

July 2004

9 India and Nepal

Our P&O liner Oronsay docked in Bombay. Two colleagues had come down from Poona to meet us and the other family travelling with us. By an oversight, no one told us that our heavy baggage would not be travelling with us. At the railway station in Poona we thought it would have been placed in the luggage van. To our horror we discovered that it would be coming by road at an unknown date. All we had for ourselves and four children, the youngest only a few weeks old, was our hand luggage and what we stood up in.

Our colleagues in Poona were magnificent. They provided us in our rented accommodation with bedding, mosquito nets, crockery, cutlery etc. It was several weeks before our heavy luggage arrived, and we coped adequately until that time.

We had travelled on an air-conditioned ship. We arrived in the middle of a heat wave, hot even for India. Our landlady, a Parsee medical doctor, abandoned her surgery in the middle one day because she could not stand the heat. Such heat was not without its advantages. I only had the shirt I was wearing. At the start of siesta Jean would wash it and hang it out, and an hour later it was as dried and aired as one could wish.

Most of our colleagues in Poona had just arrived on the field. Permission had not then been obtained to study minority languages in India, so there was a need to occupy them usefully. We had a link with Deccan College, so I set our people to search through the library there to find all books and articles on the minority languages. A card file was used to store the information, which was later assembled in book form.

The connection with Deccan College produced another benefit. In Bombay at the Tata Institute for Fundamental Research there was a CDC 3600 computer. We were able to get an allocation of free time on it, so occasionally I travelled down to Bombay to use it.

The language used on this computer was Fortran. Computer users were supposed to know Fortran. If they did not, then they had to take a course in it. I had read a little about Fortran, and I did not want to take a course. So I'm afraid I bluffed my way in. I picked it up as I went along. Going to computer advisory was a problem, as if the questions you asked were too basic, you were suspected of never having learnt Fortran at all.

I was able to follow my research into grammar analysis, making small progress. Some colleagues in Poona had been working on a tribal language there. They had a card file of the dictionary, which they occasionally typed up. It was a nightmare to think of the file ever being spilt, as it would have taken a very long time to put it back into alphabetical order. It struck me that it would be very helpful to them if the dictionary entries were transferred to computer punched cards, and a program written to sort them into order and print out the result. This would enable them to produce not only the tribal-English printing, but also an English-tribal, which they had never attempted.

Tackling this problem was a new venture for me. Some of the staff at Tata were extremely kind, showing me articles on the techniques of computerised sorting. So I gained knowledge of another aspect of non-numerical analysis.

Our Director had made several trips to Nepal. The way seemed open for members to go there, and Jean and I were selected as the first. I had been invited to present a paper on syntax analysis by machine at a Sanskrit Sahitya Samelan in Delhi, so it was convenient to stop there on the way to Kathmandu.

As Sanskrit is the language of the Hindu scriptures, the Samelan was thronged with Brahmins in white dhotis (loincloths) and sandals, heads shaved apart from one lock at the back. The chairman of the Linguistics session was an Indian professor who had been trained in the United States. He started off brightly in English when a Brahmin rose to his feet and requested him to speak in Sanskrit. He replied that he could not, and continued in English. When my turn came the same Brahmin asked if I could not at least speak in Hindi (which I was quite unable to do).

The next day I found myself, along with a number of the Brahmins, at the desk of the Treasurer. We were all there to claim travel expenses. The Brahmins were very vocal, indignant that the Treasurer should be late. I noticed that not one was speaking any other language but English.

Kathmandu was a fascinating place. The valley bottom is 4000 feet above sea level. The 'hills' around the valley ascend to 8000 feet. The 'foothills' beyond are 12,000 feet or more high. Eventually you reach the mountains, over 20,000. These are in clumps, rocky massifs. The Nepali word for a rocky massif is 'himal' from which we get 'Himalayas'. From the main street of Kathmandu you could just make out Everest, 120 miles away.

Initially we stayed in a hotel, but then were able to rent a flat belonging to a Nepali anaesthetist, a Newari, who worked at the main government hospital. As you might expect in a Hindu kingdom, there were idols and shrines all around us. A few hundred yards from our flat there was a shrine to the goddess Kali where human sacrifices had been offered not a hundred years before.

When we were settled, we helped three more pairs of members come into the country. Together we set about learning Nepali and constructing a Nepali language course which was suitable for our needs.

Helping others come into the country involved travelling to the border to see their goods which were coming by road through the customs. I would travel from Kathmandu airport by DC3 to Birganj on the border

with India. After the customs check, I would hitch-hike back on one of the trucks using the amazing highway into the heart of Nepal.

The first part of the journey was through flat country a few hundred feet above sea level if that, even though it was many hundreds of miles from the sea. Then there was a wooded/jungle region. After that we began to climb the Mahabharat, the range of 'hills' guarding the heart of the country. To and fro we zig-zagged, climbing up and up. The plains of India stretched for mile on mile behind us. We would climb so high it seemed we must be near the top. Then a corner would be turned, and we would see the highway with tiny trucks crawling up it, as high above us as we were above the plains. When the pass was reached, you could see the hills and valleys of central Nepal crowned with various snow-covered himals in the background. These were journeys I will never forget.

The time came for one of our couples to move out to a tribal location. Visits were needed to Pokhara, about 80 miles west of Kathmandu. In those days there was no road, so it was necessary to fly by DC3. We stayed in a hotel run by Tibetans, many of whom had come as refugees through the mountains. The hotel rooms had only curtains as doors. One day the three of us men were in our room when through the door came a Tibetan lama and his chela (disciple). He was a picture of friendliness, chatting away the whole time. The fact that he was speaking Tibetan, not a word of which we understood, seemed to trouble him not a whit. By gestures we understood he wanted to swap spectacles with us. He praised ours highly, which was not surprising, since his consisted only of flat window glass. We were glad to get our own back.

The village to which the couple would be moving was away out of Pokhara. To get there we had several hours trek, over bamboo bridges, up steep slopes and by the edge of precipices. When we arrived we were given all the help the people could provide in terms of food and shelter. They staunchly refused any payment for this. Some of the men had served as Gurkhas in the British army.

In the United States the biennial meeting of our organisation was taking place. There were some policy matters for discussion on which we felt very strongly. In the event, what we feared did not happen, but we still felt very unsettled. In the end we concluded that God was calling us home. We had expected to serve all our lives in Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Summer Institute of Linguistics, but we sensed that God had other plans for us.

Normally one had to book more than a year in advance in order to be certain of a passage on a P&O liner. However, war between Israel and Egypt meant that the Suez Canal was blocked with sunken boats, so ships had to go round South Africa. Some passengers had cancelled their bookings in order to fly instead, so there were berths available for us at short notice.

We flew from Kathmandu to Patna in India, and from there travelled by train for three days to Bombay. We had to change at Varanasi (Benares), and expected to find a sleeping compartment reserved for us. To our horror we found that no reservation seemed to have been made by the travel agent in Kathmandu. An Indian army officer was travelling with many of his family. He very graciously made over to us two of his bunks (one over the other). We were able to sleep on these, each bunk with two children head to tail, and an adult on the outer edge.