

A Journey with Dr. Harka Gurung

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Background

This paper focuses on the EIA skills that I was able to develop from the guidance of Dr. Harka Gurung and his hands-on practical demonstration in a field trip to Karnali-Bheri region in 1987. The objective of the trip was to assess the potential environmental impacts in the proposed Karnali hydropower inundation area, and help the government of Nepal identify better option for a pacific resettlement of the population who would be affected by the reservoir dam. Our visit covered the areas from Bangesimal of Surkhet to Karnali bend. We trekked 60 kms of jungle trails on foot, and took a 174 kilometer river journey on a rubber boat from Karnali-Chisapani.

Journey with Dr. Gurung and the Guidance

“Are you accustomed to spending nights in the jungle? “Don’t worry about this evening’s shelter in the jungle because I can take you to a highly pleasant place”. “Some twenty years ago I had traveled this jungle route, come across a spring and drunk water from there” “At that time there was no human settlement, but now because of the water source in a mid-jungle, cattle herders from Dailekh and Jajarkot have opened a yogurt selling stall where we can quench our thirsts and set up our night camp”.

This was the conversation of our team leader, who was encouraging us to enter into a jungle and continue our travel in the late evening. His chatting led me, for a while, to think whether we might have to spend night in the thick jungle and suffer a lot!! But it was not true – we were in fact led by a national guide, our study team leader Dr. Harka Gurung, who was very much aware of not only the jungle trails approaching the Karnali river, but of the whole topography of Nepal. Actually the warm tropical jungle path we walked together with him this late evening was the main trail between Surkhet bazaar and Karnali river, and the destination of that day was *Hurki Ko Mul*, or the water-spring of Hurki which was located in a thick *Saal*-jungle gorge. Dr Gurung’s prediction turned to be true and we were provided with a selfless hospitality that night in a cattle-shed. Despite frequent distractions by the roaring noise of buffalo-hiccups and their organic smells, we spent a comfortable night together with the four-footed animals under the same roof.

The next day, we set out early for the village of Baddichaur, which was totally encircled by an extensive old jungle and inhabited exclusively by a Magar ethnic group. Through western eyes, these groups may seem like a remaining tribe of hunting and gathering old-tone-age tribal groups, but for our team leader, as he explained, they seemed like a bunch of bees keeping busy in their jungle valley. According to him, “Magars due to their indigenous culture, have their own language and egalitarian social organization. “They can be differentiated from a study of horizontal social order of the Janajati subgroups”.

Time did not permit us to linger with these interesting people and enjoy their selfless hospitality. We followed the team leader, climbed steeply up to the village of Jogidando and walked downhill to our destination, the sharp bend in the river called the “Karnali Bend”, which is located at the border of the three districts of Surkhet, Dailekh and Achham. The river at this point calms down and due to its relatively easy accessibility we started our water journey from there making study of the plants, animals and people of the river. The water journey from the bend to Chisapani East-West highway (154 km) normally takes five days in a rubber boat.

The Karnali river, with the Bheri, Seti and Budhiganga, is one of the four major tributaries of the great Karnali basin. It is the longest river of Nepal, flowing from the northern to the southern borders in western Nepal. We had come as a study team to examine the potential impact of the proposed Karnali Hydropower reservoir. The inundation area above the proposed Karnali-dam at Bungadkhola-confluence would include a large area of pristine riverine wildernesses, natural beauties, community infrastructures and habitations of about 40,000 people, who would have to be relocated.

After a quick review of the 1965 base-map, Dr Gurung warned us— “The rafting team must be fully equipped and prepared for possible disaster in the rough white water sections”. “This river is not a place for those who want to holiday with their children”. “For the next 74 kilometers, to the Thuligad-confluence the steeply sloping river is filled with the sudden aggression of rapids, eddies, holes, gigantic waves, in-rushing tributaries and ever incoming frictions created by rocks, boulders and flood deposits”. “There is immense variety in this river aquatic system; it cuts through gorges, flows beneath cliffs, squeezes through bottlenecks, turns sharp bends, knocks against embankments and gathers volumes in confluences”.

In the meantime Dr Gurung stressed on a safety technique— “If the boat overturns, try your best to avoid the eddies and holes, as due to their foamy nature you will not be floated there even if you are in life jacket, rather you will get drawn into it and you will drink a lot”. Everybody was shivering not because they were wet in the snow-fed river, but because the river journey was a real threat as rafting in the Karnali river had not yet been commercialized due to its extremely rugged aquatic nature. Realizing that everyone was hesitant he further

says— “Of course, one must take the risk if one wants to experience virgin nature, if one wants to enter into the earth-womb and if one wants to touch an unpolluted hidden part of the world, it is never an easy journey”

The first half of the river journey provided pure incense of natural beauty and was definitely risky. The river was running quickly and our boat had to be slower than the speed of current because we wanted to have a close look at the wonders along the banks. Vines were hanging down into the river like garlands to welcome us. Continued dripping of milky limewaters over thousands of years have formed stalactites upon the overhanging cliffs and stalagmites on the rocky floors. It seemed as if all the wildernesses were looking down upon us as a colorful unearthly creature drifting with the current. We realized this when animals did not flee, but kept gazing at us as we passed close by. Dr Gurung suggested us— “Be careful when you float near the hives of bees and hornets on the cliffs just above you”. “But you need not worry about the large clouds of gray winged insects that greet you”. “They just come and sit all over your body and drift along with you”. “If you don’t like them just brush them off or take a dip if you are in a calm section of the river”. “They are not harmful anymore, they are only nonpoisonous playful Mayflies that emerge from the water, make love on the surface and having finished the rituals disappear again into the water”.

It seemed like we were upsetting the Kingfisher when we were staring too long at its chicks as we were passing by its nest. But the Bee-eaters were not worried because their nests were high in the cliffs beyond our reach. We were awakened every morning by echoing calls of Brain-fever bird.

Dr Gurung explains, “Catching chicks of Kaliz is a common hunting practice of Magar cattle herders of the area”. “Small chicks are reared at home for future use”. “When the chicks are taken, the father-bird comes to their defense and is immediately caught, while the mother-bird always flees, leaving babies and husband on the battlefield”. “One can speculate from this evidence that perhaps among wild chickens the mother has less affection for its babies than the father”. “However, wild chicken have different qualities; like despite borne in jungle, the domesticated Kaliz never returns to the wild. “One can understand from this idea that the poultries that are farmed now at massive scale in the urban area were originally brought from the jungle”. “But this cannot be generalized everywhere and for all kinds of birds”. For example as for the peacock, the case is just reverse because despite being hatched in the human settlement, it can anytime deceive the farmer, run into the wild and never return to the farm”.

Footprints, shaded hairs, fecal pelts and abandoned nests were common in the sandy banks and pasture lands, indicating evidences that the area had different terrestrial, arboreal, aerial and aquatic mammals, reptiles and birds. In the area near Kallimara, Thuligad and

Solta, there were a lot of evidences of ancient human habitations in the form of skeletal remains thousand of years old waiting to be dated by the paleontologists, who need not spend time, energy and money in excavation. Dr Gurung suggests, “Since the fossils found in the riverside are highly weathered and badly scrambled, the theory of *Geological Law of Superposition* does not apply in their relative dating, and for the same reason they cannot be easily differentiated”. “But in the case of ancient caves, since it is nicely preserved, identification is relatively easier and therefore the deeper you go the more prehistoric artifacts and fossils you can explore”

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To the local people, we appeared to be a unique species of mankind. They could not imagine that any man could travel upon the rapidly flowing river and spend nights sleeping on the riverside graveyards. We had already spent two nights in the river-beaches and this was the third one which was really frightful as we prepared to sleep right in the cremation yards. More dreadful was because of the fact that since there was a fresh body buried just 15 minutes before our arrival, we had to be prepared to face with the possible attack by unearthly creature like graveyard-evil-spirit who feeds off dead bodies during night. But there was no such belief in the mind of Dr Gurung as his tent was even closer to the burial site and he was feeling comfortable for a sound sleep.

Among many interesting people were the Rajis, who claimed to be the aboriginal riverine people of the Karnali-Bheri confluence. Their only subsistence is the ferrying and fishing. They live in joint family houses with a single large open room, which offers very little personal privacy. The young married couples therefore spend their nights on the river beach. Before leaving their house, the husband takes fishing net and his wife takes a fish basket and asks their parents for permission to spend an evening fishing. It is the Rajis’ belief that even if the couples are sleeping in a riverside graveyard, they will not be bothered by any evil spirit as long as they are covered up with a fishing-net.

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The Karnali project can have multi-sector benefits for the country including hydropower, flood control, irrigation and inland navigation. Despite immense benefits, such a project would change the Karnali wilderness and its people forever. More painful would be the

Rajis' homeland, which was in the submergence area of the proposed Karnali hydropower reservoir. They were therefore extremely worried that they would be forced to leave the riverside and resettle elsewhere.

In this context Dr Gurung says, "Nepal has immense hydropower potential (83,000 MW) which is second only to Brazil", of this 12 percent can come from the proposed Karnali-Chisapani project". "In Nepal most hydropower project sites are located in the homeland of indigenous people like Rajis". "This conjunction owes to historical and geographic factors" "Historically, these marginal lands had less penetration by the conquistadors from the plain". "Geographically, these areas happen to be land of steep gradient where hydropower can be cheaply generated". "However, impact assessments reveal that there is very little consideration of indigenous people's interests in project design and implementation". "Actually mitigation initiatives should have to be focused more on the benefit of the indigenous people like Rajis who have project sites in their homelands".

To Conclude

Whether it is in the water-spring of Hurki, or in the jungle valley of Baddichaur, or in the waves of Karnali, or in the riverside graveyard of Tatalighat, or in the Raji community of Ghatgaun, the guidance provided by our team leader were extremely academic and truly practical. Despite small topics, method of observing the wildernesses, approach of analyzing the prehistoric artifacts, process of studying the animal behaviors and technique of avoiding the possible disasters explained to us on the sites were specifically relevant in improving the quality of our EIA skills. Though he is gone forever, he will always be remain in our hearts, as the research skills that we were able to develop from his field-based practical demonstrations can never be faded from our memory.