

## Harka Gurung

by Monique Fort

With the tragic death of Harka Gurung on 23 September 2006 in a helicopter crash in far eastern Nepal, Nepal has lost one of its most brilliant intellectuals and statesmen. Harka Bahadur was born in Bhulbule in the heart of the Gurung country, on the sloping left bank of the Marsyangdi River, not far from Khudi bazaar. His father, a colonel in his Majesty's Gurkha regiments, sent him to study at the finest schools in India, at a time when the school infrastructure was practically nonexistent in Nepal. His frequent trips back and forth between Nepal and India, led Harka Gurung to write his "Vignettes of Nepal", in which he recounts a number of choice anecdotes, and in particular how he got away from highway bandits who, with the opening of the country to foreigners and the development of the trekking industry, have gradually died out. After obtaining a B.A. Honours from Patna College, India Harka left for the University of Edinburgh to prepare his post-graduate diploma, and a Ph.D. (1965) devoted to the geography of the Pokhara Valley, a remarkable piece of work carried out under the guidance of Pr. Geddes. At the same time, he was demonstrator at the University of Edinburgh (1963-64) and Research Fellow at the *School of Oriental & African Studies*, University of London (1964-66), thanks to which he realized that his calling was indeed research and multi-disciplinary studies which he was to keep throughout his political career.

This started barely a few years after his return to Nepal. After two years as lecturer at Tribhuvan University (1966-68), he was rapidly appointed member, then Vice-chairman of the National Planning Commission (1968-1975), then Minister of State for Education, and Industry & Commerce, and finally Minister of State for Tourism, Public Works & Transport (1977-78) in the Nepalese Government. His vision as "geographer", his sound knowledge of Nepal and its populations, strongly contrasted with that of other ministers, who had often never even been outside the Kathmandu Valley. His knack of grasping local situations made Harka Gurung *de facto* a real expert on Nepal's development, marking out future tendencies whereby Nepal, in the medium term, might progress from a situation of great underdevelopment: the creation of schools, the tracing of roads, the opening of trekking routes, the increasing share conceded to populations of tribal origin... Greatly appreciated by foreign research and cooperation organisations, especially for his capacity to stick to the point and for his objectivity, he carried out work as expert for structures as varied as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), The World Bank, The World Conservation Union (IUCN), UNICEF, the Asian and Pacific Development Centre of which he

was director for 5 years (1993-97), the World Wildlife Fund (WWF)... It was on his return from a mission with this last organisation,- aimed at relinquishing to the populations living at the foothills of Mount Kangchenjunga their rights to use the forests which they had been deprived of following the creation of the National Park-, that the helicopter bringing him and his companions back to Kathmandu crashed into the mountainside.

Harka Gurung leaves behind him an impressive list of publications tackling the most varied of subjects: geography, demography, ethnography, environmental planning and political economics. He loved the mountains in Nepal (throughout his life he sought to christen the summits climbed by mountaineers with vernacular names attributed by the populations living at the foot of these different ranges) and chaired the Nepal Mountaineering Association. He was the main actor in creating the International Mountain Museum, Pokhara. Having chosen to retire from political life over the course of the last years, he was no less active in the different research and development structures: International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), International Institute of Educational Planning, UNESCO, or Lumbini Development Trust board. He was the driving force behind New ERA, a research and consulting firm which he created in Kathmandu and which, despite the vicissitudes of the country's political life, always remained true to his line of action: to work towards a coordinated development in tune with the country and its people. Harka Gurung was a great humanist, he loved his country and its people. Throughout his life he managed to combine a university approach (relying on objective facts) and a political approach taken in the noblest meaning of the term. He contributed a lot to Nepal and always tried to promote "tribal" populations. His untimely death deprives us of the analysis he was about to make of recent events in his country. It above all deprives Nepal of this dominant figure dedicated to his country, with an exceptional mind and real political farsightedness.

Harka Gurung was the author of numerous books including: *Pokhara Valley: A Geographical Survey*; *Annapurna to Dhaulagiri: A Decade of Mountaineering in Nepal Himalaya 1950-60*; *Vignettes of Nepal* ; *Nature and Culture: Random Reflections*; *Janajati Serophero*; a dozen monographs and atlas; and over 500 published papers on culture, demography, development planning, environment, geography, political economy, and tourism.

A complete bibliography of his works is available on the website created by his children on <http://www.harkagurung.org>