

Obituary

Down the Memory Lane with Professor Gurdev Singh Gosal



(1927 - 2014)

New Year did not dawn as auspicious as I had prayed for or as happy as everyone had so graciously greeted me with. In the morning of 3rd January 2014, I received the news that Professor Gurdev Singh Gosal had breathed his last with a *Gurbani* hymn on his lips. The medical world declared that he had suffered cardiac arrest, leaving the family in tears and distress. Everyone who was closely associated with Gosal was emotionally bereft at the suddenness of his demise. How fragile and unpredictable life is!!

Gosal and I had exchanged New Year greetings just two days ago. I was in the United States at that time. It was hard to reconcile to the fact that we would never be able to speak to each other again. With a heavy heart I called the bereaved Gosal family to pay my condolences. The family

was inconsolable as Gosal had been an epitome of strength to his wife, daughter-in-law and grand-daughters after the untimely demise of his only son, Ravinderpal Singh, in 2006. He himself carried the grief of his lost son with great forbearance and fortitude. With his passing away, an immeasurable void had been created and I felt so inadequate in providing solace sitting so far away from India.

The memoir I am currently penning down is a tribute to my revered teacher. It would also be a record of my personal observations of him, spanning over an association of 54 years. In doing this, I wish to 'celebrate' who Gosal was and to 'memorialize' the grandeur of his life's journey. To be truthful it is not easy to encapsulate such a multifaceted

personality but I am going to try and write my experiences with Gosal in all simplicity and affection but without any affectation.

Gosal was born on April 1, 1927 in a Jat Sikh family in village Gosalan, located about 25 kms to the west of Chandigarh. He embraced his surname from the native village. Notwithstanding his perfect urbane life style and mannerism, Gosal was proud of his rural-agricultural ancestry. He often added in all humour 'city slicker and country yokel'. Gosal was married to Balwant Kaur for 64 years and was a proud father of two daughters and a son. Above all he was through and through a geographer. While paying tribute to him at the first Memorial Lecture organized in his honour on the date of his birth, the speaker rightly observed that Gosal loved to live and work in geographic proximity of place of birth and ironically passed away 87 days before his 87th birthday. What a coincidence!

To quote the Professor's wife, 'Gosal was a noble soul, diligent and dedicated to the cause of university; very sensitive inside, most reticent outside, Highly perceptive', were the observations of one of his admirers who had known him from a non-university world for the last about half- a- century. He described Gosal as *highly contented* with whatever he acquired or received; *unflinchingly consistent* in his stand on any issue or position in the ideological sphere; and *fiercely combative* while facing any challenge, both in the academic and other arenas. Gosal believed in ensuring dignity and grace in whatever he did while maintaining integrity which is found only in men of substance.

Highly reserved as far his personal problems and issues were concerned, Gosal was comfortably open in being one with in sharing his happy experiences. He was especially fond of expressing gratitude to his revered father, Sardar Hazara Singh, who inspired him to be always on the top of the world – *sada awwal rehna*. No less was he thankful to his school headmaster, Sardar Bant Singh, who encouraged him to go for higher education in Lahore. His treasured memories were of Professor Glenn T. Trewartha, the supervisor of his doctoral thesis on '*A Geographical Analysis of India's Population*', at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, United States during 1953-56. He often recalled the extraordinary quality of Trewartha's teaching and rigour of his research management. He described him as a rare human being who could balance with perfection his professional and family lives.

On demise of his father in 1974, Ghosal shared his grief in a personal letter to me thus: 'our parents are never too old for us and we are never grown up for them.' How poignant, pithy and true were his words. These still continue ringing in my heart over after forty years now.

In true sense, Department of Geography at Panjab University was Gosal's first love. He joined it as Reader in 1959 and retired as Professor in 1987. Panjab University honored him with the prestigious status of Professor Emeritus in 2005. Virtually it was he who founded the Department, nurtured it and laid a solid base for its assured growth and continuous diversification. The eminence that the department had acquired

due to Gosal's contributions enabled it to move up the echelon from the status of Project Support Programme of the University Grants Commission in 1978, to Special Assistance Programme in 1990, to finally as Center of Advanced Study in 2009. Meanwhile a Master's Degree Course in G.I.S and Remote Sensing and another one in Disaster Management had also been instituted at the department. The objective was twofold: to place geography in the community of professional courses and to generate additional employment opportunities for geographers.

At the department, Gosal nourished Population Geography, especially through research and teaching. Under his initiative and presidentship, the Association of Population Geographers of India was set up in 1977, and to promote its cause the journal *Population Geography* was started in 1978, with him as the Founder Editor. All this did not diminish his enthusiasm for the promotion of other branches of Geography. He was a great votary of the significance of studying Physical Geography. He encouraged his colleagues to give special attention also to Geography of Rural Settlements, Agricultural Geography and Urban Geography. While some remained focused on Population Geography, others were tempted to move on to not only sub-disciplines he indicated but also to fresh areas, such as Regional Development, Political Geography and Administrative Geography. His continuous endeavor at reinvention of the curriculum added new colors to the canvas of research and teaching at the department.

The best in Gosal manifested itself in his pedagogy style and research publications. His lectures were so well coherent, articulate and impactful that students rarely needed to do much reference work or jot down notes. He always advised his research students that before selecting a topic for doctoral research they should carefully identify the trends and developments in the discipline, assess its relevance to society, and most importantly to write well. Most of his writings were on varied aspects of Population Geography of India, some dealt with development issues of Punjab, and the remaining ones carried his ideas on Research Methodology. Several of his papers on Population Geography were published in foreign journals of repute; the works on Punjab were in the form of books, namely *Census Atlas of Punjab*, *Agricultural Land Use in Punjab* and *Regional Disparities in Punjab*; and his ideas on Research Methodology were contained in presidential and other addresses. The initial commendation which Gosal received was through his four Reports on *Terrain Evaluation of Punjab Plain*, *Punjab Himalayas*, *Shimla-Shipki Tract and Rajasthan Border*. These were done at the behest of the Ministry of Defence, Government of India. Equally noteworthy was his contribution to series of *Surveys of Research in Geography*, sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi. Gosal was meticulous in whatever research work he did or projects he undertook. There was much to emulate him. To go through any writing of his was an exercise in learning about research.

Gosal though highly eulogized for his outstanding contribution to research in Population Geography yet his lasting impact lay in teaching of Geographic Thought. Herein his fundamentals were sound and delivery most effective. He conveyed the ideas of Richard Hartshorne, one of his teachers at the University of Wisconsin, on the nature, evolution and structure of geography with immense clarity and lucidity. Gosal also had academic and technical competence in Cartography which he studied under the expert guidance of Arthur H. Robinson, again at the University of Wisconsin. He emphasized the significance of an integrated visual impression of any map in conveying the objective reality of a spatial distribution. No less memorable were his lectures on Regional Planning, highlighting its core objective as “cultivation of habitability” since he believed that inordinate outmigration intensifies the problems of both the source and destination regions. Towards the closing years of his life, he was fond of quoting the idea that “Geography of soul is the soul of geography”.

As a research supervisor, Gosal was a hard task master who always raised the bar for those who wished to pursue doctoral thesis with him. As his first doctoral student, I can safely vouch on it because I was often reproached for the work which did not meet the standards set by him. He could never stress enough on the significance of balance and synthesis in any research effort. Being on a weak wicket on count of the both, I worked hard to built in these qualities under the overwhelming influence of his care. To my dismay, he mellowed down in his reactions over the years, and at times I

missed the sharpness of his well spirited messages.

Gosal had been furnished the title of “University Man”. This is in recognition of his laudable contributions to Panjab University, Chandigarh by way of holding several positions of Honour and being on its variety of decision making bodies. He was a Member of University Senate from 1968 to 1992, for continuous 24 long years and Member of the University Syndicate from 1971 to 1990, again for no less than 20 years. Most remarkable was the series of his deanship, as Dean Student Welfare (1967-72), Dean Alumni Relations (1975-76), Dean Foreign Students (1976-79), Dean University Instruction (1980-82) and Dean College Development Council (1989-92). He had also been a Member of Board of Finance (1968-74), Honorary Director North-Western Regional Center of ICSSR (1979-87) and Honorary Director Panjab University Regional Center, Muktsar (1998-2000). Panjab University was consistently in love with him and he loved it dearly in return. Despite repeated offers of vice-chancellorship at other universities, he was firm in sticking to and serving his home university.

Memories of his exemplary functioning as Dean Student Welfare are still fresh in the minds of those who were then elected members of student community. He was adjudged as a grand bridge between students and administration and ensured that any issue brought to his notice was resolved at the earliest possible. He was the one who mooted the idea of having a Student Center on the Campus and implemented an Exchange Program of the students with their counterparts in other Commonwealth countries. Gosal often described this

assignment of Dean Student Welfare as transformational in his life. It made him sensitive to viewpoint of others enabling him to respond to them in an empathetic manner.

All this was consistent with his overall evolved personality and culture of mind. He was elaborate on empirical and concise on theory. This I found somewhat puzzling since he taught Geographic Thought with the passion of a philosopher. He celebrated actual work over verbal debates; field work over armchair brooding. He abhorred verbosity in any situation and insisted that any piece of writing should be all flesh and no bones; wrench it dry, as he always said. Even while narrating a personal experience in life, he was succinct and left it to audience to draw its own inference instead of theorizing or sermonizing. Everyone considered him a mentor but he never imposed his opinion or mentorship on anyone. His affability drew one and all, young and old, to him. He was a true bearer of his name, Gurdev meaning the 'ideal teacher with godly qualities of virtue and piety'.

Another subtle nuance of his personality may also be mentioned. He loved to socialize particularly with community of geographers, but refrained from networking. He enjoyed his privacy at the same time never impinged upon someone else's space. His sense of justice was unquestionable. He was always on the side of merit and held his autonomy high. He knew with conviction what needed to be done in a given situation and he adhered to it absolutely.

Still another remarkable aspect of Gosal was the little or no change in his physical appearance from the time I first met him in 1960 to the last days of his life.

He was always well groomed and dressed immaculately exuding absolute confidence. He carried an aura of being indomitable. His very presence induced everyone to self-define the parameters of his or her discipline and moral limits. He was a man of few words but when he spoke, people listened to him with rapt attention. He was to be admired for what he said and also for what he did not say. Although he is no longer with us, he has left an indelible imprint on each and every person who came in contact with him.

During my association, I saw my relationship with Gosal evolve from being his student, to a colleague, and finally as fellow Professor Emeritus. I continued to rely upon him as my mentor whose exhaustive flow of ideas inspired me to be a better geographer, as well as a person. I often entrusted him with my concerns and I knew he would give me comfort and advice to the best of his ability. I realize now how dependent I had become on him. His absence is hard to accept and it leaves a dreary pain in my heart. He was most dependable, hence indispensable.

He finished his courses with us, as they say, but left behind lessons worth remembering. The spirit, substance and style with which he accomplished anything were a message in itself. The torch bequeathed by him is to be carried forward with a faster pace and brighter flame.

Gopal Krishan

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