

Reflections on the Himalayan Landscape

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Reflections on the Himalayan Landscape

An Interview with Harka Gurung, a Leading Authority on the Himalaya



FIGURE 1 Dr Harka Gurung in his Kathmandu study. (Photo courtesy of Siddhi Manandhar)

Ulrike Müller-Böker (MRD): You were born and grew up in a small Himalayan village in Lamjung District, Nepal. How did this shape your personal and professional life and your political beliefs?

Harka Gurung: The village had no school until 1956 and still has no roads. But as Andre Gunder Frank has contended, globalization is nothing new. This remote village was familiar with world wars through their Gurkha servicemen. My father fought in Gallipoli (1915) and Waziristan (1919), which made possible my education abroad.

The landscape of the setting, with Himalchuli (7893 m) on the horizon and the Marsyangdi River in the gorge, determined my choice of geography as a profession. My political beliefs about an egalitarian society were shaped by the multicultural setting of the village, composed of two-thirds caste Hindus (Chhetri) and one-third ethnic Gurung.

Could you outline the main changes in village life and economy from the time of your youth until today, in relation to national and global developments?

Three events in sequence have much affected village economy and life. The first was the landslide that struck the village in 1955 and forced some people to migrate to the lowlands. This created new economic space locally with regional linkages. The second event was the opening of Manang for trekking (1978). Since Taranche lies on the route to Manang, many locals are now engaged in tourism. The third event is the growing number of youths working abroad (Middle East, Far East). The remittances they send home have become an important source of livelihood for many households. Outmigration, tourism, and work abroad have reduced dependence on agriculture and relieved pressure on land resources. As a consequence, vegetation is regenerating and the natural environment is in better condition.

For a number of years we have witnessed heated political conflicts in Nepal. What are the main reasons behind these conflicts in your opinion? What was the impetus for the Maoist movement in Nepal? Is it a mountain issue?

Since 1951, Nepal has experienced political transitions between autocratic and democratic regimes. These changes were merely in form rather than substance; hence there was very little socio-economic advancement. The main impetus for the current insurgency is twofold: poverty and social discrimination. The epicentre of the Maoist movement is located in the western hills, where poverty is acute and exploitation of the untouchables very pronounced. Even if most mountain areas are poor, the insurgency is not a mountain issue, as indicated by the cases of Mustang and Manang. Between 1996 and 2004, over 10,000 people were killed in the insurgency, but none in these 2 districts. Both are better off than other districts, due to some tourism activity. Moreover, social exclusion is alien to mountain communities.

What would be the right path towards conflict resolution?

The resolution of the political conflict will depend on the extent of structural change to promote social equality and economic opportunity. The component agendas would be devolution of authority, proportional representation, radical land reform, and affirmative action for the disadvantaged communities.

What is your vision for the future of people living in the Nepal Himalaya? Do you see new income opportunities to support mountain people's livelihoods? How will the new income opportunities shape the social and economic status of mountain people?

Labor migration has been an important source of livelihood for mountain people in Nepal, as elsewhere. This avenue will expand further with the decline in subsistence agriculture. As a repository of natural grandeur, mountain areas have much potential for tourism activity. However, the future of mountain economies lies in the exploitation of immense water resources. If roads are prioritized to provide access to potential sites, hydropower generation will not only transform Nepal's terms of trade with India but also reduce pressure on forests

for fuelwood. Based on the principle of income sharing, mountain people will benefit greatly from hydro and tourism revenues generated in their area.

You have written books about mountaineering and initiated the establishment of the International Mountaineering Museum in Pokhara. And as a former minister of tourism, you promoted mountaineering in Nepal in many ways. How can mountaineering be made more relevant to the people in the mountains? Did you ever feel challenged to climb a Himalayan mountain peak?

As a Tourism Minister, I focused on reducing the concentration of activities in Kathmandu. This was a follow-up to my initiatives on remote area development (1968) and regional strategy (1972) while in the National Planning Commission. I encouraged new hotels in Pokhara, Chitawan and Lukla (Everest area). The innovations I undertook specific to mountaineering were promotion of more climbing expeditions by devising multiple routes and seasons. The Nepal Mountaineering Association was allowed to operate 18 peaks, the income from which was used for welfare and training of Nepalese climbers.

One way to make mountaineering relevant to local people would be to provide benefits from its revenue. Presently, climbing royalties are about Rs 130 million annually, which go to the central exchequer. This revenue should be shared with the districts where the climbing is done. The policy of revenue sharing has existed since 1999 in certain national parks under buffer zone regulation.

I am only a trekker, although I was a member of the International Expedition to Everest South-West Face (1971), and

Deputy General Leader of the China–Japan–Nepal Friendship Expedition to Mount Everest (1988).

You were a politician and a researcher who has written many books and articles. How do you judge the impact of research activities (conducted mainly by Northern scholars) on the development of Nepal, particularly in the context of mountains? What is your vision for sound mountain-related research in Nepal in the future?

There are 3 reasons that made Nepal a destination for outside researchers. First, as a forbidden country until 1949, it became a new frontier of scientific exploration. Second, it was the only accessible area in the Himalaya after border wars restricted India, Pakistan, and Tibet. Third, increasing external aid to Nepal facilitated a conducive environment for outsiders.

Indeed, the exposure of physical and cultural reality owes much to foreign scholars. Three institutions may be singled out for group initiative in diverse disciplines: the School of Oriental and African Studies (London), the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (Paris), and the Research Scheme Nepal–Himalaya (Munich). Detailed field studies have generated new insights into culture dynamics and development processes. Further research needs to focus on the relationship between determining factors. For example, discourses on the Himalayan environment still remain problematic. Mountain-related research should focus on trends and patterns to guide development interventions. Another need is for translation of non-English language publications on Nepal, in order to facilitate dialogue between foreign and native researchers.

Dr Harka Gurung is Nepal's foremost authority on the Himalaya. He was the leader of the government committee formed to provide names to mountain peaks in 1983. Born in Lamjung District, Dr Gurung studied in Dehra Dun and Patna before receiving a PhD from the University of Edinburgh. He later served as the Vice-Chairman of the National Planning Commission (1968–75) and Minister of State (1975–78) in the Nepalese government. His areas of professional interest include demography, planning, environment, geography, sociology, and tourism. He has authored numerous books, including *Annapurna to Dhaulagiri* (1968), *Vignettes of Nepal* (1980), *Dimensions of Development*

(1984), *Social Demography and Expressions* (1998), *Mountains of Asia* (1999), *Landscape Change in the Nepal Hills* (2004), *Peaks and Pinnacles* (2005) and *Mountain Reflections* (2005). Dr Gurung continues his research on Himalayan life and sciences. Dr Harka Gurung was interviewed by Ulrike Müller-Böker, Professor of Geography and head of the Human Geography Division, University of Zurich (Switzerland). She is also Head of the NCCR North–South Individual Project on Institutional Change and Livelihood Strategies. She has worked regularly in Nepal since 1977, and has known Harka Gurung since 1979, when he was State Minister and she was a student.