

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON PHILOSOPHY AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF GEOGRAPHY

Srikumar Chattopadhyay¹ and Mahamaya Chattopadhyay²
Thiruanantpuram

The discipline of Geography is experiencing changes in theory and practice. During last fifty years, philosophically the subject has moved from the school of Determinism, Positivism, Marxism, and Post Modernism, and continues to deliberate on its identity and scope. Action research/ activist research added another dimension. It may be an important strategy to explore that area of understanding in which some aspects of all these concepts overlap for meaningful interpretation of social reality. Geography is perhaps the only discipline that is more identified through its approach than the content. As an interdisciplinary science, geography tries to integrate natural and social sciences, maintains a porous boundary, continuously exchanges ideas and shares theory and methods with other disciplines and is broad based. These characteristics have evoked extreme reactions. At one end geography is construed as a subject lacking core element and practiced by 'Jack of all trades and master of none' and at another extreme this broad-based-ness considered to have equipped geographers with a larger perspective and integrated framework, which, in today's context of over specialization and segmented approach, provides useful insight. In fact in recent years, there are several areas in

which geography finds its application and utility potential of the subject increased tremendously.

Human activities are important contributors in earth system processes. Physical space is undergoing changes continuously through human actions at different scales and relative space is being produced as a result of this interaction. Space is emerging as a medium to integrate natural landscape and anthropogenic activities. Recognition of the recent Geological era as Anthropocene and human dimension of environment, especially in the context of all encompassing environmental change including climate change have given further impetus to geographical research. Many of the environmental problems have societal origins, which need to be captured for devising meaningful management and decision options. It is also important to note that all human actions are not just an in-situ event there are ex-situ factors even across countries that governs them. Theoretical deliberations remain incomplete if these issues are not internalized.

Methodologically the subject has gained from the technological advances particularly in the field of geoinformatics, which have strengthened the subject to link

macro and micro perspective and engage in intricate spatial analysis across the scale. However, there are little deliberations to integrate theory and methods. As a result root causes of the problems mostly remained unaddressed. Many of the professional geographers, well versed with the latest technology, do not give adequate importance to theoretical understanding. This has led to poor quality research and lack of imagination while interpreting data although tools/ methods used for data analysis are quite sophisticated.

The country is confronted with several problems ranging from geopolitical, environmental/ ecological, disaster, competing demand for natural resources, urbanization, growing inequality and poverty. How do we geographers respond to these? How do we contribute in policy decision? Can research be value free? How do we take geography beyond academics? These are some of the emerging issues to be addressed both theoretically and methodologically.

Unfortunately, there were not many attempts to initiate discussion covering all the aspects indicated in foregoing paragraphs and hardly there were any concerted effort to apprise the young researchers and professionals about these. Rediscovering geography and its relevance for science and society figured in academic deliberations in many countries. Most of the Presidential addresses during Indian Geography Congress voiced concern about the developments in the subject. However, attempts are yet to be taken to consolidate the debates systematically and evolve a strategy to reach the young researchers across the

country about the necessity to be engaged both in theory and methodological debates. This is a huge task and multilevel activities are warranted to achieve meaningful results.

With the purpose to initiate such debates among geographers working at different levels this national workshop on 'Philosophy and Research Methodology of Geography' was organized during 7 & 8 December, 2011 by Centre for Earth Science Studies, Thiruvananthapuram. The Ministry of Earth Sciences, Government of India and KSCSTE, Government of Kerala sponsored this workshop.

This special issue of Transactions, Institute of Indian Geographers, contains 16 papers, of which 15 papers were presented and discussed. The paper of Prof. Swapna Banerjee-Guha is additionally included. She had sent the paper but could not attend the workshop due to some unavoidable circumstances. These papers highlight varieties of perspectives on philosophy, research methodology, teaching and syllabus making. The purpose of this special issue is to highlight various points of view or debating issues that are of common concern, but not necessarily to resolve or reconcile divergent perspectives. Readers may note that there is a common agreement among the authors that there are 'causes of concern' and in all three aspects of the discipline-research, teaching and application, there is a need to deliberate on our present activities and reorient.

There are nine full length papers and seven concept notes or short papers. Considering the matter dealt in these papers and concept notes it is possible to

categorise them into six groups: philosophy (one paper), general review and setting new agenda (six papers), interdisciplinary nature (two papers), research methodology (two papers), geography and society (four papers) and perception (one paper). We shall discuss these papers following this grouping, however the arrangement of papers will follow a different sequence.

Prof. K R Dikshit in his article on "Philosophy of Geography" opined that a search for the philosophy of geography is perhaps prompted by a chaotic development in geography during the last quarter of the twentieth century following swift paradigm shift. Too much emphasis on definition and attempt to predetermine the boundary may not serve the purpose. Philosophy of the subject may evolve through practice. This may be contested; nevertheless the point of developing subject's own philosophy is significant.

There are six articles providing general review and trying to set new agenda. Subject matter dealt in these papers varies widely. Prof. M H Qureshi in the paper "University Education of Geography in India" traces evolution of university education of geography in India, which is heavily influenced by British school. He drew our attention to the widening gap between physical aspect and social science tradition of the subject and argued that this gap needs to be filled, stimuli for which may perhaps come from the practicing geographers. In a way Prof Qureshi's observation strengthens Prof. Dikshit's argument that 'philosophy may evolve through practice'.

Nina Singh covers a broad spectrum from changing nature of the subject to recent challenges both in research front and teaching. She analysed various Presidential

addresses delivered during Geography Conferences across India. In the article on "Towards fresh wood and pastures new- A case of geography" she observed that Geographers often undertake critical reappraisal of their discipline- of its contents, its philosophy, its methodology, and its relationship with other academic disciplines and with the outside world. The geographers acknowledge that the nature of geographic knowledge today is very different from what it was fifty years ago. According to her most challenging task before us is how to think, do and research geographically?

Swapna Banerjee-Guha in her paper "Contemporary Globalisation and the Space of Politics" observed that the term space and spatiality are increasingly being used in social science research. The most formidable way of analysing the relationship between human beings and space, however, is through understanding of the process of reconstruction and reproduction of the latter. There is definite links among all de- and re-territorialised production and human-resource complexes of the present time with the innumerable struggles being organised at different scales against the process of 'creative destruction' promoted and executed by neoliberal state and global capitalism.

Prof. P S Tiwari in his concept note on 'A note on enriching Indian geography' observed that geography courses in India are heavily tilted in favour of human geography. According to him the challenge is to identify the areas of core competence, strengthen them and to devise appropriate syllabus. He has also highlighted promising areas of employment.

Prof. Baleshwar Thakur in his note on 'Growth and structure of specialisation trend in Indian geography' analysed growth trajectory of post independent Indian geography. Scanning through published literatures Prof. Thakur has computed paradigms, specializations and leading practioners in the country. He raises macro micro debate and makes and attempt to position them complimentarily.

Prof. Devendra Naik in his paper "Are we losing regions as focus of our study? Some reflections on regional perspectives in geography" underlined concerns at various levels about the diffused nature of geographical research in India. While pluralistic nature of the subject is considered as one of its important characteristics, question is often raised about the boundary. He strongly advocated rediscovery of regional perspectives in geographical studies in this context. The dichotomy of physical and social science aspect of the subject may be appropriately addressed through regional studies. It is of course an important issue to deliberate

Two articles deal with interdisciplinary nature of the subject. Prof. H S Sharma in his article on 'Interdisciplinary Nature of Geography' highlighted global emphasis on pursuing geographical research following interdisciplinary approach and suggests that research in geography must move beyond a disciplinary focus to address sustainability issues in the frame work of complex dynamical system. He advocates use of modern tools to pursue interdisciplinary research.

Prof. Ranjan Basu discusses interdisciplinary issue from teaching point of view. He strongly advocates

identification of allied disciplines, with which geography overlaps or exchanges paradigms and methods and suggests that these subjects may be taught in combination with geography at the undergraduate level to promote interdisciplinary studies. It may be noted that the very strong attracting point of geography is its interdisciplinary approach.

Prof. M S Nathawat and Dr. Ravi S Singh discussed methodological issues. Prof. Nathawat in his concept note on 'Research methods and tools in geography' dealt with advent of modern tools like RS, GIS, GPS and their importance in furthering cause of geography. At the same time he emphasized that research methods should be governed by philosophy and field work tradition of geography needs to be revitalized. He also presented lecture modules for training geography researchers.

Dr. Ravi S Singh in his paper on 'Application of qualitative research methods for the improvement of Indian geographic research: Issues and alternatives' observed that geography as a discipline in higher education, though relatively a late beginner in India, today, it has considerable presence. The quality of research (and training) in geography has emerged as an issue of concern in a few published works and also in academic deliberations from time to time. There has been clear lopsidedness towards human geography works and simultaneous neglect of qualitative research methods in research training in India. He argued adoption of qualitative methods to enrich and improve the Indian geographical research and presented a course outline on qualitative research.

There are four papers dealing with geography and society, however from

different points of view. Prof. Sukla Bhaduri in her note on 'Geography and society' discussed contemporary approaches in geography. She has identified several themes for research which are capable of contributing to societal development. She observed that social geography has expanded its domain and there is a need to interact with allied subjects for meaningfully contributing in societal development.

Prof. Sheela Prasad in her note on 'Geography and society' underlined that there is a crisis in geography. The challenge is to move geography away from its elitist approach and take part in national debate on caste census, SEZs and similar issues of immediate social concern. She has also proposed an outline of a syllabus for teaching the course on 'Geography and Society'.

Dr. Anil Kumar's paper on 'Geography and society' stresses on changing nature of the subject in response to societal change. This is evident in teaching, academic and professional arena. Geographers are playing larger role in decision making process. There is a need to enhance geography's competency through training and education, so that the practioners of the subject can respond to the societal demand.

Dr. D Nandakumar in his article on 'Geography and Society' traces development of the subject, methodological changes, and tries to develop a strategy for future course of geography. He raised a number of issues that can be pursued in geographical studies for responding to environmental and societal challenges.

How does geography influence writings of poets and literary figures is a field not usually explored but certainly worth of investigation. It may provide an opportunity to contextualize geography in the back ground of our culture. Prof. Mology Mukhopadhyay in his article on 'Tagore's perception on primordial components of physical environment: A geographical overview' analyses some of Tagore's works. He observed that Rabindranath Tagore viewed environment as part of the very existence of human civilisation and always believed in sustainable ecological development. The Poet strongly believed that survival of human kind is intricately related with protection of nature.

This brainstorming workshop is perhaps the beginning of a larger debate across the country. Participants agreed that research training is necessary for the younger crop to grasp the essence of the subject and use modern tool appropriately.

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Srikumar Chattopadhyay

Scientist G

srikumarc53@gmail.com

Head, Resources Analysis Division

Centre for Earth Science Studies

Trivandrum 695 031

Mahamaya Chattopadhyay

Scientist E2

mahamayac@sify.com

Resources Analysis Division

Centre for Earth Science Studies

Trivandrum 695 031