

Obituary



Dr. Harka Gurung

(Born June 5, 1935-passed away on September 23, 2006)

Dr. Harka Gurung was one of the several very important people, who may be called the cream of the global society, killed as a consequence of the fateful helicopter accident that took place at Ghunsa when returning from the Kanchanjunga Conservation Area (KAP) on the way back the 2035 square km conservation area was handed over to the local communities. It was a very sad incident, which caused the irreparable loss of very renowned group of people, only too well known for their contribution for the conservation of nature and natural resources through novel means of people's participation. Dr. Gurung was not only a conservationist but a very celebrated Geographer and with a lot of contributions in various fields of study for the benefit of the society and the country. He is known to be a legend in his lifetime. He had been the Vice-chairman of the prestigious National Planning Commission (NPC), Minister of Education and Industry as well as Commerce and later Minister of Tourism, Public Works and Transport. Dr. Gurung is also well known as a prolific writer and he has to his credit several articles published in various journals on various occasions and on various topics. His articles, books, reports and papers covered not only the areas of geographical and cartographical interest but also the issues and problems in history, sociology, anthropology, administration, agriculture, development planning, ecology, education, employment, foreign, industry, commerce, population, migration, land use, political economy, regional strategy, rural development, science policy, tourism, travelogue, urbanization and arts and sports of all kinds.

From the very childhood days he had shown great promise of being a great man who would be respected by all for his extensive knowledge, sincere dedication and valuable contribution to development in general and regional development in particular. Studying at the Tri Chandra College he passed the Intermediate Examination from Patna University in Second Division and he was said to be "the first among the successful candidates". He went to Patna to join Patna College and he passed the B.A. (Honours) in the First Division with Distinction in General Knowledge from Patna University. He then did not study in Nepal or India but went to U.K. and got admitted to the renowned University of Edinburgh where he completed the Post Graduate Diploma in 1961 and finally completed the Ph.D. in

1965. In the mean time he gained the teaching experience in U.K since he joined the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London University for some time from 1964 to 1966. Quite aware of the fact that despite the knowledge and skill that he had gathered and learnt abroad about geography he was rather handicapped in the geographical knowledge of his own country. He undertook very intensive field study of his own country before joining the Tribhuvan University. Besides his own home area of the district of Lamjung, he first visited the little developed region of the Karnali Zone all alone with a heavy rucksack on his back and a camera hung at his shoulder. He was a born trekker and later he travelled such a lot around Nepal that he covered almost all the 75 districts and concluded later that the number of districts that were constituted were far more than that could be managed properly for the balanced development of the country. He opined, "If there are bigger districts, they can raise more revenue and create their own resources". He even tried to reduce the number of districts and to get it approved by the Government some time in 1976, but unfortunately the proposal was not properly listened to probably on account of some wrong notions about the advantages of a larger number of districts and thereby a large number of village Panchayats and the Panchayat workers. As a matter of fact, many other people misunderstood Dr. Gurung on several other occasions as well although he had many admirers who could understand him and his most logical arguments. One such topic, which set afloat various controversial comments, was the Report on the Internal and International Migration in Nepal commissioned by the then National Commission on Population. Some people even went as far as to say that Dr. Gurung should be "hanged" for preparing the report. As he himself expressed his opinion later on the points they had raised; it appeared that they had raised the question, which was not addressed in the report at all. All that has been said in the report was that the border with India should be formally regulated and everybody knows very well how the open border had its own disadvantages that we – both Indians and Nepalese - have been continuously suffering from. He has rightly quoted the well known American poet Robert Frost who had said, "Strong wall makes good neighbors". He had been saying again and again "Nepal's international border should be regulated to promote integration within". Some other people on some other occasions have called him communal minded though he was the most openhearted, frank and straightforward person. Regarding the ethnic problem as a true nationalist all that he wants to let us know is that ethnic problem is not the problem of ethnic minorities alone but is also a question of survival for Nepal. All the political parties should not just indulge in lip service alone but they should come forward with practical measures and actual action for a meaningful national integration because after all the multifarious languages, cultures, customs and manners themselves are the geographical specialty leading to the correct identification of the Nepalese nation.

Friends and admirers of Dr. Gurung feel it difficult to include all that can be said in praise of the great personality in a few pages of the journal, since he has so many contributions to the

development of the nation and its inhabitants. Even as the Director of Asian and Pacific Development Center (APDC.,1993-97), an intergovernmental organization supported by 22 member countries for development research, training and dissemination he used to watch very closely how it had developed much expertise in information technology, gender program, poverty alleviation, international trade, public administration and rural energy and how Nepal had been participating in most of those activities. Even at that time he was thinking of Nepal and he opined, “The solution to win the confidence of the ethnic groups are affirmative action in education and employment, and their adequate political representation.”

He is survived by his wife, two sons and two daughters.

U. M. Malla