

## REMEMBERING DR. GURUNG

By Pitamber Sharma

“The journey once begun in a small village in Lamjung must continue beyond the last rest-place and bridge, pass and vantage point.” Thus wrote Dr. Harka Gurung in the foreword to his *Vignettes of Nepal*, a geographer’s travelogue back in 1980. That journey came to an abrupt and heart-wrenchingly tragic end in a remote cliff overlooking the Ghunsa river in Lelep VDC in north-eastern Taplejung district. “From the small village of Taranche in Lamjung to Phale is a mere 375 km as the crow flies” -- this is how Dr. Gurung would have put it in his typically precise and inimitable style. But in that distance Dr. Harka Gurung – scholar, teacher, development planner, minister, writer, consultant, administrator, sportsman, mountaineer, traveler, nationalist, champion and defender of indigenous ethnic communities and minority rights -- traversed an amazingly varied landscape of ideas and actions and left an indelible imprint on the contemporary development discourse in Nepal. Dr. Harka Gurung represented the very best of his generation and there is truly no one like him around. He was without doubt the most widely known Nepali scholar in the international scene. He was also the most traveled Nepali intellectual within Nepal, and perhaps the most widely read on aspects of Nepal and the Himalayas. His knowledge was encyclopedic and he had a streak of the Victorian scholar in him. The strength of his erudition, consistent hard work and personality was such that people were compelled to listen when he chose to speak. He was often called a living national treasure, a resource that enriched the nation.

Born in 1939 Dr. Harka Gurung was the son of Subedar Parsai Gurung and Mayishebo Gurung. His father was a Gorkha soldier who had seen action in France and Palestine in the First World War. It was perhaps from his father that Dr. Gurung inherited the almost soldier-like discipline and sense of purpose. He came to Kathmandu as a young boy of nine and later attended King George’s Military School in Jullunder, India where he was noted for his excellent academic performance, sportsmanship, and for his radical ideas. Dr. Gurung had a brilliant academic career. He topped the I.A. from Tri-Chandra College and B.A. from Patna College with a First Class Honors in Geography in 1959. He earned his post-graduate diploma and Ph.D, from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland in 1965. He was also associated for some time with School of African and Oriental Studies of University of London as a research fellow. He started his career in Nepal as a lecturer in geography at Tribhuvan University College where I had the privilege of being among the first batch of his students. Although he remained academically inclined all his life, his association with the University itself was short-lived. He was with the National Planning Commission for over seven years first as a member and then as its Vice-Chairman. He also had a brief foray in politics as the Minister of State for Education, Industry and Commerce (1975-77), and Tourism, Transport and Public Works (1977-78). In 1978 he changed course, for the better I think, to become a researcher and consultant contributing to explore a wide range of themes with equal depth and dedication. He was a research fellow with the East West Population Institute during 1984/85. He also became the Director of Asia and Pacific Development Centre, Kuala Lumpur between 1993 and 1998.

As a scholar Dr. Gurung strode the Nepali intellectual horizon like very few of his contemporaries. No theme that was of relevance to Nepal's development was alien to him. In *Regional Development Planning for Nepal* (1969) he proposed a regional approach to planning that integrated different geographical regions based on comparative resource advantages. His books *Dimensions of Development* (1980,1989), *Nature and Culture* (1989) reflect his wide ranging interest and sharp perceptions on Nepal's geography, culture, history, aspects of demography, politics and economic development. As a scholar he consistently enriched himself and continued to grow with the issues facing Nepal. His book *Social Demography and Expressions* (1998, 2003) is testament to the contemporariness of the issues that he analyzed. Dr. Gurung's lasting contribution is in exploring the regional, socio-economic and ethnic/caste inequalities within Nepal. He saw Nepal's problems of development as basically structural, and essentially related to the exclusionary ideology of the State. He demonstrated that social exclusion was not just the problem of *janjatis* and *dalits*, but a national problem that involved a majority of Nepal's population. He was among the first to emphasize that Nepal was basically a country of minority groups; Bahun-Chhetris who dominate the political and socio-economic fields were also minorities in the national context. Dr. Gurung was not a theorizer but the empirical facts that he marshaled in his writings opened up new vistas for the policy maker as well as the researcher. Dr. Gurung was also among those scholars who could revisit their ideas with hindsight and stand corrected. His collection of miscellaneous interviews on a variety of contemporary themes dating from 1973 (*Nepalko Aarthrajniti 2001*) stands testimony to his sense of honesty and integrity.

Dr. Gurung transcended disciplinary boundaries but was a geographer by training. Geography remained his first love and spatial/regional analysis was his forte. He used this mode effectively in analyzing diverse themes (*Regional Patterns of Migration in Nepal 1989*, *Graduates in Nepal. A Diagonistic Study 1972*). Dr. Gurung was the first to make a detailed geographical exploration of the Pokhara valley in which he challenged the postulations of Tony Hagen, the Swiss geologist, that Pokhara represented an ancient lake bed. His monograph on Pokhara valley in which he earned his Ph.D. is still a landmark in regional geography in Nepal. He was also the first Nepali to write on mountaineering (*Annapura to Dhaulagiri, A Decade of Mountaineering in Nepal 1968*) and prepare an inventory of the high Himalayan peaks of Nepal. *Vignettes of Nepal* was the result of his travels in Nepal upto about 1978 and is rewarding to read even today. He had that rare knowledge and comprehension of Nepal which made him a geographer's geographer. In a country where map was a tool only of the specialist Dr. Gurung popularized it as a tool for development planning and policy making. Cartography was among his hobbies. He contributed to the development of Nepal's Atlas through *Maps of Nepal* (1999), and the more recent *Nepal. Atlas of Ethnic/Caste Groups*, and *Nepal, Atlas of Linguistic Groups* (2006) published by Nepal Foundation for Indigenous Nationalities.

Dr. Gurung will be gratefully remembered by the nation for the four themes on which he drew national attention — decentralization of polity and development, the importance of tourism in development, regulation of the international border, and the case for a inclusive state.

As member and later vice-chair of the National Planning Commission Dr. Gurung was the first central level policy maker to recognize the three-dimensional realities of Nepal and call for decentralized polity and development. It was under his intellectual leadership that development regions, growth centres and growth points were conceptualized in the Fourth Plan, and a regional approach to development planning in Nepal was coherently articulated. He believed that Nepal's future lay in the mutually reinforcing integration of the hill economy with the Tarai economy. He was among the first to realize that the centralized, feudal predatory state had become a burden to itself and could not be sustained. The fact that the regional development approach proposed by Dr. Gurung never received the status of a national political commitment only underlines the feudal stranglehold from which the nation is trying to escape even today.

Dr. Gurung was the first Nepali Minister with the tourism portfolio. It was under his stewardship that tourism received the attention of the national policy makers. The concerns of tourism got him steadily attracted to the issues of environment and conservation. He championed the case of responsible tourism in various forums and believed that while the government had to show the way it was the activities of the private sector that would define the potentials and contributions of tourism in Nepal. He was the driving spirit behind the founding of the Nepal Mountaineering Museum in Pokhara.

Dr. Gurung came to renewed national attention in 1983 as the coordinator of the Task Force on National and International Migration formed by the National Commission on Population. The Task Force report recommended, among other things, that the international border between Nepal and India be regulated and that national policies, including that of citizenship, be in conformity to emerging economic and political realities. Even after more than two decades the recommendations made by the Task Force still remain relevant today.

Since the late 1990s Dr. Gurung was increasingly involved in analyzing the question of indigenous communities and national minorities, an issue that had been purposely ignored by the rulers of Nepal for over two centuries. The problem he argued was that the Nepali State had been systematically partisan to a particular religion (Hinduism), a particular language (Nepali) and the supremacy of a particular ethos (the Bahun-Khas ethos). As a scholar assessing the objective realities of Nepal Dr. Gurung concluded that the creation of an "inclusive state" was a necessary condition for the development of Nepal. The structure and functioning of the Nepali state should therefore be made to reflect the ethnic/caste and linguistic diversity of Nepal, a fact which now lies at the heart of the agenda for the restructuring of the Nepali State. He also argued for the reorganization of districts based on the criteria of economic self-sufficiency. Lately he had come to regard the idea of federalism as a necessary step towards devolution of power and was perhaps in the process of concretizing his ideas when fate intervened so cruelly. His wise counsel and advice will sorely be missed as the nation moves towards a new polity and restructuring of the state.

As a person also Dr. Gurung stood tall among his peers for his honesty, integrity and for his objective comprehension of the world around him. He was forthright and incisive, oftentimes devastatingly so. He did not mince words and carried no favor, a trait so very rare in Nepal. He had spartan work habits and, inspite of not being computer savvy, was amazingly organized in his work. In the period of almost forty years that I knew him, I never saw him idle. He was perennially busy, and always had a project in his mind. While he had no time for idlers, he was always encouraging to those who were serious. There was a steady flow of researchers to his office at New Era or in his study at home seeking guidance and advice or sharing their findings. He was a voracious reader and had a fantastic memory. Dr. Gurung's simplicity as a person revealed itself during field work in the backwaters of rural Nepal. His sense of humor was legendary and so were his quips. And he had standing invitations as a coveted key-note speaker in many a seminar. In Nepal where all seem to have their own hidden political agendas Dr. Gurung had none. But he provided the most intelligent critique of the status-quo.

In spite of his urban living, at heart Dr. Gurung remained a simple mountain man in full sympathy with the landscape and mindful of his herds, only in this case his herds were his ideas for the betterment of *all* the people of Nepal. He yearned to be in the mountains every so often. It was in one of such visits that tragedy struck and, poignant as it is, together with a number of distinguished colleagues the mountain man was lost to the mountains.

Dr. Gurung had admirers around the globe and will be missed by all those who care about Nepal everywhere. For me personally *Gurung Sir* was always a source of inspiration, a constructive and engaging critic, and a source of new insights. I will miss him forever as a *guru*, guide and mentor.

The void created by the absence of such a one as Dr. Gurung can never be filled; one can only get used to it. Truly, Dr. Harka Gurung was a mountain of a man.

May his soul rest in peace, and may his family be able to bear this enormous national and personal loss with courage and fortitude.

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With Dr. Gurung in 2004 in Biratnagar