

Commentary

DR. HARKA GURUNG AND PLANNING IN NEPAL: CONTRIBUTION, IMPACT AND RELEVANCE

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Dr. Harka Gurung (1935-2006) was one of the most influential intellectuals of contemporary Nepal and his ideas continue to influence the development discourse in Nepal. This article proposes to assess and review Harka Gurung's contribution to development planning in Nepal and also the nature and depth of his scholarship in the field.¹ A brief biographical sketch of Harka Gurung is followed by his contribution in three areas of Nepal's development planning discourse: the spatial framework for understanding Nepal's diversity, analysis of regional inequality and imbalances in development, and the articulation of the strategy for regional development in Nepal and its consequences.

Biographical Sketch

Harka Gurung was born in the village of Taranche that overlooks the Marsyangdi River in the central-western hill district of Lamjung. His father was a Gorkha soldier who had seen action in France and Palestine in the First World War. It was perhaps from his father that Dr. Gurung inherited the almost soldier-like discipline and sense of purpose. In his book *Vignettes of Nepal* (1980) he describes in candid detail his first 128 km journey to Kathmandu from his native village as a young boy. He later attended King George's Military School in Jullunder, India. It was in college that he excelled both in academics as well as sports. He topped the I.A. from Tri-Chandra College, Kathmandu and B.A. from Patna College, India with a First Class Honors in Geography in 1959. He earned his post-graduate diploma and Ph.D, from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland in 1965. His dissertation on Pokhara valley in which he earned his Ph.D.

1 I have written about Gurung's contributions to the literature on mountaineering in a memorial issue of *The Himalayan Review* dedicated to Harka Gurung (Sharma 2007).

is still a landmark in regional geography in Nepal. He was also associated for some time with School of African and Oriental Studies of University of London as a research fellow.

He started his career in Nepal as a lecturer in geography at Tribhuvan University College. Although he remained academically inclined all his life, his association with the University itself was short-lived. He was with the National Planning Commission for over seven years (1968-1975) first as a member and then as its Vice-Chairman. He also had a brief foray in politics as the Minister of State for Education, Industry and Commerce (1975-77), and Tourism, Transport and Public Works (1977-78). In 1978 political exigencies led him to change course and become a researcher and consultant contributing to explore a wide range of themes with equal depth and dedication. He was a research fellow with the East West Population Institute during 1984/85. He also was the Director of Asia and Pacific Development Centre, Kuala Lumpur between 1993 and 1998. As a scholar, teacher, development planner, minister, writer, consultant, administrator, sportsman, painter, mountaineer, traveller, nationalist, champion and defender of indigenous ethnic communities and minority rights, Harka Gurung traversed an amazingly varied landscape of ideas and actions and left an indelible imprint on the contemporary development discourse in Nepal.

Spatial Framework for Understanding and Analysing Nepal's Diversity

A major contribution of Harka Gurung lies in the use and popularization of the spatial framework to understand the diversity of Nepal among academics, planners and decision-makers in different agencies of the government. The spatial context of Nepal was traditionally characterised in dichotomous terms – the highlands and the lowlands or the hills and the Tarai. It was the north-south dimension that was the focus of attention. The east-west dimension remained more or less ignored although the salient characteristics of Nepal's river systems and its impact on settlements and patterns of circulation was noted by Brian Hodgson (1971 [1849]) as early as 1849. Gurung drew attention to both the north-south (Mountain and Hill, Tarai and Inner Tarai, Kathmandu valley) and the east-west dimensions (Koshi, Gandaki and Karnali watersheds or basins) of Nepal's physiography and endeavoured to correlate with specific demographic, social, cultural and economic characteristics for almost the first time so that they could become tools for planning. He pointed out that while 35 percent of the population was in the Tarai/Inner Tarai, the

region generated 60 percent of the GDP and 75 percent of government revenue (Gurung 1984[1971]).

The east-west dimension of Nepal was significant because the relatively less dissected drier and colder aspect of the west (particularly north-west) contrasted with the deeply incised hills and humid monsoon conditions of the east (particularly south-east). The cultural process was no less different. While the Koshi basin in the east was traditionally home to Mongoloid ethnic groups, the Karnali basin was, likewise peopled by Caucasoid *khas* groups. In contrast, the Gandaki basin was a transitional zone peopled by Mongoloid ethnic groups as well as Caucasoid caste groups. Even the hydrological regime reflected contrast – Koshi being the fastest and the Karnali the biggest river systems. In the Tarai also the eastern Tarai is twice as wet as the west, is more fertile, has lower altitude and high population density than the west. Kathmandu valley remained unique not only historically and culturally but also due to its separate hydrological regime and in terms of geomorphology and geology. Gurung posited these facts and argued for the need to recognise regions for operational planning purposes that effectively encompassed both the north-south and east-west variations in the space-economy of Nepal. He proposed three sectors (river basins) that could be seen as functional planning regions encompassing ten major regional categories (three ecological zones by three river basins plus Kathmandu valley). The development regions that were defined by the government after the Fourth Plan derived their rationale from Gurung's work. A fall out of this scheme was that the 20 contiguous districts in the south were categorised as the Tarai districts for administrative purposes, when in fact the Tarai proper in Nepal is interrupted by the Inner Tarai or *Bhitri Madhes* valleys of Chitwan and Dang. However, in the demographic and socio-economic analysis that he made, Gurung was always careful in distinguishing the Inner Tarai districts from the Tarai districts because of their unique physiographic, ethnic-demographic, migration and productive characteristics of the latter (Gurung 1989, 1998).

Analysis of Regional Inequality and Imbalances in Development

In 1951, when Nepal opened its doors to the outside world and democracy was "ushered in" for whatever it was worth the government added "development" as its major function to complement "maintenance of law and order" and "collection of revenue" which were the sole functions of the government during the Rana regime. That there were regional inequalities in demographic and socio-economic parameters was taken as

a *fait accompli* until the beginning of the planning exercise in Nepal that began with the advent of the first five-year plan in 1956. In the 1960s, Gurung was among the first to recognise the need to understand and analyse regional inequalities and imbalances in development between different ecological regions and river basins of the country. At a time when the statistical base for planning was severely limited, he utilised simple indicators such as man-land ratios, agricultural area, agricultural and industrial production, transport, provision of education and health services and number of public sector development projects to portray the regional disparity existing between the mountain/hill, Tarai/Inner Tarai, and Kathmandu Valley (Gurung 1969). He pointed out the excessive concentration of development projects in the Kathmandu valley, and the weak link between the food-deficit hills where bulk of the population lived and the food-surplus Tarai where the production potential had not reached its optimum and wondered about the implications of increased hill to Tarai migration in the long run, and argued for a rationale for hill development. He argued that regional inequality was one of the major development challenges in Nepal and a head-start had to be made by addressing the issue before it got out of proportions.

Gurung was among the first development thinkers in Nepal to argue that the policies of the Nepali state was chiefly responsible for the rise of regional dualism in Nepal, a dualism that contributed to the parasitic growth of the Kathmandu valley at the cost of the realisation of the productive potentials of the large hill hinterland. This perception was as much a result of Gurung's first hand knowledge of the backwaters of rural Nepal through his extensive travels described in *Vignettes of Nepal* (1980) as the analysis of whatever scant data that was available for the purpose. He concluded that economic polarization manifest in Nepal would have four major consequences: lack of sufficient market due to the underdevelopment of the hills, hill economy in the long run would be a burden on the Tarai economy, potential hill resources would remain unutilised, and such polarization would have far-reaching economic and political consequences leading among others to increased the inter-regional inequalities in demographic and development parameters. Even the question of economic growth was ultimately contingent on the policies pursued in respect of the reduction in regional inequalities, argued Gurung. One of the central concerns in dealing with the issue of regional inequality was to link the Tarai and hill economies in a complementary give and take relationship. This was a novel idea at a time when the Nepali state took the exploitation of the productive potential of

the Tarai to benefit the ruling classes in Nepal for granted and a benign paternalistic view of the hill-tarai migration held sway. In contrast to the official position of "nepalisation" of the Tarai through the imposition of the Nepali language, and the *parbatīyā* ethos, Gurung sought to create a conceptual framework that would lay the foundation for the integration of the hill and Tarai economies.

Strategy for Regional Development

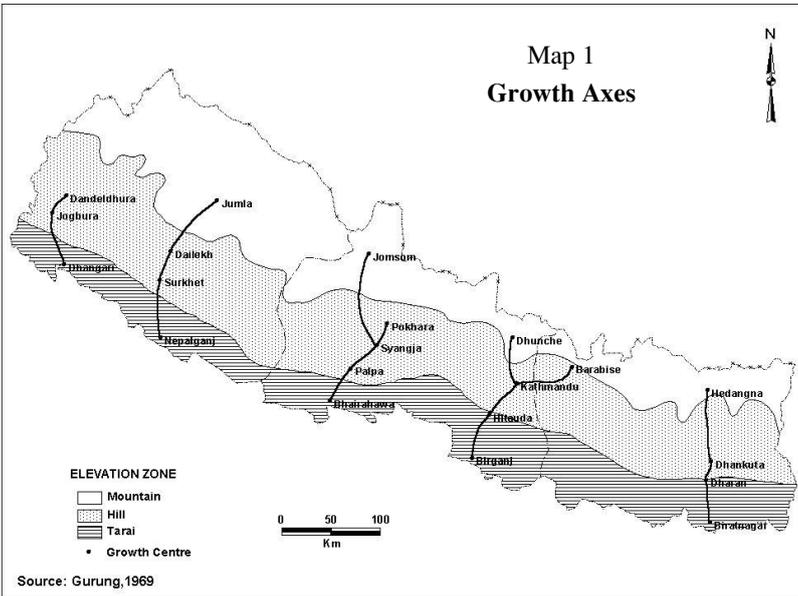
Gurung was picked by King Mahendra (who was on the look out for new ideas to enthuse the cynics of the Panchayat regime) to join the National Planning Commission in 1968. One of his first tasks in the Commission was to develop a framework for the new strategy for regional development. In this task he was supported more by expatriate advisors (like Beenhaker (1968) and Okada (1970), both supported by United States Agency for International Development) than by native bureaucrats. The regional development approach to planning in Nepal developed by Gurung was first articulated as an appendix to the Fourth Plan (1970-75), and the plan itself did little to incorporate the strategy in mainstream development thinking (NPC 1970). It recognized the disparity in development parameters among various ecological regions (Kathmandu valley, hills and the Tarai/Inner Tarai) and proposed a strategy for the reduction of inter-regional disparity and the realization of comparative regional resource advantages through the concentration of development investment in potential areas to accelerate economic growth. The five objectives of the strategy were –

- Reduction of inter-regional disparities (among ecological zones and major watersheds)
- Integration of the national economy (through complementary economic exchange between different regions)
- Breaking of the vicious circle of no-road, no-development (by development of roads backed by commensurate regional economic development programmes)
- Elimination of imbalances between projects (through better coordination), and
- Analysis of the regional economic structure (through assessment and analysis of the potentialities of region-specific resources, and settlements).

Table 1. Growth axes and growth centers envisaged in the regional development strategy

Macro Region/watersheds	Growth Axis	Growth Centers (ecological region)
Kosi (Eastern) Sector	Biratnagar-Hedangna	1. Hedangna (mountain); 2. Dhankuta (hill); 3. Dharan (tarai); 4. Biratnagar (tarai)
Gandaki (Central) Sector	Bhairawa-Jomosom	1. Jomosom (mountain); 2. Pokhara (hill); 3. Syangja (hill); 4. Tansen (hill); 5. Butwal (tarai); 6. Bhairawa (tarai)
Metropolitan Sector	Birganj-Barbise/Dhunche	1. Dhunche (mountain); 2. Barbise (hill); 3. Kathmandu (metropolitan); 4. Hetauda (inner tarai); 5. Birganj (tarai)
Karnali (Western) Sector	Nepalgunj-Jumla	1. Jumla (mountain); 2. Dailekh (hill); 3. Surkhet (inner tarai); 4. Nepalgunj (tarai)
	Dhangadhi-Dandeldhura	1. Dandeldhura (hill); 2. Jogbura (hill); 3. Dhangadhi (tarai)

Source: Gurung (1969)



To meet the above objectives the regional development strategy envisaged a series of transport arteries linking the north-south ecological dimensions and covering the major watersheds of the country. Each transport spine or growth axes would link a number of settlements or

“growth centers” where development efforts and investment would be concentrated to achieve agricultural transformation, enhanced services, trade and commercial activities and eventual location of industries. Based on preliminary studies 5 growth axes with 21 growth centers (Table 1, Map 1) were identified. Growth centers were envisaged as demonstration areas and centers of polyfunctional urban growth associated with agglomeration of economic activities from where spread effects would radiate to surrounding areas. While the growth centers identified in the Tarai were essentially growing or potential urban centers, most of those in the hills and the mountains were settlements of little significance. Growth centers were, therefore, essentially seen as planned “growth poles” where strategic investments would generate growth. The idea eventually was to complement the north-south roads by east-west roads thus creating a locational matrix with major urban centers in the nodes through which a restructuring of the space economy of Nepal could be effected. The theoretical antecedence of the growth axes/growth centre concept derives from the ideas of the French Economists F. Perroux and J. Boudeville. Perroux associated growth poles with leading sectors of the economy with high growth rates, mainly propulsive industries. Boudeville gave a geographical interpretation of growth pole by asserting that as with certain leading industries, economic growth tends to be concentrated in spatial loci where the polarisation and consequent centrifugal forces spread the multiplier effect to surrounding areas (Sharma 1973). In Nepal’s context where the industrial dominance postulate was conspicuous by its absence, and most growth centre/growth point locations in the hills lacked any urban pretensions the growth pole hypothesis was really about pursuing a strategy of deliberate urbanization anchored to the development of strategic road infrastructure.

The regional development strategy for the first time in Nepal sought to chart a course for the development of peripheral regions by facilitating the integration of the Tarai and hill economy in respective watersheds. Planning of critical road infrastructure, and induced urban growth based on economic transformation of the production base in strategic locations were the means through which complementary economic exchange between the Tarai and hill economies was envisaged. The strategy was given a formal garb in 1972 when the country was divided into four and later five development regions, and regional development centers were identified for planned growth on a priority basis.

Critique of the Strategy and Distortions

The strategy was hailed at the time as a major departure in development planning in Nepal. However, it was a set of preliminary propositions that needed to be backed by detailed investigations of the structure and potentialities of the regional economies. At the conceptual and operational levels the strategy lacked adequate appreciation of the comparative resource advantages of the Tarai and hill areas upon which the economic exchange between the hills and Tarai was contingent. The nature of the specific development package that should accompany road development in each growth axes and location also remained unspecified. The strategy also lacked a framework for investments and the sources for such investments. The regional political structure that could coordinate and sustain development initiatives was also conspicuous by its absence. Regional development is fundamentally about decentralized development. The regional approach to development in the final analysis is about addressing the three territorial policy objectives, that of justice, economic growth, stability and balance. These can be addressed to the extent that a political structure of governance is in place that ensures decentralisation and devolution of political and economic power. For a regime that thrived on comprehensive centralization of power this was a tall order. Thus it was that the regional development approach never attained the status of a national political commitment. The annual sojourns of the King to the regional development centres could never rise above family holiday ventures with senior bureaucrats and NPC members at the tow.

Successive plans since the Fourth Plan have continued to pay lip service to the idea of regional development. Reduction of inter-regional disparity and promotion of regional balance have found frequent mention in most of the plan documents. Although development regions present programmatic interventions proposed in the plans, the planning and programming itself is done from the center and on a sectoral basis.

Many of the north-south roads envisaged in the regional development strategy are now wholly or partially complete. More than half the length of the Biratnagar-Hedangna axes is complete. The road axes in the metropolitan sector have been complete for many years now. In the Gandaki sector, the Bhairahawa-Pokhara-Beni road is complete and work is afoot to connect Jomsom. In the Karnali sector, Nepalganj-Surkhet-Dailekh is connected and Surkhet-Jumla link is also complete, although much work needs to be undertaken to stabilise the road. In the far-west, the Dhangadhi-Dandeldhura link has also been completed. A number of additional north-south link roads such as the Mechi highway (Charaali-

Ilam-Phidim-Taplejung) in the east and Lamahi-Libang, and Dang-Sallyan in the mid-west have also been completed. The space-economy of Nepal is more articulated now than during the 1970s but the growth dynamics in peripheral areas as envisaged in the regional development strategy remains far from realized. Location specific potentialities remain unexplored and the “development package” that should have accompanied the laying out of roads is conspicuous by its absence. Both of these elements were central to the realisation of the comparative and competitive advantages of growth locations identified in the regional development strategy.

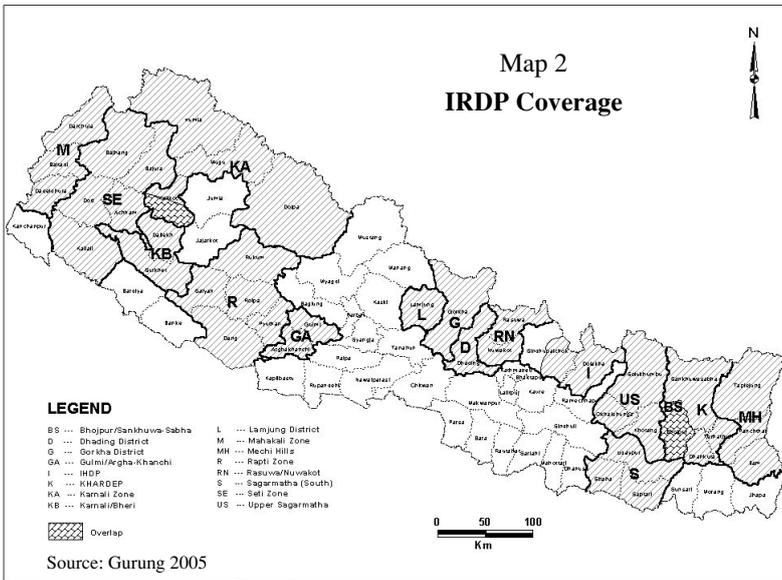
Subsequent plans, including the Fifth plan in which regional development policies were spelled out, have veered away from the basic propositions of the regional development strategy. Gurung himself has identified four basic distortions to the original strategy proposed in the Fourth Plan (Gurung 2005). First, the idea of concentrating development activities along the growth axes and in growth centers, thus laying the foundations for the “radiation” effects to the outlying areas and providing the basis for the integration of Tarai and hill economy, was abandoned in favour of dispersal of projects by development regions. Second, there was no coordination of sectoral activities at the regional level mainly because there was no comprehensive regional agency to undertake the task. Third, the focus was shifted from the overall analysis and design of the growth axes and identification of key investment areas to dispersed rural development efforts through, first the Small Area Development Programme (SADP), and later the integrated rural development programme (IRDP) (S. Gurung 1998). Fourth, the emergence of the IRDPs as the vehicles for the fulfillment of basic needs superceded the entire concept of the integration of the national economy, creation of a locational matrix by strategic road development, and induced urbanization through the harnessing of comparative advantage of specific areas on which the regional development strategy was anchored. With 16 IRDs and 12 donors with varied approaches and emphasis covering 41 project districts (Table 2, Map 2), the IRDPs dominated the development thinking in Nepal for over a decade and virtually dismantled the conceptual basis of the regional strategy.

Under the IRDPs “integration” of activities and services at the local/district level was the key concern. Different IRD projects and donors understood “integration” itself differently. Roads and complementary “development package” envisaged in the regional strategy were relegated to the background, although some of the IRDs such as

Table 2. IRDP Coverage

S.N.	Duration	Project Name	Donors	Project Districts
1.	1974-90	Integrated Hill Dev. Project (IHDP)	SATA (Switzerland)	1. Dolakha, 2. Sindhupalchok (east)
2.	1976-92	Rasuwa/Nuwakot	World Bank	1. Rasuwa, 2. Nuwakot
3.	1978-89	Sagarmatha	ADB, IFAD, EEC	1. Udayapur, 2. Satari 3. Siraha
4.	1979-89	Mahakali	World Bank, UNDP	1. Darchula, 2. Baitadi 3. Dadeldhura
5.	1979-92	Kosi Hills Area Rural Dev. Project (KHARDEP)	ODA (UK)	1. Sankhuwa-Sabha, 2. Bhojpur, 3. Dhankuta, 4. Terhathum
6.	1980-97	Rapti	USAID	1. Rukum, 2. Rolpa 3. Salyan, 4. Pyuthan 5. Dang-Deukhuri
7.	1981-97	Karnali-Bheri	CIDA (Canada)	1. Jumla, 2. Dailekh 3. Surkhet
8.	1983-98	Dhading District Dev. Project	GTZ (Germany)	1. Dhading
9.	1986-95	Seti Zone	Asian Dev. Bank	1. Bajhang, 2. Bajura 3. Doti, 4. Achham, 5. Kailali
10.	1987-98	Mechi Hill Irrigation and Related Dev. Project	SNV (Netherlands)	1. Taplejung, 2. Panchthar, 3. Ilam
11.	1988-	Gulmi/Arghakhanchi	EEC	1. Gulmi, 2. Arghakhanchi
12.	1989-99	Upper Sagarmatha	Asian Dev. Bank	1. Solukhumbu, 2. Okhaldhunga, 3 Khotang
13.	1991-2000	Gorkha District Dev. Project	GTZ	1. Gorkha
14.	1993-2000	Karnali Local Dev. Project	SNV (Netherland)	1. Kalikot, 2. Mugu, 3. Humla
15.	1994-2000	Lamjung District Dev. Project	GTZ	1. Lamjung
16.	1997-99	Bhojpur/Sankhuwa-Sabha	GTZ	1. Bhojpur, 2. Sankhuwa-Sabha
Total			12	41

Source: Gurung (2005)



Rasuwa-Nuwakot and Karnali-Bheri related to the originally proposed growth axes. Ironically, the dispersed and diverse nature of IRDs (Map2) following the whims and fancies of the donors, who provided bulk of the development funds, ensured that a coherent strategy for regional development was simply unworkable and could be dispensed with. The IRDs dominated the development scene in Nepal from the mid 1970s well up to the mid 1990s.

By the mid 1990s the donor interest and emphasis had moved from issues of basic needs to poverty reduction, human development and Millennium Development Goals. These were themes that could be more localized, thus avoiding the need to think in terms of supra-local concerns such as that of regional development. From the 1970s to the 1990s there were no innovative attempts to address the regional dimensions of development. The existence of development regions gave the superficial impression that planning was guided by regional concerns, when in fact the development region concept was long defunct. There was even an attempt in the National Planning Commission at developing a regional development master plan spanning the eighth and the ninth plan (NPC 1989a, 1989b) but these efforts did not receive formal endorsement.

Resurgence of Ideas

The recent resurgence in the interest on regional development in Nepal (NPC/ADB 2007) has given Gurung's ideas fresh relevance in addressing the issues of contemporary Nepal. This resurgence of interest is a result of three inter-related developments. The first is the realization that the sectoral bias in planning missed the issues of acute spatial disparity (Banskota 2006) that had a bearing on poverty and human development, both issues of special concern to donors as well as the government. For a country *de facto* dependent on the donors for the bulk of financial resources earmarked for development this is an unavoidable concern. Second, there is a realization even among globalization-enamoured neo-liberal economists who have presided over the National Planning Commission for much of the period since the 1990s that some form of regional approach to planning was desirable for the coordination of sectoral activities designed to take advantage of the synergy of investments from different sectors so that comparative advantages as exist can be exploited. The third and perhaps the most critical is the post-*Janaāndolan II* context of the novel political as well as development paradigm for Nepal as a federal republic with a clear agenda for inclusive development that needs to be addressed not only at the political, socio-economic and ethnic levels but also at the spatial/regional/federal levels.

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