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Obituary for Frederick Gaige

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FREDERICK GAIGE

1937-2009

BY BANDITA SIJAPATI

Anyone with even the remotest interest in issues of ethnicity in Nepal—in particular, in the Tarai—or the question of regionalism, would have come across references to Frederick H. Gaige's book *Regionalism and National Unity in Nepal*. I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Gaige in his apartment in Brooklyn, New York, late in the evening of December 2008, when the Social Science Baha asked me to deliver a contract to him for permission to reprint his book in Nepal. Even though the request had come just the day before I was to take the flight back to Kathmandu, and I was not sure a meeting would even be possible, I readily agreed. First, it was an honor for me to meet the person whose work is still considered the seminal piece of scholarship on the Tarai; and second, having followed *Madhesi* identity politics quite closely, I was eager to meet the individual who was visionary enough to dissect the socio-political issues in the Tarai so acutely that some of his assertions and conclusions still hold today.

As Arjun Guneratne wrote in the foreword of the recent re-publication of the book (2009), even 34 years after its first publication, it “remains the single best introduction to the socio-political context of Tarai politics.” Broadly speaking, Dr. Gaige's work focuses on the relationship between the centralizing Nepali state and its relationship to the Tarai inhabitants it had marginalized. The book is an exceptional piece of scholarship on several counts. During my meeting, as well as in the preface to his book, Dr. Gaige mentioned that he settled on the issue of regionalism in Nepal as a research topic for his Ph.D. dissertation as a result of his search for a subject matter “beyond the frontiers of my world.” Undoubtedly, for many foreign scholars like Dr. Gaige, Nepal remains far removed from their own world in the United States or Western Europe, but the significance of his work rests on the fact that he was drawn into focusing on the Tarai at a time when most other western scholars had limited their research to the exotic hills and mountains of Nepal, and to a large extent continue to do so. Consequently, Dr. Gaige's work remains one of the few pieces of scholarship on the Tarai despite the fact that the region covers approximately 23 percent of Nepal's total land area, is home to nearly half of its total population, and is considered to be Nepal's “bread basket” and “industrial heartland.”

Very ambitious in its research design, the book provides an in-depth analysis of six of the twenty Tarai districts—Jhapa, Mahottari and Dhanusha (which Gaige treats as a unit rather than as two separate districts), Bara, Kapilvastu and Kailali, as opposed to a focused ethnographic treatment of a single ethnic group or a town. This type of methodology not only helped Dr. Gaige provide substantive evidence for his assertions and conclusions, but also provides a broader perspective on the Tarai region as a whole and the contours of regionalism in Nepal, the main theme of his scholarship. Viewed in the current context of Nepal where the unitary nature of the Nepali state has been contested by many ethnic groups, including the *Mad-*

hesi, in their demands for ethnic federalism and greater autonomy, the book helps us understand the socio-political history and the context for those demands. More specifically, Dr. Gaige's scholarship compels us to recognize the problems of the dominant paradigm for national integration in Nepal—“forced” assimilation of indigenous groups, *Madhesi*, *Dalits* and other minorities into the national structure without any provisions to ensure their participation in the nation's political and social life as equal citizens. In this regard, Dr. Gaige's examination of regionalism in Nepal, not in terms of the existing five development regions demarcated on a north-south basis but on the basis of the Tarai and the hills, was an astute way to highlight the problems of state building and national integration in the country.

Dr. Gaige passed away some months after our meeting, in Amherst, Massachusetts, on August 25, after a long struggle with cancer. It is true that he had long disappeared from academic circles in Nepal and had instead chosen another career path, retiring after serving as Dean and Campus Executive Officer (or Chancellor) of the Pennsylvania State University, Berks, from 1984 to 2001. Prior to his long stint at Berks, Dr. Gaige had taught at Davidson College, North Carolina, where he had been instrumental in establishing a South Asia program and launching a consortium of colleges and universities called the Southern Atlantic States Consortium for Asian and



PHOTO: PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY BERKS

African Studies. But this is not to say that during his role as a college administrator in the U.S., he had forgotten Nepal. On the contrary, Dr. Gaige, together with John Scholtz and Leo Rose, had returned to Nepal to observe the historic 1991 elections, and these scholars had published a short article on the elections in *Asian Survey*.

At the time I met him, Dr. Gaige was undergoing treatment for cancer, and had moved from his home in Pennsylvania to a small apartment in Brooklyn to be closer to his family, particularly his grandchildren. As a Nepali, I was struck by the fondness with which he remembered Nepal and his Nepali colleagues, his research participants, and his peers from the U.S. with whom he had worked during those days. During our conversation, Dr. Gaige, in a wistful tone that I cannot forget, mentioned that the one thing he would like to do before departing this world was to visit his research site and meet with the people and families with whom he had worked in the sixties in the course of his fieldwork. With hopeful plans that his health would one day allow him to return to Nepal, he had stocked his small apartment in Brooklyn with notes from his research in the late 1960s.

Dr. Gaige had also been following the news of Nepal through the internet, but not very surprisingly, his understanding of the current situation was quite limited. He continued to refer to the *janjati* as the “hill people” and the *Madhesi* as “plains people.” Unaware of the migration of Nepalis to distant places, including New York, he, to my amusement, excitedly told me about how he had found out that the driver of the taxi he was taking to visit his doctor one day was Nepali.

After giving him a brief update about the current situation, especially with regards to the *Madhes* over Christmas cookies that his wife had baked, I began to tell Dr. Gaige about the importance of his work. He was amused when told that there are only a few people in Nepal who own a copy of his book; the rest of us have been violating copyright laws and making photocopies.

Undoubtedly, he was surprised, and I am sure pleased as well, to learn that his book was still so highly regarded. But then, like many of us, he was also deeply saddened to know that the situation in the Tarai was not much different since the time of his research in the late 1960s.

When asked why he had decided to work on the Tarai, Dr. Gaige told me that when he had initially broached the topic, it did not strike a chord with many people, including his own advisors, whose vision of Nepal was that of an archetypical hill and mountainous country. Such misinformation, he told me, was one of the reasons he decided to not only conduct research on the Tarai but also to “write a dissertation that would serve as an advocacy piece for the people of the Tarai.”

Dr. Gaige’s death means the loss of a scholar who was able to discern the plight of the people in the Tarai while the state and many of us Nepalis remained oblivious of the discrimination and exclusion experienced by nearly 40 percent of our compatriots. This is a tribute to Dr. Gaige but also a reminder that little has changed in the Tarai since he worked there four decades ago. We certainly have a long way to go, but unfortunately, have also lost a most sincere sympathizer of the Tarai and its people.

Bandita Sijapati completed her Ph.D. from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, NY, and is currently serving as an Adjunct Professor at the Nepa School of Social Sciences and Humanities in Kathmandu, Nepal. Among her research interests are civil and ethnic conflicts, including the ongoing tensions in the Tarai region.

SAUBHAGYA SHAH 1961-2009

By MAHENDRA LAWOTI

Saubhagya Shah was a very decent human being and a close personal friend, and his passing came as a great shock. As an anthropologist, he was making his mark in the field of Nepal Studies, and at the time of his death (by cardiac arrest), was working on transforming his Ph.D. thesis into a book. Saubhagya was a year senior to me in school but I only came to know him well much later. When I returned to Kathmandu after completing a degree in architectural engineering in 1990, I began to hear about him. He had topped his class at Tribhuvan University while obtaining a Master’s degree in Sociology (for which he had done interesting research on sex workers) and had published a couple of very well read articles in Himal on the challenges the post 1990 hill Hindu state was facing from the aspirations of its multitude of ethnic and caste groups and from the spread of Christianity. I became personally close to Saubhagya in the nineties, but he was an intensely private person who rarely shared personal things even with his close friends and family members. Only after his death did I learn, like many of his other close friends, that he had had heart attacks a couple of times before.

Saubhagya and I began our graduate studies in the US in 1995 under scholarships provided by the US government. He was already regarded as a promising social scientist, while I did not know at the time that I would be venturing soon into the heady world of the social sciences from engineering. Saubhagya, who was on the faculty of the Central Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Tribhuvan University at the time of his death, and Program Coordinator of TU’s Department of Conflict, Peace and Development Studies, was very popular among his students. He was an excellent teacher and he provided his students with work in his research projects as well. As a testament of his students’ admiration and gratitude towards him, they organized several condolence meetings in his memory.

Saubhagya’s strengths as a scholar lay in his ability to synthesize a large body of relevant literature to make his arguments, while furnishing his papers with evocative titles (a talent based perhaps on his earlier work as a journalist). Saubhagya worked painstakingly and meticulously on his projects, a devotion to detail that was both a strength and perhaps a limitation. It was a strength because he produced well researched and well argued scholarly essays even when the themes he was dealing with were challenging. The flipside was that he only produced a limited number of them.

After he completed his Ph.D. in 2004 from Harvard and before his death, he published two important peer reviewed works in prestigious international venues. This was remarkable because the pull of social and family obligations, professional duties and the need to supplement income as a consultant has prevented many other promising Nepal based academics from going through the rigor of producing peer reviewed and quality publications. I was fortunate to be associated with his East-West Center publication as the principle researcher of the Nepal study group of the Internal Conflicts and State-building Challenges in Asia research project. He was the only one to complete a monograph from half a dozen or so commis-