

A Tribute to Dr. Harka Gurung

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With the death of Dr. Harka Gurung in September 2006, an era has ended in Nepal. In the fields of development planning, economic geography and management of natural resources in Nepal, Dr. Gurung remained a dominant figure for more than four decades. With his passing, Nepal has lost a pioneer, an advocate of ethnic rights, a scholar and a visionary.

I met Dr. Gurung for the first time in 1975, when I was an associate professor at Tribhuvan University. I met him at the old Bureau of Statistics building in Thapathali and was fascinated to spend some time with one of the major intellectuals of Nepal. While teaching at the Institute of Engineering, I was beginning to get interested in the issues related to community and economic development. I had just recently completed my architectural degree, as a part of which, I had designed a regional administrative center in Dhankuta for the Eastern Regional headquarter, a brainchild of Dr. Gurung. Dr. Gurung's writings were my main references to understand how spatial distribution of investment and political power may create a balanced pattern of development in the country

In course of my professional career, I eventually transitioned from architecture to the study and practice of urban and regional, and later environmental planning, but never straying away from Nepali issues. While I was pursuing my graduate studies in architecture and urban planning at the University of Hawaii in the late seventies, Dr. Gurung's regional planning strategy once again became my references for study.

Subsequently from 1997 to 2000 while I served at IUCN-The World Conservation Union- Nepal, I had a few more opportunities to meet with Dr. Gurung, rather closely, and to benefit from his enormous and first hand knowledge about the Nepali geography, and issues related to the environment and economic development. I sometimes called him on the phone to seek advice on natural resources management policies. I also had a few opportunities to be present in some meetings and conferences with the distinguished geographer.

One evening in 1999, in a program organized to release Dr. Gurung's book on the mountains of Asia, many of us had gathered at the Everest Hotel in Kathmandu. In retrospect that was an eventful evening, as I shared the stage with Dr. Gurung with other two individuals, Dr. Chandra Gurung and Mr. Mingma Sherpa, who also perished in the ill-fated September 2006 helicopter crash in Nepal. Dr. Gurung was loudly acclaimed for his book.

In my limited encounters with Dr. Gurung, I learnt that he took scholarship and studies seriously. He was a master of several areas in spatial geography, regional development, natural resources management, demographic shifts and economic development issues facing Nepal. He studied and applied the related concepts to Nepal with passion.

I also had observed that he was not the most diplomatic individual when it came to speaking his mind on issues of ethnicity and politics. This was so perhaps, because he so deeply cared about inclusionary policies, and so strongly favored the upliftment of the underrepresented and disadvantaged groups in Nepal.

Dr. Gurung will be sadly missed.