

## Harka Gurung, A Quint Essential “Human Geographer”

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I view Harka Gurung not as a geographer but a scholar of human geography—with the emphasis on ‘human’. This association understandably derives from his whole being. Gurung himself possessed an imposing human presence. More importantly, he was a scholar who could not *but* explore and record the human landscape along with the physical terrain that sustains our humanity. His geographical studies were certainly as abundant in human features as in geological and ecological elements.

Harka Gurung’s values and ways of looking at intimate ‘lifeways’ and the world crucible in which they exist are close to those of anthropology, the discipline I trained in, and employed in my research. Many of our associates were engaged as professional anthropologists too. I think most of us who knew him felt that Gurung was himself 75 percent social anthropologist, so intensely did he examine our reports and debate issues about which we deliberated.

My association with this generous man began in 1968 when I was a graduate student in London about to depart for his country to undertake field research. In the course of our discussions over the following 38 years of contact, I do not recall hearing Harka Gurung talk about topography, landscapes, historical developments, climate, and ecology *without* their human component near the center of his discussion.

That said, he had a special fondness for maps. Topographical maps were essential to him. He seemed to always have one on hand to help us ‘visualize’ the essential political and physical perimeters of an issue. As a government cabinet minister in the 1970s, Gurung introduced the publication of maps (of his nation) on the front pages of the national newspaper—”To help our people educate themselves about their country.” He also summoned maps to encourage us to appreciate, in terms of space, the dimensions of any issue—political, social, economic, touristic, administration or planning—that we were dealing with. Due to his influence, whenever I lecture on international issues, I emphasize geography to my audience, urging: “Look at a map. Look at the sea lanes and shared borders.” The proximity of rivers and aquifers, ports, settlements, mountain ranges, deserts, and concentrations of strategic resources helps explain the political agendas and the economic designs of imperial forces as they establish their empires and fight one another.

Because of Harka Gurung's spatial sensibilities, his international perspective, and his intellectual capacity, he possessed an extraordinary grasp of human history in general and Nepal's history in particular. Some scholars are satisfied to peruse two-dimensional landscapes, utilizing gazetteers and photos along with traditional maps. Not this man. Gurung insisted on feeling, hearing and smelling the land itself—tramping the soil, ascending a ridge, gazing over a vista, speaking with its shepherds and tillers, its administrators and its lords, photographing its flora and fauna—inside the concepts he was dealing with. So, in Scotland or China, in Malaysia or his own Nepal, at every opportunity he moved over the surface of a place and into a habitation. And he read as much as he could—in fiction as well as non-fiction, memoirs and poems, journalistic as well as scholarly writings. He would eagerly read manuscripts in progress.

I personally think this peregrination stemmed from Gurung's need to be *inside* any landscape, and from his ultimate, deep-rooted quest to know Nepal in all its aspects. His studies were a totally integrated part of Gurung's personal and ideological quest. It may also have derived from this man's essential satisfaction and pleasure in the company of others—men and women he could interact with, learn from, strategize with, challenge, and provoke. He may not have announced it, but Gurung's work and interests were part of what I believe was for him, a spiritual adventure. Some might call it 'vision'.

Harka Gurung was, in my opinion and perhaps to others as well, "a Renaissance man"; he read far more widely than in his specialty and in history and linguistics than any person I have ever encountered; he was an accomplished painter and photographer; he wrote poetry and spent his earlier years with Nepal's leading bards; he was an athlete; he traveled widely and wrote beautifully in English as well as Nepali. He tapped the intellectual resources of the countries where he studied and worked—in Nepal and India, the UK and Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan and the U.S.A. among others.

Some may not think of him as a political man, but there was no doubt in my mind that Harka Gurung was highly motivated politically. (After all, politics and geography are inextricably intertwined.) This Nepali patriot may not have been identified with a party or a movement, or a single ideology. But his mind was certain to grasp and absorb the geopolitical implications of an issue. In my research about women rebels of the Arun Valley during the 1980s, Gurung's readings of my manuscript and other documents I brought to him demonstrated his keenness for evidence of political vitality in his country. He mulled over theories about the differences between eastern and western Nepal in terms of their respective peoples' experience in political resistance, of a proclivity for dissent in this over that locality. I watched him read the *hazurbani*, protest poems composed by the Kulung-born dissident Yogamaya, with profound admiration. Here again, art, geography and politics intersecting. About the anti-Rana movement of that extraordinary Nepali agitator, he observed: "A resistance often takes on the idiom of the oppressor:—religion to counter religious

establishment; arms struggle to oppose physical submission; economic revolution to combat the exploitation of one's resources." As I ponder current international conflicts, I remember those remarks.

Gurung probably understood more about Nepal's human migratory history than anyone else did. Those migrations must have inspired him immensely. Even as certain trends also troubled him. On the positive side, Gurung's grasp of peoples' movements and resettlement (through the example of Nepal) gave him a profound sense of the fluidity of cultures and of an ongoing dynamic among interacting civilizations.

Doubtless Nepal was an ideal laboratory for a scholar of the scope, intimacy and energy of Harka Gurung. Here, in a relatively tiny expanse of land lodged between two giant states (each one an overwhelming civilization), one finds immense human and geological diversity, abundant variety of flora and fauna, the rare and the common, linguistic richness, religious co-existence, ancient and modern beliefs appearing, diversifying and merging all at the same time, with colossal geological forces in evidence along with profound tenderness and magical endurance. This child who was birthed in hilly terrain and nurtured by mountain streams and meadows never placed one knowledge above another in terms of its significance or potential. I was deeply influenced in my work by this colleague's firm belief that no culture was doomed to extinction by another, no language or mountain stream or hill or ritual too slight to be unworthy of our attention. To Harka Gurung nothing was insignificant. High and low applied to mountains, not to people, ideals and civilizations. Perhaps this was behind his attentiveness to the needs or thoughts of all who crossed his path or sought him out.

I do not know what professors of geography teach today. Or what draws students to the field. But if they can integrate something from among the range of issues and forces Gurung applies himself to, they would be well served and will surely make the discipline more powerful as an intellectual and political force in the world.