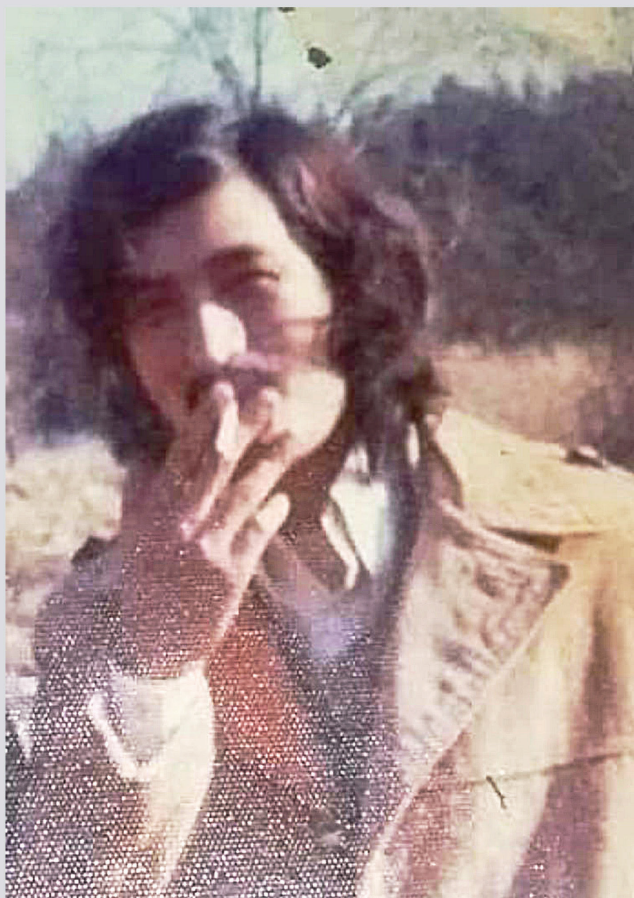


# **A NEPALI'S AMERICAN ODYSSEY**

**Ramesh Shrestha**





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# Foreword

— Mike Gill

I met Ramesh Shrestha for the first time only in 2018, in Dhulikhel, where my wife Barbara Butterworth and I were living at the time. Ramesh and his Thai wife Thananya had built a remarkable glass house just outside of Dhulikhel to escape the oppressive summer heat of Bangkok and to enjoy a bit of Nepal's relatively cooler monsoon. Not surprisingly, our paths soon crossed and we hit it off immediately; indeed, it was as if we'd been friends for years.

The reason was clear: in so many ways our lives had followed parallel paths. "A Nepali's American Odyssey," Ramesh's tale of his two years as a Fulbright student scholar at Michigan State University is a mirror image of my own experiences as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Nepal from 1967 to 1970.

In his 'Odyssey,' Ramesh skillfully explores with sometimes painful and sometimes hilarious detail the tribulations and the joys of the long-term student expatriate experience: the unfamiliar food, the initial language challenges, the bureaucratic hurdles, the loneliness and the eventual breakthroughs and unexpected friendships that come with gradual acculturation.

The bulk of Ramesh's Odyssey takes place not as a years-long struggle to return home from a foreign war, but through the lens of an epic, transcontinental bus trip

*A Nepali's American Odyssey*

on America's fabled bus line, Greyhound. Although viewed from different vantage points, his story rings just as true for a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer such as myself as it must for the thousands of Nepalis whose first encounters with the "outside world" have been as students in the USA.

# Introduction

This book is the result of my attempt to give myself something to do, to keep occupied in the lean and mean Covid years of 2020~2022. In my youth, I spent a rather intense two years in America as a Fulbright student. I never actually left the continental United States but, in those days, to many of us in developing countries, the USA was just ‘America’, and during those fleeting two years, I was determined to see as much of it as I could, eventually spending a full month on Greyhound buses travelling the country, coast-to-coast.

While the virus was raging, and physical travel difficult and risky, I had fun to reminiscing about my Greyhound trip. I started writing down whatever I remembered as if it were a diary – the places I’d stopped, the friends I visited, the routes and stops I had taken. To fill in the gaps in my memory, I sent drafts to friends I had visited and with whom I was still in contact. They were helpful and encouraged me to prod my memories further and complete the whole story – starting with my preparations for departure, the two years spent as a student and then my return home to Nepal.

My monthly Fulbright scholarship grant of \$300 at Michigan State University (aka MSU) in East Lansing, Michigan, was enough to pay for breakfasts, lunches, and dinners at the Owen Hall cafeteria (under what was called a “meal plan”) with occasional forays out to McDonald’s and KFC. The grant also covered textbooks, record albums,

which cost around \$3.99 at the East Lansing record store, and TGIF beers at the Silver Dollar Saloon, the Peanut Barrel and other such joints just outside the campus on Michigan Avenue.

By today's standards \$300/month seems tiny but in the 1970s it was rather generous and I was able to save enough money to take occasional trips. I was determined to see as much of America as I possibly could. When no free rides with student friends were available, Greyhound was my preferred means of travel. In those days the Greyhound bus line went all over the USA, east to west and north to south. A monthly pass allowed unlimited travel and cost \$150.

In June 1974, I took a Greyhound from Lansing south to Tampa, Florida to attend a 10-week long summer school course. Once it was finished, I embarked on a month-long trip from Florida all the way up the West Coast to northern California, Eugene Oregon on to Madison Wisconsin, and finally back to East Lansing.

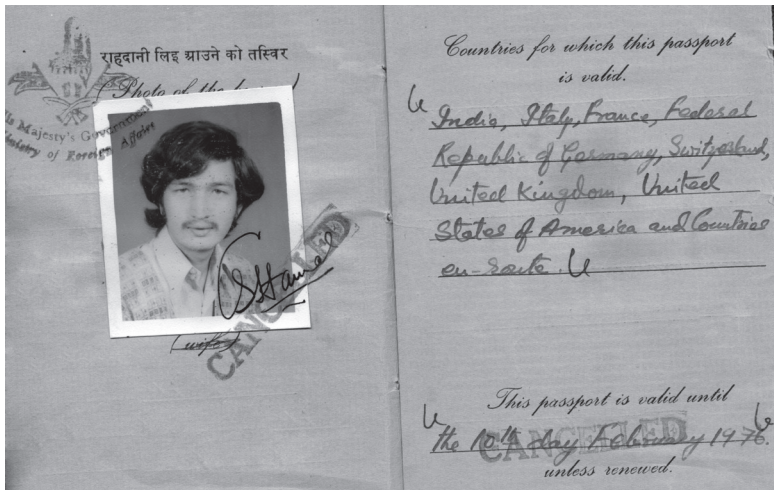
There were several other Nepalis also studying at MSU and living at Owen Hall, but unlike me, they constantly talked about saving money and regarded my travelling as a waste of money. One such friend, a student in the Forestry department, was positively obsessed with saving. His dream was to save enough from his one-year stipend to buy not one but two Japanese motorcycles after returning home. He daydreamed constantly about ordering one 125 cc Honda for himself and another 125 CC Suzuki to sell. At that time, Kathmandu hosted a single local dealer, Mercantile Corporation, which would accept orders for bikes and process their importation, but buyers needed to prove that their foreign currency had been earned overseas.

## *Introduction*

My own elder brother, Rudra, had a similar mindset. He was Headmaster at Bidyodaya High in Bhojpur, the same school I had attended and where I taught for two years right after my high school graduation. Rudra spent six months in 1968 studying at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale under an American teacher training scholarship program. He saved every dollar he could, accumulating enough to buy some land in New Baneswore, Kathmandu. Over a decade later in 1979, he invited me to build a house on the piece of land he had bought, providing a sanctuary for all of us in Kathmandu including him, sometimes his whole family, our parents and younger brother. During those leaner times, everybody shared the one-story house together – now there are two two-story houses on that plot of land.

During my sojourn in America, I was not focused on saving dollars as my Forestry department friend or my brother had. With the money that the American government granted me, I secured a good degree from MSU and had a good time making new friends, visiting old friends, and travelling all over, as you will read.





## CHAPTER I

# Winning a Fulbright Scholarship

My American Odyssey started with the day in February 1969 when I first saw an ad for the Fulbright scholarship in 'The Rising Nepal' newspaper. I had just completed my BA and even though the ad clearly stated that only those with an MA degree need apply, I posted a type-written letter to the director of the US Educational Foundation (USEF) that administered the scholarship, asking whether I could apply, even though I did not have an MA degree. I pointed out that I had scored an excellent High Second Division, having missed First Division by just six points, with English and Nepali as my combination subjects of study.

Since I was working at the Tribhuvan University Library in Kirtipur during the day time in order to support myself, I

studied for my BA during the evenings at Saraswati College in Lainchour, Kathmandu. Also, night colleges were not too strict about student attendance. Another helpful thing about the night college programs was that we were required to take regular internal tests, besides the national exam at the end of two years. Those frequent tests made us pay attention and I somehow managed to come on top on these class tests, attracting attention of the lecturers who seldom saw me in classes. One lecturer of English, Ramavatar Yadav, took notice and started coaching me. It was the same Yadav who later became my unfortunate competitor for the Fulbright scholarship.

Surprisingly, the USEF director replied positively, suggesting that I go ahead and apply. That is the American spirit – I was impressed. Any Nepali administrator would have shot down my request as excessively outrageous, irreverent even.

Encouraged, I promptly walked to the USEF office, which was then located in the USIS building on Kathmandu's New Road, and picked up an application form. One of my friends, Abhi Subedi, who was already attending his first year MA in English, offered to write the requisite essay to accompany the application.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Director who had been so encouraging clearly was not persuaded by my application, as I did not hear anything more from him.

So, I just waited out the next twenty-four months or so until I had my MA and applied for the scholarship again.

In those days, that is what we all did – apply for any grant and leave the country for further study as quickly as possible. If you had a science tertiary degree, you applied



## *Winning a Fulbright Scholarship*

to become an airline pilot or a medical doctor in India. With a social sciences degree, one could aspire to travel to the UK, USA, or Australia for a humanities degree. In the case of the US, we had only two options then – a Fulbright, which got you to the mainland US, or an East-West Center grant allowing you to attend the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu.

The second time around, in February 1973, I was better prepared to apply for the Fulbright. I not only had a proper MA degree but better contacts in the world at large, including Lindsay Friedman, a 35-year-old British woman married to an American then working in Kathmandu for the World Health Organization. Lindsay had taught phonetics at the University of Edinburgh, so I asked her to write my essay to accompany the scholarship application. It was cheating, of course, but I'd given her a detailed outline



From my MA days. KB Gurung, Peter Karthak and Trailokya Man Singh (seated on the foreground 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> from left. Seated on the chairs are Head of English Department Dr Alan Davis and TU VC Trailokya Nath Uprety. Sheila Roka standing on the left, with Nirmal Tuladhar in her front. Standing on the back row with just the head visible leftmost is me.

of what I planned to study – linguistics – and how the discipline's cause at my university would be bettered after I'd earned the degree and returned home.

For those who think I was dishonest getting someone to pen my essay, I want to tell you right away that I could easily have written it myself and probably would have won the scholarship, for two years later I wrote a similar essay for a friend's application and he too secured a Fulbright scholarship. More surprising is the fact that my friend was a physics MSC degree holder from Tribhuvan University applying for a computer science degree. I wrote how knowledge of computer science he would gain by attending an American university would benefit Nepal when he returned. I knew nothing about computer technology then. In fact, the year I wrote his essay, 1978, I had not even seen a computer.

Ironically, for the record, my friend not only won the scholarship but stayed on in the United States as a lecturer after finishing his degree and never returned to Nepal to benefit the country.

I learned that there were two applicants for a seat in Linguistics, the other being Ramawatar Yadav, my erstwhile English teacher during my BA days at Saraswoti Night Campus. Ramawatar Yadav was without doubt more qualified than me and deserved to win more than I did. Still, I was determined to do whatever I could.

The very next morning, I went to see a student friend of mine named Trailokay Man Singh Shrestha, or "TMS" as we called him. In our MA classroom, he was virtually the Prefect, the chief honcho of the class. He always seated himself in the front row near the door, keeping an eye on

all of us, like one of those self-appointed class monitors we used to have in high school. He was also the solver of all our little and big problems.

TMS lived in an impressive Rana-style bungalow with a huge compound in Chaksibari, Chhetrapati, a suburb of Kathmandu. In the Sixties, Nepali Congress party leaders would congregate there to visit TMS's uncle, who was none other than Ganesh Man Singh, one of the top party brasses. To this day, Congress leaders continue to converge on the bungalow at all hours to meet another top party leader, Prakash Man Singh, Ganesh Man's son and TMS's cousin.

I arrived at Chaksibari bright and early, but TMS did not even take the time to offer me a cup of tea. Right away, he escorted me to an equally well-appointed house just across from his, to the home of Kalyan Bikram Adhikari, a man who I later learned moved in Nepalese royal circles. At the time, however, I had no idea who he was.

His servants kept us waiting in the guest room for quite some time, and when Kalyan Bikram finally came down, freshly bathed, he saw TMS and apologized for keeping us waiting. Nobody had told him it was his next-door neighbor coming to see him, he explained.

TMS presented my problem with the Fulbright scholarship and asked him if he could kindly help.

Kalyan Bikram was one of the chief secretaries of King Birendra, and in those days, even a palace clerk could influence things anywhere in Kathmandu. Kalyan Bikram later became the Governor of Nepal's central bank, the Rastra Bank. His proximity to the King at the time meant that he could influence people in making their decisions.

Efficiency was also Kalyan Bikram's second name; he

asked me to tell him exactly who at USEF he should talk to. "You have to give me the name so my call can go to the right person who can then decide," he instructed me.

I gave him the name of J. Gabriel Campbell, the USEF Director.

As with all Fulbright selections, a committee conducted the interviews, reviewed the applications, and recommended the final winning candidates to the Fulbright board. The board's problem, apparently, was that the government did not want to have two candidates in Linguistics. The committee and board had selected me on merit as the alternate candidate behind Ramawatar Yadav<sup>1</sup>. Fortunately, while fighting this battle with the government to get me approved as the second grantee in Linguistics, Fulbright had gone ahead and submitted my name to several US universities and ironically, I was admitted to Michigan

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1 Dr Ramawatar Yadav later reminisced about our common Fulbright saga as follows: "In 1973 after I was selected as No. 1 candidate for a Fulbright scholarship for a PhD in Linguistics, the then Secretary at the Ministry of Education, Krishna Bahadur Manandhar, downgraded me from No 1 to No 2. And when the USEF Director Gabriel Campbell announced that one American university had already sent a confirmation accepting my application before another candidate's (that is mine's) it was decided that there would be two scholarships given for linguistics studies. But then the Ministry of Education raised noisy questions about whether Nepal could "afford" two linguists (one PhD and one MA). In those days, linguists in Nepal were as rare as snakes in Ireland. The education minister at the time, Krishnaraj Aryal, could not give his decision on the matter. Members of the National Education Commission like Surya Bahadur Shakya, Harka Gurung and Mohammed Mohasin could not give their decision either. In the end, Govind Lohani, Secretary of the Human Resources Division at the National Planning Commission, decided that the country will not come to any harm with more than one linguist." (Quoted from Yadav's inaugural speech at "Nepal Terai: Context and Possibilities" conference, organized by the Social Science Baha on 10-11 March 2005. I was totally unaware of all this happening, and Yadav did not mention a word about it when I visited him at the University of Kansas in Lawrence in the summer of 1975.)

State University even sooner than Yadav<sup>2</sup>, who was shortly thereafter admitted to the University of Kansas.

As Gabriel Campbell explained to me years later, the call to USEF from the palace supporting my application opened the door to the selection of two candidates in Linguistics. After I returned from MSU in 1978, Gabriel even hired me as a linguistics expert for a research project called “The Use and misuse of Social Science Research in Nepal.”<sup>3</sup>

As soon as I got the welcome news of my selection from SB Subba, the USEF Program Officer and owner of the world’s softest, friendliest voice and the sharpest moustache was to walk down one flight of stairs from the USEF office to the USIS Library to quickly study up about Michigan, the state that would be my home for the next two years.

The USIS library reading room with its air-conditioned luxury wafted the sweetest aroma of fresh, clean, and quiet space. I remember that the British Council library, located in the King’s Way not too far away, also exuded that nice foreign, western smell but was colder and usually more crowded.

Later, I smelled the same sweet scent evoking memories of the USIS library on New Road, Kathmandu, each time I entered the Radio Shack shop near the MSU campus in East Lansing.

Judging from the entries in *Encyclopedia Americana*, Michigan looked rather big on the map, and on a facing

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2 And when the USEF Director Gabriel Campbell announced that one American university had already sent a confirmation accepting my application before another candidate’s (that is mine’s) it was decided that there would be two scholarships given for linguistics studies.

3 J. Gabriel Campbell, Ramesh Shrestha, Linda Stone: “The Use and Misuse of Social Science Research in Nepal.” Kathmandu, Mandala Book Point, second edition 2011.)

page, a photo featured a huge blue lake framed by colorful autumn leaves.

The evening I learned the good news, I told my friend Jonathan Formanek about it. He'd been a Peace Corps Volunteer in Nepal and had recently returned to Kathmandu to undertake field research on Nepali architecture. A Southerner, Jonathan told me bluntly that he did not really like the idea of anybody going to Michigan as it would be too cold and that he rather wished I had been admitted to a university on the US East or West coasts, none of which made any sense to me at the time.

Jonathan and I had met three years earlier when he was a Peace Corps volunteer in Dhulikhel, a hilltop town 30 km east of Kathmandu. At the time, he had given me a brand-new copy of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's book of verse "Coney Island of Mind." I had particularly liked the poem "To Love is to Fuck Again" and had tried to popularize it by reading it to my friends at my Boy's hostel evening functions. Jonathan later became one of my ardent supporters throughout my stay in America.

Now my preparation for travelling to America began in earnest. It started with a visit to *Aunt Jane's Place*, a new restaurant in Kathmandu that was the Nepali capital's first American eatery. It had been recently opened near the Freak Street at Dharmapath by the wife of a Peace Corps administrator and was popular among expatriates in the capital. I was taken there by two friends, an American named Kathy Strom who was a tourist or 'groupie' as they said in those days, and a British Volunteer Services Overseas (VSO) named Vicky Charlton. It was they who showed me that people did not live by *dal*, *bhat*, *tarkari* (lentil, rice,

and vegetables) alone and introduced me to the essential American cuisine items of hamburger, French fries, and Coke, followed by apple pie and ice cream.

Another American Peace Corps friend of ours, Steve Eckerd, took me to another high-class restaurant near Basantapur Durbar Square one afternoon. He ordered my first ever chicken sizzler, which arrived, well, sizzling, with an impressive whoosh and so much steam that I can still see it in my mind's eye each time I order my chicken sizzler in Kathmandu.

Deepak Mathema, a friend who worked at the USIS office, informed me that, as a Nepali travelling abroad, I was entitled to exchange the Nepal Rupees equivalent of \$100 at the Rastra Bank, which in those days was the only bank with permission to execute foreign exchange transactions with ordinary Nepalese. The problem was that I did not have one thousand Rupees.

I tried to borrow that amount from SB Thakur, one of my flat mates in Bhimsenthan, but Thakur, who was then still an Indian (although many years later he became a Nepali citizen), had just been fired from his job at the Indian Library in reaction to a letter he had written to the editor of 'Dinman', then a leading Hindi national weekly, in which he condemned India for its mistreatment of Nepal in a border-related issue. So, he did not have 1,000 rupees, either.

Another friend, Durga Pokhrel, who was then teaching at the Padma Kanya Campus in Bag Bazar, came to the rescue. I still remember the pristine single 1000 rupee note she handed to me, featuring the photo of King Mahendra wearing his jewel-studded crown, with a long, white Bird of Paradise plume and a scepter clasped in his hand. Such

large denomination notes were a rarity in those days, at least in my rather impoverished circle.

Decades later, when I met Durga in Bangkok on her way to the USA where she had migrated, I wanted to return the money to her. We decided on the current \$100 equivalent in Thai currency, all of 3000 baht. In the Eighties, she had gone to Harvard for her PhD and had married and eventually settled down in the US. We still keep in touch via Facebook.

Thakur and I then organized a farewell party among my friends in our one-room Bhimsenthan flat. Peter Karthak, one of our MA class friends, had taught us the art of keeping hard cement floors shining for dancing by sprinkling it with a generous quantity of Cuticura body powder, a widely popular British brand then imported from India. Peter himself arrived in the evening with his 45-rpm Philips record player and a good supply of vinyl records. Nirmal Tuladhar, another MA class friend, also arrived with his portable three-in-one Sony hi-fi with large 10-amp speakers.

A nursing friend of my sister Laxmi's, named Tara Tamang, turned up with her own cassette tape recording of 'Leaving on a jet plane', the Peter, Paul, and Mary classic so appropriate for the occasion. For the first time in my life, I heard that plaintive anthem with its references to honking taxis eager to leave, and Mary wondering when he'd be back again. The song made us all so sad.

We drank and danced until midnight. The next morning there were half a dozen friends all drunk and still asleep on the floor, including a couple in deep embrace. We all knew they had been in love for the last few months. We all wished them both a speedy holy matrimony.

Before I launch into my journey to America, there is one



more story pertaining to my scholarship I need to tell. One evening, Peter Karthak asked me to join him to visit the Bhutanese prince called Dasho Lhendup Dorji. Lenny Dorji, as he was known to his friends, had self-exiled himself to Nepal. Together with the-then King Mahendra's brother, Prince Basundhara, he had founded Kathmandu's first and only casino at the Soaltee Hotel, which Prince Basundhara owned. Leni had given Peter his first job in Kathmandu as a croupier at his gaming club and promoted him later to an inspector.

Leni Dorje lived in Kathmandu's posh district of Tahachal, near Prince Basundhara's own palace and he received us there in a classy room behooving his status. We were offered rum with Coke, the first I had ever tasted. Peter proudly introduced me to the prince as his Nepali friend who had won a Fulbright scholarship to study in America.

"What subject would you be studying, young man?" the prince asked me.

"Linguistics," I answered.

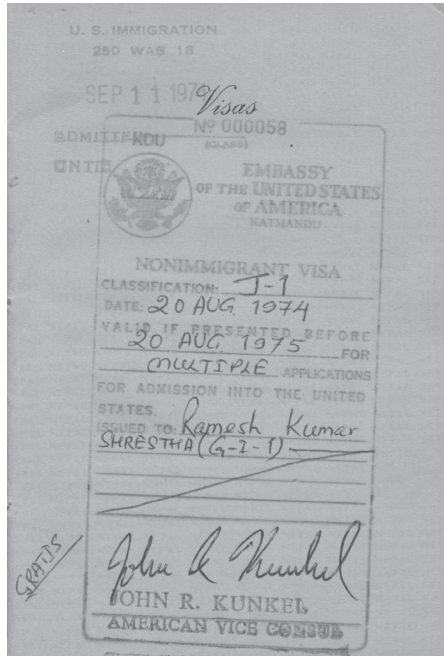
"What? What for?" he asked, visibly disappointed.

"You should be studying hotel or tourism management. Something that is more useful for Nepal. What a bloody waste" he sounded furious.

Later at MSU, I did try registering for a course in hotel management as per the prince's advice, but my request was rejected by my academic advisor as irrelevant to my major in Linguistics.

As a foot note to my meeting with Dasho Lhendup Dorji, I cannot resist recounting my own experience as a trainee croupier at the Casino Nepal he founded. The year was 1968. After taking my Intermediate of Arts examination, I applied

for nine different jobs including one at Casino Nepal. The job interview was conducted in English, I got selected for training as a Croupier. After a few days of learning how to deal cards, spin the roulette wheel and correctly dispense poker chips with a mere touch of fingers, I realized I did not really like the idea of starting my career at a gambling den. So, one late afternoon as I was walking out of my rented room in Basantapur to go to the Soaltee Hotel where Casino Nepal was located, I turned right instead of left in front of the Durbar Square and walked along the New Road straight to the American library, bringing an end to my less than a week's stint at the Casino Nepal.



## CHAPTER II

# On the Way to America

THE FULBRIGHT Commission was lavish in its air travel arrangements for me. I was provided with a round- the-world Pan Am air ticket, on Flight 001 taking me west from Kathmandu to New Delhi, then on to Frankfurt in Germany, London and eventually to Washington DC and Lansing, Michigan in the USA. Two years later, with my return ticket, Pan Am101, I would fly from Lansing to LA, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Bangkok and finally home to Kathmandu

The first leg of my Journey to Michigan started with a flight from Kathmandu to Delhi on an Air India Boeing 727. The airplane was big, much bigger than the Royal Nepal Airline's Dakota I had taken when in 1967, after a three-day's walk from my hometown of Bhojpur, I first flew to the capital from the southern town of Biratnagar.

The Boeing 727 was also much bigger than the Pilatus PC-6 Porter single-engine STOL aircraft I started taking from Kathmandu to fly to Tumlingtar airport when regular services commenced in 1972. To catch the cheaper (and briefer) 45-minute flight still meant a full two-days strong walk up and down many hills before the small-town bazar of Bhojpur came into welcome view.

The hearty lunch aboard the Delhi flight, with a can or two of Budweiser beer, told me I was into something good and luxurious from here on out. Not for the first time, I silently thanked the Americans for their generosity in awarding me the scholarship.

In Delhi, I was to be accommodated overnight in the opulent Hotel Akbar. The hotel driver who picked me up at the airport immediately offered to buy the Levi's jeans I was wearing. Indians those days came in droves to Kathmandu to buy their "foreign goods," imports of which were still totally banned by the Indian government. The driver also spied the bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label I had bought at the duty-free shop in Kathmandu airport and offered to buy it. He bid Indian Rupees 1000 for both the jeans and whiskey – more in value than the \$100 I had in my pocket, but I declined.

After I was settled into the hotel, I had a visitor.

Mohan Koirala was an old friend from Kathmandu then

doing his BSc. in Delhi College of Engineering. We all thought of him as brilliant, because he'd passed both his high School Leaving Certificate and his Intermediate of Science with first class honors. He had won a hotly contested scholarship to study for an engineering degree in Delhi. Like me, he also came from Bhojpur and his father was one of our village's most respected citizens. Pashupati Koirala had become a supreme court Judge and then one of the Palace Secretaries during King Mahendra's time.

But I liked Mohan more because he was my age, played Indian harmonium and *tabla* drums well and occasionally smoked ganja. At the hotel restaurant, the waiter kindly let me order two meals and cover both with the free airline voucher I had for the dinner.

We were all shocked and saddened when Mohan committed suicide a few years later.

The Delhi immigration stamp on my passport shows I arrived in Delhi on 4.9.74 and left on the 5<sup>th</sup>. My Jumbo Jet flight left Delhi early that morning, touching down in Beirut around mid-day for refueling. The Lebanese capital gleamed glorious on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea which looked bluer than blue. I was looking at my first ocean and at the first Western city with tall buildings.

Next stop: Frankfurt, where I had arranged to spend a few days with Ute Johanna Mayer who lived just outside the city in Kalkheim, Taunus. She was a "disciple" of Madhusudan Thakur, an Indian friend who had dropped out of his teaching career at Patna University, India, to live the free "hippie" life in Kathmandu. Madhu, as we called him, had lately been sharing the one-room Bhimsenthan flat with Saket and me, and after my trip to the US was affirmed, had arranged for

me to visit Ute and her family in Germany (more on Madhu in Chapter IX).

In her aerogrammes, Ute had instructed me to get off the plane in Frankfurt and call her from the airport coffee shop, where she would come and pick me up. To her, and to me the novice globetrotter, it all seemed perfectly simple.

Thinking back, I really feel sorry for myself. A tired Nepali boy pretending to be a world traveler, without a word of the local language, someone who had never seen a public telephone booth before (Kathmandu did not have a public phone service then) was about to try to make that important call. As the plane taxied to its bay, I realized I had no idea how a public phone operated. And did I even have a German coin, a Mark, to use to place the call via an operator?

But then, there seemed always to be a guardian angel hovering nearby, ready to rescue me. In the plane, it happened that I was sitting next to a young American who told me he had just finished a stint in Nepal as a Peace Corps volunteer and was on his way home. And I think he realized the horror of my situation when I told him about getting off the plane next and making a telephone call.

He swung into action – came out of the plane with me, made the call, and connected me with Ute.

But my Peace Corps savior was not there to help me deposit my suitcase in a coin-operated left-luggage box at the arrival Lounge. It was stressful asking a German couple passing by to help, for the man was in a hurry and almost ordered the woman to ignore my request for help, though my luggage was eventually stored.

Gingerly I found my way to the coffee shop. I placed my order with the attendant for a cup of coffee. He gave me

a cup of black coffee and pointed to the sugar and milk I asked for. But to my dismay the milk for my coffee came in a plastic sachet, and the sugar in a glass dispenser, the likes of which I had never seen in my life. Life was getting to be oh so very stressful!

Ute turned up soon after. She took me by train to her house in Kalkheim. It was my first ride on a city train. But everything was easy from now with a local to follow.

Ute was living with her mother and an elder brother in a quiet village with her own garden of apple trees. Ute's mother told me she had worked as a nurse in the Second World War, an experience which had made her turn to spirituality. With Ute's brother Wolf and his friends, I sampled my first home-made apple cider. Wolf's young friend kept on talking about hearing a "constant call to go to Frankfurt," which sounded to me like he needed a quick fix or something.

After two days of rest and sightseeing, I headed back to the airport for my flight to London.

Getting off the plane at Heathrow, I had a memorable welcome to London in the form of greetings from the Immigration officer at Heathrow. He looked at my passport and asked me what I did in Nepal. I told him I taught Shakespeare. Did he hear "sexpear"? I am not so sure he understood that I was a teacher of his language in Nepal. "Can I see your money?" he asked. As you remember, all I had was one 100\$ note in my pocket so I was not too keen to show him my cash. "I'm sorry but I left my purse in my checked-in baggage," I lied. I do not know what he thought about me but he promptly stamped "One month" on my passport and let me go.

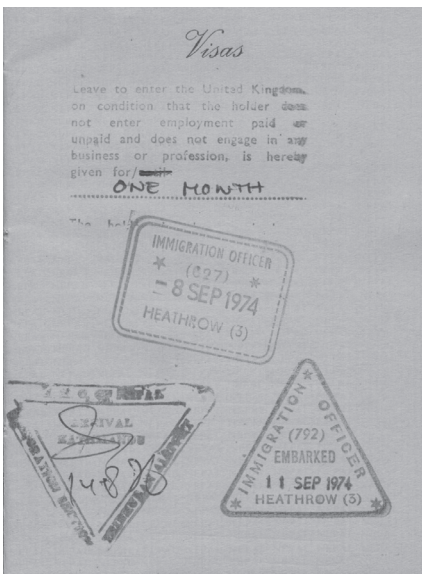
Now on to the tube station to take the train to Hounslow

*A Nepali's American Odyssey*

to meet a Nepali family who were friends of Deepak Mathema from the USEF in Kathmandu. He had kindly arranged a free stay with them for me in London and thoroughly briefed me on how to get from the airport to Hounslow. I had no money to take a taxi and I was lugging a huge second-hand suitcase. I had never been in an underground train on my own and though all the different lines were clearly marked with different colors, I had no idea how the network ran so it all looked horribly confusing.

Happily, I got to the Hounslow station in one piece and called the number Deepak had given. I think Deepak had also given me the coin with which to telephone.

The Nepali host who answered the phone was expecting me and asked me to wait for him at the station, but he never showed up. So, I called again. He told me he had come to the station but hadn't seen me and had returned home.





Apparently, I'd been waiting inside the train station and not at an exit, as I had no clue about train station exits, entrances and terminals.

He returned to the station, picked me up in a ubiquitous black taxi, and took me to his home, which was to be my home in London for the next few days.

Luckily, several former British VSO friends who had served in Nepal showed me around London. They were the same people who had turned up one cool and crisp October morning in 1972 at Patan Campus to "observe" us local teachers of English teaching their language to hapless Nepali undergraduate students. John Whelpton, Marilyn, Jack Scholes, Victoria Charlton, Janey Moon - they were all in their twenties just like us and were in Kathmandu for their orientation program before they went on to teach at different parts of the country. We really enjoyed this great period of mutual discovery; several of us remain in touch even today.

On my second day, at lunch near Buckingham Palace, Marilyn told me she had gone to the Heathrow airport with her father, armed with my flight number from Delhi and time of my arrival, to pick me up but had not been able to find me.

Alas, there had been a hiccup back in Frankfurt. After I had arrived at the airport, I found that my flight had been delayed so had asked to be put on another flight, having explained to the counter staff that I had arranged to meet a friend in Heathrow after landing. Luckily, they were able to meet my request.

Marilyn, meanwhile, having found by phone that my flight had been delayed, had also delayed her own arrival

at the airport. She had waited and waited for someone who had landed hours earlier but on a different flight.

London was a big disappointment for me. The city was too, too vast and I did not have sufficient time to explore it properly. I regretted being unable to see the places I had really wanted to visit: Oxford, Cambridge, Strafford-upon-Avon, the Lake District – names I had associated with England in my MA English days were all beyond reach. London was so overwhelming that once I stepped inside the city, I forgot all that I had previously known about it. There were also sights my MA English course never touched upon. Walking with Marilyn by Westminster Abbey and Buckingham Palace, I was shocked at the sight of an unkempt drunk middle-aged bum haranguing staid-looking people making their way to work.

Sightseeing alone, I had lunch at a self-service café by Big Ben and spent some time looking at the Thames from Westminster Bridge. The scene was certainly not what I expected from reading Wordsworth's Daffodils poem. I wondered what he would think if he were to walk those streets today. The rivers in Kathmandu were still pristine then, but the Thames was utterly polluted and squalid and the river Main in Frankfurt was no better. I saw scores of lakes from the airplane and wondered whether they were the lakes in the Lake District romanticized by Wordsworth and Coleridge.

My next stop was Washington DC, where my sole purpose was to visit Bill Hinkley. Bill, a lanky American, had been a Peace Corps Volunteer who, like me, worked at Tribhuvan University Library in Kirtipur. I was a clerk in the book requisitions department while I completed my MA studies and Bill worked there as a cataloguer. It was Bill

who explained to me that the name “Bill” was the common nickname for persons named William.

At that time in my life in Kirtipur, I dreamed big about all things American. Stoned out of my head at some dive on Freak Street in Kathmandu like the young hippies from the West, I would read American literature, listen to American songs and watch pirated American movies. Bill’s American ways, such as bicycling all the way to Godavari Botanical Gardens in Kathmandu’s southern outskirts, were becoming my model. I bought a Chinese-made bicycle at the government-run National Trading Corporation, which, in those days, was the sole importer for blue and red Chinese bicycles and green Russian motorcycles. Bill opted to rent his bikes, and once we tried cycling up the Phulchoki, Kathmandu’s highest hill but had to turn around when we came to a spot that had been washed away by recent monsoon rains.

Bill would occasionally invite me to dine on *dal bhat* at his flat, where he employed a young Tamang boy who was not a very good cook. In return, I would invite him to my “Boys Hostel” for dinner, with the meal often preceded by hard Newari drink, *aila*, distilled in Kirtipur town just outside the university. For Bill to get to his place required spirited cycling down the hill, across the Bishnumati river and then pedal another two kilometers along a road with very few working streetlights.

My job in Book Acquisition at the university library entailed notifying the heads of the various university departments with lists of the new books received, most of which were from Indian book publishers. I would also compile lists of the books they requested and place orders with booksellers in India. Shanti Mishra, the librarian,

signed off the letters, not me, and it was Shanti Mishra herself who interviewed me when I applied for my first job in Kathmandu in 1967.

At times there were big consignments of expensive encyclopedias arriving via post – with invoices offering huge 30% - 60% discounts – which I then processed for Shanti Mishra for official order. Most were outdated by many years, and I still wonder today why our lady librarian was buying old editions and not the latest.

I once took the liberty of ordering two books from a local shop, Educational Enterprises: one was 'Lolita' by Vladimir Nabokov, which I knew to be a classic and wanted to read myself, and the other, 'Valley of the Dolls' by Jacqueline Susann, which Newsweek had recently listed as an American bestseller. Shanti did not approve of the books I ordered but Bill had said that every university library should have a copy of Lolita, and that there was no harm in occasionally carrying a contemporary bestseller.

Bill and I worked together until he finished his two-year term in 1970 and returned to America. I bid him farewell at the Kathmandu airport, and we regularly wrote to each other afterward. Now, around four years later 11 September 1974, I was stopping in Washington DC on my way to MSU to pay a visit to him. I had had a twenty-four-hour day, having left London at 10:30 am and flown more than seven hours by the time I touched down in Washington DC. But the local time was just 1:30 pm and the day was still young. Bill had thoughtfully placed a placard by the baggage carousel at the Dulles Airport, which read: "Welcome to Washington DC, Ramesh. I am waiting for you at the arrival lounge just outside! Bill"

Travelling from the airport to the part of the city where he lived, Bill pointed out several landmarks to me including the CIA headquarters buildings and the Watergate Complex (where the 'Watergate scandal' had led Richard Nixon to resign just a month earlier). It felt like Washington DC was throwing toward me everything it had to offer right at the first instant.

That evening, Bill, and a friend of his took me to see an English comedy in the Kennedy Center, and after an impressive performance, we went into a pub. Bill lived on the 12th floor of an apartment building on 4th Street SW near Michigan Avenue. Early the next morning, he left for his office at the Library of Congress. Alone in his apartment, with shelves full of books and a brand-new record player with hi-fi speakers and many vinyl records, I decided to make myself a nice cup of tea. To my embarrassment, I had to call him at his office to ask how to turn on the gas stove, which was a completely different entity compared to the kerosene stoves I used in Nepal.

After tea I left the apartment for a stroll, walking hesitantly, slowly on Michigan Avenue, for it was such a wide road and such a long street going on and on for so many miles. So many tall buildings. So, this is what they call skyscrapers!

Soon I found myself in a fountain park, an open and leisurely place where some straight and some hippie looking people were having lunch or just hanging around. I sat on a bench shaded by a big tree and heard crickets and cicadas amidst the roar of monster cars going by and airplanes overhead. I watched as a black vagrant approached everybody, kneeling on his hands, and begging for a cigarette and food. He had a

knife in his back pocket, I could see, and was strongly built but he looked harmless. Dirty, unkempt, and dragging his box of belongings, he asked me for a dollar. I managed to escape his advances, leaving him to target donors bearing much more American currency than this Nepali student.

Before entering the park, I had stopped at a grocery shop and bought a large can of beer which was handed to me in a paper bag, much to my amazement. Bill later told me that in America, disguising the contents was the proper way to drink alcohol in a park – as going around swigging from a can of beer would not be proper in a public place.

As the next day was Saturday, Bill took me to the Library of Congress, where he gave me a tour of the Nepal section. It spanned half a floor and comprised hundreds of books, many dating back half a century and out of print today.

Bill also took me to the National Mall to see the monuments and memorials, and the Capitol Building on Capitol hill. I still remember his describing the lift we took at the Capitol as DC's most sophisticated, most elegant – or something like that. We also visited the nearby Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.



With my MSU class mates George and Greg in East Lansing.

### CHAPTER III

## MSU Days

A SMALLER plane ferried me for the domestic flight from Dulles Airport, Washington DC, into the Lansing Capital City Airport, Michigan, located about 5 kms northwest of downtown Lansing, landing at around 10 am. It was a bright and sunny day in September, and at the airport I was met by an Indian graduate student from MSU's Department of Linguistics and dropped at the Owen Hall, the graduate student's dormitory. I had booked a room months earlier by mail from Kathmandu but the receptionist in her 50s with a broad smile and crooked teeth told me after checking her records that I had no booking.

Had I filled in the reservation form and posted it? Yes, I replied with mounting anxiety, from Kathmandu central post office two months ago. Had I enclosed a cheque with it, to cover my living expenses for the first quarter? Of course, I had not, as I had struggled to even find enough rupees to change for dollars for scotch whiskey and cigarettes before departing. I had assumed that all my costs would be offset by the university as part of the Fulbright package of \$300 per month.

“Don’t worry,” she said, with a reassuring smile that suggested my predicament was far from unique. “Why don’t you leave your luggage at the locker room and go to the International Center next door. I am sure they will find something for you.” She offered the most helpful advice. Everyone was so helpful and friendly.

I was told there were some 10,000 foreign students entering the university that year (out of a total student enrollment of 60,000). At the International Center, several student volunteers had been assigned to take care of me and my intake of foreign students. I was given a form and asked to fill it out, which in my jet-lagged state, proved to be a struggle. Sitting next to me on the same table was a Japanese student, who was skipping through the form with much more ease and confidence than I could muster, her pen wiggling furiously and producing beautiful handwriting.

I ticked ‘yes’ to the question asking whether I would be interested to meet American students and talk about my country.

I eventually completed the form, submitted it and was instructed to go to my department, whose full title was “The Department of Linguistics, Oriental and African Languages,”



to see if something might come through by way of temporary accommodation. The department was located on the third floor of Wells Hall, just a short walking distance away.

I was surprised to find that the department was headed by a middle-aged, tall, rotund Chinese gentleman named James Wang. Somehow, I had expected a Caucasian. He told me he had read and liked my essay accompanying the application form. Little did he know it was written not by me but by a veteran linguist like him named Lindsay Freedman, the woman I have already told you about. Lindsay had taught Phonetics at the University of Edinburgh, married a WHO official and had been living in Kathmandu. Her linguistics background, in combination with her regular dinner invitations with plenty of Johnnie Walker Red Label scotch and duty-free Triple 5 British cigarettes, made it inevitable that we had become best friends, offering each other moral and mental support whenever it was needed.

My academic advisor was a rather stern lecturer named Julia Falk. I was instructed to go to her with any academic questions I had. She would initial all my applications for new courses each semester, and it was she who had rejected my request to do a course in tourism as advocated prior to my departure by the Bhutanese Prince Lenny Dorji back in Nepal. She had however, approved my request to take a course in American history, albeit with great reluctance.

I opted for a course in American history because months after my arrival at MSU and settling into the hostel, I became friends with an elderly Indonesian who had told me the American history class was held in the evening and that the instructor was kind with grades. I passed the course with an A, enjoying at the same time learning about the Pilgrim

Fathers who came from across the sea and massacred the American Indians.

It transpired later in the afternoon on that first day that the department secretary, Linda, was taking care of my temporary lodging, at her home. At the end of the long day at the department when she was ready to drive home, I found next to me in her car two other students including the same Japanese girl who had been filling the form so confidently at the International Center. Her name was Atsuko Shoji and she explained that she was starting as a graduate student in the same department while working at the same time as a Japanese-language teaching assistant. We three were temporarily lodged at the department secretary's house for a few days.

The following morning after a quick breakfast, Linda took the three of us to her church, my first church service in life. We stayed at her place for the next few days. I noted how hard a secretary's life was when she had to wake early and drive still in the dark. The mornings were cold, the weather snowy, and starting the car was difficult.

After a couple of days at Linda's, I returned to Owen Hall to ask if any room was available now. Standing next to me was an African student asking the same question. "I've just come out of the bush, you know," he was telling the same lady with the crooked teeth. "I am totally lost here. I have no idea how to find a place on my own," he told her, a little plaintively.

"Really, out of the bush? Where are you from?" the lady asked. "From Nigeria," he replied matter-of-factly, as if his origins were obvious. The receptionist's face melted, imagining the hardships this Nigerian student was having to

face. She suggested that he try the nearby Fee Hall, asking me and another student from France, standing in the line next to us, to join also.

As we crunched our way to Fee Hall, the Nigerian explained his strategy. "To get their attention, you must tell them you have just jumped out of the bush. Otherwise, they do not hear you." Prior to starting at MSU, he had been living with a cousin in Chicago for six months, he admitted candidly.

We did indeed find a room at Fee Hall, a room for three that we would share for the whole quarter. Most of the time during that first quarter, we three would take our evening meals together— mostly to a chicken place, which I loved. It took some time before I discovered that it was the ubiquitous Kentucky Fried Chicken I had fallen in love with. I had never seen a KFC before so had not quite realized the universal appeal of the sign out front.

I moved out of Fee Hall at the beginning of the Winter quarter when I was assigned a room at Owen Hall on Shaw Lane as I had earlier requested. The room was a twin-share, and my roommate was an American graduate student who was mostly absent. He had bought the meal plan but never ate at the common restaurant: a restaurant official once asked me if I knew why, but I had no idea. I was happy to have the room to myself and peruse the copies of *Penthouse* and *Hustler* magazines that he regularly bought and left lying around on the bookshelf that separated our two beds.

My room was located on the East Wing. Yes, for there was an equally huge West Wing block also. I found that out the hard way very early on when I thought I was knocking on the door of my own room and found myself standing

before a shocked Korean-looking lady. Right floor, correct room number, wrong wing. So many strange mistakes I was making.

It was great finally to be able to have my own room sharing a common bathroom with the neighbor. The room was on the eighth floor of the East Wing and, besides a telephone, it had a fantastic view of the campus. Having my own phone in the room was a luxury, even though I never called anybody back home.

In my 'honeymoon' period at MSU in the first few weeks, I was the only Nepali student in the department (though some did come a few weeks later). Consequently, I spoke English all the time, until I saw someone walking toward me who appeared to be Nepali. But when I started speaking Nepali to him, I quickly gathered that he did not understand a word I was saying as he was Indonesian. After realizing my mistake, I apologized to him in English. My mind was famished for speaking my native tongue, being unable to use it for so long. That aborted exchange with the hapless foreign student completely shocked not only him but me as well, as I knew I had made an embarrassing mistake but still could not stop myself from uttering a flood of Nepali sentences at him.

That was my first real experience of culture shock, a sensation of being an alien in an alien place that was at once exciting and yet so lonely and depressing. It seemed to drain me of energy. In Nepal, we thought we understood our American friends quite well, but I was finding that Americans in the US were a different people. The America I was inhabiting was vastly different from what I knew from reading books like 'Zen and the Art of Motorcycle

Maintenance'. I was beginning to think that the America we foreign students were discovering was going to be different for each one of us and that ultimately, the America each of us eventually found would be our own 'America' as one defined it and nobody else's.

I realized then the loneliness of my Peace Corps volunteer friends in Nepal, even though they never shared with us their own culture shocks they had experienced. As I faced America in the month of October 1974, I felt lonely, as never before, but I also hoped that my difficult personal encounters would help me someday to discover a beautiful togetherness with the country.

Adjusting to American life was fraught, vending machines, for example. There had been no vending machines in Kathmandu when I left, but they were ubiquitous at MSU. My hatred of vending machines started with the post office, which I had to pass daily on the way to my lectures, having to insert coins into slots in a machine to buy aerogrammes and stamps to send letters home. I longed to just go to a counter and ask a human being for what I needed, like stamps and aerogrammes.

To shop for daily necessities such as soap, toothpaste, coffee, a jar of crunchy peanut butter, clothes, and the like, I often asked Frank Rose, a graduate student from the economics department I came to know, to give me a ride to K-Mart, especially when they advertised sales in the free campus daily newspaper. Even the MSU student-run daily, like all things in America, was bigger and fatter than the government-run 'The Rising Nepal' daily newspaper.

Shopping at K-Mart was both a revelation and a trial. Faced with one aisle after another of so many brands of

soap, detergents, toothpaste, foods, etc. my mind reeled to the point of nausea.

In Kathmandu, foreigners often complained about suffering from dysentery due to unhygienic Nepali foods while in my case, a foreigner in America, I was suffered the same symptoms during the whole of my first spring quarter. Was it unhygienic American foods? Perhaps unholy McDonald's hamburgers going into my holy Hindu stomach? True, I thought at first that hamburgers were made from ham or pork. It was months before I learned they were made from beef. "I have shitted every color of the rainbow," John Whelpton, a VSO friend recalls me writing to him.

For the first three months or so, by day's end I was both mentally and physically exhausted. I put it down to a combination of Western food in a stomach accustomed to *dal* and *bhat* curry, plus all the sensory overload from having to deal with so many unfamiliar vending machines, strange questions people asked, a central heating system which kept me too warm, not to mention the pressures of my graduate classes with all the strange morphemes and phonemes, psychosomatic as physical.

I felt utterly lonely, lonely to the point of breaking; it was a tearsome, chokesome, lump-in-the-throat kind of feeling. The Grad Center in Owen Hall was bursting with international students. I waited for mail through the lonely fall months. Every letter received was a blessing. A single letter from my folks in Nepal could change my life. Bereft of all my friends back home, I felt I was facing the whole existence anew.

The central heating really messed up my metabolism. I would fall asleep anywhere - in the library, in class,

everywhere. I found it difficult to get up in the morning. I would wake up groggy because the early morning air was not as fresh as back home in the mountains, while outside, the days grew cold and the nights even colder. Soon it is going to be below freezing, the locals would warn me.

One morning very early on, Linda, the linguistics department secretary asked me to come to the phone. Someone wanted to speak with me. The voice on the end of the line had a soft, slow Midwest/Southern drawl, like John Wayne's. "Are you Ramish from Nepal," a male voice asked. "My mother works at the International Center, and told me that you'd like to meet American students. How about getting together?"

A few hours later as I waited in the department in Wells Hall on Red Cedar Road, a tall, lanky young American arrived with his long feet dragging and his name, Mark Nilsson, clearly written out on a piece of paper firmly attached with tape on his shirt pocket.

By way of introduction, he explained that he had been a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Philippines and was now a graduate student at the Agriculture Economics Department. He could speak a bit of Tagalog, he told me. After about five minutes of pleasantries, he said he would pick me up that afternoon and take me for dinner at his house in Okemos, not far from campus.

Mark turned out to be a blue-blooded Spartan. His father working in the MSU administration, his younger brother Geoffrey was an undergrad history major, and his mother, who worked at the International Students Center, had told him about this Nepali student who was keen to meet his American counterparts and talk about his home country.

During dinner at his house, Mark introduced not only himself and his family, but the whole American lifestyle. At his house, I learned how American families lived, “pull” one another’s legs, teasing each other in harmless verbal exchanges, play pool or table tennis in their basements, visit relatives, invite each other to dinner and go out together to eat ice cream. He offered me my first banana split sundae.

As the freezing Michigan winter evenings wore on, Mark took me tobogganing in a park near his house, sliding downhill on an ordinary restaurant plastic tray. Addressing my sartorial shortcomings, he took me to a Salvation Army military warehouse sale on Michigan Avenue in downtown Lansing to buy a warm jacket for \$2 and winter shoes for a dollar to replace my only others, a pair of then fashionable high-heeled leather shoes that I had bought a few months earlier in Lucknow, India and had worn all the way from Nepal to America.

Mark even took me swimming at the heated indoor campus swimming pool, and to the MSU ice skating rink. Water sports have limited mass appeal in land-locked Nepal, so I was never much of a swimmer so I almost drowned in the pool, while skating found me more often horizontal than vertical, as ice skating was totally unheard in Nepal.

He also took me to see my first (and only) game of American Football, the MSU Spartans versus the arch rival Michigan Wolverines from the University of Michigan. On the day of the big joust, MSU and the city of East Lansing looked totally festive, with everyone as happy as in our Dasain festival days back home. After all the pre- match



hype, American football looked more like a game of handball to me. I did not know how to follow the balls thrown by hand and the rules seemed all very strange. Nor do I understand the rules even now.

Mark often took me to party with his undergraduate girlfriends at the ivy-covered Yakeley Hall, MSU's only female-only hostel or residence hall. I learned the "bump," a popular dance among this crowd. In an effort to impress the bevy of girls we met with our "foreign language" capability, we would put on a show of Mark talking to me in Tagalog and me replying to him in Nepali. Looking back on it, I don't think they knew or even cared whether a Nepali spoke Nepali or Tagalog.

For the record, Mark ended up marrying Cheryl, one of these Yakeley Hall students whom we had gone "bumped." They are now happily retired and living in Pensacola, Florida and have two sons in the US Army.

It was from talking with these undergraduate American girls that I realized with a shock how gullible they were and how little the vast majority Americans knew – or cared – of the world outside America's borders.

Lela, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed student and already married, told me excitedly one morning at seminar class that she had seen the coronation of Nepal's King Birendra, the other night on CBS. She told me she had seen the king riding an elephant. "And what does the queen ride on," she asked.

Oh, I said matter-of-factly, "our queen rides on a lion." "Wow, how cool!" She cooed. A few days later, she confronted me. "Ramesh, you told me your queen rides on a lion. My husband tells me nobody can ride a lion."

*A Nepali's American Odyssey*

I gradually gave up on my Yakeley Hall rounds with the undergraduate girls. Mark told me I was too shy to make an impression on those girls with their brains mangled from too many movies.



## CHAPTER IV

### MSU Days II – TGIF

My Friday classes ended at 4 pm. I would run up to Agriculture Building to meet Mark, goading him to join me on my TGIF rounds. Weekends in America, a time to relax and party, especially on university campuses, would always start with Friday afternoons, so Thank God it's Friday. TGIF was a big part of my MSU days.

TGIFs became an institution of sorts in the 1960s and 1970s, long before it became a global restaurant franchise offering sports TV and snacks. The bars around campus would offer a pitcher of beer at half price, \$1.25, but only until 6 pm. Mark didn't drink much, but he accompanied

me on many of my TGIF bar-hopping jaunts from the Silver Dollar Saloon on Michigan Avenue to Peanut Barrell on Grand River, to Beggar's Banquet on Abbot Street. Mark even told me about brown-bagging (smuggling your own cheaper bottle into a bar in a brown paper bag) and sometimes he was the one holding the brown bag for me. Weekends were great fun, which I enjoyed seeing lots of movies, drinking gallons of beer and hanging out with friends.

After my TGIF outings, I would return to Owen Hall for dinner, where the food was expensive and lousy. After eating, I would go to see a movie shown in one of the campus buildings, often old classics by Charlie Chaplin, Hardy and Laurel, Marx Brothers, and the like. 'Jesus Christ Superstar' was one of the very first movies I saw on campus. It was my first musical and I was mesmerized, completely blown away by the music and hippy scene I was somewhat familiar with back in Kathmandu. I also remember watching 'East of Eden,' 'Serpico' and 'Towering Inferno' at cinema halls in Lansing.

After the final credits had rolled, I would wander back to my hostel and try to catch another movie on TV. One Friday night on campus, there was a 10.30 pm blues concert – I do not remember whose – before heading into Lansing for beer. I remember stumbling back into the hostel at 2 am.

Some Fridays Mark and I would make a detour to the Alley Eye night club, which also had TGIF rate of \$1.25 for a pitcher of beer, followed by a pizza party at Mike's house on Abbott Street not too far away – Mike and Frank, both ex-Peace Corps volunteers in Malaysia or Thailand, had been to Nepal as tourists. After Mike's, there was often another party at Pueblo's, an Economics student from Australia who

considered himself a great playboy. Tired of fooling around with the Yakeley girls, Pueblo had settled down with a steady girlfriend.

On Sundays, most students on campus would get back on track with their studies, often with fellow linguistics student, working on some class assignments for the following week.

I learned some American slang expressions which I delighted in sharing with Nepali friends, like “That’s cool” (sounds neat); “I got to get down, man” (to studies); and “Have you been booking a lot?” (Reading books a lot). Americans abbreviate almost everything too, I had found, with the Department of Linguistics being drastically shortened to just ‘LIN,’ and Economics to ‘Econ.’

Let’s you get the wrong idea, I have to say that campus life was not all alcohol-fueled frivolity. Together we saw several bands, including one American jazz and world music group called Oregon featuring young American musicians from the West Coast playing Indian Sitar and tabla. I continue to listen to the group’s ‘Essential’ album even now after all these years.

Mark had a car and like any American graduate student, he travelled a lot. I remember riding with him to Chicago and asking him to leave me in front of the Chicago Museum of Art which – besides all the popular museum pieces – had a nice lawn where I could lie down and warm myself in the sunshine. East Lansing’s winter was mostly sunless and the snowy days never seemed to end. Chicago was a windy city, and the wind often swept away the snow from the Museum of Art’s lawn. On a whim and with some small change, I conquered the Sears Tower, tallest building in Chicago at the time.

On a trip to Indianapolis with Mark, we visited the newly built International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) temple and gate-crashed the Indian vegetarian *Haluwa* breakfast. In those days, all were welcome to partake of these divine breakfasts without having to join them in their Hare Krishna Street dances. I am not a great believer, but the Baha'i House of Worship in nearby Wilmettee is another building I still remember as one of the most spectacular temples in the area.

The first thing I bought with money saved from my \$300 monthly Fulbright scholarship (tuition fees were paid directly to the university) was a Sony three-in-one music combo. A sleek box of Japanese electronics wizardry, it had an FM radio, an LP record player that allowed you to stack two records to play one after another, and a six-track cartridge player. I still remember the clicking and whooshing sound as it changed records automatically, the amazingly sweet sound of comfort.

On the FM radio, I listened to two stations every day: MSU 88.9 FM run by students, mostly from the department of mass communications, and the WKAR NPR FM.

Every weekend without fail, I tuned into Casey Kassem's American Top 40, the week's collection of chart-topping hits that was broadcast coast-to-coast. My favorites were Simon and Garfunkel, Temptations, Manhattan Transfer, Gladys Knight, and the Pips. Diana Ross, Stevie Wonder, Olivia Newton-John, Elton John, Neil Diamond, and Roberta Flack. Writing this now in the stifling heat of Bangkok, I can still feel the cold, lonely, freezing winter's days of 1975 all around me when I hear those sad, soulful songs.

At my beloved East Lansing record store, an LP album

used to cost \$3.99. I bought George Harrison's 'I dig Love' and a three-record set of Tchaikovsky's 'Swan Lake' at discounted prices. I loved the photos of the Hindu gods on the album covers of the band Mahavishnu Orchestra but did not think it was worth my hard-saved dollar.

I also liked the cover photo on Chick Corea's 'Return to Forever' album, which had just been released in the fall of 1974 when I had just arrived in the US. I had never heard of Chick Corea but I fell in love at first sight with the cover of the album in front of me – a large seagull flying over the blue-Panama sea. I decided to bet all my budgeted \$3.99 and hoped the music would be as lilting as the package it was cocooned in. Back in my room at Owen Hall, I eased the album onto my brand-new Sony record spinner. I liked the music, loved the sound of Spain, and was instantly mesmerized by the voice of the Brazilian singer, Flora Purim, a kind I had never heard before.

I bought Elton John's 'Yellow Brick Road', Chicago's Hits and Eagles' Hits, the latter with the skeletal head of the bird on the cover. I had brought all these sacred treasures with me to Bangkok when I moved here in 1980 but alas, the albums were destroyed in the massive flood that washed through the Thai capital in 2011. Happily, music technology advanced and I was later able to replace them all with CD versions.

Bob Seger's 'Kathmandu' actually added magic to my lonely days when it became a national hit and every FM station started playing it. Bob Seger and the Silver Bullet Band singing rapturously about the city I had only recently vacated was a kind of reassurance, a solace. Here I was, someone from Kathmandu in blood, sweat and tears – but

no one in America was giving a damn. Still, I felt strangely vindicated, reassured every time I heard the song – and I think I still do each time I play it.

Simon and Garfunkel's 'America' seemed to be written just for me as I too was here to look for America. Its lyrics paraphrased my own life: So, we bought a pack of cigarettes – I was a heavy smoker then. Michigan seems like a dream to me now – hard reality for me every day. Saginaw, he took four days to hitchhike from – is it the same Saginaw just 100 miles north, I wondered.

My connection with returning American Peace Corps volunteers, already close back in Nepal, deepened further at MSU. As soon as I got there in the fall of 1974, these young Americans were eager to meet foreign students and for the latter, it was easier to relate, share experiences of getting lost in a new culture and language. RPCVs, as they were known, were the most helpful and all acted as my bridge to the USA, even those who had served in countries other than Nepal.

Frank Rose, even though he was not a PCV, had met and married Kumiko in Nara, Japan. Frank was in the Ag Econ Department, as was my pal Mark Nilsson, so we all became good friends. I even helped Kumiko find a job, after spotting a hand-written ad for a babysitter that was stuck on one of the walls of my hostel.

In April 1976, Bruce Springsteen stopped at our campus during his concert tour; Frank, Kumiko and I went to see him and his band perform at the auditorium. The tickets were expensive at \$30, and Bruce Springsteen was the same age as me then – and he still is. He sang 'Born to Run', the house exploded. We gotta get out while we're young, 'cause



tramps like us, baby we were born to run. He sang with his electric guitar accompanied by a young black saxophonist.

Another big-name performer we three saw in concert at the MSU auditorium was George Benson.

Frank and Kumiko took me to their parents' home in Canandaigua, a town in upstate New York's Ontario County during my first Christmas in America. I still remember the Manhattans' Kiss and Say Goodbye playing on his car radio when we were leaving the MSU campus for New York.

Another PCV I met who became a special friend was Bob Tomory. He had been a volunteer in my own village, Bhojpur. When I met Bob at MSU, he showed me the photo of a newly opened teashop in the hilltop village of Shyamshila, Bhojpur, the same bamboo hut Jonathan Formanek and I had stopped at for a cup of tea just a year earlier on the way to Bhojpur. Bob was doing a PhD in educational psychology.

Among my class friends at the Linguistics department was Momolu Massaquoi from Liberia. We both stayed at Owen Hall and often walked together to the department and back. "Hey, you smell like the flowers of Arabia today"- I would tease him when starting our early morning walk to the department. "And you smell like a cigarette factory," he would retort.

I told him Nepali folk tales. Each time I finished, he would take the same story from there and go further. Liberian folk stories often did not stop where Nepali ones did but went on and on, liltily like Momolu Massaquoi's own name.

He used to buy new LPs like myself, and in his room, we listened to Olivia Newton-John's 'I Honestly Love You' over and over again. These love songs often brought tears to Momulu's eyes, as he was missing the girl friend he said

he had met just a few months ago and had separated from coming to MSU.

Back home in Monrovia, he worked for the Education Ministry and had fallen in love with a young lecturer teaching at one of the girls' colleges. Their love flowered as they went to watch films together in Monrovia. They went to long walks in the palm-lined beaches along the rolling coastal plains and explored northern highlands. Just before he was due to fly to America, she had told her she had become pregnant. They were writing to each other but he felt helpless as she was trying desperately on her own to get an abortion, which was still illegal in Liberia.

The quarterly term system at MSU allowed four breaks per year. Each break, I visited friends who had invited me to their homes. Sometimes I would catch a lift with fellow students who were looking to share the cost of gasoline.

During the spring break of 1975, my classmate George Lewis and his wife Karen invited me to drive with them to George's home in New York City. They had married just a year earlier and they invited me to their Spartan village apartment for meals together with Greg Turner, another of our linguistics department friends. On the way to New York City, we camped for a night by one of Finger Lakes in upper New York State. After a few days in New York city, we drove to Vermont and walked part of the Appalachian trail, spending a night in an open log cabin on the trail and cooked over the fire outside. For the first time I saw one of the New England stone walls, made famous by Robert Frost's poem about good fences making good neighbors, which reminded me of popular line from my favorite Nepali poet, Basu Shashi, which goes: "when you build a wall, you wall out many things".

One of my frequent haunts on the MSU campus was the Grand River rapids next to the Linguistics department and Admin building. I went there almost every day for a cigarette break and some quiet time. The flowing water left ripples and foam behind, glittering in the sun. The river was mostly dark and dead but at that spot it was dammed and with some rocks made the water come to life with its own music. Ducks would paddle by, some with a family in tow. The ducks would migrate south for the winter when the whole river iced over.

This spot reminded me of the Himalaya and the hills back home. I realized that the October festivals of Dasain and Tihar had completely passed without my being aware of them.

Late one afternoon, I went for a lonely walk just behind my hostel on a walking trail that led to a patch of forest. I felt like I was in the middle of heaven when, by the banks of the Red Cedar River, I first saw the leaves bursting in the reds and oranges of the North American autumn. In Spring, I would go canoeing on the river with Hagiwara, a friend from Japan. He was doing his PhD in Economics and introduced me to his mostly female friends from Japan, Singapore and Indonesia who adopted me as a regular guest when they met on Saturdays for an Asian cooking-and-eating fiesta.

One November, as I looked out from my 6th floor room the sky was deep blue and the sun shining. It seemed like a nice warm day was calling me for a leisurely walk in the sun. Clad just in my shirt, I took the elevator down and stepped out into the sun. But it turned out to be so freezing cold I ran back in, jolted by the seeming contradiction of a sky so blue and the glorious sun and the bone chilling cold.

After about six months, I found that I was not particularly good at theoretical linguistics. I liked transformational grammar, but generative linguistics was my undoing. I did not understand a word of George Lakoff, who was single-handedly changing the semantics of generative linguistics back then. I was worried about getting an F in the subject I had opted to study, until one sweet day, the lecturer himself did not make it to class. It turned out that he was having a breakdown and had just vanished. God saved me from an ignoble “F”.

I started moving out of hard-core linguistics into sociolinguistics and language planning. I studied with David Dwyer, a lecturer in the Department of Anthropology with a PhD in Linguistics, including a one- on-one “seminar,” which I found stimulating. We would meet early in the morning at a nearby cafeteria twice a week with our coffee and donuts, and David would assign new reading materials which he would ask me to present back to him for further discussion.

At some point, I thought I should try and transfer from MSU to the Department of Linguistics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois to work under Dr. Braj Kachru, an Indian linguist who was making name for himself as the head of the department. I found his approach to Indian English, the concept of “Englishes” he was propagating truly inspirational.

So, during a quarter break in March 1975, I took a Greyhound to meet him and ask if he would accept me in his department. He not only wrote for me a letter of recommendation but also invited me for a curry dinner at his home. Despite my best hope, that evening I did not get to meet his wife Yamuna Kachru, a well-known linguist in

her own right. Dr Kachru called an Indian student of his and persuaded him to let me stay overnight at his place.

I then went to Chicago (a 10-hour Greyhound ride) to the Fulbright office, met the director and applied for a change of department. Alas, the director told me bluntly that “they” (the Fulbright Foundation) would not look favorably on my request for a change in the middle of my degree. I heard nothing more from them, so I was stuck with continuing my chosen course.

In my final written exam for my MA at MSU, I chose to answer questions relating to the sociolinguistics topics we covered in my seminar classes with David. For that reason, I was given a Low Pass on my final by Julia Falk, my advisor.

Not to worry. That pass with its 3.5 grade was equivalent to a first-class grade back home and would entitle me to receive the prestigious Gorkha Dacchin Bahu medal (“The right arm of the Gurkha King”) to be presented to me by the King of Nepal. But in my short time in America, I had caught the virus of republicanism and hated the whole idea of receiving a medal from a king so much that, to my friends’ shock and dismay, I did not even bother to apply for the award. But the low pass did help me get a promotion at Tribhuvan University Central Campus back in Kathmandu two years later, elevating me from my lowly Assistant Lecturer position at Patan Campus prior to leaving Nepal to ‘Lecturer’ upon my return.

This account of my days as a student in America would be incomplete without mentioning Peter and Shirley, my host family at MSU. They were already in their Sixties when I met them and had been missionary preachers in India. They had applied to the International Center to host students from

the Indian subcontinent. Later however, they also adopted my Japanese friend, Hagiwara, after I took him with me to dinner with them. Though Shirley cooked a great curry, they would take us to Chinese restaurants when she did not cook at home, and that is when I was introduced to fortune cookies. In their care as well, we would be taken to various flower shows and musical events which added a bit more color to our lives that were devoted mostly to boring books.

Two American couples who were grad students in the Forestry department and who lived in Spartan village (the university's accommodation for married couples), also occasionally invited Hagiwara and me for dinner. We would arrive with a six pack or two of Schlitz beer, then the least expensive beer one could buy. During winter days we walked all the way to Spartan village through the corridors of centrally-heated buildings to avoid the cold winter. Oh, the two winters I spent in Michigan were cold, very cold.

In December 1974, the snow lay more than 12 centimeters deep and foreign students were easy to identify by the way they slipped continually. Can you imagine, I wrote to friends back home, no sun and all snow on the ground for almost a week? Fucking lousy weather. Too much is too much. I thought all this was leading me to one great moment of realization. Do not ever try to find yourself, I counselled to myself. That is all so hard and so unreal. Just let yourself drift, drift on and survive.

My first quarter at MSU had finished, and most Owen residents had left to spend Christmas and New year at home. The campus was getting eerily quiet, as was the whole of East Lansing. Alone, I was enjoying my great stereo and some gin all by myself, thinking of home. America, I thought,

is a big pain in ass. Everything is just so damn different. So vast and unfathomable. But I told myself not to worry too much, lest I go out of my mind.

Still, life was not all that painful. Things were good too. I could get everything I wanted. For the most part, people were just marvelous. They understood – or at least tried to understand foreigners more than we Nepalis would do in Nepal. This is a great nation to be in, I kept telling myself, totally unable to make up my mind between satisfaction and despair. My culture shock was palpable.

Michigan helped me to look at myself more clearly. There are no mountains in Michigan, no clouds hanging on the hills, no warm sunshine. There was no walking, no mad following the moon and the stars, no lying on the grass like during my MA days at Kirtipur Campus. Streets were mostly empty; sidewalks with no people walking on them. In the streets of Kathmandu, in contrast, you felt the warmth of people transmitting itself through their very presence, their smiles. I wondered if I could ever fall in love with America in the same way. I doubted it; this place was just too cold for me.

An MSU student's life revolved around grade points. I'd been away from the student life for some time, so returning to it was a difficult adjustment for me, made worse by the fact that I gradually realized that linguistics was not my cup of tea. I had opted for linguistics, like many of my compatriots, because this was at the time the only subject, that Nepali students of English literature could apply to go see America.

As my alienation from Linguistics increased, I found all my classmates had turned into “Four Point Zero” grade

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point worshippers in the big Four Point Zero temple of MSU. Between classes, Wells Hall turned into a London tube station where people walked as if they were all in a dream numbly groping at each other, sleepless eyes turned inwards, refusing to meet the eyes of the Arabian, the Japanese, and the Liberian. It was a Four Point Zero trip.

My daily routine seldom varied. I got up. Put on music. Showered. Went down to the café for breakfast. Read the MSU daily newspaper. Some days were super lousy. I heard the mad scream in my soul as if I was in a frenzy of destruction, mostly because of unfulfilled longings. My



**By the Grand  
River Rapids.**



existence these days was a fantasy of loneliness, full of constant, inchoate longings. Winter days were especially difficult, as it snowed all day almost every day. I longed for sunshine, a gentle breeze, a spot of green grass where I could lie down and stare away the loneliness of life.

Gradually the hard winter gave way to spring. In May the snow melted and flowers were everywhere. Leafless trees became green seemingly overnight. Suddenly the campus was greener than any green I had ever seen. People went mad, almost naked in delirium. Wow, white girls in scant clothing!

Love was palpably in the air. A Puerto Rican friend of mine fell in love with two graduate girls during the same week that spring. He told me how he played Ravi Shanker to both while making love alternatively. He soon gave up on the American girl but remained loyal to his Brazilian girlfriend until both finished their studies and returned to their respective homes. His girlfriend got pregnant but unlike in Monrovia, help was easily available at the MSU hospital.

As the weather warmed, the campus also came alive with music. I saw a rock concert at the MSU auditorium, featuring Rufus, a black contemporary band. There was a lot of noise, people dancing on the floor, especially on the front seats. I found the spotlights maddeningly annoying. Besides Jefferson Starship, I went to see the Madrid Symphony Orchestra as a guest of my dear host family. I saw many classic films – costing around half a dollar and screening in several campus buildings: ‘Lost Horizon’, ‘Doctor Zhivago’, ‘The Great Gatsby’, ‘Grapes of Wrath’. I read ‘One Hundred years of Solitude’, Kerouac’s ‘On the Road’ again,

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'Rock Garden', and 'Report to Greco' by Nikos Kazantzakis. Erica Jong's standout was 1973 hit, 'Fear of Flying' with its tantalizing promise for a sex-starved 24-year old Nepali of "zipless fuck" in America.



Christmas 1976 with Bill Hinkley and his family.

## CHAPTER V

# Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Term-break Holidays

During term breaks, most foreign students travelled, securing rides with American students driving home to stay with their families.

The nice thing was that almost every American friend from my class invited me to their home for my first Thanksgiving holidays in November 1974. Kathy Corcoran was not an ex-Peace Corps volunteer nor even a graduate student like me, but she was a regular among my coterie

of friends. With her freckles and fuzzy hair, she appeared mature and not as wild as the other undergraduate girls of Yakeley Hall. She invited me to spend Thanksgiving with her family in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Kathy found a fellow student from her hometown to share the nearly 650-km drive on a wintry road paved in snow and ice.

With Kathy and her family, I enjoyed my first full on American Thanksgiving dinner, complete with turkey, mashed potatoes, stuffing, squash, corn, green beans, cranberries and pumpkin pie.

Kathy's father had graduated from MSU in animal husbandry, she told me, but had developed a reaction of some sort, making it impossible for him to work in his field of study. He was staying home, looking rather lost, I thought.

Her younger brother liked Jim Croce, just as I did. We played his 'Photographs and Memories' album, which was launched in 1972 and had become a coast-to-coast hit. The family took me to see the lakes and the state's long Mackinac Bridge.

Another time, during the spring quarter break, I got a ride as a paying passenger to Cleveland, Ohio on a fuel-sharing basis (though my kind driver later refused to accept any money). This was a short trip to visit Jonathan Formanek's parents. I can remember driving all over the town accompanying Jonathan's father as he delivered bottles of Coca-Cola.

Jonathan's mother asked me to call her Maria, not Ma or Ama as one would call the mother of a friend back home. She was a caring person. Before I left to return to MSU, she told me to write her for anything lacking at the hostel, which I did. She sent by mail a nice comforter, a very light

kind of blanket. Befitting its name, it was lighter and warmer and more comfortable than the heavy cotton-filled blankets (*dolains* and *siraks*) we use in winter in Nepal.

During one Christmas break, Frank Rose and Kumiko invited me to join them to visit their parents and two visiting sisters in Canandaigua, a small town in Upstate New York. Once there, Frank asked me to join him to buy a Christmas tree - a real evergreen conifer tree at a large farm just outside the town. The whole family got together and invited me to decorate the tree and the exterior of the houses with colorful lights. I had my first American Christmas experience complete with a big family dinner somewhat in the style of Thanksgiving dinner including roast turkey, mashed potatoes, meat pies and gingerbread cookies. Santa Claus arrived sometime in the night leaving candy and small gifts inside the stockings and underneath the tree.

After a big breakfast together, Frank and his youngest sister took me to visit a nearby lake and the city of Rochester the corporate headquarters of the famous 'Kodak' film and photography company. I didn't know it at the time, but in nearby Syracuse, a young Thai student named Thananya Prabhasanobol, was doing her Master's in Journalism at the same time I was visiting Frank in Canandaigua. We finally met in 1979 in Hawaii and married a year later. We have been together ever since raising our son and daughter in Bangkok.

Sadly, I have completely lost touch with Kumiko and Frank having last seen them in June 1979 when I visited them in Paris. Frank was working with one of the UN organizations. They already had a son, Hideki, by then.

I have already introduced Bill Hinkley, my RPCV colleague

at the TU Library whom I visited in Washington DC on my way to MSU. During my second Christmas holidays in the USA (1975), Bill invited me to his parents' home in Massachusetts, near Boston. I hitched a ride for the approximately 1,300 km trip from East Lansing to Salem with a fellow student who was driving home to Boston. As we drove through Buffalo New York, the stink of tanned buffalo hides assailed my senses. I thought of the city of Buffalo as a buffalo seated, wallowing in mud. I remember enjoying the hilly landscape as we passed Pennsylvania

Bill's parents lived in an ageing clapboard house in Danvers, near the city of Boston. His sister and her husband had also come home for Christmas. There was snow everywhere. The moon shone brilliantly, and I snapped a photo of it with my new Kodak Instamatic – my first and last instamatic camera, as it was all I could afford at the time.

The family took me to my first midnight Christmas mass. We were seated on a balcony overlooking the ceremonies below, all nice and holy. Alas, right in the middle of the proceedings, I felt a strong movement in my bowels and shafting pain, and whispered to Bill, asking where the toilet was. He understood belly ache immediately, having experienced them several times when he was in Nepal. Thus, my first and last Christmas midnight mass was spoilt by Kathmandu/Michigan belly.

It was nice to witness the Christmas morning exchange of gifts. Thinking back, I had not even brought any gifts (I was unaware of the tradition of exchanging gifts), but I remember receiving a very nice warm sweater each from Bill and his sister.

I remember Bill's father driving me every morning to see

## *Thanksgiving, Christmas*

nearby Gloucester beach. He told me he was going to make a beachcomber out of me – pointing out what seashells were worth collecting, for example. Each time he took me to the beach, we stopped at his favorite Pancake House, which I remember as a rather big restaurant bathing in the morning sun enhanced by brightly lit electrical lights.

I remember them taking me to see the ‘Motif No. 1’ fishing shack in Rockport, Massachusetts, where we had seafood lunch of lobsters, snails, and oysters – all new to me. I also had my first Boston’s famous clam chowder.

On 27 December 1975, Bill and I woke early and by 8:30 am were ready for Boston sightseeing. We took the train. The first stop was City Hall, the office of the mayor located in downtown Boston, and I marveled at the building’s fabulous architecture. Next, we went into an old library – whose extensive Nepal collection spanned several hundred years in old books– and stopped by the adjacent graveyard where Benjamin Franklin is buried. It was bitterly cold walking, but we kept moving, calling in at the state capital building housing the governor and elected politicians.

We lounged around Beacon Hill, an artsy-craftsy place, then onto Harvard Square, which had a certain atmosphere about it. Lively, scintillating, with the tens of excellent bookstores. On this occasion, two days after Christmas, the streets were lined with shops selling so many kinds of goods, somewhat like the streets of Basantapur in Kathmandu. There were even a couple of stores selling goods from India and South Asia. In one, we found a Nepali-Tibetan woolen jacket marked for \$35.50. Another store was full of posters of Hindu deities like Bishnu and Shiva, and rice paper prints of Buddha images. An incredibly international, cross- cultural

place, with phenomenal bookstores and such artistic furniture also for sale. I was mesmerized.

We walked a couple of blocks to see American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's home. "Tell me not in mournful numbers life is but an empty dream/ Life is real/ Life is earnest Grave is not its goal." Bill was suitably impressed when I recited the opening of one of Longfellow's poems, which we read in Class 10 in Bhojpur. Longfellow appeared as rich as our poet Bal Krishna Sama back home, his house overflowing with ornate furniture, book racks, paintings. We saw the dining hall where Longfellow, Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau had dined together, and the drawing room where Longfellow had twice entertained Charles Dickens.

Thoreau's home in Walden was only 40 kms from Boston though I had had no opportunity to visit it, for which I was very sad. In fact, Massachusetts was the home of many writers of the 19th century. Henry James had spent his summers in Boston, and John Updike, who died in 2009, had lived in Danvers, Mass – the same district Bill Hinkley's parents lived. With the Boston Tea Party, Boston is also the most historical city in America.

In one of the bookstores, I found a volume titled simply, 'Himalayas', that was prefaced by Arnold Toynbee and contained a testimonial by none other than our King Mahendra. I wanted to buy it, but its \$75 price tag was almost one-fourth of my monthly Fulbright allowance, so I had to leave it there.

I was to visit the Boston area one more time before finishing my two years after my Japanese friend, Hagiwara, moved to Harvard as a teaching assistant. I spent two weeks



with him at his apartment located not far from Cambridge Square, checking out all the popular bookstores, libraries, and other monuments of the famed university. I remember jogging all over and losing my way until I had to stop and ask a passerby “which way to Harvard?”

One fine day, I decided to walk to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I picked up a good map from one of the newspaper vendors and started walking on the banks of the Charles River. But my journey seemed to be taking me an inordinately long time, so I asked someone, how far is MIT? I was told I was walking in the opposite direction. The village where I was born had only three streets. And we never used a map walking in Kathmandu.

Gradually, however, I became more adept at travelling in America, especially after my month-long Greyhound trip in the summer of 1975. All I needed was a little invitation, in most cases initiated by myself, from fellow students. I remember I took two more Greyhound trips. One to meet Kathy Strom and her father near Kansas City. More on that later.

I also visited Ramawater Yadav at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. Yadav and I were awarded Fulbright scholarships for Linguistics the same year. He told me he had a good year and had been accepted for a PhD program. Yadav had started speaking American English. A few years earlier, he had completed a one-year degree course in England and returned to Nepal speaking *pukka* British English, or at least, Received Pronunciation as it was called then. His reading of English news on Radio Nepal was a hit. Now he had already replaced his RP with a perfect American twang.

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My most cherished memories of visits are those spent in Madison Wisconsin with Krishna Pradhan and his family. I'll relate more of these in the coming chapters.



## CHAPTER VI

# Summer with the Linguistics Institute

I completed the Fall, Winter, and Spring quarters at the MSU Linguistics department, taking a full load of nine credits per quarter. But as the department offered few courses during the summer quarter of 1975, I had applied to attend a nine-week Linguistics Society of America (LSA) at the University of South Florida, in Tampa. Happily, I was accepted. Marcia Fiske, an MSU-classmate, had also registered for the LSA

Institute, so we both took the Greyhound for the largely uneventful trip from Lansing to Tampa, a trip of about 41-hours and 2,000 kilometers.

Driving through the state of Kentucky at night, the flashing neon light billboards advertised cheap cigarettes and Kentucky Bourbon whiskey. Others flashed “Marry, marry” and yet another set flashed “Divorce, quick divorce.” Nearing Florida, I remember coming across my first runaway teenager, a pretty girl who looked far too young and vulnerable to be travelling alone in the wide, wide world.

Arriving at the dorm at the University of South Florida, I found I had to share a room with an American student from Alaska attending the same program. “Scheisse,” he used to say each morning when he opened the window. The first time, in response to my quizzical look, he explained that the word was German and meant shitty weather.

He also told me how in the cold city of Anchorage where he came from, women from India (and probably other South Asian countries) still wore flimsy saris, despite the cold.

Walking off campus on the very first day, I noticed that the cost of a haircut at a barbershop here was only 5 dollars. I promptly decided to get a haircut as it was a good deal compared to the \$10 rate in East Lansing.

Florida felt much like back home in Kathmandu. Warm soothing breezes and blue sky, that would glow pink during and after sunset. Sounds of crickets and cicadas. Some evenings I went out to watch the sunset. I just lay on the ground, closed my eyes, listened to the cicadas, remembering how a friend in Nepal, Manjul Ralfa, would strum his guitar to the sound of cicadas, singing loudly in the bamboo jungle.

I experienced my first July 4 holiday in Tampa, the big American Independence Day. We went down to the Latin Square, called Ybor City, with houses tightly built and paintings on the walls. It was said to be more than a century old.

The linguistics program I participated in at USF, which dates from 1928, was sponsored by the Linguistics Society of America and continues to this day. The organizers describe it on their website as an “unparalleled gathering of top linguistics students and professionals from throughout the field and around the world.”

Of the two classes I took, one called the History of Linguistics proved to be the most popular and attracted the largest number of students. Most American students attended these classes just to hear the British historical linguist R.H. Robins giving non-stop, extemporaneous lecture of the sort that professors in English universities were well-known for. A reputed name in linguistics Robins's book, 'A Short History of Linguistics' was among the course's required readings and his "General Linguistics: An Introductory Survey", was one of the prescribed textbooks for my 'Introduction to Linguistics' course back home in Tribhuvan University in Kirtipur.

His fluency and style kept all attendees at his lectures thoroughly engaged. In the very first I attended on the first day, however, I was momentarily distracted after glancing to my right and seeing a familiar face. For a split second I thought I was back under the pipal tree in New Road, Kathmandu. Krishna Pradhan, seated just a few chairs down from me, was also attending the Institute. He had been doing his MA in linguistics at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Needless to say, being the only Nepali in town and

someone I knew in Kathmandu (though initially not very well), Krishna and I became good friends almost instantly.

Later, Krishna and his family became my “next of kin” in America after I had stopped for a much-needed rest at their house in Madison at the end of my month-long Greyhound tour. Afterwards, his home is where I would go each time there was a break from my college.

Noam Chomsky attended the Institute as a keynote speaker. He spoke about his groundbreaking theory of generative linguistics, none of which I understood but I have a sweet memory of shaking his hands and bragging to my friends back home in Nepal about not washing mine for months.

There were lots of interesting students and teachers of linguistics attending the course. Krishna became a constant companion. Hiroko, a female Japanese lecturer of linguistics from a university in Shizuoka near Mt Fuji was another, together with a lot of friendly students from throughout the United States.

Eva, a buxom undergrad student from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, was a popular figure, enthusiastically leading all the young and not-so-young participants from all over the world to dances and parties. She promised me that if ever I decided to visit her town, she would give me shelter and act as my guide.

But Dorothy Yim, a Chinese American, was the soul of our group. She was always at the front, organizing fun outings. She led a day trip to Walt Disney World in Orlando, giving many of us our first and last experience of America's biggest fun park. She arranged another trip to Cape Canaveral on Tampa Bay to watch the Apollo-Soyuz launch, the first

international space mission crewed jointly by American and Soviet astronauts. I was extremely impressed at seeing what seemed like the whole of America turning up to witness the event, though in my mind I was recalling how I watched Neil Armstrong landing and walking on the moon at a video player running non-stop through the windows of the USIS Centre in New Road, Kathmandu, over many evenings during July-August 1969.

Dorothy, a rather lonely soul behind her warm, smiling sociability, tried her best to help international participants at the Institute experience Florida's quintessential attractions. Tallish, wearing thick glasses, everybody would find a friend in her. She, too, would later act as my guide in Los Angeles during my cross-country Greyhound tour.

Besides the regular parties held at our hostel (Alpha Hall) among LSA participants, where we would sing Nepali, Japanese, Swahili, American Indian and English songs and share juicy Florida mangoes, my enduring memory of those Tampa days is constant swimming breaks at the hostel pool. I went to the pool every day trying to learn how to swim, a skill which I've never quite mastered to this day. My pool days in USF, Tampa, started seriously when Marcia, my classmate from MSU, and I joined a regular swimming attended mostly by undergraduates. Classes were held every other morning before lunch. I learned the basic skills of breathing coordination, keeping afloat, crawling, kicking, and gradually progressing to breast stroke, backstroke, butterfly, freestyle and finally jumping and diving. After a leisurely lunch at the cafeteria, it was time for the lectures on historical linguistics, periods that were useful for stealing the occasional nap.

Our hostel had a small pool where we went regularly to further exercise the skills learnt in the classes. Besides some friends from the Institute, there was a young American who joined regularly. Marcia at some point told me the guy was a Jehovah's Witness and was trying to recruit me to his creed.

For LSA, like a true linguist, I bought a tape recorder to record lectures, running the tape repeatedly to catch strange phonemes, morphemes, and other assorted utterances. But for me, its work consisted of playing one pre-recorded music cassette almost on a closed loop. In 1975, music cassettes were \$8 apiece, twice as expensive as vinyl records. Indeed, cassettes were too expensive, so I was able to buy only one – America's 'Greatest Hits'. Each time since then when I hear 'Muskrat Love', my mind is assailed by the sound of water splashing and the smell of chlorine in these Florida swimming pools, reminding me of my own whirling, twirling and floating.

The Summer Institute began in June, but the regular session was over in just eight weeks, with one week set aside for departing the campus. I had been hoping for a quiet week, but that was before the cheer leaders descended on us. A camp of almost eight hundred 6-to-14- year-old girls, all pom-poms, and high-pitched screams. They started their cheerleading training quite early so we had to go to the cafeteria before or after them.

After the Institute, I had a six-week break before my Fall quarter resumed at MSU. So, I decided to buy a month-long Greyhound pass and go on a true coast-to-coast trip from the Eastern coast of Florida (Tampa) to the western coast of California, up to Eureka, California, and all the way back to the Midwest, ending in East Lansing. I was to cover more

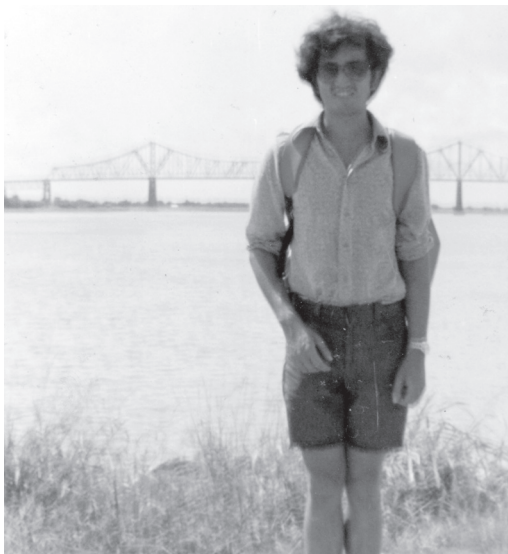


than 9,000 km. A monthly Greyhound pass cost \$150 and allowed unlimited stops.

I could not afford to stay in a motel, much less a hotel or anything comparable, so my plan was to stop wherever I had a friend: perhaps someone from Nepal also attending college on Fulbright scholarships like me, or a returned American Peace Corps volunteer whom I had befriended in Nepal, or a Summer Institute student whom I had met in Tampa. If I wanted to visit a place but had no friend nearby for a free stay, typically I would visit during the day and spend the night travelling on Greyhound to get to the next overnight destination.

I would write or call and confirm my time of arrival with my friend and then stop for a few days. If no extra room was available, I would just sleep on their couches, the sleeping arrangements of most of my student friends. They would show me around the town as best as they could.

Every stop I planned worked out well as almost everybody I asked to visit and stay with was usually waiting to meet me, allowing me to stay and, in most cases, showing me around. In Idaho Falls, however, I got off the bus after an overnight ride only to find that the friend was out of town. So, I climbed back onto the next Greyhound for the 72 hours ride all the way to Madison, Wisconsin with a few stops to change coaches.



With all my possessions in one rucksack.

## CHAPTER VII

# A Month on Greyhound – From Tampa to Austin

With my most valued personal possessions squeezed into just one small red rucksack, my month-long Greyhound tour started in the middle of August with an early morning coach taking me from the Tampa Greyhound station on a short three hours' ride to Gainesville. Outside the bus window, North Florida looked like one big complex of department stores, walkways, roads, and real estate developments.

University of Florida, Gainesville, was my first stop. A Nepali friend, Chaitanya Mishra, was doing his PhD in sociology under the same Fulbright scholarship as me.

Happily, he was there waiting for me at the bus stop to take me to the single room he had rented in a nondescript two-floor, off-campus house just two handy blocks from the Greyhound station.

We bought a six-pack of Schlitz beer to celebrate our meeting in America. Slightly tipsy from imbibing the cheapest beer the country sold, we went for a walk around the town. On 13th Street, we chanced upon a cinema hall showing raunchy, blue movies for just \$2 dollars a ticket, aimed at poor students like us. We could not resist the temptation.

Chaitanya had a friend named Subarna Malakar, one of the few Nepalis I met who had come to America without any American scholarship support. He had found his way to Gainesville with the help of his uncle who had worked as a cook for an American professor in Kathmandu. His uncle had somehow been able to make use of that link and move to the US, starting out as a cook at an Indian restaurant. Soon he opened his own hamburger joint and later, a 7-Eleven store in Jacksonville, not far away. After Subarna had graduated from St. Xavier's school in Kathmandu run by the Jesuits, the uncle had arranged his nephew to come to Florida and help him in his business. Subarna lived with the uncle, waiting tables in his restaurant for hours every day, but was able to enter UF. Eventually, Subarna managed to extricate himself from his uncle's supervision and began to live independently.

Chaitanya told me Subarna was not just the only Nepali he knew at the time in the state of Florida; Subarna was a Nepali at heart and tried not to veer away too much from his ways back home. He bought a house in Gainesville early 1977 and let Chaitanya stay rent-free there for six months. They

cooked chicken curry and rice just about every evening. Often times, it was Subarna who cooked; Chaitanya did the washing up.

Chaitanya walked me back to the Greyhound bus stop the next afternoon to see me off on the second leg of my journey. On the way we stopped at Chaitanya's favorite second-hand bookshop where I bought a copy of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. It was August 20, 1975 – a date clearly noted on the yellowing copy of the book still in my bookshelf.

The scene outside the coach window continued to be miles and hundreds of miles of shopping centers all the way to Tallahassee, the capital city of Florida. That early evening at the Greyhound station where I had to change my bus for New Orleans, I witnessed a most memorable scene – that of a moon rising above the golden arches of McDonald's amidst pale neon lights. The moon somehow looked to me like myself, like a beaten old Spartan, the mascot of the MSU football team, pale and benumbed, like the weary bespectacled bus rider waiting for his long bus ride to Memphis or Vancouver.

I completed the vision later in a poem:

This is an electric moon in an electronic sky, a TEXACO  
MOON shining above the golden arches of McDonald's  
hamburgers, a fast piece of scenic beauty. An ESSON  
Moon. A space moon of the space age. Electric moon in  
the electric sky Shining up above the sky so high/  
Like an advertisement by the roadside/  
Like a salesman's prop in  
the sky.

Gainesville via Tallahassee and Pensacola to New Orleans is a 17-hour, 863 km ride. With a change of coach in Tallahassee, I was on it all afternoon and all night, arriving in New Orleans Greyhound station on a sunny morning.

There was a young European couple also alighting the bus. I asked them where they were going and on being told they were here to explore the city, I tagged along.

We walked toward the Canal Street and together took an elevator to the top of a tall building to sample the bird eye view of the city. The city sprawled for miles in all directions, punctuated by skyscrapers and huge roads. The Mississippi delta loomed so large.

After leaving the building, at some point I found that I was walking alone, the couple having vanished, so I made my way toward the banks of the Mississippi immediately ahead of me and took a public ferry to cross the river. Oh, finally I was on the Mississippi, the river of Huckleberry Finn and his friend Jim going up and down the river I had read so much about in my American Lit class during my MA days in Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur. Every evening we got together for a glass of local *raksi* whiskey at our Boys Hostel in Kirtipur, Krishna Gurung, one of our classmates, would sing so plaintively of “My Huckleberry friend” and “Moon River.”

As the ferry chugged across, I let my memory run nostalgic and went back and forth on the boat as there was no extra charge for multiple crossings and I was not in a hurry to go anywhere. I loved the expanse of the Mississippi as wide as the Saptakoshi River back home. I sat on the bench, full of reveries. I was lying down on the empty bench enjoying the wind in my hair – until a big cop came and ordered me in no uncertain terms to put my feet

down. The cop sounded and looked rather unfriendly, his revolver hanging from his belt. I left the boat and slowly walked toward the French Quarter and Bourbon Street. It was coming into early evening, and I could hear jazz beginning to waft around the streets. I went into a bar, had a lonely glass of Budweiser, and took in more of the fabled New Orleans Jazz scene I had heard, read, dreamt so much about.

I thought of how I first heard Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday or maybe even Stan Getz in my childhood years ago in Bhojpur on the Voice of America via short wave radio. After all the village's street dogs had gone to sleep, Willis Conover's slow, measured and husky voice would come on to lull me through his Jazz Hour. He played a kind of music I had never heard before but fell in love with instantly. So, I began listening to the Jazz Hour. Why do I remember it as Jazz America today and not as Jazz Hour?!

I hung around Bourbon Street until late at night to catch a coach that would arrive in Glendora, Mississippi in the morning. I asked the driver to let me know when to get off. He looked at the map - and then said OK.

The bus was full. All the lights were turned off and was quiet - until a female voice screamed from somewhere in the back in the middle of night.

"Stop whatever you are doing back there. If you don't, I'll drive us straight to a police station," the driver yelled. It was all quiet inside the bus after that.

Early next morning the driver announced Glendora and left me at the curbside. It was heavenly to see my friend May there waiting for me with her boyfriend to drive me to her home. You have met May twice already: she was the one

who had taken me to the American Marine bar in Phohara Durbar, Kathmandu, where Nepalis were allowed only as accompanied guests. Seeing so many young Americans enjoying themselves in a bar was a new kind of scene to me. That is where I must have had my first taste of Budweiser too. You met May again when she had visited me a little over two months earlier in Tampa.

May's house was not a house but a palace, it looked to me. It was a typical Mississippi slave owners' kind of house in the middle of a vast farm that you have read about in books or saw in old movies about the South. It was nice to have my own big room to sleep after two days and nights on the bus and walking all day in New Orleans.

I do not remember anything about her parents now, but I do remember her boyfriend had a huge car and an equally huge protruding beer belly. May was tall with blonde hair.

In her home in Glendora, I remember we smoked a joint together the first evening and me falling asleep right away, thanks to the accumulated lack of sleep for the previous two days and nights.

Many years later in the 1990s, May came for a visit to Thailand. She spent a few days with us in Bangkok. We took her to Kanchanaburi. Sadly, she developed a brain tumor and passed away. Rest in peace, May.

May dropped me at the Glendora bus stop one evening for my overnight ride to Memphis, Tennessee. Getting off at the Memphis stop, I remember the hushed midnight crowd of deeply unhappy, tired, and worn black faces seated on the waiting lounge. A fat, white policeman with a pistol guarded the scene. This midnight Greyhound crowd in Memphis has remained etched in my mind forever.

I took a sit among them in the lounge, waiting for Jonathan Formanek to rescue me early next morning. Jonathan had organized my visit to his parents in Ohio during my earlier MSU days.

He had been a Peace Corps Volunteer working as what was called a JTA (Junior Technical Assistant) at the Nepali government's agriculture department in Dhulikhel in 1970 when I was a student of English Literature at TU Kirtipur. Hari Bhakta Khoju, one of my classmates, took Sheila Roka, another class mate, and me on a rickety green Sajha bus from Kirtipur to his home town in Dhulikhel. In Dhulikhel we ran into this American who was about our age. He invited us to his place which he had decorated with Nepali paper mâché, table lamps and plenty of Nepali handwoven clothes.

The best part was he served us Khukuri Rum with warm water, which instantly made him our favorite man in Dhulikhel.

Jonathan was doing his Master's in architecture at the University of Memphis and I felt at home going around the town in his car. He took me to many bars to listen to Blues, R&B, and soul music. One day when he had classes to attend, he dropped me at the Memphis Public library, which brought back memories of my first job in Kathmandu at Tribhuvan University Library. I went to the American poetry section and started reading American Zen poets like Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, Alan Ginsberg. I felt like I was entering a state of satori right there and then. Coming out of the library I thought I was home walking somewhere in Kirtipur.

At a book shop nearby, I bought a second-hand copy of



## *A Month on Greyhound*



**With Jonathan Formanek and his dog in Memphis.**

Chogyam Trungpa's 'Meditation in Action' which I continue to read every year in Dhulikhel, despite all the controversies that subsequently followed this great Buddhist teacher about his drinking and debauchery.

Jonathan was already an enterprising student; he hired me to work on a landscaping job and paid me an hourly rate, putting some cash in my usually empty pocket. I also remember we drove to visit his rich brother, Peter, in Nashville. They taught me how to play croquet in their yard and they took me to the Grand Ole Opry.

Suffice it to say, Jonathan has remained one of my dearest American friends. I visited him again in Houston in Aug 1979; twice he came to Thailand and stayed with us. And in 2011, he spent three months with us in Dhulikhel, designing and supervising the construction of our house.

I am now entering the Greyhound bus in Memphis for my

1,000+ km ride to Austin, Texas. I look around and see the bus is almost full. A kind elderly white gentleman gets up from his seat and politely invites me to the empty seat next to him. Thank you, I sit down with gratitude.

“See, I am a nice guy to welcome you,” he starts saying to me. The man is unkempt with unshaved stubs of hair on his face and greying hair.

“Someone from above is calling me,” he tells me next, pointing his finger to the sky. “He’s calling me,” he repeats. I thank the one above when he stopped talking. I pretended asleep after a while.

Getting off the bus in Austin, I called my host-to-be, again a fellow Fulbright student, Bal Kumar KC, who was doing his PhD in Geography at the University of Texas. Bal Kumar had passed his BA in first division with Geography as his Major. I remember even now stopping him when I saw him walking in Chhetrapati, Kathmandu, and telling him how proud we all were of him and how inspiring he was to us all. That must have been around 1967-1968.

So, I called Bal Kumar KC from the Greyhound station. He came to pick me up in his car. He was the only Nepali Fulbright scholar I met who had managed to buy his own car. “Oh, it’s you,” he said, by way of a greeting. “I’d have been more enthusiastic to receive you had I known it was you,” he told me.

Apparently, he had not completely figured out who this guy was he was to put up at his place, feed, and show him around for a few days. How open and welcoming people were then!!

Bal Kumar had a lovely family, with his wife working and two children going to school. One day they took me to a

nearby lake for a bit of a barbecue picnic. The picnic place is a big park next to the lake. The lake is actually a river but it is dammed and it makes a big lake. In a way, it is like the Phewa Tal of Pokhara. However, Lake Austin is much bigger. It was interesting to know that the same lake had different names in different sections. When it passes through hills it is called Lake Travis. Further down it is called Lake Austin, and where it divides the city as north Austin and South Austin it is called Town Lake. The river enhances the beauty of this small city.

Near the picnic area there was a swimming pool. I saw people of all ages going towards the swimming pool. It was hot and I was almost going to suggest to Bal Kumar whether we are going to swim for a while after the barbecue was done. But I kept quiet and kept enjoying the chicken leg. When we were done, we all got into the car and left the park. Bal Kumar mumbled, "I will show you a little bit of the city on our way back."

He drove along the lake. After a while he turned left and we could see a tall building with a big dome straight ahead of us. It was beautiful. Bal Kumar told me that it was the capitol building. It stood on an elevated ground. He asked me if I wanted to go inside the capitol. I said, "no, not really", because it felt hot and I felt tired. I wished Austin's weather were cooler. Except for the weather the city was small but beautiful with the lake cutting the city into two halves.

One day before I left Austin, Bal Kumar took me to his Geography Department. He showed his office and we went out to walk around the campus. Not far from the geography building stood a tall tower with the clock on the top. Bal Kumar told me that it had 29 floors. We walked around the

tower. We stood in the east side of the tower and looked eastward. I could see a huge water fountain in the middle of a green sloping lawn. Beyond that there were a couple of large buildings. One of them was LBJ Library. In the south side of the tower there was a wide green lawn where a lot of students were basking in the sun.

It was August, the month when it is generally hot in America, with southern states being the hottest. I found Austin surprisingly very hot – as hot as Biratnagar in Southern Nepal, with flies as big.

Attending the university at the same time was another friend from Nepal (though his name escapes me now, unfortunately). In Kathmandu he was working as a reporter for the 'The Rising Nepal' newspaper. He had a broken, hoarse, husky voice, damaged by too much smoking. I liked his journalistic, cynical, and sometimes surprisingly fresh points of view, especially on things Americana. He would say things like: "this university spends more money on American football than on its students"; "a university which is big in football is proportionately smaller in its academic soul" – and things like that.



Taking in Grand Canyon at the Hopi Point.

## CHAPTER VIII

# Greyhound Month – To Albuquerque, Madison, and Michigan

I left Austin on an evening Greyhound bus and arrived in Albuquerque, the capital of New Mexico, the middle of the following morning. I found a telephone booth to call Eva, a friend I'd met at the Summer Language Institute in Florida who'd promised to host me here. She was an undergraduate student and we often met in classes and at events and parties. When I told her about my planned trip, she offered to let me stay at her place if I had nowhere else to go. She had given me a number to call when I arrived but after trying

the number, a recorded message said it was temporarily out of order.

I didn't know what to do. I thought maybe I could recheck her number in the AT & T White Pages in front of me. And when I opened the telephone book, I saw a hand-written note on a piece of paper addressed to me. Amazingly, it was from Eva. I called the number. She told me to wait at the bus station.

When we met, Eva explained that she had to move to a new dormitory and so had a different telephone number from the one she had given me in Tampa. As she did not know where to contact me, she had decided the only way she could tell me about her new number was to paste a note on the cover of every telephone book at the public telephone booth! The Greyhound people did not much like what she was doing, but after explaining the dire situation of needing to rendezvous with a penniless foreign student, they had reluctantly let her put the notes on the books.

Next Eva was able to smuggle me into the girls' dormitory at the University of New Mexico campus where she was staying. This was to be my first and last experience ever of spending a night in a girls' hostel in America. Eva had let me stay in her dorm room, making the arrangement perfectly clear to her friends, having herself gone to stay with someone else in the same dormitory.

What did I do in Albuquerque? I remember having an adrenal rush at the high elevation of the city and taking in the surrounding Rio Grande mountains. Eva drove me to see an adobe house in Santa Fe which reminded me of our houses in the Southern Terai plains of Nepal, constructed from a mix of mud and straw. She also took me to visit the

New Mexico Museum of National History & Science.

After a day or two early one morning, I was once again standing at the Greyhound station waiting for the bus for my next destination, a long journey from Albuquerque to Los Angeles when a young boy of preteen years came up to me and asked, “Cherokee?” I told him no; I am a Nepali. Hearing my answer, he did not say anything but bolted away like lightning in the other direction. I guess he was disappointed that I was not his tribal brother, even though it seemed I looked like one.

I saw on the Greyhound map that Grand Canyon was doable from Flagstaff, Arizona, as a detour of only 130 kms, about two hours away. The bus would take you to Grand Canyon where they will give you an hour or two to take in the view and then bring you back to Flagstaff.

So, there I was on a late afternoon, trying to enjoy the view of the world’s greatest canyon in an hour or so. The bus dropped me off a short walk from Hopi Point, a lookout on the rim, where in a glance one could get a feel for the immensity of the magnificent canyon as the mellowing afternoon sunlight added vermilion to the reddish hill tops and their shades and shadows where sunrays could not reach. A map at the point showed that the surrounding hilltops were named after Hindu, Egyptian and Persian gods, and prophets. I easily recognized the one right across from where I was standing, the flat-topped Shiva Temple, named for the Hindu destroyer. In the very bottom of the Canyon, I noted, were some gorgeous black rocks polished smooth-as-glass by the Colorado River, called the Vishnu Schist.

There were walking trails going all the way down to the



Son Sunit taking in the same view from the same vantage point 24 years later.

Colorado River flowing at the bottom. Did I see the river actually or am just imagining now? I am not sure.

I asked someone to take my photo with my Instamatic 24 years later, in the very same place our son Sunit was to have his photo taken when he visited the Grand Canyon during his year as a high school exchange student at Round Valley High School in Eager, Arizona.

Los Angeles is a long bus ride from Flagstaff, 13-hours non-stop even today, according to Greyhound website. So, the priority was to grab a meal first. Today's website features many fancy restaurants at bus stations but at that time, there were only outposts of a chain called Post Houses, which were basic, handy, and affordable. I usually went for hamburger, French fries, and Coke, or if I wanted something exotic, a bacon, lettuce, and tomato (BLT) sandwich.



Greyhound station toilets were not as dirty as ours in Kathmandu Bhugol Park, but the walls were liberally adorned with dirty hand-drawings and scribbles, providing telephone numbers for all kinds of nasty services.

On the bus to LA, it was another all-night vigil, looking out on well-lit wide freeways when we neared a city. Looking up at the sky and at stars: I sometimes tried to choose one star above to accompany me all night. It was early morning as the bus entered the Greyhound station somewhere in Los Angeles.

I get off and hesitantly called Dorothy Yim, my friend from Summer Linguistic Institute in Tampa, who would be my LA guide. She took the phone on the first ring. She told me she had taken it to her bedroom so as not to disturb the family if I happened to call her early. She soon turned up at the bus station in her car and we drove around a beach – Huntington Beach I think, where I went for a quick swim in the Pacific Ocean. The tides were more powerful than I could easily handle with the rudimentary skills I had acquired from my swimming classes at USF, but I was so excited to see the sea, with so much churning water.

After my dip, Dorothy took me to visit Knott's Berry Farm, a 57-acre theme park located in Buena Park, California. Today, it claims to be the twelfth-most-visited theme park in North America, averaging approximately 4 million visitors per year. All I remember of our visit is the image of a goat with a long goatee near the entrance, which of course for a Nepali was nothing all that special.

Dorothy found a motel for me in Long Beach, near her home. This was the only time during my whole Greyhound tour where I actually paid for my accommodation. The

receptionist was friendly and welcoming, but the room was lonely and I had to use a common bathroom.

Dorothy picked me up early morning next day to take me for more sightseeing around LA. We drove through the wide, leafy streets of Santa Monica Boulevard and up around Beverly Hills studded with movie star mansions.

At one point, Dorothy parked her car to walk around a university town. We had just crossed a street when a white policeman stopped us. He asked to see our IDs. Dorothy was fined \$5 for jaywalking; the cop told her she should have known not to, as she was a local. He let me get off after he saw my ID as an out-of-state student from Michigan State.

Dorothy was fuming, saying the cop had pounced because he had seen two Asians jaywalking, not two white Americans. This was my first brush with Anti-Asian sentiment, which, until then, I had not really been aware of.

I had foolishly thought that the trip from Los Angeles to San Francisco would be a short drive, given that both cities lie within California. But California, I was to learn is even larger than the whole of Nepal. The direct Greyhound bus from LA took more than 10 hours to reach San Francisco.

Once off the Greyhound, with my red rucksack on my shoulder, I took the local Bay Area Rapid Transit bus to get to the University of California Berkley campus. The bus driver was a friendly woman and fellow bus passengers more mixed and relaxed. Altogether a different scene from that of a Greyhound. I found BART busses easy to navigate and travelled in them to get everywhere during my short stay in San Francisco.

The first thing I noticed entering the Berkeley campus

was guys holding hands. Which was common in the streets of Kathmandu but I had not been expecting it in America. Did I see them wearing flowers? I felt at home among the flower children, almost like in the streets of Kathmandu just a few years earlier. The young, liberal, warm atmosphere of Berkley was exhilarating.

I stayed with Nepali friend, Basu Uprety, at his campus hostel. He was doing his Master's in Statistics, also on a Fulbright scholarship. He too would go back and teach the same subject in Tribhuvan University after he completed his degree. There, he would also stay at the same Professors' Quarters located near the Bagmati River, as I would.

Basu took me to see San Francisco's major attractions, including Fisherman's Wharf, the Asian Art Museum, the colorfully painted Victorian houses, and China Town. The view from the cable car ride to the summit of Nob hill was most picturesque. Late one afternoon on another day when I found myself alone at a hilltop park with a view of the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco looked absolutely like the capital of the universe.

My next stop was the northern California coastal city of Eureka. I had never heard of it before and my only reason to visit was that my Peace Corps friends from Nepal, Randy and Kathy Walker, were living there. They had met in Kathmandu and had a son they had named Siddhartha, who was born here in Eureka soon after they left Nepal. They called him Sid.

It was a whole day's drive on Route 101 north of San Francisco on Greyhound on one of the most scenic roads in America, with miles and miles of splendid views from both sides of my bus. On the left was the blue Pacific churning

with huge white ocean waves. On my right were hills covered with tall trees all along the meandering road.

Randy and Kathy had been the heart of the Peace Corps and VOA groups in Kathmandu and were close friends. He was usually the lead singer with his guitar at our parties, with Kathy also joining. They seemed to know all the songs of the Beatles, Bob Dylan and Carpenters which were popular at the time. Randy sang some of those songs on his guitar again one evening. We created a bit of nostalgia for Kathmandu.

When we met, Randy told me he was working as a *chowkidar* – a Nepali word for a lowly guard of a property. They took me to see some Victorian homes and some redwoods.

All good things must end, and one evening it was time to say goodbye to Randy, Kathy and little Sid and head to the bus stop where I was bracing for my 17-hour, non-stop journey to Idaho Falls. My Greyhound coach went on a northerly route passing through the Oregon towns of Eugene and Portland.

Another an all-night journey. As usual, I kept awake the whole night looking at the stars above and hills, towns and villages passing by below. And you know it must be Idaho when you see the morning breaking over a thousand water hoses and pipes irrigating thousands of acres of potatoes. The early morning sun shining through the water hoses created instant seven-colored rainbows, delighting my tired eyes.

I got off the bus and called Jon Ochi, another Peace Corps friend I knew from my hometown of Bhojpur, to tell him I was in town. Back in Nepal, he had worked as a

Junior Technical Assistant (JTA) in Yaku Birta, a village about a 6-hour walk to the east of Bhojpur Bazar, the district headquarters. That was in 1970, the year I first attempted to secure a Fulbright with just a BA degree. He had helped me fill out my application when I first tried for the scholarship.

Whenever he journeyed from his village to Bhojpur Bazaar, he would spend the nights at the house of Mantrini Ama whose husband, Narad Muni Thulung, had been a minister in Nepal's first Cabinet, formed after the end of the Rana regime in 1950, the year I was born. His rented place was right next to the main street where my family lived and where I had grown up.

At that time in Bhojpur, I remember Jon Ochi singing an excellent rendition of Dylan's 'Blowin' in the Wind' at a small party of our friends one cold winter evening at the Tundikhel parade ground when it was completely enveloped in fog and mist. It was a full moon night and the music and the strong local *raksi* from Mantrini Ama's place kept us warm. After his Peace Corps posting ended in 1972 in Bhojpur, Jon spent a couple of months in Kathmandu renting a room from our friends, Peter and Ranjana Karthak. We always made time to have *dal bhat* or *raksi* when we all got together. It seems so long ago when we were young and excited to be explorers of life. When he finally departed Nepal Jon gave me his ancient Remington typewriter as a parting gift for which I was most grateful.

Many years later – around 2008 – he returned to Nepal with his wife Gail and trekked to the village where he had worked as a PCV. We met in Kathmandu and checked out the places we used to haunt when we were both young and unmarried.

Now I was in Idaho Falls at Jon's door. I got off the bus, found a public telephone booth and put in a call. Jon's mom told me he was away canoeing in Minnesota. Somehow, we had missed coordinating it smoothly through the postal service. In those days living on a tight budget, I seldom used phones to confirm things long-distance in advance. However, his mother was kind enough to invite me to her house and rest but somehow the stopover would not be the same without Jon.

I went back to the bus to continue my journey. Next stop would be Madison, Wisconsin, as I had no more friends on the way to mooch on, and my one-month Greyhound pass was nearly exhausted.

The bus from Idaho Falls passed through Salt Lake City. I still see in my mind's eye, the vast lake in front of me. I was also thinking of the Jehovah's Witness student who persisted in joining me at the USF hostel swimming pool trying to claim my Hindu soul for Jesus.

I had a change of bus here to take me somewhere in Wyoming. I remember having another unforgettable chat with a passenger seated next to me. He asked me where I had come from. I told him from Nepal. I was not sure he heard. So, I added - I mean from the Himalaya. I still saw a kind of lost expression on his face. "I mean, you know where the Himalaya mountains are, right?" "Yes, I know. They are in Wyoming," he insisted.

Our bus must have crossed part of that state, but I do not recall seeing any hills or mountains. I do, however, remember passing through miles and miles of flat, corn country in Nebraska. Then on and on past more of the same flat expanses of corn country through Iowa.

After almost 80 hours of Greyhound travel, from Eureka, Northern California, to Chicago, then Madison, Wisconsin via Idaho Falls, Salt Lake City, Wyoming, and Nebraska, I was getting tired of the monotonous disembodied announcements you heard every bus station for the next connections every next bus stop, still next and next connections whizzing past - to Utah, Denver and so on. Tired of waiting for the pay toilets to be free. Tired of lewd bathroom graffiti offering coast-to-coast free accommodation and blow jobs, complete with telephone contact numbers. Tired of looking out of bus windows at stars and planets whose names I knew not. Getting tired of this vast space growing vaster and vaster against time hanging sleepless. Tired of looking out the window all day and night. Tired of the road stretching ahead and of the monotony of nondescript Greyhound announcements ringing coast to coast.

“Keep driving, America” I mused. When I was almost at the end of my journey, another journey was starting for someone else. I imagined all the loneliness of the road and the hushed midnight crowds of the Greyhound stations.

One morning I saw a young fresh, handsome boy from England (that is where he must come from, I thought) brushing his teeth in the bathroom and another mean looking man (surely a local, American) making a pass on him.

I was sick and tired of the Post House food. The hamburgers, French fries, Coke, and BLTs had become as boring as a *dal bhat tarkari* meal in the morning and *tarkari bhat dal* for dinner back home in Nepal.

My mind was too awake for my eyes to fall asleep at night, but during the daytime I could get my tired eyes busy with

the America that passed by, whirling in the shape of wide roads, villages, towns, and cities.

At night I start identifying stars up above the sky so high and keeping them for company. The white streetlights lining the downtown areas where the buses drive through for stops, change of buses I found invariably lonely.

And then the driver announces he is entering Chicago terminal where I must change for my journey's last leg to Madison.

In Chicago, I am eager to board the coach for Madison, looking forward to taking a well-deserved rest at the house of Krishna Pradhan, the Nepali friend with whom I had spent ten weeks at the Summer Linguistic Institute in Tampa.

I went to the ticket counter, showed the woman ticketing clerk my monthly pass and asked if she would be kind enough to add just a few days and extend one more destination from Madison to Lansing, as my ticket was about to expire. The woman scowled, swore at me in Portuguese and said, "take your filthy bundle of rags someplace else."

From Eureka to Madison, it was three days and nights on buses, more than 70 hours of Greyhound -- non-stop except for time taken for five or six transfers. I was too tired to take another bus so I splurged on a taxi to Krishna's house. The sight of the friendly young woman taxi driver reading a book waiting for a passenger is etched in my mind even now.

Krishna Pradhan had moved from Kathmandu to Madison just two years earlier, with his wife Bishnu, two grown up sons, Rajan and Rajiv, and two young girls Jala and Anjali. Anjali, the youngest, was then just around five. Twisting her tongue like an American, she told me how she was already bored in America. Nepali kids do not get bored, or at least,



do not talk about it if they do, but little Anjali was already doing well picking up the American lingo. The family was living in Eagle Heights apartments for married students on the university campus.

In Kathmandu, Krishna had taught Nepali to American Peace Corps Volunteers. It was the same experience that had brought him to the US, as a teacher of Nepali at the Center for South Asian Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He had lots of students, as it was where young Americans going to Nepal as Peace Corps volunteers were sent to learn Nepali. Krishna was also doing a PhD in linguistics at the University.

One of the oft-told jokes that newcomers to the Center for South Asian Studies were told was of spotting foot prints on top of the toilet seats, perhaps those of scholars from South Asia.

The campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison was beautiful, with stunning lakeside views and pleasant streets reaching all the way to the state capital. It also had the prettiest students' union I saw in America, Memorial Union, situated on the shores of Lake Mendota. With food carts on its shores selling snacks from all over Asia and Africa, I felt right at home each time I visited.

Eagle Heights, the married peoples' apartments on the campus, was like a homecoming for me. I spent a few days recuperating, repairing body and soul in the love of the whole family. They were so generous to me that I kept going back every quarter-break until my last year at Michigan State in 1976.

Back at the bus-station one morning a couple of days later, I bought my ticket for the final leg of the journey, full

circle back to Lansing and MSU. The bus driver announced again that he was pulling into the bus stop in Chicago, going through a tight, narrow spot so be patient ... or something like that. In Chicago I transferred to the bus for Lansing.

The coach pulled into Lansing early the next morning, a cold and misty September. There was a commotion at the terminal as one of the alighting passengers had found somebody had died overnight inside the bus.

When classes resumed for the 1975 Fall quarter, I had completed my first year in America. The campus was resplendent again with maple, aspen, larch, red oak, and hickories providing a mosaic of autumn colors of orange and red and yellow.

I wrote to a friend back home that now I really enjoyed MSU. I had friends, something to do, a whole vast land under my feet. So much to do and to explore and above all, to learn. I wrote that I was learning to be a new person every day. Meeting people from so many cultures – I find that most exciting.

I often went to Ann Arbor, about 100 kms away, to visit Hemanta Rana, a fellow Nepali Fulbright student and his wife Dipti. When I stayed overnight with them at their married housing, they introduced me to a few other Nepalis, some of whom were working as doctors.

At the end of the Fall quarter, I spent a week with Krishna and his family again in Madison. Just before the winter term began, Jonathan Formanek visited one weekend, and for two days we talked, drank beer, and smoked cigarettes. He was then living in Memphis.

I took 12 credit hours that winter term: Historical and Comparative Linguistics, Generative Grammar, Tagmemics

## Greyhound Month

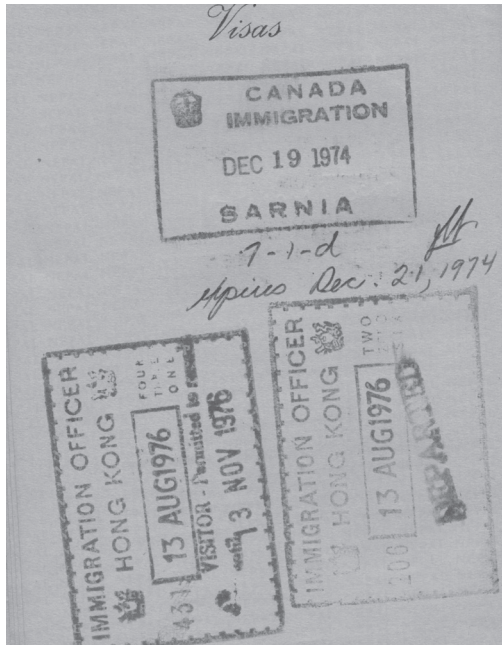
By lake Mandetta,  
University of  
Wisconsin, Madison  
with Krishna Pradhan.



and Language Planning. One day, it snowed all day, making the campus resplendent in its white, snow glory. Many schools had closed because the snow made driving dangerous. There were ice skaters on the frozen Red Cedar River. Foreign students unused to snow and ice were slipping everywhere. It was so overcast you could not see the sky, all so very depressing, but I really did not have time for anything except study.

The Nepali student population on campus had grown to seven, including three wives who had accompanied their husbands doing graduate degrees in Forestry.

One unmarried Nepali Forestry student had acquired a Japanese girlfriend the previous spring and was living a full life in America, which made us all very happy and envious.



An earlier Canadian visa at the Niagara Falls for a full one day.

## CHAPTER IX

# Our Great Bicentennial Night Bivouac in Niagara Falls

It all started with my good buddy from Nepal Krishna Gurung, who had stopped to visit at MSU. He had just finished his two-year graduate degree course in TOEFL at the University of Hawaii Manoa campus under an East-West Center scholarship. There were at least two other friends from Tribhuvan University attending graduate school at Manoa's faculties the same year. In their infinite generosity,

the Center offered most scholarship recipients a trip to the mainland to make sure these scholars did not think America was just the island of Oahu.

Having started his America familiarization tour from Honolulu in early June 1976, Krishna landed on the West Coast and had been slowly making his way across the continent, visiting friends like me pursuing their own degrees, as he could count on free accommodation and all of us could share common experiences.

I had just finished my final exam and had a month or so left in which to pack up, do a final bit of travelling, and enjoy my last American summer before heading back to restart my boring job as a lowly lecturer of English at Tribhuvan University.

Krishna arrived at my doorstep at the end of June and stayed a couple of days, sharing my one-room cell at Owen Hall. We checked out a few off-campus bars and talked about his collection of X-rated movies and the copies of *Hustler* and *Playboy* he planned to take with him back to Nepal.

As the summer nights dragged on and we had become bored with nothing to do, we thought it would be great fun to go to Niagara Falls on the New York and Canada border, 400 kms north-west of East Lansing. There we would meet up with our mutual Indian friend Madhusudan Thakur from India, whom I mentioned in Chapter 2 and who happened to be in Ontario visiting Canadian friends.

Arranging our historic meeting with Madhu would be easy and we could marvel at the sights around Niagara at the same time. We were able to get a free ride from East Lansing on July 3 with Frank Rose, my friend at MSU, who

was driving home to spend the summer break with his family in Canandaigua in upstate New York. He was the caring soul who had invited me for my first all-American family Christmas. It now seemed like a decade ago but was in fact just 18 months earlier. Frank offered to drop us at Niagara Falls, which was on the way to his home in Canandaigua.

I told Krishna that we would pass by the City of Buffalo, and that he would know because we would be hit with a ton of stink from buffalo hides being tanned. Just like back home in Nepal each time we pass by a poor, untouchable *dalit* shoemaker's abode next to a water-well, curing the hides of dead buffalo. I am not kidding: autosuggestion or what, this is what I felt each time I passed through the City of Buffalo in New York State. And in my two years in America, I passed the city three times.

By the time Frank's 1960 Chevy pickup hiccupped us into Niagara Falls town, it was already late afternoon. Before leaving us on our own, Frank took us into town to help us find a cheap motel. But surprise, surprise. The first motel we tried was full. And the next, and the next. All places were full that night, we were told.

We had not realized that our great trip had coincided with the Fourth of July holiday weekend and that the whole country had turned up to enjoy spectacular fireworks by the waterfalls. And in a further complication for us clueless South Asian tourists, it wasn't just any Fourth of July holiday, but the Fourth of July Bicentennial weekend commemorating two hundred years of America's Independence since 1776.

By the time we realized the historical nature of our "looking for America" escapade, Krishna and I realized it was

getting late for Frank Rose to drive all the way to his family home in Canandaigua, so we asked him to just drop us at a park. We'll find somewhere to spend the night, we assured Frank.

It was my second time visiting Niagara Falls, my first being with Frank and his wife Kumiko on the way to celebrate my first Christmas in America with their family nearly two years ago. On that visit, I remember the Canadian immigration officer looking at me when I produced my Nepali passport. He stood up, came to me, and told me how happy he was to see a Nepali after so many years. I would go with a Gorkha anywhere, he told me. He had been a British officer at a Gorkha unit fighting communist guerillas in the Malaysian jungle in the nineteen sixties, he confided to me. The Canadian Immigration stamp on my passport bears the date Dec 19, 1974 with a handwritten note underneath that the visa is valid for 1-1-d(ay) and expired Dec 21, 1974.

Niagara Falls Park, like everything else we had encountered in America, was big and beautiful. The three waterfalls spanning the border between Ontario, Canada, and the state of New York, drain Lakes Erie and Ontario with a spectacularly vertical drop that certainly looked different from the Sundarijal waterfall, east of Kathmandu, where Krishna and I used to go for our college picnics.

As it was getting late in the afternoon with the sun almost setting over the horizon. Krishna and I crossed over to a convenience store to buy a pack or two of hot dogs, a bottle of water and a six-pack of Schlitz beer. We found a quiet corner with a couple of benches and a table on which to unpack our spread and enjoy our hot dogs, looking like

two nervous vagabonds planning to occupy the park for the evening.

Just as we were getting settled and sorted, we had a visitor, and who else in America but a policeman. He did not look menacing or anything, as this was only my third time being stopped by a cop, the first being asked by the police to put my feet down from the bench I was lying down on the Mississippi public ferry. Second time was when I was with my Chinese-American friend being warned for jaywalking in LA, as you will remember. "You just saw how they treat you when you're an Asian," my friend had pointed out at the time.

The cop asked to see our ID. Krishna showed his University of Hawaii ID; I showed mine from MSU. And we told him how we had not found any room in town that evening and so had come to the park to spend the night. Thankfully, he said he understood. It was OK, he said, to spend the night at the park. "But just tonight. Do not let me see you two again tomorrow," he told us in no uncertain terms.

So consoled, happy for tonight, we continued unpacking. Krishna extracted a light sleeping bag from his rucksack which he had figured would come in handy later as the night got cooler.

Then in my own red rucksack, what did I find but a happy bottle of Kentucky bourbon, a farewell gift given to me just the other day by Bob Tomory, one of my regular friends at MSU doing his PhD at the Education faculty. He had also been a Peace Corps volunteer as a Junior Technical Assistant in my hometown of Bhojpur.

Bob's farewell present proved to be a nice heart and body-warming gift under the spectacular fireworks across



the sky, especially after the night started getting darker and chillier. Krishna then began singing his favorite Moon-River-Wider-Than-a-Mile song, which made us both feel like a Huck Finn lighting out to new territories of our American experience.

Besides his Moon River song, another thing Krishna was famous for was his very weak liver, overstressed during his days as a Captain in the India Gurkha army battalion in Dehradun, India. He loved his whiskey but always ended up throwing it all up.

Soon the fireworks stopped. The waterfalls got noisier and noisier. The mist started becoming heavier and colder until the body started freezing. All the sweet bourbon had disappeared, leaving us wide awake and chilled to the bone, despite Krishna's light sleeping bag we shared as blanket.

Next morning, we were the first to arrive at the Observation Tower to board the double-deck Maid of the Mist tour boat. The boat went in and out of the bases of the falls through the swirling whitewater and massive rock formations.

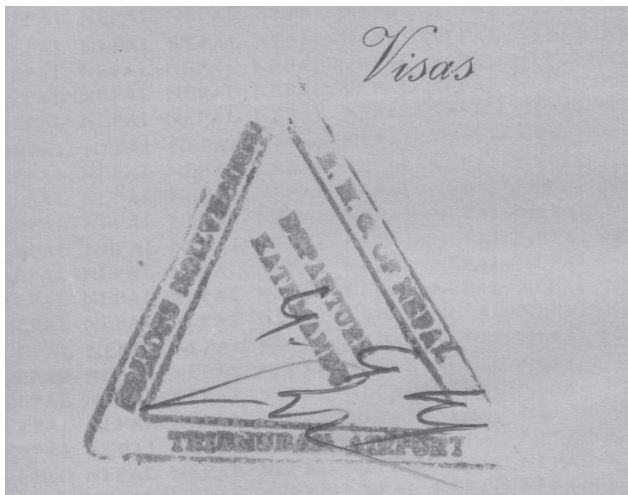
Then it was time to meet Madhu, who was, after all, the reason Krishna and I had come all the way to Niagara. As Krishna and I did not have Canadian visas, we met him on the American side of the Falls with his Canadian friend, Dan Sokoloski (many years younger than Madhu, much like us all) at a restaurant and had lunch. It was woefully short meeting, compared with the time it took us to get there and back to MSU on a Greyhound.

But the occasion was so special that I remember it every Fourth of July and never tire of telling the tale about my

*A Nepali's American Odyssey*

memorable Bicentennial night bivouac in Niagara Park on 4 July 1976!!

(Krishna Gurung returned to teaching at Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur and passed away in 2014. Madhusudan lived in Delhi celebrating his 90th year in October 2021. He passed away in 2022 (<https://linguae.weebly.com/madhusudan-thakur.html>). I've lost touch with Frank Rose. Bob Tomory passed away in 2012 (<https://auislandora.wrlc.org/./peac.../datastream/pdef/view>).



## CHAPTER X

# Return to Nepal

THE MSU Commencement to confer degrees to those graduating in the Spring Term of 1976 was scheduled for Saturday 12 June 1976. Students had to apply to the Registrar's Office in advance to attend the ceremony, but I decided to forgo all the pageantry and color, prayers, gowns and hoods, bands and alma mater songs. They certainly would not be worth the money I would be charged to attend the ceremony. So, I let the Commencement pass but made sure to visit Room 150 in the Hannah Admin Building to collect a copy of my degree transcript.

The Commencement book includes a page with a list of those who graduated from my department the same term as I did.

CANDIDATES - SPRING TERM, 1976

COLLEGE OF  
ARTS AND LETTERS Linguistics  
Marcia Yvonne Fisk  
Linda Gene Gastaiiaga  
Atsuko Shoji  
Ramseh Kumar Shrestha  
Lela Louise Vandenberg

Was the typo in my name a mere proofreading fault or a revenge for my stinginess in skipping the ceremony? But then the typist also misspelled my classmate Linda Gene's last name from Gastanaga.

In any case, after celebrating the American Independence Bicentennial by bivouacking at Niagara Falls, I had no more reason or resources to hang around. I was saddened to realize that my two years in America had come to a sudden, simple, and God-given, irrevocable end, whether I liked it or not.

"Do anything, but don't come back," a friend from my TU days, Sheila Roka, had warned me in one of her letters as soon as I got to MSU nearly two years ago. I had failed her. I had failed to convince Fulbright to support me for my PhD and postpone my going back at least by a few years. I had not applied for funding with any other university nor looked for any on campus or off-campus jobs. Nor had I gotten back to Dr Braj Kachru seeking his help nor sought any of my American friends to help me disappear as an illegal immigrant.

I had been having such a full, good time in America that

I had completely neglected to look for anything that would let me stay on. It was as if I had suddenly awakened from a sweet dream only to realize that I had nowhere to go but to my completely unmissed motherland.

As I pointed out at the beginning of this memory run, Fulbright had been extremely generous with air travel arrangements, providing me with a round-the-world air ticket on PanAm. With my outward PanAm Flight 102 ticket, I had hit the road going west from Kathmandu to New Delhi, then on to Frankfurt in Germany, London and eventually to Washington DC and Lansing, Michigan.

Flying back to Kathmandu, I took PanAm Flight 101 west, flying first to LA and then on to Tokyo where a Japanese friend from MSU, Hagiwara, was waiting for me at Haneda airport. He took me on the monorail to spend a few days in Japan as his guest in his parent's house. He was staying with his wonderful, ageing parents who were taking care of his sister's baby son.

Hagiwara took me to teriyaki bars around Shinjuku almost every night and by day, by train to see all major attractions in Tokyo including Sensoji Temple in Asakusa and the nearby Ueno Park. We spent a whole morning in Shinjuku Gyoen. Afterwards, we stopped at an area in Shinjuku famous for cheap electrical goods to buy my three-in-one compact National Panasonic brand audio system. We also took the Shinkansen train to Kyoto and visited Daigoji, Kinkakuji and Ryonji temples with their sand and moss gardens.

On the last day of my Japan trip, Hagiwara took me to the four-star hotel included in my air ticket in Shinjuku and bid me goodbye. Early morning, I took a cab from the hotel to the airport to catch my flight to Hong Kong where at the

airport, a pleasant surprise awaited me – a hotel car driver bearing a display board with my name in it. In those days Nepalis did not need a visa to enter Hong Kong or Bangkok, my next destination. I can still remember the hotel in Bangkok where I spent my last night as a PanAm traveler, the Golden Dragon Hotel, with its loud air conditioner that kept me awake most of the night (I visited the hotel two decades later and asked a staff about their air conditioner. She confirmed the air conditioners had still not been changed). My PanAm ticket was now connected to Nepal Airlines, hence the much more modest hotel grading. Early morning, I took a cab from the hotel– I remember the palm trees gently swaying against the rising sun just outside the hotel on my short drive to Don Muang airport.

At Don Muang, 'Kathmandu' at the Royal Nepal Airlines check-in was the first sign of Nepal I had seen the whole way from Michigan to Bangkok. There was not a single reference to my beloved country Nepal anywhere I had travelled through. Nepal just did not seem to exist in the world, and only emerged for me for the first time – at Bangkok's Don Muang airport in Thailand.

My Royal Nepal Airlines flight to Kathmandu's Tribhuvan Airport carried a party of foreign tourists. "Where are you from?" I asked one. "Michigan" came the reply.

I had left Nepal for my US Odyssey on 4 Sep 1974. I arrived back in Kathmandu, my Ithaca, on 14 August 1976.

# Postscript

At the end, I'd like to acknowledge help from friends without which this little volume wouldn't have seen the light of the print.

I have still been connected with a number of my American heroes and heroines appearing in this narrative. Huge thanks from the bottom of my heart to Mark Nilsson, Krishna Bhai Pradhan, Bal Kumar KC, Jon Ochi, Chaitanya Mishra, Kathy Corcoran, Marcia Fisk, KarenMarie Terrain – and J. Gabriel Campbell.

How valuable that we could find each other on the wonderful world of FaceBook. Sadly, in this process of reconnecting, I was too late for Dorothy Yim, whose obituary reached me just after I had found her on FB. She is sorely missed.

Special thanks also to Abhi Subedi for saving my letters from America to him and returning them to me to freshen my memory.

Thanks too to Nirmal Tuladhar, John Whelpton, Kamal Adhikari and Durga Pokhrel for sharing their infinite memories from that time and helping me fill in the gaps. Also, thank you to Mike Gill for going through the manuscript and encouraging me to finish it and write a Preface for the book. And to Russ McCulloch for editing it with the same keenness he used when polishing my news stories at 'Business in Thailand' magazine in 1981. To Chiran Ghimire for typesetting and artwork; to Sakar Shrestha for cover design and photo. My deepest gratitude to Basant Thapa for his constant support and guidance.



**Ramesh Shrestha** was born in Bhojpur Bazaar, Nepal on April 28, 1950. After finishing his SLC from Bidyodaya High in 1965, he spent two more years in Bhojpur teaching at the same school and doing his Intermediate of Arts as one of the first batch of students of the newly opened Bhojpur College.

In 1967, he came to Kathmandu for his BA when he also joined the capital's vibrant literary scene publishing his poetry and essays in local magazines. He attended Tribhuvan University for his Master's in English in 1970 when he started writing in English.

He then joined Patan Campus as an Assistant Lecturer of English in 1972. In 1974 he was awarded a Fulbright-Hays Scholarship to spend two years studying Linguistics at Michigan State University, East Lansing.

He then became a lecturer in the English Department at Tribhuvan University's Kirtipur Campus. He also joined the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) as a researcher.

In 1979 he became a Professional Associate at the Center for Cultural and Technical Interchange between East and West (or East-West Center), Honolulu.

The year 1980 saw him to Thailand where he has been ever since, teaching at Thammasat and Dhurakij



Bundit universities and working in such diverse fields as journalism, marketing, media, and advertising. He founded *The Advertising Book, Thailand Advertising, Marketing, Media Guide* in 1984, which continued to publish annually until 2015.

In Thailand he has been an active member of the Nepali community, founding the Thai-Nepal Chamber of Commerce and the Non-Resident Nepalis Association (NRN) Thailand.

Ramesh Shrestha is married to Thananya. They have two children and currently divide their time between Nepal and Thailand.

### **Literary Publications:**

*Trends in Nepalese Poetry* (in Nepali). Kathmandu, Sajha Prakashan, 1979

*Manas* (a collection of poems in English). Co-authors Abhi Subedi and Peter J. Karthak, 1977

*Bhojpur – Kantipur – Kirtipur – Ramesh Shrestha’s Journey in Poetry* (in Nepali). Kathmandu, Ratna Pustak Bhandar (2015)

*Collected Poems (1970-2012)* (in English). Kathmandu, Bidh-Ya Books (2016)

### **Research Publications:**

*Adult Literacy in Nepal*. Kirtipur, Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, 1977

*Use and Misuse of Social Science Research in Nepal*. Co-authors Dr. Gabriel Campbell and Dr. Linda Stone. Kirtipur, Research Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, 1979

*Language Policy of Nepal*. Kathmandu, Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University, 1979 (mimeo).

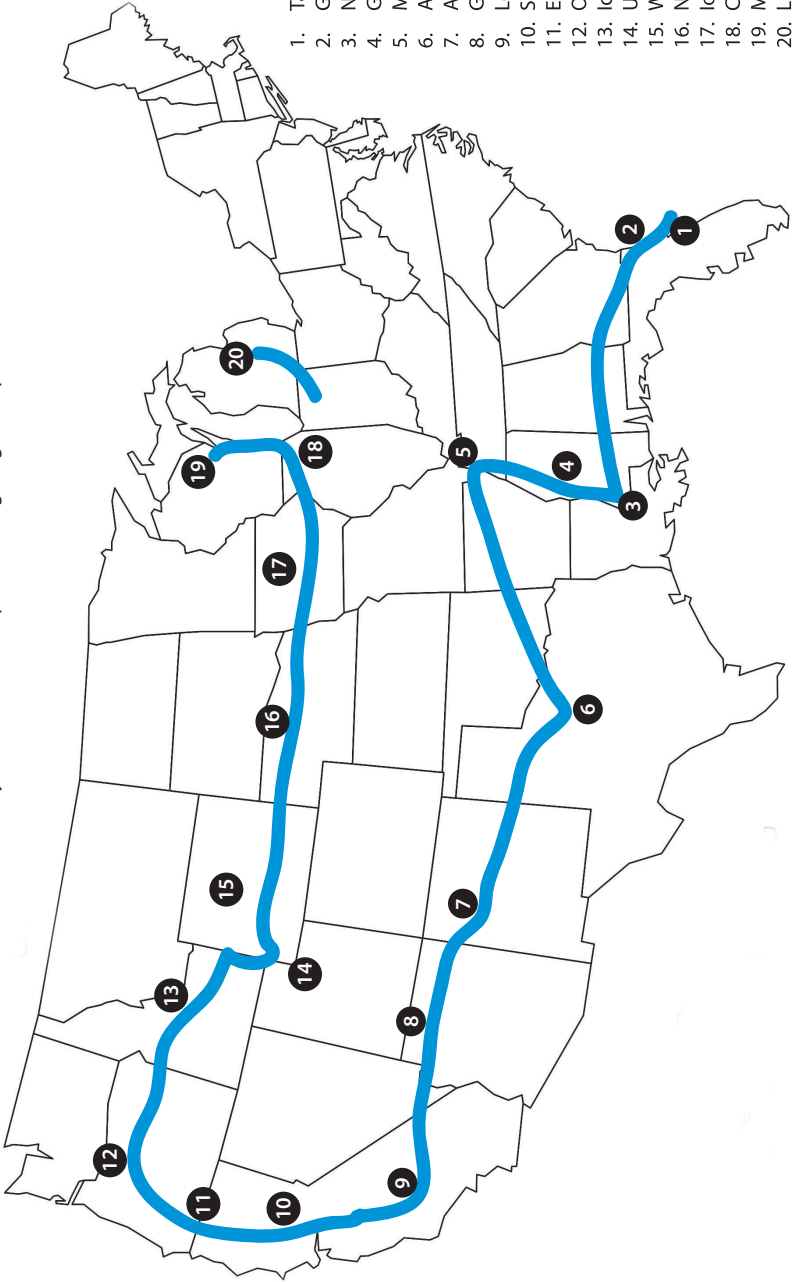
*Diglossomania in Nepali English*. In: Malla, K.P., ed.: *Papers in Nepali Linguistics*, Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University, 1979

**Other publications:**

Several journalistic reports covering mainly advertising media and marketing industries since 1980 in *Business in Thailand* (1981- 83), *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* (Bangkok); *Media* (bi-weekly) and *A&M* (monthly) - both from Hong Kong; *Advertising Age* (weekly) (Chicago, 1981-89); and *Metal Bulletin* (bi-weekly) (UK, 1999 – 2004).

# United States of America

A Month on Greyhound – From Tampa to Lansing (August -September 1975)



1. Tampa
2. Gainesville
3. New Orleans
4. Glendora
5. Memphis
6. Austin
7. Albuquerque
8. Grand Canyon
9. Los Angeles
10. San Francisco
11. Eureka
12. Oregon
13. Idaho Falls
14. Utah
15. Wyoming
16. Nebraska
17. Iowa
18. Chicago
19. Madison
20. Lansing

“This evocative memoir takes you on time travel as a young Fulbright scholar explores the wide expanse of the U.S. in the mid-70s. Ramesh Shrestha’s clear-eyed account of the journey is filled with poetic touches as he recalls his culture shock but also deep interest in traversing the country and absorbing experience wherever it presents itself. While Nepal has provided the stage for plenty of foreigners to document their adventures, there’s very little in the way of literature about the reverse perspective - a Nepali chronicling life on the other side of the globe. This unique, sometimes subtle, voice glides across the scene while providing small sensory details that illuminate his cultural expedition in America. An academic assignment took him far from home but this book is anything but an academic read.”

– Brent Wiley

\* \* \*

“Ramesh’s tale of his two years as a Fulbright student scholar at Michigan State University is a mirror image of my own experiences as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Nepal from 1967 to 1970. “

– Mike Gill

\* \* \*

“Fun, honest, and thoughtful, Ramesh Shrestha’s Odyssey gives us a special view into the adventure and heartache of a Nepali free spirit’s travels to distant shores fifty years ago. A great way to see Nepal and the USA through a new set of eyes.”

– Tom Robertson