I'm sometimes questioned as to what is the most interesting country I have been privileged to visit or to work in. Certainly India, Vietnam, and Cambodia are all up there as major contenders. Another favourite is Bali. Bali superficially, because I don’t know it well enough, but with its rich Hindu/Buddhist inheritance and natural beauty it has to be another favourite. But on some reflection - I think the country I would most like to visit and where I made most friends with the local people - was Nepal.

The old cities of Patan and Bhaktapur in the Kathmandu Valley - with their traditional Nawari architecture - were wonderful to visit. Maybe I'll have another opportunity to visit Nepal - perhaps on holiday and to visit and to note much more so as to convey it you my dear reader. Another time and I’ll try to ensure I see more of the stupendous mountain scenery.
It is extremely difficult to capture in a short essay the range of colour and the richness of culture and tradition and the friendliness of the people that one encounters all over Nepal. This is a deeply religious country. One feature we consultants appreciate very much, especially because it is so novel, is the religious disposition of the people which is responsible for the huge number of religious festivals taking place all over the country. I think it was during the period from September to November when religious celebrations accounted for maybe half the number of working days and when no work was done. It may have had its restrictions but the spectacle and excitement and colour and the novelty of it all - will always remain in my memory.

I think I first went to Nepal about 1996. I went with an EC colleague and we worked closely with our local Nepalese colleague Mohangopal. We continued missions there regularly up to the end of the year two thousand. My last mission was in 2005. Our initial involvement was with the multi-donor Basic and Primary Education Programme II. During that period we worked with representatives from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, NORAD, the Norwegian development agency and with DANIDA, the Danish development agency. We were there during the beginning of the political division of the country between the old traditional parties in the Congress and the emerging political power of the Maoist Peoples Party. During that first phase it wasn't a shooting war yet. Kathmandu and the major towns and cities were firmly under the control of the King and the parties close to the King. It is worth pointing out that the King was then seen by many of the deeply religious in his traditional role as the earthly manifestation of the Hindu god Shiva.

A little historical background

Nepal has had a long history of interaction with Moghul India and then subsequently with the British Raj. During the Raj Nepal was isolated and kept separate. The British had a Representative there. Once the Russians were kept out and the King or the Rana nobility provided the British armies with a supply of soldiers - that for the British was deemed to be sufficient. Traditionally, the clans of Nepal fought with the Moghuls across the border in India. Over time the discipline and valour of the Ghurkha troops was recognised not only by the Moguls but also by the British who succeeded them. British armies in conflict with the Ghurkhas were apt to receive some bloody noses.

A solution was reached between the British and the King of the Ghurkhas. Young Ghurkhas of soldiering age were encouraged to enlist in the British armies of India. There were financial incentives for the King and the nobility to arrange this. On the other hand there was income to be gained by the young men and at the same time their departure from the Nepal guaranteed some peace with the most volatile elements of society away on foreign military service. Those who returned came with a British army pension and contributed to building up the society. Thus was Nepal governed and its economy supported.

The Rana nobility saw itself as being of equal status to the King of Nepal. Sometime during the nineteenth century they took the King hostage and ruled Nepal for more than a century under their own very peculiar system. To cover themselves they made a point of cozying up to the authorities in British India. They had not much time for education - certainly for educating the lower castes. The British established a school
for the nobility in Kathmandu towards the end of the 19th century but there was no organised schooling for the rest of the population until comparatively recently.

Even more interesting was the tradition of hereditary prime ministership, which continued again until relatively recently, or until the king escaped to India shortly after partition in 1947. Up until that time the king and his descendants had been held hostage for several generations. These Rana nobles were gamblers and generally highly irresponsible, if colourful. The book ‘a Tiger for Breakfast’ which I have somewhere was written about some of the goings-on in Nepal during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

It is only very recently that Nepal was governed in anything that came close to democratic rule. It is generally agreed that the watershed for transition to democratic rule occurred around 1990. Even still, this was only a partial sharing of power with the people. The king played a central hereditary role and continued to do so until last year - in 2008 - when he was deposed as a main condition of the peace treaty negotiated between the political parties and the Maoist army. The government parties in power were supportive of the king. Certainly from what I could see of their carry on they paid small attention to the needs of the poor which were and continue to be substantial.

These Rana nobles travelled to France in the nineteenth century and greatly admired the palaces of the nobility they found there. So taken with them that they brought over French architects and the centre of Kathmandu now plays host to a number of impressive nineteenth century palaces. Some are now being utilised as hotels, such as the Yak and Yeti (the Himalayan cow and the Abominable Snowman) and a most prestigious establishment where the World Bank has its offices, or government buildings such as the Kashir Mehal, the headquarters of the Ministry of Education and
Culture. They are truly marvellous places. You register them with great surprise as they seem to be so out of context with their surroundings. The palaces of the recently deposed king in contrast are much less impressive. So the nobles enjoyed their time between palace building and a hereditary prime ministership.

Some cultural aspects

The country is divided into somewhere between 20 and 40 different linguistic communities, each speaking their own separate language. These communities are divided by insurmountable mountainous passes which are a feature of the Himalayan range; the highest mountains in the world.

As noted already the country is rich in traditional Hindu religious customs. For example, we noted our local colleague would always have his head shaved following the anniversary of the death of his father. In doing this he was proud to continue the age-old traditions of his caste and country.

One of the social malaises, probably the principal one regarding education, is the continuing existence of the untouchable class, the Dalits. Children from this class were not accepted into the normal state-run schools. Neither were they allowed to eat or drink water in the presence of children of the recognised castes. Indeed, a considerable emphasis in the implementation of education reforms under the Basic and Primary Education Programme was aimed at the amelioration of this awful and grossly inequitable situation.

Then again there is a huge poverty across the country. Traditionally, several brothers often would share one wife. This unusual situation is called polyandry and I’ve only heard of it in relation to Nepal. This was made possible by the absence perhaps of one or more of the husbands to serve long-term in the Ghurkha Army either in the United
Kingdom or in India. Another feature of great poverty was the trafficking of children, especially girls, across the border to work in brothels in India in places like Calcutta or Mumbai. There would come a time when these girls were no longer income generating through abuse and they would be let go, destitute, to find their way back into their traditional communities in Nepal.

These practices happened, it was happening while we were in Nepal, and appear to be tolerated to some degree by the men who of course are dominant under Hinduism. This male dominance in society continues to pose a question for me, namely, whether it has always been a feature of society and social usage in the subcontinent or whether it was brought to it through the expansion of incoming peoples from Central Asia or through Moslem social norms. It is my considered opinion that this male dominance and control has always been a feature of India as it has been throughout South-East Asia. Education will change it but it will take time and some formidable resistance can be expected.

On one occasion we were invited as a mission with the European Commission representative to a Nepalese house. The representative, a German, was married to a Nepalese lady of a lower caste. The team members including myself took our place without a thought at the high table beside the host and hostess. The host incidentally was a retired general. In contrast, the German and his wife took up position at a lower table. They stayed there until they were invited with great courtesy to join the top table.

That same evening I remember we were offered what we took to be a non-alcoholic drink with which we were told had been prepared by an elderly relation of the family who was present. The refreshment was served in small silver cups from an elegant silver teapot. When the party was over I found myself to be more than a little tipsy.
from the liquor – as we belatedly found it to be. Both my colleagues were in even worse shape and required some help to negotiate the stairs.

Education in Nepal

Nepal's primary education officially is recognised to suffer from several constraints such as inadequate access and low participation, a low retention of students in the schools, a low level of educational quality, inequalities in relation to various regions and social groups, inadequate financing, and limited management capacity and inadequate institutional support. I suppose this says it all.

Nepal was one of the poorest countries in the world at that time with a per capita income of US $220 and very low social indicators. 42% of the population lived below the official poverty line. According to the 1991 Census, the overall literacy rate for the population of 6 years and above was 40%, with a female literacy rate of 25%. The adult literacy rate, however, was 32%, with 18% for females. There exist wide inter-district and regional variations in literacy rates. Literacy among the ethnic minorities and rural populations is alarmingly low. Ethnic and linguistic groups have always experienced differentiated access to quality educational services. This situation created differential educational outcomes among various groups, and especially females from linguistic minority groups, Dalits and other socially deprived groups.

In response to this somewhat dismal situation the expansion of schooling was recognised by the donors and by some of the ruling classes as constituting one of the most effective long term means of raising levels of economic and social development. The objective of donor support was to strengthen the human resource base of the country so as to alleviate poverty. A major element of the donor support design had been the decision to support recent legislative reforms and to reform the civil service, and the building of a decentralised institutional framework together with strategies to strengthen the Ministry of Education, both at the district level as well as at the school community levels.

Overall, implementation of the project we worked on has to be seen against the background of the then ongoing Maoist insurgency, which by then had cost over 11,000 fatalities in a country of about six million. It may be interesting for the reader to reflect on what happens to an educational system and the teachers and children who were affected by armed insurrection during the extended course of the Nepalese conflict. The following are extracts drawn from the final evaluation of the Basic and Primary Education Programme II which was completed sometime in 2005.

“The insurgency has had a profound effect on the delivery of essential services in many parts of the country. Violence has intensified in the eight years of conflict and now almost all districts are affected to varying degrees. National bandhs (strikes/closures) have resulted in widespread disorder, people have migrated away from affected areas, and state officials have been unable to function any appreciable distance beyond district headquarters in some areas of the country.
The education sector has been explicitly targeted with attacks on educational facilities, school strikes, disruptions to daily schooling practices, and the abduction of teachers and students.\footnote{47}

The intensity and extent of the ‘People’s War’ launched in 1996 by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) has significantly increased since 2001, when the army was directly drawn into the conflict. Over the course of the eight years of the insurgency, the violence has intensified and the geographical spread of the conflict has extended. Now almost all districts of the country are affected by the conflict to varying degrees.

It is difficult to determine with any accuracy how many school age children have been denied access to schooling in areas especially affected by the insurgency. The apparent influx of children to relatively secure areas (and consequent overcrowding in schools in or near district capitals as observed in the district case studies) suggests that the insurgency has had a significant, negative impact on access. Development activities in many of the most affected areas have been severely constrained or halted. Most development organisations are unable to operate in the rural areas under Maoist control and have pulled back to district headquarters or to Kathmandu.

A women’s literacy class in full swing in an isolated area we visited.

Teachers in many areas are ‘caught in the middle’ between the security forces and the Maoists - and are fearful of being targeted or victimised by both sides. Teachers’ Associations estimate that over 150 teachers have been killed during the conflict and many hundreds more are no longer in post - whether as a result of forced migration or as a result of abduction. Teachers throughout the country are being forced to make ‘donations’ to the Maoists, further adding to the climate of fear.

Without systematic data, it is difficult to know the exact impact of the conflict on children. What is clear is that the Maoists have targeted older students (grades 8-10)

\footnote{47} Sadly as I also noted from a study of the worst forms of child labour it is always the children who suffer most in these conflicts.
as potential supporters. There is evidence that students – even in younger classes – have not attended school for extended periods of time due to fears of being kidnapped on the way to or from their classrooms. The psychological impact of the conflict on children has not been investigated."

My comment on the foregoing official analysis would be that it’s not all bad. In contrast to an apparent lack of interest in education reform evidenced by the ministerial clique living centrally in the security and luxury of the Kathmandu Valley, a visit to the communities living outside the valley was quite instructive. There non-government organisations and community-based organisations were busy promoting education and the education was inclusive including both the lower caste children as well as the children of the recognised castes and wealthier populations.

There was evidence of commitment and enthusiasm. The picture above - although sadly not very clear - is of literacy classes being provided to lower-caste mothers by the local NGO in a Maoist area. In the absence of good governance from the centre and support for education I suppose it is legitimate to assume that there would be politicisation of the system with very close linkages between the NGOs and the Maoist politicians who were seeking to bring education to all and to improve conditions generally for the rural poor.

A stroll through Kathmandu

Usually as a team we would stay in the Shangri-La Hotel to the north of the city in the direction of the airport. Coming out of the hotel you turn right and walk along a busy footpath past shops with silks and all sorts of exotic cloths and hats – just before you reach the old, old palace of the former king you pass the headquarters of the Ministry of Education Youth and Culture. This was originally built as a Rana Palace. I have been there so often, have attended meetings, and have been interviewed by the administration and the Minister in the finely decorated reception rooms. Then we leave the Ministry - dodging the bird droppings along the pathway and turn right - and soon we begin to enter the old city in the area called Tamil.

Tamil is the old centre of Kathmandu. I have been through it passing the tall buildings with their golden doors and shop windows and enjoying the spectacle of such an attractive, unusual, old but always engaging environment. I see in my mind’s eye the old brick walls, the heavy sculptured doors wide open and from the inside a huge array of objects many or most of which would have been thrown away in our throwaway western culture, or fruits, or cases of teas or spices in sacks piled high on top of each other. Around every corner there is a new perspective; one different from the other an overall there is a huge sense of history.

This is the tourist area and we are traversing it to reach the old Durbar Square at the far side of Tamil. Along the way there are shops which all kinds of mountain gear; anoraks, trousers, mountain boots, hats – and all at such cheap prices. I must have bought myself and our two boys a range of mountain clothing in these shops.

Further on past the restaurants I look left and I see a sign with ‘Irish Pub’ written on it. Some years ago I was introduced to the Irish girl who was the proprietor of this pub. She was from Tipperary and had met the love of her life during a holiday trip to Kathmandu. Now she was married and they had a child. But business had not been so
good and so she was considering returning with her husband to live in Ireland. What the change must mean for him! What the changes to live in Nepal had been for her! It was lovely to meet them and to offer to bring back to Ireland some package for her parents. Recently, I found it sad to hear an Irish language poet boasting of his homosexual encounters with young men in bars in this area. The Nepalese youth I found to be gentle and trusting of foreigners. I hate to think of them being preyed upon by any dubious predators coming from my country.

Continuing on, I pass the Pilgrim Bookshop where I have spent many happy hours drinking coffee or beer and fingerling the wonderful books and catalogues that are available there. I continue on – aiming to find the simple old restaurant where I have had many, many, sizzling steaks along with glasses of local Kathmandu whiskey! On so many occasions traversing through the north Tamil area I’ve been enthralled by the always open bars, the old buildings, the tables set in restaurants, bookshops, clothing shops and all beckoning for my attention. At the far end were the tailor shops. First in one shop you bought the material. I remember buying material for a suit which was marked ‘excellent English wool’. Then I brought to the shop a pair of comfortable trousers and a blazer. These were used by the tailor as models. Two days later I returned to collect one of my favourite suits which I still have hanging in my wardrobe.

I think I mentioned earlier I worked as part of a European Commission team of experts which in itself was part of a broader government/donor community team. I very much appreciated the opportunity of working with such a wide range of Nepalese, South Asian, European and American consultants. This team was normally split between management and technical experts, the latter involved in a whole range of issues relating to school quality and attendance. But within these teams it was not unusual for some heat and tension to be generated. On one occasion there was considerable resentment by the technical team members that they should be required
to make visits into the bush while the management team remained in the cosy ambience of the Kathmandu Valley. I was amongst the latter management team – but for my part I would much have preferred to be out exploring across the countryside.

There was an Indian lady representing the EC Delegation in Delhi. Occasionally there was the lady whom we called the “Little Princess” who came with us from Brussels. As a group we worked together with the full team of World Bank experts, representatives from the Asian Development Bank, from UNICEF, the Danish aid mission DANIDA and the Norwegians. Coming together on a number of missions as might be expected we developed a great deal of cross friendships. The lady colleagues in particular were very enthusiastic on insisting that a certain stages we would socialise together in a nightclub called the Underground Bar. It became apparent that the ladies escorted by the more elderly gents would enjoy dancing until they were imposed upon by the local Nepalese young men. The ladies didn't always appreciate the fairly heavy-handed advances made on their persons by the latter. After maybe two hours we would withdraw in a group and have a meal together in some of the beautiful but simple restaurants of Kathmandu. It was altogether a spectacular and always very enjoyable experience.

The team visiting a class of deaf-mute boys and their teacher out in the countryside outside the Kathmandu Valley.

It will be interesting to see the changes which will arise from the dismissal of the traditional Hindu king and his replacement with an elected government with substantial left-wing Maoist representation. In my experience, up to 2005 anyway, there has been a huge emphasis on religious and cultural traditions across Nepal. One particular example relates to the Kathmandu valley itself. Traditionally, the Nawari clan ruled the Kathmandu Valley. It was the Nawari's architectural concepts transferred from Nepal that travelled across China and extended even to Japan. They were the great architects and constructors of their time. But some three hundred years ago the Nawari dynasty was overthrown by the Ghurkha kings, who came from outside the valley. I was assured by members of the Nawari clan that there was no intermarriage between the two groups. They have lived parallel lives for centuries without any social interaction.
Returning to the mission there often were tensions between the teams representing the various donor agencies. Once there was a particularly strong confrontation with the World Bank over what we considered was the disproportionate investment they proposed to make in school buildings. Construction is always the opportunity for corruption. I was aware that the World Bank knew that the government and regional officials would very much welcome a substantial investment. The other donors combined and faced down the World Bank on that occasion. I think a split of seventy five per cent for education quality and management and twenty-five per cent for construction was agreed. It didn’t make for friendly relations between the EC and World Bank teams.

The older team leaders had a way of patronising the opposition. On one occasion the World Bank team was led by small plump but very capable Dutchman. In contrast his DANIDA, Danish counterpart, was the tallest man I have ever known. He must have been two and a half metres tall. I suppose the different physical attributes paid a part in contributing to the continuous barrage of criticism which took place between them. To our mind each of them acted like a prima ballerina. The rest of us became very embarrassed to see this carry-on take place in front of our Nepalese counterparts and hosts. On one occasion we all decided to face up to them. I invited them to a drinks party in my bedroom. While there the Dutch colleagues confronted their countryman. I had a go at the Dane. I felt so small as I put my shoulders back and looked up and criticised him. I knew what it must have been like to be David against Goliath!

There was peace for a while. Then one morning as I led my team consisting of myself and three ladies and colleagues from the Delegation in India into the meeting room the Dutch man greeted us with “Ahh….. Here comes Liam and his lovely ladies.” I was very much amused by the reception. The ladies were not and made it very clear that they were not. I heard them whispering to each other – highly critical – and in no way flattering remarks. It was a long time before they forgave him.

Another time and it was the man from World Bank’s turn. The teams were seated on a Dias around a large table. It was a formal meeting and each of the team leaders was presenting his or her findings on different aspects of the project to the Minister and his colleagues. The meeting seemed to go on for hours. I began to doze off and after a while was blissfully asleep and far, far away from the proceedings. The World Bank man must have heard me snoring gently. Anyway while I was still asleep he concluded his presentation saying something like it was his task to outline the broad principles and he would leave it to his EC colleague, Mr Owens, to fill in the details. I awoke with searing pain caused by something like a stiletto shoe going deep into my shin with the sharp end. I was lucky. I had prepared what I was going to say. I began well and taking confidence from a good start went on to make what seems to have been an acceptable presentation. Afterwards, I was very resentful of the situation which the World Bank fellow had tried to place me in. Anyway he was a cold fish and not popular with the group as a whole. I developed a further strengthened reputation for “rent a speech” after that incident.
I’m reminded of Yeat’s “public man” as I visit a local school.

It wasn’t always easy to work with government ministers and officials. While I enjoyed seeing them in their national dress: their colourful embroidered hats and jackets and their tight white puttees – on the whole I found them disappointing. Given the huge needs of an impoverished population for education advancement the degree of cynicism and mendacity practised by politicians and officials alike was often truly scandalous.

We were left under no illusions about this. In speaking privately with our counterparts we learned of their criticism and condemnation of the corrupt practices which took place. One of my local counterparts characterised the inauguration of the new Minister of Education in terms of “the new Minister will bring his family members and retainers, he will realise that in the short term of his appointment it will be necessary for him to use all his guile to loot any funds available”. Senior officials in the government – if they wanted to maintain their position – had to go along with these predatory practices. I sympathised very much with the best of them. Not all the politicians were so corrupt. Once I interviewed a very well-spoken intellectual Maoist member of the Parliament.

Not far from Kathmandu outside the valley and down towards the Tirai and Bihar in India is Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha. This is a most important religious pilgrimage centre. Each of the Buddhist countries worldwide including representatives of important Buddhist communities in the West erect their national pavilions to facilitate their pilgrims. These pavilions formed a riot of colour. Each of them sported their exotic national tapestries, furnitures and carvings. With so many pilgrims from a variety of nationalities there was a special buzz about the place.

On the way back to Kathmandu we crossed a gorge. Thirty metres below the river ran. We were in the bright red Mercedes taxi that we always hired as transport. As usual, we had warned the driver that if he didn’t slow down we’d find someone else. He never slowed down for long. But even he was shocked when the truck immediately
ahead of us turned over and fell down into the river killing the driver and his passenger immediately. We looked down on the fast flowing oily slick and the bubbles – and that was all. There was nothing we could do. We drove back very much chastened by the experience.

During one of our early missions we were able to go out into the field to visit schools. It was such a pleasure to be welcomed into the area and to meet children and their teachers and to see how even with the most basic of materials there was teaching and there was a learning process in place. There was one school where I was introduced to the assembled teachers and school children. I asked my few questions and made some congratulatory comments about school and how it has managed. Afterwards, I was asked to sign the visitors’ book and to write some comments which would be shown to inspectors and other ministry dignitaries when they visited. In the humidity and the sweltering heat someone took a photograph of me writing my comments in the book while behind me I was fanned by a kind old gentleman.

On one mission into the field in Chitwan District we overnighted in a village very close to Tiger Tops, the very well-known national park of Nepal. The weather was mild and warm and we decided that each of us would hire an elephant and spend an hour or so as tourists on elephant back viewing the fauna and flora of the locality, especially the former. We had been advised to expect to see sightings of the very scarce white rhinoceros. If we were lucky we might see a tiger and of course there would be a variety of deer to be seen.
Whatever about the tiger we did see two young white rhinoceros and some deer. So accustomed were they to the presence of the elephants and the tourists that they allowed us to come very close to them and they would just continue on browsing. The pictures above and below are souvenirs of that happy dalliance.

I'm proud of this close-up shot of the white rhinoceros taken from elephant back.
In February 2005 and I had been working with my Nepali friend and colleague on a new project for EC funding to succeed the basic and primary education project. The mission started off in the EC Delegation in Delhi where we were briefed on the expected results. As usual we have got on very well although the political background in Nepal was quite ominous. There were rumours everywhere that the king was intending to impose martial law and to launch a coup with the support of the army.

The previous evening I had been invited by my friend to meet his family and to share dinner with them. Before the meal each of his three daughters took a turn to read extracts from the sacred Bhagavad-Gita, the Hindu religious text. His wife served us but didn’t join us at the table. I still can see how proud she was of her husband and her daughters. It was a lovely experience.

The next day being Friday and therefore a holiday started off well. I accompanied my friend to a farm where some of his friends, several of whom were also consultants, bred as a hobby different types of exotic orchids. We sat back on easy chairs in the sunlight and together we mixed business and conversation. The father figure, the head of the family showed me around the gardens and in the distance I could see high white snow-capped mountains. It was a perfect sunny day. We chatted away at our ease while the children ran around and the ladies conversed together in Nepali. We had some large glasses of local whiskey which only added to the pleasant atmosphere.

About three in the afternoon I thanked my hosts profusely and took a taxi back to my hotel. There was one short cryptic emailed note from my brother back in Dublin that my sister had died in her sleep. I was stunned. It is what travelling consultants fear the most – that they would be away on mission on such occasions. I felt so miserable and so lonely and so far away from home and all whom I loved. I wouldn’t wish that experience on anyone.

I realised it being Friday that there was no way I could contact my friend until the next day, Saturday, to arrange a flight home. I knew it would be difficult as the king had put the city under martial law a day or two before. The next day and very much due to the good offices of my local friends and some expenditure of baksheesh I managed to organise a seat on a plane to Europe.

Before I left Kathmandu in the early morning darkness I have vivid memories of being stopped and checked by a military patrol and at several checkpoints. That was my last experience of Nepal and both an unusual and untypical one. I prefer to think of the Nepali as a kind, friendly, welcoming and dignified people with an amazingly colourful history and culture.