

Chapter 8

Working for the International Labor Office and Asian Development Bank 1991-1998

(7-19, 2010)

1. Assessing productivity improvement needs in Nepal: My first ILO “mission”

The management style of the USU Economics department head and controlled by two deans, made my life less satisfying at USU. Since I also had a desire to do some international consulting because of my considerable experience in the areas of productivity and quality of work life (QWL), I began exploring the possibility of working for the International Labor Office in Geneva, Switzerland, as a way to enter the international consulting arena. That proved to be very successful and productive choice for me.

January 21, 1991 I received a fax from ILO’s Washington Office, informing me that I was being offered a five-week assignment to participate as a member of an ILO “identification mission” to Nepal scheduled for January 25 - February 28, 1991. A few days later, the starting date was moved to February 15, 1991. The ILO “identification mission” was to conduct a study on developing a national productivity improvement policy and program.

Before leaving for Bangkok to begin the mission to Nepal, I obtained the permission of my USU Economics department head and the two deans for a 35-day leave from USU. I also arranged for Glenn Marston to teach my classes while I was away.

I spent five days, February 15 – 20, in Bangkok, Thailand, obtaining a visa and UN Identity Card, undergoing an orientation, obtaining air tickets for the trip to Nepal, money to pay for my expenses in Bangkok and Nepal, and generally preparing for the mission. Our team leader was Keith Lewis, an experienced ILO consultant from Great Britain. He and I were assigned to spend February 20-March 16 in Kathmandu to assess both the need for and the potential for creating a productivity improvement program and center for Nepal. A Nepalese national consultant was assigned to work with us.

My memories of my Kathmandu experience follow:

Flying into Kathmandu was very interesting, especially with the backdrop of the Himalayan mountains. Keith Lewis met me at the airport. I then changed some money into the local currency, and we went out to get a taxi to town. Several young children followed at our heels trying to carry my luggage or beg for money. We went into town and registered at our hotel, the Himalaya Hotel, located several blocks from the UNDP country headquarters.

Two things struck me right away. First, the city was very poor and dirty. Second, the hotel was one star at best, and the ditch running in front of it smelled of sewage. I later saw first hand that the locals defecated by the roadsides around Kathmandu. The first time I took a shower at the hotel I could not believe how bad the yellowish water smelled and looked. I kept my eyes shut and my mouth closed and made the ordeal as short as possible. I continued that practice the entire time we were in Kathmandu. We had to go downtown to buy bottled water (bottled by the San Miguel Brewery), to drink. The food at the hotel dining room was very basic, and I had been told not to eat any fresh or uncooked foods. It was apparent to me that I was in a *very* poor and backward country, with little to offer other than the beauty of the Himalayan mountains.

After making the rounds to the various government ministries, whose accommodations were also *very* basic, we set about our work using desks in the UN Country Office. During our stay, we visited employer organizations and several business enterprises, including a tannery and a cotton spinning mill. In both instances I had the feeling that I had stepped back 150 years to the early stages of the industrial revolution in Britain. The tannery was wet, dirty, disorganized, and stunk to high heaven. The cotton mill was a big room full of clanking Chinese-made machinery and thick with cotton lint and dust. Working there was a sure way to shorten one's life considerably. An OSHA inspector would have gone bananas in those plants.

While in Nepal we ate at several of the local restaurants. I remember getting sick after eating at a Chinese Restaurant. On another occasion, while sitting in the Japanese restaurant, Keith Lewis asked me all about Mormonism and the Church's interest in genealogy. Keith was a fascinating person. He told me he was the offspring of a liaison between an English actress and an American GI during WWII.

Since this was my first consulting job in a very poor, backward, developing country, Keith Lewis gave me some very good advice about consulting work for the ILO. He said, "Not to expect to accomplish *anything* through our efforts. Then I would not be disappointed. That was what usually happened. If, per chance, something good came from our work, I could feel good about it." That was very good advice, and helped me not only in Nepal, but in the coming years while working for both the ILO and USDOL abroad.

I remember going into the Himalaya Hotel bar, where the only TV was located, and watching the CNN news reports about the main Desert Storm coalition troops invading Kuwait and S. Iraq during February 24 – 28, 1992 while I was in Nepal.

The other thing I remember was going out to the local university, Tribhuvan University, and talking to several officials. My impression was that the university was in as bad a shape as the rest of the country. The officials proudly told me that they had received some 24 notebook computers as part of an aid program. When I asked to see them, they took me to a little room where they were stacked up in a pile and very dusty. They admitted that the computers were not working any more.

Thinking about that event reminded me that I took my first notebook computer on that trip and used it in my hotel room to draft our report although the power in the hotel was not very consistent.

One weekend, Keith Lewis hired a car and driver and we drove outside the city to see some of the sights in the area. We went a mile or two out of town and stopped on a hill overlooking the area. I looked down and saw a body of water with greenish, horrible looking water meandering through the pond. (It reminded me of square lake--the sewer ponds west of Logan, Utah.) I asked Keith if that was the city's sewerage treatment plant. He said, No, that was the city's water reservoir. I soon learned there was no sewage treatment plant. The people stopped by the side of the road to defecate or

relieve themselves. The ditch in front of the Himalaya Hotel was there for a purpose. Some years later I read that USAID was helping to fund a project to improve Kathmandu's water supply. None too soon I might say. After seeing that sight, we drove toward the mountains outside of the city.

About five miles outside of town, we started up into the mountains. Two things struck me: first, how utterly barren the hills were, and second, how soon the road narrowed from two lanes to one, and then to an unpaved track that was barely passable. There was obviously no such thing as road maintenance. We finally made it to our destination, a small restaurant located on top of a hill. We stopped there and had lunch while looking at the barren hills in the near vision and the snow-capped mountains in the distance. After lunch we drove back to Kathmandu.

While we were in Kathmandu, Michael Henriques, our ILO project officer from Bangkok, came to see us and find out what we were learning. Michael was Danish, with Portuguese ancestry, and had an MBA from Harvard. I asked him how someone with a Harvard MBA wound up working for the ILO instead of a major corporation where he could make lots of money. He told me that he was more interested in helping people than in making money.

Michael became a good friend. I worked with or for him on a number of other ILO projects over the coming years as he rose through the ranks of the ILO hierarchy. He later took Jurgen von Mural's place as the Department Head in Geneva when Jurgen retired several years later.

While we were in Nepal, another ILO staff member from Bangkok was also in town for a few days. Over dinner he regaled us with his exploits while living and working in Bangkok. On one occasion he told us about his experiences touring the nightspots (fleshpots?) of Bangkok. One time he either became drunk or was given a drug and woke up several days later somewhere else; lucky to be alive but without his money and documents. Before he left to return to Bangkok, he went to the Tibetan refugee camp on the outskirts of Kathmandu to buy some rugs made by the people there. He carried them to the airport for the return trip to Bangkok, but found that the flight was cancelled. So, he lugged them back to our hotel and stayed overnight before getting a flight out the next day.

After making a number of site visits, meeting with government officials, employers, etc., and reading what documents were available, we began writing our final report and had it typed up at the local UN Country Office several blocks from our hote. When we finished the report, it was reproduced and submitted before the conclusion of the mission and our return to Bangkok. (My wife remembers me telling her that I was so eager to leave Kathmandu that I checked out of the hotel and went to the airport several hours before my flight was scheduled to leave.)

Upon completing our work, Keith Lewis and I returned to Bangkok March 16-18 to report to Michael Henriques, the Regional ILO officer, and turn in our receipt for payment of our expenses and services. I stayed at the Royal Hotel. March 19-20, Keith and I went to Geneva, Switzerland, to be debriefed and report on our Mission at the ILO Headquarters. Stayed at the Hotel Eden. Thus ended my first "mission" for the ILO. March 21-22, I went to Washington, D.C., and stayed at the New Hampshire Suites before flying home.

My recollection is that there was considerable unrest and other problems in Nepal after we completed our mission and left the country. For a time it looked like Keith's assessment would be fulfilled -- nothing would come from our report and recommendations. However, several years later I remember reading in some ILO publication that the Nepalese government

had set up a productivity center and productivity improvement program. So, our mission to Nepal and recommendations eventually made some kind of a contribution, however small, to the future development of that country.

August 31, 1994, I received a fax from Michael Henriques at the ILO inviting me to participate in a five-week mission to Bangladesh during the first part of October to “strengthen the institutional capabilities of the productivity service wing under the Bangladeshi Employers Association to improve its productivity service. (August 31, 1994 Fax from Michael Henriques to GBH) The start of fall quarter classes at USU prevented me from accepting that assignment.