



UNDERSTANDING NEPAL THROUGH DOM MORAES' TRAVELOGUE "GONE AWAY"

DR. ARAVIND ANGADI,
Assistant Professor of English,
A.M.T.A Govt. First Grade College, Aland
Dist. Kalaburagi

"All History is a corridor of mirrors, in which adventitious images are recorded for posterity to accept or not to..." Dom Moraes

Abstract:

Gone Away details Dom Moraes' extensive journeys throughout India and Nepal, capturing the essence of his adventurous journeys. It is a chronicle that provides a factual account of his journey through India and Nepal—a trip that was, in every sense, highly eventful and intriguing. Nepal, in particular, seemed to captivate him the most. He was fascinated by its mysterious valleys, majestic mountains, intricately carved and architecturally stunning houses, and unique landscapes. The grandeur of the Ranas' palaces in the Kathmandu Valley, their lavish lifestyles, and the oppressive nature of their rule intrigued him deeply.

Keywords: History, Culture, Religion, Travelogue

Dominic Francis Moraes, widely known as Dom Moraes, is a towering figure in Indian English literature. Recognized as a foundational author in this field, he was a prolific writer, poet, journalist, memoirist, biographer, and autobiographer. His reputation as a prose writer is largely built on his autobiographies *My Son's Father* (1968) and *Never at Home* (1992), as well as his biography *Mrs. Gandhi* (1980), which explores the life of one of India's most influential women, Indira Gandhi. Moraes gained significant acclaim with his poetry collection *A Beginning*, published by Stephen Spender in 1958, which earned him England's prestigious "Hawthornden Prize" making him the youngest and only non-British recipient of the award. Following his debut collection, Dom Moraes published his second poetry book, *Poems* (1960), which won the "Autumn Choice of the Poetry Book Society" prize. His third poetry collection, *John Nobody*, was released in 1965. Moraes also authored several notable travel books, including *Gone Away* (1960), *The Open Eyes: A Journey through Karnataka* (1976), *Out of God's Oven: Travels in Fractured Land* (1992), *Rajasthan* (2000), and *The Long Strider* (2003).

Gone Away chronicles Dom Moraes' extensive travels across India and Nepal, capturing the essence of his adventurous journeys. *Gone Away* recounts three months of Dom Moraes' life spent in the subcontinent during the Chinese incursions on the Tibetan border in 1959. *Gone Away: An Indian Journal* is a tiny journal. He writes in his preface to the book: "It is not a travel book, nor is it political. It is a journal of what I did and felt during August and November last year, when I happened to be in India. So it may be too personal, but I hope and I think, that that may be a good thing, because perhaps it makes the world more true." (p.xii)

The book is a chronicle that gives the factual accounts of his trip to India and Nepal, a trip, in the real sense of the term, very eventful and interesting. Dom himself writes that it is not a travel book but as the reader keeps turning the pages finds himself travelling through India in the various parts of India and Nepal. Different landscapes, weathers, people, life styles, values, ways of life along with meeting with very important people in different fields of life, like politics, paintings, art, music, films, poetry, literature and so on who provide Dom with their own observations and opinions of India and Nepal

Dom Moares was only 20 years old when he authored this book. The book opens with the author reconnecting with Mulk Raj Anand. While looking for Mulk Raj Anand's house, Dom accidentally ends up in the wrong flat. The woman there provides him with the correct address and remarks, "You should never trust people's directions in India; they are always wrong." This opinion, expressed by an Indian housewife in the book, reflects Dom's broader views and experiences that shaped his perceptions of India.

The chapter "Living like Rana" describes Dom's experiences in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal. Dom and Ved Mehta (his friend) were hosted in Kathmandu by a Nepalese General, who was an acquaintance of Dom's father Frank Moraes. They were welcomed at the airport by one of Dom's father's correspondents. Both were immersed in the mountainous landscape of the Kathmandu Valley, which is surrounded by peaks. Kathmandu Valley also referred to as the 'Nepal Valley' or 'Nepa Valley,' this bowl-shaped region is situated in the Himalayan Mountains of Nepal. Positioned at the intersection of ancient Indian subcontinent civilizations and the wider Asian continent, it boasts over 130 significant monuments, including several important pilgrimage sites for Hindus and Buddhists. The valley is home to seven World Heritage Sites. The valley was predominantly used for cultivating rice, maize, and beans. The women were noted for their beauty, and the houses featured intricately carved, old wooden doors that added to their charm.

Dom provides a vivid and picturesque description of the grand palace of the Nepalese General Rana. The walls were adorned with the heads of hunted tigers and large photographs of deceased Ranas. To their amazement, a live, enormous Himalayan bear was kept in the drawing room. "We sank into a sofa and the servants disappeared.

We heard voices in the distance

‘I expect someone will come for us,’ I said. At this point I became aware of an enormous Himalayan bear crouched next to the sofa. It glowered at me. I gasped. ‘Now what is it?’ ‘There is a bear next to us. It must,’ I added, groping for common sense, ‘be stuffed.’ ‘Honestly, Dommic, I know you have a fantasy life, but what do you think? Have you ever known anybody who kept a live bear in their drawing room?’ ‘I only wondered,’ I was beginning lamely, when the bear rose, snarled at us, and shambled loosely out through the farther door.” They were introduced to Rana’s son and his wife during their visit. The prince spoke about Devkota, the most renowned poet of Nepal, noting his high social standing. When Ved Mehta inquired about Devkota’s work, the prince explained that the poet’s verses focused on the struggles of the poor, reflecting his liberal mindset. However, there was a stark contrast in the prince’s own behavior; he treated his servant, Pannalal, poorly, even instructing them to beat him if he did not serve them adequately.

The Ranas were originally Indian princelings who had crossed the high mountain passes into Nepal a century ago and established themselves as the ruling class. They were the last of the world’s feudal overlords. While the king resided in Kathmandu, the Ranas held the real power and pulled the strings behind the scenes. Across Nepal, these Ranas constructed grand and opulent palaces, living in luxury and surrounded by numerous women they had forcibly taken from their families. They wielded absolute power over ordinary Nepali citizens, with the authority to arrest and execute them at will, particularly if the impoverished locals failed to show the required deference to the Ranas.

As recently as 1942, the Chief Rana made monthly parades through the streets of Kathmandu on an elephant. Women were required to stand outside their homes, and those who attracted the Rana’s attention were promptly seized by his soldiers and taken to his harem. Fathers and brothers were powerless to stop this and faced harsh punishment if they dared to protest. Dom describes an event in the village of Halembu, known for its beautiful women, which was raided, and all the women were forcibly taken to the harems (A harem refers to the practice of multiple women living with one man, particularly in Muslim societies. It also denotes the section of the building where these women reside). The Ranas, frequently bored, occupied their time with these abducted women. These relationships resulted in many children, leading to three distinct ranks of Ranas: first-class Ranas, born of legal wives; second-class Ranas, the children of established mistresses; and third-class Ranas, the product of casual encounters. Every Rana, regardless of class, was born with the rank of General and was given the name Shemshere Jung Bahadur Rana at birth.

British incursions into Nepal began when the Nepalese signed treaties with the British. The arrival of Western influence brought significant changes to the Ranas’ lives. British officers introduced whisky and soda to the area. When British emissaries visited Kathmandu, the Ranas would offer them whisky and champagne. With little to occupy their time, the Ranas spent their days drinking and socializing with women. Their excessive consumption of whisky and champagne led to many Ranas dying before they reached the age of forty. Dom seemed

profoundly fascinated by Nepal, its mountains, the Kathmandu Valley, and the Ranas. The Ranas resided in their opulent palaces, indulging in their preferred elixirs, fathering numerous illegitimate children, burdening the poor with heavy taxes, abducting women, and committing various injustices against the Nepali people. This state of affairs continued until 1951, when the Nepalese, disillusioned with the Ranas, rose up in rebellion. The Ranas tried to seize the king, who managed to flee to Delhi. The Ranas were ultimately overthrown, with many escaping to Bangalore, which Dom calls “Indian Cheltenham.”

Dom's travels not only present accounts of his journeys across India and Nepal but also offer vivid descriptions of the places and people he encountered. His interactions with prominent figures and detailed observations provide readers with insights into the religion, faith, and lifestyles of the people from various regions. Among all the places Dom visited, Nepal appears to have captivated him the most. He was intrigued by the mysterious valleys, majestic mountains, intricately carved and architecturally stunning houses, and the unique landscapes. The opulent palaces of the Ranas in the Kathmandu Valley, their luxurious lifestyles, and the oppressive nature of their rule fascinated him. Dom also reflects on the eventual abolition of Rana power, the dismantling of their monopoly, and the end of their cruel reign. He was particularly mesmerized by the ever-changing landscapes, where the dramatic hills and distinctive mountains seemed to follow visitors throughout their journey in Nepal, sometimes appearing in shadow and other times in full view.

Dom provides a thorough exploration of Nepal's religion and faith, highlighting the significant influence of Buddhism. While Hinduism is the state religion of Nepal, there is a notable Buddhist presence. The blending of Hinduism and Buddhism has created a unique form of Buddhism that differs considerably from traditional Buddhism. Additionally, Dom notes another distinct religious tradition in Nepal—Lamaism, which is rooted in Tibetan Buddhism but remains separate from pure Buddhist practices. Bhuttha is a significant location in Kathmandu, home to a prominent Buddhist stupa (an important form of Buddhist architecture) and a stronghold of Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley. It houses a Tibetan refugee community and a monastery where Lamas reside. This community is overseen by a Mahayana Lama whose ancestors came from China and who established the stupa in Tibet five centuries ago. The influential Lama who governs the entire community is known as the “China Lama.”

Dom Moraes and Ved Mehta also met a distinguished Lama who served as the abbot of a monastery in Tibet. His residence was near that of the China Lama. A true Tibetan, he had been the Abbot of Ando Monastery. Lamas are referred to as “Rimpoches,” meaning “beloved,” a title reserved for high-ranking Lamas. The Lama was delighted to learn that Dom had met the Dalai Lama in Delhi. It pleased him to know that people from across distant lands were friendly with the Dalai Lama, as all Tibetans viewed him as the embodiment of Tibet itself. It was inconceivable for them to imagine Tibetan life without the Dalai Lama.

In the chapter “Dying Poet” Dom and Ved meet Laxmi Prasad Devkota, the renowned poet of Nepal, was suffering from intestinal cancer. He resided in Kathmandu and was highly celebrated among the Nepalese. His

poetry was widely recited throughout the country. Devkota significantly influenced Nepali literature by initiating a modern romantic movement in the country. He was the second writer from Nepal to begin composing epic poems in Nepali literature. With his innovative use of the language, Devkota elevated Nepali poetry to new heights. The locals had a ritual where a dying person would be taken to the Pashupatinath Temple ghats, on the banks of the river Basumati, to breathe their last. Dom writes: "The face that we saw was a mask, with thick dark hair drooping dryly above. Beneath the hair was a fine forehead, with large eyes that opened a little to look at us. Below the eyes the face had fallen in: the cheeks like craters, the lips sunken and wrinkled like a very old man's. But from under the dirty sheet two long hands projected from stalklike, sand-coloured arms, crept slowly together, and made the namaskar." It was an intensely emotional moment for them.

Thus, *Gone Away* as the title of the book suggests, is the true account of the writers going away from his place to learn things beyond his comprehension. He was lost in the process, forgets himself. The book shapes itself as a travelogue as Dom travels from place to place from Bombay to Delhi and later to Kathmandu, Sikkim, Gangtok along the borders of Tibet with the interior and remote places and small villages, where too poor and insignificant people dwell. Met people to shape his understanding of Nepal, a country of natural beauty surrounded by Himalayan Valleys.

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