

An apology for a road

Tribune, Sept. 1, 2025

Just as we crossed Moradabad, there was a sign on the left which said Kashipur and Jim Corbett National Park. The oracle, aka Google Maps also instructed us to turn.

However, not being a firm believer in technology, and also having some vestiges of the archaic habit of asking directions from local people, I asked a traffic cop if this was the correct way. With extreme confidence, which incidentally is always the case with anyone who is asked directions, he affirmed that this route will take us to Kashipur via Aliganj.

Both Google and the cop were right- except that soon we found ourselves on the worst road possible. The dictionary describes road as “a wide way leading from one place to another, especially one with a specially prepared surface which vehicles can use”. The operative part is “a specially prepared surface”. In this case, there was none! The “road” would have a flat surface for a few feet before giving way to large holes or ditches for a hundred feet or so before another small patch of a plane surface. It was as if, it wanted to make sure that one always kept one’s hopes alive that things would get better.

Interestingly, despite there being no road to speak of, there was perfect signage all along. Thus, if a village path was joining it, there would be a sign for a T-junction. And if that was not enough to convince us that this was indeed a road and not just a village lane, there would also be an octagonal STOP sign on the village path. Right in the middle of this rural heartland, where cows were roaming around, where the village pond had pigs ruffling through the garbage heap, there were these road signs. It all seemed a bit Buñuelsque .

The thing that struck me was how little we as citizens care about the State’s responsibility. The villagers seemed unconcerned about the state of the road- they were possibly thankful that there was a path, no matter how terrible, on which they could ride their motorcycles, tractors and cycles, perilously no doubt, but one which will get them to the nearest town. And it is not just about the fact that they are in this off the beaten track place. Even we, cosmopolitans in metro cities, are quite content to see our streets not cleaned regularly of garbage or leaves. In fact, we are grateful that the trolley which is supposed to come every other day to clear the green waste, at least comes once in 15 days to do it. It doesn’t seem to bother us that there is a covenant

between the state and us citizens which is routinely broken- a covenant where the government exists to serve the citizen.

A few months after my trip, I went for a haircut and got talking to the barber. It turned out he was from Aliganj. When I mentioned the non-existence of a “road”, his response summed up our collective cynicism- “The ‘road’ was sanctioned just before the previous elections. Now that elections are imminent, we might see an actual road which will at least exist till the next monsoon!”.

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August 29, 2025