

Vignettes of My Father

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Introduction

My father Harka Gurung was a gifted man. He had an extraordinary talent to instill in everyone a special love for Nepal, particularly rural Nepal. His love for his country was so deep; it was almost spiritual. One became transfixed listening to his stories about our country. His deep affection for Nepal and the Nepali people was highly contagious. Listening to my father, it was difficult not to love Nepal.

In the midst of dire political turmoil, he never once doubted that Nepal and the Nepali people would triumph. After the Royal take over of February 1st 2005, when many of us were feeling hopeless, my father sent me a brief email: “Sometimes things need to get worse before they can get better”. He possessed an amazing ability to see light even in the darkest hour. His optimism wasn’t based on fantasy. He was a true scholar of history and modern nation building in Nepal. He understood the intricacies of Nepal’s social diversity, the conflicts between its rural and urban livelihoods, the contradictions of tradition and modern development, the burden of a nation built upon false history and oppressive caste and class structures. Most importantly, he believed that a balance could be found, a New Nepal could be build, and all Nepalis could enjoy a better life. In one of his last email correspondences, he wrote:

The first democracy survived only a decade (1951-60). It took 30 years to restore democracy. It was usurped by absolute monarchy after 12 years. However, the autocratic regime was toppled in less than four years (Oct 2002-April 2006). People’s power has been asserted for a new democracy.¹

In this essay, I share some early memories of many family trips we took together where my father introduced to me to the Nepali landscape and instilled in me a deep love and affection for our country.

Exploring Kathmandu Valley’s Cultural and Natural Heritage

My earliest recollections of my father are weekend family picnics around Kathmandu Valley where we lived. That was the late 1970s Kathmandu, when rickshaws, bicycles and

¹ Personal email, April 28, 2006.

pedestrians ruled the roads of Kathmandu; Ring Road was that “far away, empty highway to be avoided at night”. My parents, my three siblings and I, a caretaker and a driver would all somehow fit into our tiny Toyota. Off we would go for our ritual Saturday picnic. Sometimes, family friends and distant relatives joined us, turning this family affair into a grand feast.

I remember my father in his checkered English tweed shirts, dark sunglasses, smoking a pipe and carrying his trusty Pentax SLR camera loaded with slide film. Later, on someone’s birthday party these slides became the main source of entertainment for our gatherings. We all loved my father’s slide shows.

On one such Saturday outing, we visited Swayambunath temple. My father was not a religious man but he had deep admiration for the Buddhist monks and their simple life style. He actually sometimes fantasized about giving up everything, returning to his home village and becoming a monk.

After visiting the temple that day, we decided to picnic on the northern edge of Swayambunath that bordered Ring Road. We picnicked under a big tree literally right next to Ring Road. I have a vivid memory of that big tree with father taking a picture of me in my big blue hat. Nearly three decades later, I would get married under the same tree, my father taking pictures with the very same Pentax camera. The only difference being that the peaceful tranquility of our Ring Road picnic spot was overtaken by a major bus stop, a busy market, and a 30 foot high statue of Buddha.

Our family picnics were occasions to celebrate my mother’s cooking, explore the natural beauty of Kathmandu Valley, and really spend time with my father. He always had a very busy schedule. These picnics introduced me to enchanting places like Kakani Dada, Bajra Barahi Temple, Bhaktapur’s Salla Ghari, Budhanilkantha, Sankhu, Changunarayan Temple, Nagarkot, Godhavari, Phulchoki, Surya Binayak, Dolalghat, Banepa, Dhulikhel, Sangha, Palanchok Bhagbhati, Tato Pani, Nagarjun, Balaju, Chobar, Pharping, Dakshinkali and Raniban.

Reflecting back, I realize that these picnic spots were parts of the cultural and natural heritage of the greater Kathmandu Valley. Perhaps my father had made a conscious decision to take his family to these special sites.

Escaping Kathmandu Winters

“We are going to escape the Kathmandu winter”, father would say. He would usually arrange a land rover from one of his many generous friends for our winter trips. Our entire family, except for father, was a victim of carsickness. Therefore, a car journey to Pokhara

and Chitwan was always torturous for us. We stopped the car many, many times to step out and throw up (vomit).

There are a few stops along the Prithvi Highway I always associate with my father. As soon as we pass the Thankot Dada's check point, where a wide new valley opens up with a majestic view of the mountains, my father always stopped the car, took out his famous camera and, before taking a picture, he would tell us the names of each of the mountains before us, starting with the one on the left and moving right across the horizon. Our family albums have many pictures of that particular Himalayan panorama. Next stop would be Naubise. There we would refresh ourselves with hot cups of tea and depending on the season munch on sugar cane. We occasionally stopped at Malekhu for fried fish; my father loved fried fish.

While we tried to sleep in the car to relieve ourselves from carsickness, my father would continue to scan the landscape, identifying each and every hill, mountain, creek, river and even small villages for us. He pointed out the foot trails that existed long before the highway arrived—the same foot trails he had walked a whole week as a nine-year-old boy, traveling from his home village, Taranche, to Kathmandu. (Gurung, 1980). I probably would have remembered more, had I not been so knocked out from carsickness.

An encouraging parent, my father's favorite line during those road trips was, "we are almost there". The favorite stop for us kids was Mugling. At Naulo Hotel in Mugling, we looked forward to the tasty meal of a Thakali *Bhatti*.² We never stopped our patronage of this small hotel even after fancier hotels and restaurants opened there. My mouth still waters at the thought of *kalo daal*³ and local *kukhura ko masu*⁴ from Naulo Hotel.

Pokhara

Pokhara was my father's first love. In the early 1960s, as a young graduate student, he spent months traveling on foot, conducting a detailed survey of the entire Pokhara Valley — this included its physical, human and economic geography. The result of those studies was submitted as his thesis in 1965 in University of Edinburgh, Scotland and published later in 2002 by Nepal Geographical Society, Kathmandu, as a book (Gurung, 2002).

In Pokhara we always stayed with Mr. Haridhoj Tulachan. One of my father's best friends, almost like a brother, he was owner of the Dragon Hotel. To us, he remains our "Dragon Hotel Uncle".

² Family-run small restaurants found along roadsides and walking trails.

³ Black lentil soup, a specialty of the Thakali people.

⁴ Chicken curry

In my father's mind Pokhara was the perfect place where the tropics meet the high mountains. He never failed to point out tropical plants like banana and papaya trees, the backdrop of Annapurna I, III, II, IV (in order from left to right) and the magnificent reflection of the Machhapuchhre on Phewa Taal. Sometimes, my father took my brothers duck hunting around Rupa Taal and Begnas Taal. Perhaps my gender was partly responsible for my exclusion from those hunting expeditions. My father believed that there were no place quite like Pokhara. As his daughter, I would get the opportunity to visit and explore Pokhara every winter of my childhood.

Chitwan

Our next winter destination was Chitwan. We had many relatives in Chitwan since they were part of the hill-to-terai migration of the 1960s. We visited my mother's brother's farm in Gaurigunj just outside the Chitwan National Park. Sometimes we also went to my father's brother's fish farm in Bhimnagar. One uncle was settled in Kawasoti, Nawalparasi just across the Narayani River; but there was no bridge then. I remember crossing the river on a ferry that actually carried our car across with us. That was always an exciting part of our trips to Kawasoti.

Winter trips to these family farms became my most intimate childhood experiences of living in rural Nepal. We loved all the fruits and vegetables that grew so abundantly in the farm. My younger brother, Bikas, now an avid fisherman was in heaven in my uncle's fish farm. I loved watching the farm animals at morning feeding time and collecting warm chicken eggs from the chicken coop in the late afternoons. Hunting for little birds with a homemade slingshot was a favorite past time of Sagarmatha, my older brother.

After visiting the farms, we spent a few days in one of the many lodges inside Chitwan National Park. A favorite pastime of my father was riding on the Rapti River in a dug-out canoe. He always took along his "Birds of Nepal" book (Fleming and Bangdel, 2000); we borrowed binoculars from the lodge. My brothers and sister and I then had a competition as to who could sight the most birds. With a expansive list of Siberian ducks, darters, swifts, swallows, sparrows, peacocks, bulbuls, white-breasted kingfishers, cormorants, fishing eagles, fish owls, hawks, weavers, hornbills, orioles, mynas, herons, sandpipers and woodpeckers, Bikas always came out the champion of bird watching. Elephant rides and fishing were also part of our Chitwan trips. There are too many wonderful childhood memories to recount here but thanks to my father, we have many of these moments captured in his slides.

Traveling East to West

In the mid 1980s, when it became possible and fashionable to travel to Bangkok, Hongkong and Singapore for the urban Kathmandu elites, it was only natural for me to dream about flying to Hong Kong or Singapore. However, my parents would not even consider taking

us to India. My dreams of seeing the world had to be satisfied with road trips across Nepal, from East to West. In 1986, we traveled to far Eastern Nepal all the way to Kakarbhitta. Three years later we traveled to West Nepal, all the way to the Karnali River. For reasons I do not know, my mother and I stayed in Bardiya Wildlife Reserve with my uncle while my father and my brothers took a ferry across the Karnali River and traveled from there all the way to Mahendra Nagar. They had a real adventure, getting lost and hitting a wild boar on the highway! Upon their return, we relaxed for a few days in Bardiya Wildlife Reserve. That is where I saw my first and only wild Asiatic elephant.

What I most remember about those two road trips are the continuous never-ending driving. Luckily the straight roads didn't make us carsick. We stopped at major cities such as Hetauda, Biratnagar, Janakpur in the East and in Butwal, Kapilbastu, and Nepalgunj in the West. Some of these industrial towns we had visited when my father was the Minister of Industry and Commerce.⁵ But I was too young then to recall much. Except I have faint recollections of visiting a sugar factory which emitted a horrible stench, and a cigarette factory where my siblings and I stole discarded cigarettes for our chain smoking driver *dai*.⁶

Going Home to Lamjung

It was in 1983 that I accompanied my father to his village for the first time. My older sister and my older brother were with us. Bikas was too young to travel and he stayed in Kathmandu with my mother. In 1983, my father's village was a three day's walk from the nearest motor road. So this was to be my first long trekking trip. Father knew that the journey would not be an easy one for a sixth-grader. So he had a plan.

Instead of venturing straight to the village, we took two short detours. First we went to Manakamana Temple. The easy 10 minute cable car ride did not exist then.⁷ We had to climb straight uphill from Abu Khaireni; it took over four hours to reach the summit at 1,314 meters. I did well, for the most part, although, I remember being carried part of the way. When we reached the temple, the first thing my father pointed out to us was Mt. Manaslu (8125 m) and Mt. Himalchuli (6336 m) at a distance. He told us that pretty soon we would be very close to both the mountains.

My father named my sister "Himalchuli" and me "Manaslu" after these two mountains, the peaks closest to his home in Lamjung. He also named my older brother Sagarmatha, after

5 Harka Gurung served as a Minister of State for Education, Industry and Commerce, Transport and Public Works and the first Minister of State for Tourism from 1975-1978.

6 *Dai* in Nepali means elder brother.

7 Manakamana Cable Car opened in 1988 making the Temple accessible to more people; however, the small teashops and lodges in Abu Khaireni and along the foot trails have lost significant business.

Mt. Everest (8848 m)⁸. People always wondered why my younger brother Bikas wasn't named after a mountain. Whenever questioned, my father would laugh and say, "Well, Bikas means development in Nepali, and in Nepal, development is the most challenging mountain to climb!" My father, a true man of the mountain did not know then that someday a mountain will be named after him.⁹

After Manakamana, our next stop was Gorkha. I don't know why but my father didn't accompany us to the Gorkha Durbar. Instead he sent a guide with us to climb the 250 meter hill. I was disappointed when we got to the top that we were not allowed to enter the Gorkha Durbar. We were only allowed to peek through a window into a dark room that consisted of a single chair. But we visited the famous temple of Gorkhaknath inside what appeared to be a cave.

After our successful ascent of Manakamana and Gorkha Durbar, we were finally on our way to my father's village. The climb itself was not as steep as our trek up Manakamana or Gorkha Durbar. What I remember most is the numerous rivers we crossed, many times traversing the same meandering river. My brother and I tried to catch tiny fish with a handkerchief and we spent long hours eating our snack on the banks of murmuring brooks. At the end of first day, when we arrived at a local lodge, our legs were swollen. My father massaged our legs with iodex and we all slept well.

On the second day, we saw an old lady being carried in a *doko*¹⁰ on a porter's back. That old lady turned out to be my very own grandmother! She had decided, it seems, to migrate for the winter to warmer Chitwan. So much for visiting my grandmother in the village! I don't remember how much time we spent on the trail with her, but she continued her journey towards Chitwan while we continued climbing towards her home in Taranche, Lamjung.

My first trip to my father's home was filled with mixed experiences of shock, fun, dismay, challenges and learning. For the first time, I had to go out in the fields early in the morning for my bathroom; the only shower was right in the river; there was no electricity; we had to fight the flea and bed bugs every night; and for the first time I was served rice that was not white. An old lady, probably one of my father's relatives, offered me a cigarette to smoke when she saw I couldn't eat that rice. Another new experience for me: every morning, alcohol made from millet was offered to my father for breakfast.

Things were very different here in Taranche. I met many of our cousins and relatives who had never left their village. Although we had never seen each other before, we were no

8 Sagarmatha is the Nepali name for Mt. Everest.

9 On March 5th, 2007 Nepal government passed a decision that Peak 29 (7871m) of Manaslu Himal, also known as Ngadi Chuli in Lamjung district will be renamed Dr. Harka Gurung peak.

10 Big weaved basket used for carrying heavy loads on the back with a help of a strap over the forehead.

strangers, since they knew a lot about us from our father. I wished I could say the same about them.

We had a great time in the village visiting all my father's relatives. We made many new friends. We visited the village school and neighboring villages. We tried to catch fish and frogs in the nearby river. We celebrated *Loshar*¹¹ there with a buffalo sacrifice. We watched a bamboo bridge being built (a seasonal structure) over the thunderous Marshyandi River. It was quite an amazing endeavor. In the summer, we were told, this bridge would be swept away by the monsoon floods, then would be rebuilt the following winter.

In 1987, I accompanied my father to the village again, this time with Bikas who had missed the first trip. My memories of these two visits are meshed together and I cannot remember anything distinct about the latter trip, except that we had to walk for only one day.

Leaving Home, Leaving Nepal

The late 1980s marked the beginning of an end of family picnics and travel adventures. We all began to leave home for higher education. Himalchuli ended up in the Philippines; Sagarmatha went to Japan; I was in South India and from there came to the United States; Bikas followed me to the US soon after. My parents also left Nepal for a time, migrating to Kuala Lumpur in 1992. But we gathered in Kuala Lumpur during the summers of 1992 – 1997 where we tried to revive our weekend family picnics. But we all missed Nepal, my father more than anyone else.

The five years my father spent in Malaysia was perhaps one of the most difficult times in his life. He was traveling across the globe between different time zones so frequently that day and night stopped having meaning to him. He stayed up all night reading, writing, working. His health suffered and he was hospitalized a few times. It was during this time while he was heading the international organization, Asian and Pacific Development Center (APDC) in Kuala Lumpur and globe trotting most of his time, that he completed a new book, *Faces of Nepal* (Gurung, 1996). This is just one testament about where my father's heart really was. Whenever he was not working, our home in Kuala Lumpur would hum with Nepali folk music day and night.

Just before father's term in Malaysia ended, my grandmother passed away in Kathmandu. Father was deeply hurt that he could not be with his mother in her final moments. Moreover, Kuala Lumpur was no Kathmandu. He missed his friends, his colleagues, his work, and Kathmandu social life. In short, my father missed Nepal.

11 Gurung New Year

The Last Decade

Upon father's return to his homeland in 1997, he leapt back into the Nepali public life almost with a vengeance, perhaps to make up for the lost five years he's been away in Malaysia. He became active in all spheres of Nepali life, joining groups from the grassroots levels all the way to the top. He began to write vigorously and he started publishing books at such speed that he hardly had time to inform his own family about his new publications. I myself stumbled upon a few of his new books by accident. He was writing so fast, and I myself was very busy in graduate school. Some of his new books would sit in my library for a long time before I could open them.

My father became so engrossed in this work that family life took a back seat. My siblings and I were all adults by now, each of us pursuing our own individual dreams. We felt we didn't need him as much as we did when we were little. I stayed connected with him not as his daughter but as a student of geography. His writings on Nepal dominated my library and they helped me to stay focused on my homeland. For my master's field research, I chose my mother's maternal home village, Ghandruk. I received my father's precious endorsement for my work when he recommended publishing my master's thesis (Gurung, 2004).

The last couple of years, except for our final trip together to Lamjung in January 2006, my interactions with my father were limited to brief phone conversations and briefer email exchanges. He was a man of few words, but was always very direct and to the point when we spoke or wrote. This suited my busy life in the United States. In retrospect, I wish we had spent more time together.

Our Final Trip Together

My third trip to my father's village was in January of 2006. It would also be my last trip with him. But it was a momentous journey. We celebrated *Loshar* in the farm fields behind my grandparents' house until the wee hours of the morning with much drinking and dancing. The main occasion for that trip was the 50th anniversary of the founding of the village high school. This village school was built on land donated by my grandparents. Since my grandparents' death, my father and his brothers continued to support the school so the family has become sort of patrons of the school.

My father's presence at this celebration attracted hundreds of people from neighboring villages. Many had walked for hours to attend the program and to meet him. On the day of the celebration, we were met by a team of traditional musicians who displayed their talents without any reservation. Then the entire village marched with us all the way to the school. We were offered flowers and garlands all along the route and everyone welcomed us warmly. This was my first true experience of being a celebrity's child.

At the end of the school's celebration program, my father gave a brief speech and called our attention to a *lapsi*¹² tree standing in the middle of the school ground. Apparently, my grand parents' old house stood right there by the *lapsi* tree; that was where my father was born one August day in 1935.¹³ As the program ended and the crowd started to disperse, I sat on a bench near the *lapsi* tree. Far off on the northern horizon I could see the tips of Manaslu and Himalchuli simmering against the red sunset sky. In the foreground, prayer flags fluttered from the *lapsi* tree in cool air. I could see my father at a distance, smiling heartily, shaking hands, offering *namaste* and talking to people. I was so proud of him. I was so proud to be his daughter. This is one memory that I will savor for many years to come.

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12 Spondias axillaries, very sour fruit found in high altitudes, commonly known as *Haw plum* in China.

13 On September 28th, 2006 my father was buried very close to this location following the traditional Gurung rituals carried out by Pachyu and Ghabre shamans.