

Organization of Space for Administration

Surya Kant, Chandigarh*

Honorable.....

I feel deeply honored at the outset, and express my sincere gratitude to IIG, particularly its patron Professor K.R.Dikshit, for giving me this rare opportunity of presiding over their great Institute and also the present event organized by them. Also I am beholden to Professor Aditya Shastriji, Vice Chancellor, Banasthali University, Banasthali for organizing the 38th IIG Meet at their venue. The university has a fantastic natural setting. Mahatma Gandhiji said once that, 'Banasthali is enshrined in my heart'. In a real sense, Banasthali Vidhyapith is a confluence of East and West, a fusion of modernity with tradition. To deliver my presidential address here is a life time opportunity for me.

Here I take this opportunity to share my ideas on a research theme which has received a scant attention of Indian Geographers at large.

I

I begin with a set of questions addressed to all present here in the august gathering. These include:

1. Have you ever thought why all the states in India have administrative units, such as districts, sub-districts(subdivisions/mandals/talukas/tehsils), and

development blocks for administration at the sub-state and local levels?

2. How the same government policies, such as reservation for Other Backward Classes or Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), do not carry the same significance for different Indian states? and
3. In which manner the efficiency to implement the same program or scheme differs by states?

An answer to all such questions is not neutral to the way space is organized for administration in Indian states. 'Administrative areas' as well as 'area administration' both are of prime importance and interest. It is the space where ideology is translated into organization and the polity is forced to come to terms with the complexity of physical, economic and social systems (Whitney 1970, 3).

This is the field where geography has an interface with public administration. Notwithstanding a close association between the administrative process and geographic space, the academic as well as administrative worlds hardly appreciate the importance of geographic perspective on administration. This is evidently clear

* Presidential Address delivered at the Indian Geographers' Meet held at Banasthali University Banasthali - Rajasthan, on

from the fact that while scrutinizing our administrative world through a variety of 'perspectives on administration', Dwight Waldo (1956) scanned the interface of public administration with history, literature and social sciences. He covered, among the social sciences, political science, cultural anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics and business administration. Inadvertently or by design, he missed taking a note of geographic perspective on administration.

Has Geography failed to project its role in administrative studies? It is notable that the traditional geographic regions have been in conflict with administrative areas. Heterogeneity within administrative areas is invariably highlighted and every regionalization scheme is posed as an alternative to the existing administrative map of any area. This has decreased rather than increased the love of geographers for administrative areas.

Geographers' weak background in Public Administration is certainly a strong factor contributing to the prevailing situation. The interface of Geography with Public Administration is the weakest among all the social sciences. Unfortunately both disciplines have so far deprived themselves of the benefit which could accrue from their mutual interaction.

Moreover, the policy makers and administrators are generally not aware of the spatial dimensions of their problems and policies. Their dimensions and activities are guided more by political considerations and social pressures than by the rationale of the spatial realities. Hence, geographers are

generally not asked to make a contribution of which they are capable.

In the following, an attempt has been made to reflect on the questions raised in the beginning. I will base my arguments on the research findings of the works conducted at Department of Geography, Panjab University, Chandigarh. At the department, Professor Gopal Krishan, besides pleading a case for 'Administrative Geography', in research monograph prepared in 1982 at the Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom in consultation with Professor Michael Chisholm, contributed several seminal research papers and supervised pioneering doctoral dissertations in this branch of Geography. Professor Nina Singh's (1991) work on administrative geography and development process in Haryana and Surya Kant's (1987) on administrative geography of Punjab were accomplished under his supervision. Recently awarded doctoral research thesis of Harbans Singh (2015), making a comparative study of territorial organization of administration in Punjab by public, private and non-government organizations in Punjab, is the latest addition in this garland of beads growing and enriching with his inspiration and research inputs.

II

To begin with, it is to be understood that administrative areas did not emerge by accident. They are the product of a long historical process spanning centuries. At the global level, the emergence of administrative areas followed the formation of the early state. This happened more than

five thousand years ago in Mesopotamia (Iraq) and somewhat later in the valleys of the Nile (Egypt), Indus (India) and Yangtze (China) rivers. The subsequent process of growth and diffusion of states set in motion a search for an effective mechanism to sustain societal integration in progressively large and culturally heterogeneous societies (Soja 1971, 15). The solution was found in division of a state into a number of units enjoying sociological homogeneity or functional unity. Some of these had earlier existed as feudatory territories. The new arrangement was intended to, (i) maintain a control over people and resources, (ii) impart due recognition to distinct identity of different communities, and (iii) facilitate collection of revenue.

In India, the Punjab, located in the Indus valley, was the scene of one of the earliest civilizations in human history. It saw the emergence of an early state and subsequently of administrative areas, as a mechanism to manage large and heterogeneous territories.

Briefly, the underlying philosophy as also the methodology of organizing space for administration differed during successive periods of Indian history. That was reflected in organization and subsequent changes made in territorial administration. In the hoary Vedic period, administrative areas coincided with clan territories. The structure became feudal-federal during the ancient Hindu period. The arrangement under the Muslims initially remaining militaristic changed to revenue collection after acquiring stability with time. The focus mainly was on urban administration. The

British adapted the traditional organization of space to their own colonial and economic interests. Their greatest contribution lay in the systematization, intensification and diversification of the administrative process. Both urban and rural areas were duly covered and the boundaries of administrative areas were clearly defined. The post-Independence era was distinguished by the introduction of the development block as the base tier in the administrative hierarchy. Addition of the development block at the base local of local government administration amounts to an attempt of translating the philosophy of development and democracy in spatial context.

Here lies the importance of tracing the evolutionary process of administrative areas, since such studies will provide a solid base to any exercise on administrative area reforms.

III

As a manifest expression of administrative organization of space, administrative areas are precisely defined units of varying hierarchical order designed to perform certain specific functions in each case.

Administrative areas can be classified as general purpose and special purpose. The former comprises all-purpose units like districts or sub-divisions. The latter are specific function units such as *taxation ward* and *revenue circle*. In addition, there are regional authorities like Food Corporation of India and National Capital Regional Planning Board, constituted especially for the development of a particular resource or management of a special service or planning of a specific region.

General purpose administrative areas manage a multitude of services. For example, Punjab is divided into five divisions, further into twenty-two districts, down into eighty-one subdivisions and further down in 145 development blocks. All have history behind their evolution. The relevance of division as a tier has considerably reduced in medium sized states like Punjab, because of the diminution in size of the state through its successive reorganizations.

Some of the administrative units initially evolved as special purpose authorities gradually assumed the character of general purpose administrative units. The development block, which was initially only a rural development unit, has acquired the status of general purpose authority with trickling of administrative functions down the spatial hierarchy. It has its own overall eminence.

Special purpose administrative units are functional division of the general purpose authorities. Each sectoral division is to look after a specific activity, such as agriculture, education, health, finance, law and order and so on. That is how we have a large number of government departments.

The post-Independence era has witnessed a proliferation of special purpose authorities. Since special purpose authorities had been organized at different points in time, and these differed in intensity of administration, their spatial arrangements were also diverse. Their overlapping boundaries gave rise to the problem of coordination and duplication of functions.

Regional authorities represent a hybrid of both general purpose and special purpose

authorities. They are especially constituted to manage some higher order service or to develop the resource base of a problem region spread over a number of general purpose authorities. State Electricity Board and State Transport Corporation are such examples. The necessary financial autonomy is accorded to them.

Thus, the general purpose authorities try to reconcile the overall spatial requirements of different functions but leave the individual functions to special purpose authorities to handle. The latter try to adjust their spatial framework of administration to that of general purpose authorities. This may not be achieved in many cases owing to technical or other constraints. In comparison, regional authorities try to acquire the character of both general purpose and special purpose authorities; their spatial organization usually overlaps that of the former.

A meaningful analysis of systems of general purpose, special purpose and regional authorities in a state would reveal the implicit philosophy and explicit objectives of governance in a state. It will also reveal any distortion in the spatial attributes of administrative areas in terms of their size, shape, location of headquarters and hierarchical pattern. The geographers can suggest the necessary reforms in the organization of space for administration in such cases.

IV

Now moving to the question, how the same government policies do not carry the same significance for different states? Take for example, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

(MGNREGA), which promises guaranteed wage employment to job seekers in the rural areas for specific period of time on fix daily wages. If the wage rates offered under its schemes are lower than those in the open labour market of any state or group of states, then hardly any wage employment seeker will come forward to work under such schemes. Hence, this scheme does not have much relevance for developed states like Punjab and Haryana.

Another example may be cited of subsidies provided on items, such as chemical fertilizers, tractors, and power supply for tube well irrigation in rural areas. These have limited significance for hill states like Himachal Pradesh. During the course of working on a research project on this state, I found a huge gap between the number of tractors purchased on subsidized rate and their actual number in the state. On further investigation it was revealed that tractors purchased by many farmers of Himachal Pradesh to avail subsidy soon found their way to the neighbouring states of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana.

Likewise the agitation against the implementation of recommendations of Mandal Commission on reservation of government jobs and seats in educational institutions for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in 1990 was confined mainly to the north Indian states. The southern states especially Tamil Nadu and Karnataka remained almost peaceful. They had already made such provisions.

All such examples bring home the point that while formulating government programs and policies, the detailed comprehensive

understanding of the regional and sub-regional realities is always needed for their successful implementation. Geographers are competent enough to conduct such studies, falling under the domain of area administration in Administrative Geography.

V

Coming to the third and the last question linked with administrative efficacy of different state governments. A number of programs and policies including new economic policy (NEP), distribution of essential commodities to the poor households through the public distribution system (PDS), Education for All, Universal Immunization Program, National Rural Health Mission, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Panchayati Raj Act, Food for Work, Midday Meal, National Food Security Mission, Antyodaya Anna Yojana, Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), Smart Cities Mission and so on have been launched from time to time by the Government of India. Go through the implementation evaluation reports of the Government of India of these schemes, you will find startling difference among various states on this count. The record of the less developed states is often dismal largely because they do not have matching funds to contribute. By contrast, New Economic Policy has yielded better dividends for the more developed states.

The above discourse has remained focused on administrative organization of space designed by the public sector agencies or the government. It is also true that private sector organizations, political parties,

religious and voluntary organizations and charitable trusts also organize their spatial administration to perform functions or distribute manufactured goods or services. It would be interesting as well as academically rewarding to find out how the spatial administration designed by all such agencies/ organizations differs from that organized by the public sector organizations. Recently, Harbans Singh (2015) took a lead by conducting a comparative study of territorial organization of administration designed by public, private and non-government agencies, making Punjab as a case study. He found that private sector organizations in Punjab make their territorial arrangements with minimum possible number of hierarchical tiers and keep on reforming administrative areas frequently in a quest for achieving higher order of economic efficiency. Against this, administrative space once designed by the public sector agencies remained untouched for decades. Another finding states that the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), a regional political party, has organized its administration in Punjab much more intensively than the Indian National Congress. The three tier spatial administration of the Indian National Congress (INC) terminated at the Block Congress Committee, with each Assembly constituency having two blocks. Against this, three tier hierarchy of spatial administration designed by the Shiromani Akali Dal have the SAD 'Circle' at its base, boundaries corresponding with the police *thanas* in rural areas. There were 291 SAD Circles against 234 Congress Blocks in the state.

In a way, the whole matter relating to any administration boils down to the optimality of organization in space. Optimality of any administrative system can be judged through the basic parameters of economic efficiency, justice, democracy, harmony and development, which are the concerns of any government. **Efficiency**, in an economic sense, calls for an administrative organization of space which maximizes resources, and saves time and minimizes effort. **Justice** demands a spatial arrangement, rendering equity to the core (the headquarters) and the periphery of any administrative unit. This is achieved more easily in smaller units, especially when means of transport and communications are not so developed. **Democracy** is realized by ensuring greater participation of people in the administrative process. Administrative structure with fewer tiers, a unitary form of administration at different hierarchical levels, and smaller units are generally more effective for the purpose. A **harmonious** community life is facilitated by creating an association between the administrative units and ethnic homogeneity at local level. This calls for a correspondence between the sociological and administrative organization of space. Lastly, the **development process** is best promoted by adjusting administrative units to resource regions.

All this makes Administrative Organization of Space, the subject matter of Administrative Geography, an exciting field of study. It calls for nourishment through research and teaching. This will be in the wider interest of or discipline.

Jai Hind and Thank you one and all

References

- Krishan, Gopal (1982), *Administrative geography*, A monograph prepared at Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom (in consultation with Professor Michael Chisholm).
- Kant, Surya (1987), Administrative organization of space in an Indian state: A case study of Punjab, A doctoral thesis submitted to *Department of Geography, Panjab University, Chandigarh*.
- Singh, Harbans (2015), Territorial organization of administration by public, private and non-government agencies in Punjab: A comparative analysis, A doctoral thesis submitted to *Department of Geography, Panjab University, Chandigarh*.
- Singh, Nina (1991), The development process in a newly organised Indian state: a case study of Haryana, A doctoral thesis submitted to *Department of Geography, Panjab University, Chandigarh*.
- Soja, Edward W. (1971), The political organization of space, *Association of American Geographers, Resource Paper No.8*.
- Waldo, Dwight (1956), *Perspectives on Administration*, Alabama: University of Alabama Press.
- Whitney, J.B.R. (1970), China: area, administration and nation building, *Department of geography, University of Chicago, Resource Paper No.123*.

Surya Kant

Professor of Geography (Rtrd)
Department of Geography
Punjab University
Chandigadh