

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET February 17, 2011

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Taken at India and Nepal

THE STRIKE: RUNNING THE GAUNTLET

[Here is a story from one of our trips to Tibet and India that is good for a chuckle or two. In 1997 I took my family to meet the Karmapa, a reincarnate lama who (like the Dalai Lama) is the head of an entire lineage. The young Karmapa was the poster child for the movie "The Golden Child." This story has to do with trying to get out of India and back into Nepal.]

Coming back from India into Nepal, we had a problem. The day we were to fly back to Kathmandu from Bhadrapur in Nepal there was scheduled another of the Nepalese nationwide strike days protesting the advent of VAT taxation. In fact this time they were striking for two consecutive days and the first day was declared to be what they called "very serious." "Very serious" means they throw rocks at you. In order not to have our vehicle stoned we had to somehow get from India into Nepal early enough in the morning so that the strikers were not yet up and about. So far, OK.

My wife Margaret and three of our kids (Anne, May, and Michael Andrew) all arose well before dawn, grabbed our baggage, and prepared to set off. Our hotel was locked up tighter than a drum so we had to feel around in the dark for lights, wake the gatekeepers, etc. There were chains and padlocks on the doors. I have no idea what would happen if there were to be a fire. At any rate by 5 AM we had left Silagree and were heading toward the Nepal border.

Even in the pre-dawn darkness there was heavy people-traffic on the road, probably because the day was some sort of Hindu holy day. Everywhere along the road were small tent shrines set up with glaring lights in which were brightly-painted statues and loud music. In many places bare 4-foot florescent tubes were mounted upright and lined-up on either side of a shrine to create a funnel-like light effect from the road into the statue. Perhaps as many as ten or twelve tubes would be set up this way giving an eerie and almost a carnival-like effect. The sacred music boomed out of the darkness as we sped along. It was like a circus, but a sacred one.

Before long we were once again in the dangerous area outside of Karkavitta heading toward the Indian-Nepal border. This was the area where you did not want to slow down, much less stop, because people were robbed and even killed if they did. We held our breath and sped along. At the border, the three official checkpoints were not yet even open and huge booms across the road blocked all traffic from passing through. In our hurry to avoid the strikers we set about waking the local officials, who were in no hurry to help us until we promised some 'bakshish' or bribe money. Even then, it was a slow go.

Finally the customs and immigration officials appeared and slowly put us through the long form-filling process while we eyed the clock and the coming of dawn, which meant possibly more danger for us once inside Nepal. There were three checkpoints, three sets of forms, and three long waits. The light of dawn was in the sky. I left my family locked (like some folks lock dogs in a car when going into K-Mart) in the jeep in the darkness. Of course, they had to have each member of my family personally come into the office and sign the forms, even my 11-year old

son.

At last we were done and had crossed from Karkavitta into Nepal. We had left India. Unfortunately it was now already light as we headed for the airport. Groups of Nepalese were already gathering here and there. Some had rocks in their hands and were giving us the 'evil eye'. But luck was with us and we finally wheeled into the tiny airport and all piled out. The runway was just a long field and they had to chase the cows off of it to take off. We were pleased with ourselves that all had gone so well thus far and that here we were already at the airport. Now all we had to do was wait for the plane. Well, that's what we thought, anyway.

It was still early and no one was around. Our conversation managed to wake a few people who had been sleeping somewhere in the open building. Our driver had an animated dialogue with one of them and then turned to face us, a little wide-eyed. For a moment I thought he was telling me that the plane had been cancelled, that the plane would not be coming here today. The man next to him nodded in agreement and in better English said the airport had been closed due to water in the field that served as the runway. He WAS telling me that!

I was in shock and refused to accept this information. Of course they were happy to repeat it and it sounded no better the second time. My mind was now racing. Let's see: The strike was on in Nepal, not just for today, but for tomorrow also. The plane we needed only came twice a week, and so on.

In other words we were stuck hundreds of miles from Kathmandu with no plane and no way to travel to another airport. Worse, we had only two days to make connections for our plane reservations back to America. The start of a two-day strike meant we could not even take the all-night bus ride through the mountains to Kathmandu, even if we had wanted to. I was not a happy camper and my protestations soon produced an airline official on a motorcycle. A Brahmin who spoke English assured me that we could stay here locally as long as we wanted and be well treated. Not comforting.

"But I have no intention of staying here," I protested. The official then appealed to the airport manager, who just stood there shaking his head. He would allow no planes to land here today and that was that. Then the airline official said he would appeal that decision and that 'their' planes could land in these conditions. Accompanied by another motorcyclist, the two drove their motorcycles out on the runway field and went up and down. I was hopeful, but when they returned, they just both shook their heads. No plane today or even soon. He suggested that we go to this local restaurant and wait and he gestured toward a building that was little more than a hovel. "No!" said I.

By now we had quite a group of people gathered around to enjoy the show, which was mostly watching me freak out. The nearest city was Biratnagar, almost a 3-hour overland journey from where we were, but there was the strike to consider. A call to the owner of the jeep we had been riding (and paying for) this last week brought only the response that he would not allow us to use his vehicle. There was too much danger of damage from the strikers. We were stuck.

All of this was made worse by the fact that my son had been quite sick the last few days, throwing up and not feeling well. He had lost some weight and we needed to get him back to Kathmandu where there was food that he would eat. Thoughts flooded through my mind of us being here for days, trying to get out, missing our flights to the states, not to mention the fact that we needed those last days in Kathmandu to finish up our trip. After all, we had not yet been to the great Swayambu stupa, etc. and etc.

I pleaded with the different folks there for help and asked if there was possibly an ambulance that we could hire to drive to Biratnagar. Surely, people would not stone that. I pointed out that my son was sick and he hacked and coughed for them on cue. There was also this off-duty policeman who was standing around. Perhaps he could ride with us up front in the ambulance and make us look official.

Well, they liked the ambulance idea and began to call around looking for one. We found one, but it would not be available until sometime in the afternoon. "Better than nothing," was my response. Upon hearing of the advent of the ambulance, the owner of the jeep (who had refused our use of it today) now personally came down to the airport and dickered himself with us. He was also a Brahman and we had a Brahmin war between the airline official (who really was trying to help us) and this man who did not like to see us spending money on an ambulance, when he might get some. We suggested that the policeman ride in his jeep, of course, for a stiff fee. He saw dollars and said "Yes, of course." We were willing to chance it and this way we could start at once. I don't have the most patience and like to do something rather than nothing. We made a deal to drive through the strike to Biratnagar and all we could hope for was that there would be a plane leaving soon from the airport at the other end.

After a stop to bless the jeep (to protect it from harm) and to lay some garlands of flowers on the front bumper, with our uniformed policeman sitting up front, we headed out into the strike zone. The plan was to tell anyone who stopped us that we were headed to the hospital at Biratnagar and at the last minute change course and head for the airport instead. My son Michael Andrew lay across our laps in the back and hacked and coughed when we were stopped. He looked the part. Skinny anyway, he had lost weight in Tibet and India. He did not look well.

And so began about a three-hour trip across southern Nepal. And we were stopped at different checkpoints and we passed endless groups of men armed with stones, but none really were thrown. Perhaps I heard one hit the back of the jeep. Still, there was tension in the air as we drove along. Our policeman sat bolt upright in the front passenger seat and hung one arm out the window as if he could care less (as a policeman should), surveying the endless throngs of people along the road eyeballing him. The fact that the strike was on meant that the roads were empty of cars but even more full of people and animals.

The short of it is that we actually made it to the airport and through the line of armed guards that had congregated there. Once inside, we had the extreme good luck of catching a plane to Kathmandu that was leaving within the next 30 minutes. Now this was luck! We said goodbye to our driver and the police guard, gave them some extra cash, checked in our pile of baggage, and were ushered to one of those small propeller planes and given cotton for our ears and candy for the swallowing. We soon were on our way back to Kathmandu. And a funny thing happened in that flight.

I am not a lucky person, in that I don't win raffles, contests, at poker, etc. And everyone who knows me will tell you I don't like to fly. I don't normally even like to travel at all. Yet here I am flying across Nepal in a prop-driven plane with cotton in my ears. And the flight attendant holds an in-flight prize drawing based on our seat number. And they select my son Michael Andrew to pick the winning ticket. Oh yawn. And you guessed right. I won the contest and my reward: a free ticket on the same airlines for any place in Nepal. Talk about irony. I had to laugh and I gave the ticket to a friend. All I could think about was getting back to Kathmandu and seeing my daughters again.

Once there, the strike being still on, we paid through the nose for a taxi willing to brave the Kathmandu streets and were driven safely back to the Boudnath Stupa area and the Happy Valley Hotel where we were eventually reunited with our two daughters. We were so glad to arrive and everyone was glad to see us too, for they worried about us when our plane from Bhadrapur never arrived. By mid-afternoon we were all sitting high on the terrace in the Stupa View Restaurant enjoying a quiet (and eatable) vegetarian meal when only hours before it had looked like there was little hope to reach Kathmandu for days. What a switch.

If you like these kinds of mild adventure stories in foreign lands, you might have fun reading the free e-book "Our Pilgrimage to Tibet" which is about taking my whole family into the mountains of the Himalayas.

<http://astrologysoftware.com/books/index.asp?orig>



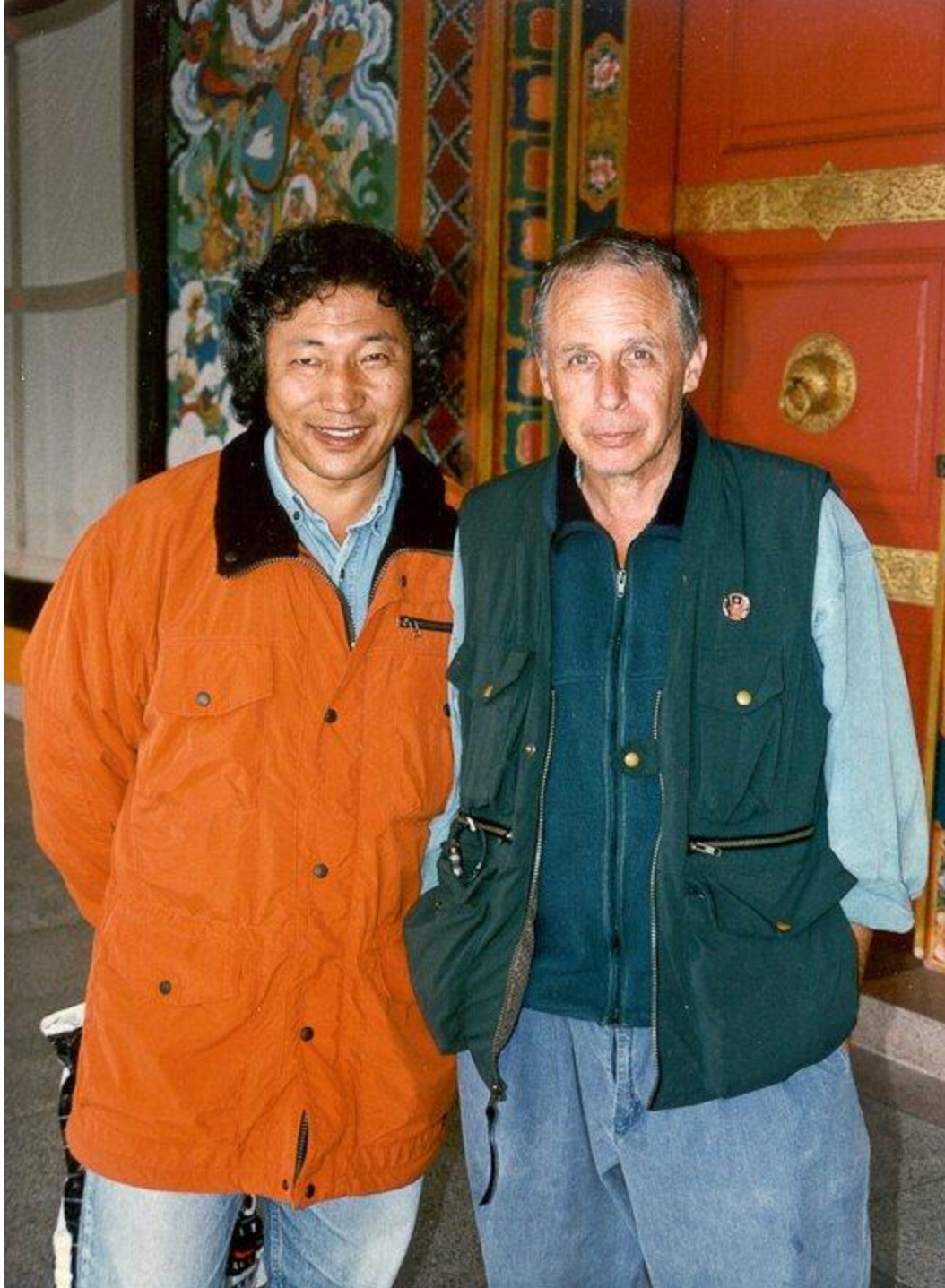
Here is a typical road block in Nepal, where a gang of men decide to close the road until a tariff is paid.



Nepalese roads are not like American roads. You don't just drive down them, but you negotiate them a bit at a time. Everyone and every animal likes to be in the road. I have seen babies left on the road itself while their mother did something nearby. That is different than here.



Here is my son Michael Andrew, the driver (left) and the off-duty policeman (right) who helped us run the strike.



Here I am with my good friend Ngodup Tsering Burkhar in India.