.7 percent of their “racial makeup.” The Tibeto-Burman speaking Newars have been Hinduized or Sanskritized over the last two millennia, yet they still retain residues of their tribal past. Thus, a Shrestha Newar can have his *gotra* as *kāśyap* while at the same time having as his “totem” *sulpyā* (snail).

Nepalis belonging to the dominant hill Hindu “high” caste groups have not always been sympathetic to the concerns of the “minority” groups of the country. This has become evident in post-1990 as these minority groups have increasingly become more assertive of their rights. But there are historical antecedents for such attitudes. Malla points to the in-built distrust in TU for most of the social sciences in general and subjects like Social Anthropology and Linguistics in particular. Both have been branded as subversive and disruptive academic disciplines, allegedly sowing the seeds of social and political discontent. The then vice-chancellor of TU in 1965 warned against subjects like Anthropology, Linguistics and Sociology and against “foreign historians” and stated that “our textbooks” in History and Culture should lay special emphasis upon cultural unity and national unity and refute what has been propagated by foreigners. The vice-chancellor was speaking at the dawn of the “nationalist” Panchayat era, but one will find echoes of such attitudes in the present context.

Nepal’s dominant groups have often portrayed the assertions of the country’s “minority” groups as communal, disruptive of social harmony, even as separatist and encouraging the break-up of the country. As a person belonging to a “minority” community, Malla himself has been accused of being “parochial” by a fellow Nepali academic belonging to the hill Hindu “high” caste group. Yet Malla is no “romantic” viewing his own community through rose-tinted glasses. As a person who quotes the motto of London’s Royal Society *Nullius in verba* or do not take anybody’s words for granted, Malla is keenly aware of the scientific tradition that has animated the West for the last five hundred years. This is not a trait that is very common among Nepali academics, as the works by many of them are testimony to. Malla often stands in opposition to the supposedly mainstream views of the Nepali society. Nepal’s Hindus have often raised hysterical outcries regarding Christianity and the proselytizing activities of Christians in the country. These

Hindus should read what Malla has to say in this volume about Christianity and Christians as well as Hindus in general.

Malla's justified concern for his community, i.e., the Newars and for their (and his own) homeland the Nepal or Kathmandu Valley are evident in this collection. Malla points to the "occupation," that is encroachment and in-migration into the Kathmandu Valley of outsiders that has led to the marginalization of the language, culture and way of life of the indigenous Newars of the Valley. Beginning with the Gorkhali conquests of 1769, this process has only accelerated with the "developmental" Nepali state of the last half century. Malla points among these development activities, which has led to the marginalization of the Newars, the building of the "disastrous" Ring Road in the Valley. One wonders in this context what Malla would say about the plans to build an Outer Ring Road in the Kathmandu Valley! Given his concern, Malla has not shied away from contributing to the language, culture and way of life of his community academically. An example in this regard is his work as the chief editor of *A Dictionary of Classical Newari* (2000).

Malla talks about "self-rule" for the Newars, but not being a political scientist does not go into elaborate details in this regard. In a federal Nepal the Newars can, like other groups, be provided with autonomy in their ancestral homeland, i.e., the Nepal or Kathmandu Valley. A federal Nepal can accommodate the aspirations of groups like the Newars. But as the current debates over federalism show quite clearly, Nepal's dominant groups are not willing to let go so easily of the powers and privileges they have enjoyed for the last two centuries and more. One can foresee more turbulent times for Nepal in the future in this context.

The publishers deserve credit for bringing together in a single volume the disparate writings of an academic like Malla. And although not all the articles compiled in the book are of the same quality, with some articles more rigorously researched than others, they make for an interesting read. The more rigorously researched articles will surely stand the test of time, and future researchers and academics will no doubt refer to them. Malla and his publishers could, however, have been more careful about the final product, as there are typographical and other errors that mar the text. Malla is also guilty of using gender insensitive pronouns (he, his). He is also not consistent regarding the use of honorifics like Mr./Dr./Prof. Malla refers to other academics sometimes by their first names and sometimes by their last names, even referring to a fellow academic by the initials DVV! Malla

points to the raids on the Nepal or Kathmandu Valley by Khasas and Doyas as well as by Samsud-din-Illyas in 1349. Malla, however, refers to the last as a “Muslim invasion.” In this context, the attacks by the Doyas and the Khasas should very possibly be called Hindu invasions or something!

Malla says that he at present is not in proper physical form. This reviewer would however like to request, given the current fad of writing autobiographies, Prof. Malla to pen his autobiography. As a person who lived through “the decade of extroversion” of the 1950s through the homogenizing nationalism of the three-decade long Panchayat period to the more “multicultural” phase post-1990, Malla has been through interesting times. And as a person belonging to a “minority” community of the country, Malla no doubt has borne the slings and arrows of the world. There are hints of such even in this volume, but a full-fledged autobiography would illuminate things to a greater extent. An autobiography would also allow for a comparative perspective. Malla in this volume has referred to problems such as politicization in the TU. Given the present state of affairs at TU, Malla’s “retrospective look” would no doubt be enlightening for younger generations. Malla has pointed to the country’s intellectuals running after material success, including ambassadorships and other such posts, rather than academic pursuits. It would be interesting to have Malla’s views regarding the intellectuals of today’s Nepal in the context of an increasingly commercial and crassly consumer society. An autobiography would be Malla’s “final” fragment to shore against the ruins.

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