

## Harka Gurung : Chronicler of Nepal's Mountains

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“There can be no other country so rich in mountains as Nepal” reads the opening line of Tilman’s classic *Nepal Himalaya*. (Tilman 1952) One would expect that a country with the majestic Himalayas and 8 of the 14 peaks of over 8000m would also have an abundance of mountain climbers and more than enough mountain chroniclers. The first is true. Between 29 May 1953 when the first ascent of Everest took place and May 28, 2002 for which complete data is available a total of 1093 mountaineers reached the top of the world from the Nepal side. A total of 387 were from Nepal (Nepal Parbat 2003). According to another source, in the year 2002 a total of 159 climbers summited Everest from both the Nepali and the Chinese side. Sixty-eight of these were Nepalis. And 29 of these were repeat climbers in the same year (AdventureStat.com 2003). Nepal indeed has the largest number of Everest summiteers in the world and the largest number of repeat climbers. Not so with mountain chroniclers. Mountain chronicler is indeed a very rare breed in Nepal.

### Making of a Mountain Chronicler

The late Harka Gurung has the distinction of being the first and perhaps the only native chronicler of mountains and mountaineering in Nepal. In October 1982 when the 44<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Union of International Alpinist Association was convened in Nepal Harka Gurung had a hard time finding Nepali contributors to the Symposium. Thus originated his famous quip: “in Nepal those who climb do not write and those who write do not climb”. In one sentence he summed up the state of mountain chroniclers in Nepal. Harka Gurung authored one slim volume (Gurung 1968) and a collection of miscellaneous pieces on aspects of mountains and mountaineering (Gurung 2004). While the first is a history of mountaineering in Nepal between 1950 and 1960, the second has, in addition, 18 short write-ups on various themes woven around the mountains or mountaineering.<sup>1</sup>

In the Preface to *Peaks and Pinnacles* Harka Gurung describes himself “as a geographer interested in mountain matters.” But his love and curiosity on mountain matters seems to have been imbued from his childhood days. For someone who spent his early years just 25km south of Himalchuli (7893m) the perennial snowy peaks become the stuff from which dreams are made. The attraction of the Himalayan peaks was indeed a powerful

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1. *Peaks and Pinnacles* is divided into two parts. Part One is a reproduction with some editing of the long out-of-print *Annapurna to Dhaulagiri*. Part Two has 18 mostly short pieces on various mountain themes.

influence on him so much so that he named the first three of his four children after the Himalayan peaks.<sup>2</sup> The first mountaineering team he encountered also was in his native village in 1955. It was a All-Kenya group which made an unsuccessful bid to scale Himalchuli.

Gurung was introduced to Herzog's *Annapurna* and Tilman's *Nepal Himalaya*<sup>3</sup> both classics of mountain literature during his college days which impressed him with the "drama and pithe". His interest on the mountains and mountaineering was deepened during his days at the University of Edinburgh where during the holidays he climbed Scottish peaks including the highest Ben Nevis (1344m), completed a short course on climbing in North Wales and also personally met the legendary H.W.Tilman. In later years he travelled around Europe and visited the Swiss Alps where he met Gunter Dyhernfurth and Erwin Schneider, both pioneering explorers of the Everest region (Dyhenfurth, 1955). These travels made him realise the unique significance of the high Himalayan peaks of Nepal. The research for *Annapurna to Dhaulagiri* (Gurung, 1968) was done during two summer holidays in the libraries of Edinburgh, London and Zurich. Unfortunately, *Annapurna to Dhaulagiri* was not followed by similar volumes for later decades due, in Gurung's own words, to the "sheer increase in number of expeditions in subsequent years and unavailability of published documentary sources in Kathmandu," and perhaps the time and effort required to catalogue and keep track of mountaineering teams and their stories. For a person like Harka Gurung with many interests and as many involvements this was not always possible.

## **Annapurna to Dhaulagiri**

*Annapurna to Dhaulagiri* can be described as a concise history of mountaineering in the Nepal Himalaya from its beginnings in 1949 to 1960. It was a pioneering age of exploration of the major Himalayan ranges and a period in which all major summits were climbed. The title *Annapurna to Dhaulagiri* alludes to the ascent of Annapurna (8091m) by the French expedition led by Maurice Herzog on May 14, 1950 and the ascent of Dhaulagiri (8167m) by a Swiss expedition on May 13, 1960. It was a decade in which Mount Everest, the highest of them all, and all the eight thousanders were scaled. It was an age of innocence as it were in mountaineering in the Himalayas. With poor and bulky climbing equipment, very little communication with the outside world while on the mountain, very poor basis for reconnaissance and planning other than being face to face with the mountain, and often with sheer grit and stubbornness expeditions after expedition tried their luck in the Himalays. This was an age when heroes were forged and they were some of the best mountaineers

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2. The first son is named Sagarmatha (the Nepali name for Everest) and the two daughters are named Himalchuli and Manaslu. Himalchuli (7893m) and Manaslu (8156m) are respectively the 25<sup>th</sup> and the eleventh highest peak in Nepal and both are located in Harka Gurung's native region.
  3. Maurice Herzog's *Annapurna : Conquest of the First 8000 meter Peak*, London Jonathan Cape 1952 chronicles the ascent of Annapurna and Tilman's volume describes his travels and climbing in Langtang and Annapurna regions in 1949.

and mountain chroniclers in the world. The likes of Edmund Hillary, Tenzing Norgay, Maurice Herzog, G. Dyrhenfurth, Wilfred Noyce, Charles Evans, Jean Franco, Kenneth Mason<sup>4</sup> and many more. Many of them dedicated their lives to the mountains, climbing, writing, lecturing and in general getting the public interested in these mountains, and the people who inhabit these remote regions. They were the ones smitten by the immortal words of George Mallory – “because it is there”.

Table 1. Ascent of Nepal’s 8000m Peaks Between 1950 and 1960

8000m peaks of Nepal	Height (m)	Date of Ascent	Expedition
Annapurna I	8091	14 May 1950	French
Everest (Sagarmatha)	8848	29 May 1953	British
Cho Oyu	8201	19 Oct 1954	Austrian
Makalu	8463	15 May 1955	French
Kangchenjunga	8586	25 May 1955	British
Manaslu	8163	9 May 1956	Japanese
Lhotse	8516	18 May 1956	Swiss
Dhaulagiri	8167	13 May 1960	Swiss

Source: Harka Gurung, 1968.

Harka Gurung’s chronicle provides the drama of the early exploration of the Nepal Himalaya and the ascent of the high peaks together with a lot of lesser ones. Presented in a year to year format with sub-titles indicating the mountain range *Annapurna to Dhaulagiri* is both a guide and a reference book for the layman interested in the Himalayas. In the decade all the eight thousanders, 11 seven thousanders, and at least eighty six thousanders were scaled. Some adventures that Gurung recounts are worth recalling, none more than that of Everest and Dhaulagiri.

It took 31 years to successfully summit Mt. Everest. Between 1921 and 1937 the British had made seven unsuccessful attempts from the Tibetan side. Gurung describes the attempts from the Nepal side. The first three — reconnaissance of the southern approach by the British expedition that included Tilman and Houston in 1950, the Danish attempt in 1951, and the British Eric Shipton’s reconnaissance together with Hillary again in 1951 – were really exploratory ventures. The Swiss expedition led by E. Wyss-Dunant in the spring of 1952 included Tenzing Norgay camped at 8351m but were repulsed by bad weather and snow after reaching 8560m. In the autumn of the same year the Swiss returned again led by Gabriel Chevalley. They lost a Sherpa in an ice fall and the fierce gales forced them back from a height of 8030m. The Swiss who so desperately wanted to prove themselves as the

4. Kenneth Mason’s *Abode of Snow* published in 1955 is a definitive history of Himalayan exploration and mountaineering from the earliest times to the ascent of Everest and is regarded as a classic in mountaineering chronicles.

first to reach the summit were beaten by John Hunt's British expedition on May 29, 1953 although the summiteers were a New Zealand bee-keeper and an ethnic Nepali Sherpa whose nationality was contested. But as Tenzing himself said – "on a mountain . . . life is too real and death too close for such things as politics and nationality, and a man is a man, a human being that is all." Gurung shows that in the final analysis the ascent of Everest was not a victory of one expedition — it was made possible by the succession of failures spanning for over three decades. At these times when, with the right amount of payment one is assured of a foot-hold in the 8848m summit of Sagarmatha (or Quomolongma or Mount Everest as one prefers), these early mountaineers embodied the true spirit of mountaineering, the noblest of all sports.

Dhaulagiri (8167m) with its refreshingly white peak (as the Sanskrit name suggests) arising from its steep shoulders is among the most majestic of all Himalayan peaks. To watch Dhaulagiri in the glow of the setting sun reflected in the summit and the clouds above it, an image that Toni Hagen has candidly captured in his classic *Nepal, A Kingdom in the Himalayas*, is an experience that is forever etched in ones' memory. The story of Dhaulagiri is also associated with the Swiss but in a different way. In 1953 while the British expedition was making history in Everest the Swiss team led by Bernard Lautenburg was attempting to negotiate the steep battlements of Dhaulagiri. Finding the task impossible they called retreat at a height of 7666m and recommended that the battlement be dynamited for easy tackling. The advice was heeded in 1954 by an Argentinian team led by Francisco Ibanez that had followed on the footsteps of the Swiss. They indeed dynamited part of the battlement to pitch a camp at 7575m but had to retreat from a height of 7954m due to bad weather. Severely frost-bitten the team leader died later in Kathmandu. In 1955 it was the turn of the Swiss German team led by M. Meir to retreat from a much lower altitude. In 1956 the Argentinians led by E. Huerto made two bids for the summit from a camp at 7554m but early monsoon washed away their dreams and were forced to withdraw. The third Swiss attempt was made in 1958 under W. Stauble. They reached a height of 7575m but were repulsed by a raging storm and heavy snow. A different route was chosen for the ascent of Dhaulagiri by an Austrian team in 1959. They made three attempts at the peak from a camp at 7333m but terrible blizzards pushed them back. Dhaulagiri remained unassailable. It was the Swiss who ultimately ascended Dhaulagiri under Max Eiselin in May 1960. It was an elaborate expedition complete with a light aircraft to ferry equipment, which unfortunately crashed later, and an acclimatization camp to ensure that the climbers were well prepared. From a bivouac camp at 7757m braving the mountain's proverbial bad weather six climbers including two Sherpas stood atop Dhaulagiri on May 13, 1960. The last of the eight thousanders of the Nepal Himalaya was finally scaled.

Gurung's chronicle is matter-of-fact with an eye for human asides and extra-ordinary mountaineering fits. Kangchenjunga and Makalu were climbed within a difference of ten days in 1955. In deference to the 'mountain gods' of Sikkim the British climbers refrained

from stepping atop Kangchenjunga and turned back from a respectable distance of six meters from the summit. A Swiss team in 1956 made mountaineering history by climbing two eight thousanders in three days — Lhotse (8511m) on May 18 and Everest on May 21. In 1957 the British expedition led by J.O.M. Roberts and including Wilfrid Noyce attempted the picturesque Machhapuchhare (6993m) but abandoned the climb just short of 46m from the peak not due to their veneration of the mountain gods but because negotiating a 60 degree slope under heavy snowfall in the late afternoon was tantamount to inviting disaster.

As Gurung recounts, in this first decade of mountaineering in Nepal both the abominable yeti and the local population added to the Himalayan lore. The first yeti hunting expedition in the Khumbu area was in 1954. It was led by Ralph Izzard who climbed 8 peaks of over 5454m in search of the yeti. Sometimes mountaineers propose and the weather Gods dispose. And sometimes mountaineers propose and the villagers dispose. The Japanese expedition to Manaslu in 1954 was in for a surprise when they were given a hostile reception by the villagers of Sama who attributed previous years landslides to the defilement of the mountain by the Japanese. The expedition had to settle for Ganesh Himal instead. Neither are brigands in the mountains a new phenomenon. In 1959 the Japanese Fukuoka University expedition to reconnoitre Gaurishankar (7146m) was surprised by a group of Tibetan brigands who descended on their base camp and extorted cash. Financially depleted the group had to abandon their plans and return back.

The second part of *Peaks and Pinnacles* is not mountaineering history, but a collection of miscellaneous essays on and about mountains and mountaineering. Some describe his own ventures as an amateur mountaineer, others provide an overview of the Nepal Himalayas and mountaineering tourism, probe into Nepalis involvement in mountaineering from earliest times or remember pioneering mountaineers. From a 1959 essay penned as an undergraduate at Patna University we get a glimpse of what mountaineering meant to Harka Gurung. Mountaineering provides “a challenge to one’s own qualities. . . a chance to conquer one’s own weaknesses, ignorance and fear”. It is the one sport “where victory and defeat will not be assured in terms of ecstasy and sorrow but provides victory without pride and defeat without despair”. To Harka Gurung mountaineering represented that “Olympic spirit which asserts that the essential thing in life is not winning but fighting well”. This could indeed be a motto for life itself, as it was for Harka Gurung.

## **Himalayan Encounters**

Gurung trekked extensively in the hills of Nepal. He provides the vignette of these trips in his travelogue *Vignettes of Nepal* (Gurung, 1980) But his own encounter with the Himalayan peaks was on two occasions, the first while crossing the Kagmara lekh in the Karnali region in 1966 and the second as a member of the International Himalayan Expedition to the south-west face of Everest in 1971.

The attempt on Kagmara (5297m) was only incidental. He was crossing the Kagmara lekh (5114m) enroute to Phoksumdo-tso in Dolpo when it occurred to him that an attempt on the peak some distance to the north might be feasible. His companion, a Dolpo man refused to accompany him. He started alone in the early morning giving six hours for his companion to wait for him in the cairn near the pass. Ill equipped and unaware of the rashness of his decision he slogged in the glacier snow field on the way to the peak for over three hours. As the sun rose high the glacial boulders underneath began to rumble and move due to heat and insolation. The Kagmara peak was still 366 meters “above and away”. He became panicky, but one cannot run on a glacier. So the retreat was as laborious as the climb. As he returned he appreciated the native wisdom of the Dolpo man and tore the note he had scrawled on a piece of paper. Had he succeeded, later climbers would have found a note inside a small box that read “Harka Gurung was here on 15 June 1966” in the summit. Typical of him he recounts this tale with self-effacing jest and humour.

In 1971 Gurung was invited to join the International Himalayan Expedition led by J.O.M.Roberts to Everest. The expedition was large and international – 31 members from 12 countries and included some world famous climbers. Gurung’s intention was not to climb Everest but if possible reach the Western Cwm above the ice fall. Being neither a “good climber to blaze a trail nor strong as a Sherpa to carry loads” he waited at the base camp at 5500m for over three weeks reminiscing with passing climbers, reading and re-reading the mountaineering classics, and using the time to study glacial activity around. At long last he was given the go ahead to proceed to Camp I together with two colleagues, Sonam a Sherpa guide and Murray Sayle, an American journalist. After nearly seven hours of uphill climbing through a maze of ice-walls and crevasses in snowy conditions they reached Camp I at the western tip of the Western Cwm (6200m). Camp I was perched on a narrow snowfield between two deep crevasses and a false step would send one tumbling down the crevasse. Bad weather had dislocated communications and the group was unaware of the tragedy that had befallen a climber, Harsha Bahuguna, higher up in the mountain. Further, the two-day snow had covered all the flag markers to the base camp from which supplies had to be ferried to higher camps. Gurung and his team roped together and led by Sonam were detailed to open the route to the base camp. This was a treacherous task. Heavy snow had hidden the crevasses and a wrong step would land one in the icy chasm of the crevasse. Gurung describes in hair-raising detail of how one of the Sherpas of his group just disappeared in the crevasse and was lucky enough to be rescued by the technical expertise and tact of Sonam, the group leader.

Meanwhile the weather got worse. They spent three consecutive days trying to open the route to the base camp without success. Claustrophobia and the grey wilderness of the tent heightened the sense of suffocation. There was no sense of perspective or direction and there was little communication with the outside world.

Finally they were able to open the route through the ice-fall. They saw that another party from the base camp was advancing up opening the route. In the excitement of waving to the party that was making its way up, there was a moment's lapse, a wrong step in the soft snow and Gurung lost his balance and fell head long in the side gully of hard ice. The sirdar pulled him by the rope but a sharp ice-edge cut into his skull and blood streamed through the face. Back at the base camp he required three stitches.

## **Gurkhas and Sherpas: Finding the Niche in Mountaineering**

Gurung also delves into the antecedence of the involvement of the Nepali hillmen in mountain explorations and mountaineering. Mountaineering as a sport began in European Alps in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was the British who took the lead in exploration and climbing. Nepalis involvement in exploration started early. Charles Bruce of 1/5 Gurkhas had trained some Gurkha riflemen in mountaineering in the 1880s. In 1889 Francis Young husband (who later opened the Chumbi valley route to Lhasa) used Gurkhas to investigate the raids on caravans crossing the Karakoram. In 1892 Martin (later Lord) Conway led an expedition to explore and climb the Himalayan peaks in the Kashmir Himalayas. The group included a few Gurkhas from his regiment. Gurung traces some of these early mountaineers — Amar Singh Thapa, Karbir Burathoki, Harkabir Thapa, Lalbir Rana, Pretiman Rana (perhaps all of Magar ethnicity) who find mention in the accounts by Conway and Bruce. Conway appreciated the Gurkhas as “admirable scramblers and good weight carriers”. Conway explored the Alps in 1894 and was accompanied by Amar Singh Thapa and Karbir Burathoki. They traversed 2500km in 86 days, crossing 39 passes and climbing 21 peaks. They even named a 3063m peak Piz Gurkha to commemorate their efforts. The first attempt on Nanga Parbat (8125m) was made by A.F.Mummery in 1895 and included two Gurkhas Raghurib Thapa and Gaman Singh. Having failed in the attempt to scale the peak from the southern approach they tried the northern route a few days later on August 23. The three never returned. This was perhaps the first major tragedy in Himalayan mountaineering and the first that involved Nepali climbers. Gurkhas were involved in the exploration and climbing in the Indian Himalayas in Kashmir as well as Kumaon and later in the British expeditions that attempted to scale Everest between 1921 and 1938.

It was only in 1907 that the Nepali Sherpas, who are now synonymous with mountaineering in the Himalayas, were first involved in mountaineering. The credit of introducing the Sherpas in trekking and mountaineering goes to A.M. Kellas, a physician from Glasgow who explored and climbed the Sikkim Himalayas between 1909 and 1921. He relied entirely on the Sherpas. He was also a member of the 1921 Everest expedition that attempted the peak from the Tibetan side. The expedition included numerous Sherpas. Kellas died of heart failure in the course of the expedition. But as Gurung notes Sherpas have dominated climbing efforts in the Himalayas since then.

Gurung pays tribute to a legendary Sherpa mountaineer who remained little known in Nepal during his lifetime. Born in Kunde village in 1907 (the very year in which Kellas was introducing the Sherpas to mountaineering) Angharkay Sherpa took part in the German Kangchenjunga expedition in 1931. In the British Everest expedition of 1933 led by Hugh Rountledge Angharkay helped establish camp at 8303m an enormous feat during that time. He was awarded the Tigers Badge of the Himalayan Club which is an exceptional honour. Angharkay took part in five expeditions to Everest all together before it was scaled by Hilalry and Tenzing. With Eric Shipton he explored and climbed in the Kumaon Himalaya, and the Karakoram. He was with Maurice Herzog in the successful French expedition to the Annapurna in 1950, the first expedition to scale a 8000m peak and received the Legion of Honour for his services. He was the Sirdar with the Swiss reconnaissance expedition to Dhaulagiri in 1953, and the American expedition to Makalu in 1954. That he was not involved in “peak-bagging of major category was the reflection of the times when Sherpas were considered basically as support staff.” But for Harka Gurung’s tribute the legendary Angharkay would have been forgotten by the Nepali mountaineering world. Angharkay died of cancer in Kathmandu in 1981.

### **Nepal Himalaya Inventory**

Harka Gurung was known for his quips. “Nepalis take pride in the Himalayas but do not know them” is one such. And Gurung made it his, Nepal’s mountaineering community, and the government’s business to *know* the Himalayan peaks.<sup>5</sup> In the late seventies he also became the first minister of tourism in Nepal. Some attempt was made before him by geographer J.B.S. Burathokey to prepare a general sketch of the Nepal Himalaya but Gurung worked in the development of a comprehensive inventory. This inventory prepared together with R.K. Shrestha in the 1980s was based on two main sources: the topographic sheets prepared by the Survey of India at 1:63,360 and 1:253,350 scales and the 57 area maps at a scale of 1:50,000 which are part of the Sino-Nepal Boundary Agreement of 1979. In an earlier publication Gurung had provided a list of 231 peaks along Nepal’s northern border based on the Sino-Nepal boundary protocol (Gurung 1983). The *Nepal Himalaya Inventory* was published by the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation in 1994 and is even today the only such Nepali source. The inventory includes the main Himalayan system or range from Kangchenjunga in the east to Gurans Himal in the west, subsidiary ranges, their east-west and north-south limits and the spot height of known peaks and passes. The inventory lists 1310 peaks of over 6000m including 17 peaks (not 8 as is generally presumed) of over 8000m. Many of the major Himalayan peaks had no known names or had names given by the climbing expeditions. However, the inventory in terms of location, extent and spot height of peaks is only as good as the sources on

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5. The establishment of the International Mountain Museum in Pokhara (opened in 2002) owes much to Harka Gurung. The museum now has a corner dedicated to him. He also played a key role in professionalizing the Nepal Mountaineering Association which runs the Museum.

which it is based. Verification from other sources (satellite imagery, triangulation, spot height as reported by climbers etc) while necessary was not possible in the lack of required information.

In 1983 the government constituted a Committee for the naming of Himalyan peaks. This committee chaired by Harka Gurung in which the present writer had the privilege of being a member, named 31 peaks. The inventory prepared by Gurung shows that only 259 of the 1310 peaks of over 6000m can be identified with specific names. There are still peaks that have not been included in the inventory because of the lack of detailed maps and verified spot heights. In the last Atlas that he edited (Gurung 2006) and which was published posthumously there are three maps of the major Himalayan peaks and passes covering the western, central and eastern sections of the Nepal Himalaya.

### Summing Up

Harka Gurung was a scholar faithful to his roots and to the mountains that sustained and made his spirits soar. His chronicles of mountaineering in Nepal covered only the first decade, but to-date he remains the only native scholar to contribute to this genre of mountaineering literature in Nepal. “In a hundred ages of the gods I could not tell thee of the glories of the Himalaya” says the *Skanda Purana*, a repertoire of Hindu myths and philosophy. Harka Gurung’s modest attempts were only to know these mountains better so that they could sustain better livelihoods as they have sustained the human spirit over the ages. In a country that receives over 120 mountaineering teams from over 40 countries every year and derives about 600 million rupees annually in the form of royalty and expenditure of mountaineering teams (MOCTCA 2005) it is ironic that 80 percent of the Himalayan peaks remain unnamed and to a large extent unknown. Harka Gurung pioneered efforts to make a comprehensive inventory of Himalayan peaks so his compatriots and the world would know and appreciate these mountains better. The need is to take the task he began further.

In recognition of his contributions to tourism and mountaineering the Government of Nepal decided in March 2007 to name Gnadi peak (earlier Peak 29) after him. The 7871m Harka Gurung peak overlooks his native village in Lamjung. It is one of those peaks that he gazed and wondered as a child.

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