

ENRICHING GEOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH IN INDIA THROUGH QUALITATIVE METHODS: A PLEA

Ravi S. Singh

ABSTRACT

Geography as a discipline in higher education, though relatively a late beginner in India, today 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. The objective of present article is to argue for the greater adoption of qualitative methods to enrich and improve the Indian geographical research. And, at the end, a course outline on qualitative research is placed for the benefit of the interested readers.

Keywords: Research, Qualitative Methods, Human Geography, Indian Geography.

Introduction

Despite of a over eight decades old institutional presence, research in Indian Geography 'ails' from a variety of pestilences associated with practices, methodology, focus and the question of its relevance too. One of the constant preoccupations of the practising Indian geographers in academe has been 'pseudo' or 'spurious' quantification of geographical research and undue overemphasis on the modern information technology based tools. The continuity of this practice probably is due to lack of recognised identity and for a "scientific" tag to makeover the lackings. Consequently, there has been gross neglect of a potent alternative approach—qualitative approach—in the course of research training in general. My objective in this brief article is to bring out the salient features geographic research in India, argue for

the incorporation of qualitative approach to geographic research, and discuss the qualitative alternatives. At the end, a short course outline is proposed. The discussions made here are in the larger context of past trends and current practices which are heavily lopsided towards broader field of human geography.

Research: meaning and characteristics

The meaning of research is often enshrouded with several notions, conceptions and doubts. Hence, it is quite vague in meaning among people including the academics, other intellectuals, and more commonly among the young researchers. Etymologically, the word 'research' has its roots in Middle Ages French *recherché* or *recherchier* which means 'to investigate thoroughly', from Old French; and, from re- + *cerchier*, that is "to search". Therefore, its meaning

could be understood as ‘to search or investigate exhaustively’; studious inquiry or examination; especially, investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts, revision of accepted theories or laws in the light of new facts, or practical application of such new or revised theories or laws; and, the collecting of information about a particular subject (*Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, Tenth Edition). To appreciate the formal academic meaning, following definitions may be considered:

- ‘Research’ is a process and a means to acquire knowledge (Misra, 1989:1).
- ‘Research’ is “a structural inquiry that utilises acceptable scientific methodology to solve problems and creates new knowledge that is generally acceptable” (Grinnell 1993: 4).
- Research is ‘a systematic investigation to find answers to a problem’ (Burns, 1994: 2).
- ‘Research is one of the ways to find answers to your questions’ (Kumar, 2005: 6).
- ‘Research is a diligent search, studious inquiry, investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery of new facts and findings; or, broadly, it may relate to any subject of inquiry with regard to collection of information, interpretation of facts, and revision of existing theories or laws in the light of new facts or evidence (Adams et. al., 2007: 19).

In the academic and intellectual world, a process of study which adheres to the following three criteria termed as *research* which could be of many types (cf. Table 1):

- is being undertaken within a framework of a set of philosophies;

- uses procedures, methods and techniques that have been tested for their validity and reliability; and,
- is designed to be unbiased and objective.

On the basis of the above, it can be said that to qualify as ‘research’, the process must have certain characteristics:

- *Controlled* (best achieved in physical sciences)
- *Rigorous* (procedures to be followed are relevant, appropriate and justified)
- *Systematic* (logical sequence)
- *Valid and Verifiable* (correct and can be verified by any one)
- *Empirical* (based up on hard evidence collected from real life experiences or observations)
- *Critical* (the process adopted/ followed be full-proof and free from any drawbacks, able to withstand critical scrutiny).

Table 1: Research Types

General Descriptive Research Explanatory Research Predictive Research <i>Or</i> Basic Research, Strategic Research Applied Research.	Objectives Based Descriptive Research Exploratory Research <i>Or</i> Correlational Research Explanatory Research
Application Based Pure Research Applied Research	Inquiry Mode Based Quantitative Research Qualitative Research

Significance of research ultimately lies in the goal of new knowledge creation; but, equally important is the fact that to what use that knowledge is put. In academics (including geography), its significance could be understood in terms of the broadening the field of knowledge, pedagogy, predicting future scenarios, and suggesting/recommending solutions to the problem(s) under study.

Brief literature summary: *research quality concerns and poorer responses*

Indian Geography though a late entry in the institutions of higher learning has acquired own form and status. Its approach, methodology, and application have not been the same all through these years (see Singh 2009a,b,c). The professional Indian geographers nevertheless feel that there is a common ailment, found across these periods signifying changes, which is excessively west-orientation and poor standard of research output. It has thwarted qualitative change and led to a dismal state/image of Indian Geography at the international level. Concerned scholars have been raising voices occasionally on the lacking and ailments (Singh Ravi 2009a & b).

Sopher (1973) initiated the project of critical appraisal and lamented the issue of lack of “Indianness” in Indian Geography. In the contemporary perspective, his call was for constructing a post-colonial Indian Geography to address the greater goal of making an Indian identity and “Indianness”. Joe Schwartzberg (1983) indicated why the quality of geographic research is pathetic and how it has been worsening despite many reassured sources and resources, number of geographical societies all of them having a journal of their own in south Asia, particularly India.

The most candid confessions were made by A.B. Mukerji (1992). The pabulum out of Mukerji’s critical churning was put into 11 groups to the readers. The over-“gerontocratic” grind is thwarting the future hopes and methodological dogma and copycatting the west is clearly taking its toll. K.R. Dikshit’s (2002) cautioned young Indian geographers, “... younger geographers in India look at the senior geographers, venerably and even uncritically. This may be an extremely polite gesture of good will, but, certainly, it doesn’t represent the spirit of science or scientific enquiry. Let us remember, a critical assessment is far more rewarding than an uncritical acceptance of everything that the elders do”. It is an indicator of how young generation of the Indian geographers normally conduct the scientific research without developing/training a critical outlook. This problem does not end with the consequences for the “accomplished” master/doctoral dissertations. If thought seriously, it is the beginning of future academic downfalls—breeding of infertile thoughts incapable of germinating and creating new knowledge which is the ultimate purpose of any research.

A pertinent question is how long we will carry forward with simple descriptive method with overloaded burden of choroplething of simple percentage values already shown in tables and used for making diagrams to show the unexplained and unattributed “spatial pattern”? The methodological problem arises due to our insufficient and improper grounding in the philosophical, conceptual, and theoretical underpinnings of our discipline (Dikshit 1994, vii-viii; 2001) despite the introduction of a compulsory course/paper on geographical thought at advance level.

Questioning research praxis is essentially a deconstruction enterprise. Raju (2004) has rightly highlighted the mainstream tendency, still stuck to the conservative colonial conventions, discouraging works on a non-conventional research problem related to emergent realities and openness. The conservative Indian Geography thus continues to prevent the unfolding of alternative geographies and critical academic enterprises. Lahiri-Dutt (2005) raised many valid questions intertwined with her own engagement with geography as a student-teacher-researcher at Burdwan University. Her (self-)experiential narration steals a look into the problems of Indian geographic research with reference to non-elite institutions situated in peripheral areas.

With changing times, circumstances and challenges facing a society change, and so do the response(s) to them determined by the contemporary perception, state of knowledge and cutting-edge technology available for application. How far Indian Geography has responded to that? And, what are future plans to plug the problem?

Qualitative methods: opportunities and constraints

Like the problem with meaning (of research), there are enough confusions and biased opinions with regard to “scientific” research methods. As far as the professional geography is concerned, the last century was most enriching. Scholars have identified many paradigmatic shifts showing the discontent/dissatisfaction with the previous disciplinary practice and emergence of a new alternative approach. If compared, there has been general sway of the qualitative methods. Of course, there is clear-cut distinction in the nature of the practised

qualitative methods. For example, the pre-mid 20th century method was descriptive and simple; whereas, the quantitative methods employed since the 1980s with the cultural turn and engagement of geographers in the critical social theory are analytical and rigorous. Thus, one may find apparent departure from the past practises. Actually, after every criticism, an approach and methodology emerges stronger.

In Indian Geography, one finds various concerns expressed with regard to the nature of research practices and major shortcomings. It is apparent that there is greater emphasis on the quantitative methods compared to the qualitative ones. Perhaps, the later is not even taught to the senior level graduate and research students.

The rise of qualitative research in Geography in a big way has followed the paradigm shift in favour of ‘postmodern turn’. Critics may paint it differently; however, in reality this philosophical turn has provided a stronger and vital tool in the form of ‘deconstruction’ which not only facilitates construction of new(er) meanings but also ensures ‘openness’ in research to a great extent for which even the Indian geographers have been calling for (cf. Raju 2004). At this juncture, two arguments generally given against the postmodernism in Indian Geography are mention worthy (though I am yet to come across any formal published argument in this line). First, ‘postmodernism’ is the logical fall out of the western capitalism which the Indian society is yet to experience; so, its relevance here is questionable. Second, does its adoption here will not be copying of the western models allegedly one of the weaknesses of Indian Geography. Both of these points could be

responded collectively. 'Postmodernism' is a philosophical movement. Of course, we are more familiar with its western *avatara* the students of the Indian philosophy know about its older Indian origin. Moreover, any philosophical idea transcends time and space limit. It hence needs to be understood that following a 'postmodern turn' is different from adopting a Western model to explain an indigenous reality. Overlooking the geographical philosophies for they being developed in the West would then require an overall recasting of the indigenous traditions as the way Geography as a discipline is practiced across the globe is essentially a European tradition (cf. Stoddart 1986).

In the same line of argument, looking at the nature of emerging social issues in Indian society, appropriate method is needed that nevertheless does not mean switching over to rigorous quantitative techniques or modern information and communication technology (MICT) based techniques like remote sensing, GIS or GPS. People's perspective has emerged crucial and that is why the approach and method of research should also reorient. As mentioned above, one of the core concerns of qualitative research is (social) 'structures' and (individual) 'experiences' which shape human space and ultimately the geographical space. The proper understanding of making, unmaking and remaking of spatial patterns therefore could be better accomplished at the local level through qualitative methods than the other available options. Of course, other methods could be appropriately integrated at higher scales. The following discussion attempts to put the qualitative research methods in perspective.

What is qualitative research?

Contrary to the image painted by the critics, the qualitative research too is a type of scientific research as it shares characteristics of a scientific research and hence:

- seeks answer(s) to a question;
- systematically uses a predefined set of procedures to answer the question;
- collects evidence;
- produces findings that were not determined in advance;
- produces findings that are applicable beyond the immediate boundaries of the study;
- it seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the people, or technically speaking the 'population', it involves;
- it is more effective in acquiring specific cultural information related with the values, opinions, behaviours, and social contexts of particular populations. It is well known that the concern of qualitative research is with social *structures* and individual *experiences*; and
- it tries to maintain a 'fine balance' between examining structures and processes in one hand and individuals and (their) experiences on the other. Qualitative research stresses on the multiplicity of meanings and interpretations instead of imposing 'a correct' interpretation, claimed by the positivists.

Qualitative research method types

Oral methods

The general call of this qualitative research type is give chance to the respondents to "speak with their own voice". It is very rich

as evident from the following Table 2. These methods are quite frequently employed in the social sciences research, especially the interview and survey methods. However, with the ‘postmodern turn’ which challenged ‘foundationalism’ and laid greater emphasis on ‘multiple voices’, the biography methods have also been found increasing clientele and emerged as a favourite research method.

But, it is not the same for geographical researches conducted in India. A common problem associated with oral methods is the ‘romanticisation’ and difficulty in verification of the acclaimed. Despite of such hurdles, oral sources have been frequently referred to across the disciplines—from history to legal studies—to put the side of subalterns (cf. McRanor 1997).

Table 2: Oral qualitative methods

General Method	Specific Method	Research Questions	
<i>Biography</i>	Autobiography	Individual	
	Biography		
	Oral History		
<i>Interviews</i>	Unstructured		
	Semi-structured		
	Structured		
<i>Surveys</i>	Focus groups—open ended		
	Surveys—structured		
	Questionnaire—structured		

(Source: Winchester 2000: 7)

Textual method

‘Texts’ are the storehouse of knowledge. But, the meaning of “text” here is wider than the generally perceived one which is limited to written texts only. In the qualitative research the sources of text could be categorised into *creative* (examples literature, art, music, and films), *documentary* (examples maps, newspapers, records like planning documents or police files, posters, pamphlets, postage stamps, etc.) and *landscape*. The written texts themselves are the rich repositories which are used to make a critical reading and unravelling the underlying (social) structures and their implications.

Observational Method

The significance of this method is best expressed in the popular saying “*seeing is believing*”. In Geography particularly, as also in other field disciplines, this method has been trusted and tested for a long period of time. Learning (and education) through observation still continues to be important. Observation is used vividly in the geographic practice since the ancient times. The example of education of young Carl Ritter in Salzmann’s (who was influenced by the educational procedure advocated by Jacques Rousseau in his famous work *Émile*, 1762 and the Swiss educator Johann Pestalozzi)

school at Schnepfenthal (Thuringewald) under the supervision of J.C.F. GutsMuths (James 1972: 165-166) is classic one to see the value of this method in the education of geographers and also future research.

Observation could be defined as ‘watching and noting’. In a formal/scientific observation, of course, weight is given on accuracy and occurrence (of the phenomenon). That means, it is always purposive and therefore the observer has the choice of deciding what to see (phenomenon) and how to see (method of observation). Observation is fundamental to all knowledge-enquiry systems. Kearns (2000) refers to three objectives of observation:

- counting (enumerative),
- providing complimentary evidence, and
- contextual understanding.

There are three identified main types of observation: direct/indirect; controlled/uncontrolled; and, primary/secondary.

- **How to use qualitative methods in geographic research?**

Quantitative methods have several limits and also suffer from inappropriateness for the researching into the areas of social reality like attitudes and behaviour, core of our everyday practices in all spheres of life, which cannot be measured by such statistics. Moreover, “meanings” and “contexts” are given due importance in qualitative research which tries to unravel the sequences (‘how’) in which participants’ meanings (‘what’) are positioned. In other words, there is concern for particular contexts and sequences of action which is termed as *contextual sensitivity* (how an apparently

stable phenomenon is actually put together by its participants).

The opportunities

Since the 1980s when the geographical discourse and research took a ‘cultural turn’ with greater inclusions of postmodern paradigm in research and teaching together with growing element of critical social theory in geographical practice.

Now, mere mapping a phenomenon to show the pattern(s) is no longer sufficient; interpretation of the making of a pattern and its consequences is rather more crucial. Similar shift may be noted in the process wherein our engagement has gone ‘thematic’—a departure from the tradition of mapping the mappable where map-making part got greater emphasis. The same however cannot be said of Indian Geography in which but for a few solitary examples we are hesitant in breaking way from the dogma of convention and progress ahead in tune with the current practices of the global human geography particularly.

Limitations

Contextual sensitivity

It is not always shown by qualitative researchers. Sometimes, they forget to put phenomena into inverted commas and chase some ‘essential’ object often apparently located inside people’s heads like ‘meaning’ or ‘experience’. For instance, some qualitative researchers use open-ended interviews to try to tap directly the perceptions of individuals. This ‘romantic’ approach can make unavailable the situations and contexts to which their subjects refer.

It is suggested that it should only be contemplated at early or ‘exploratory’

stages of a study. Viewed from this perspective, qualitative research can be used to familiarize oneself with a setting before the serious sampling and counting implying that quantitative data are the standard form and that 'statistical analysis' is the bedrock of research.

Reliability

The problem of reliability in qualitative research is considered important, if looked through the critics' eyes. The associated points could be presented in the following way:

- Being dependent more up on the (long descriptive) narratives than on quantified data, how does it handle categorization of the events or activities described on which an analysis actually rests with the qualitative research upon.
- How reliable is the interpretation of pauses, overlaps or body movements, which could be rubbished as trivial but are apparently impregnated with crucial deeper meanings in highly significant in particular contexts, even when respondents' activities are recorded through the audio or video and transcribed.

The problem of anecdotalism

Related with the soundness of the offered explanations revealed in the way in which research reports sometimes appeal to a few telling 'examples' of some apparent phenomenon, without any attempt to analyze less clear (or even contradictory) data .

In this way, the problem of 'anecdotalism' directs the whole issue towards validity, 'another word for truth' of qualitative research in general. The suspicion may

arise either due to the fact that the research 'has clearly made no attempt to deal with contrary cases or because of the "extended immersion in the 'field', so typical of qualitative research".

Conclusions

Research is the creation of new knowledge. The formal research in the scientific world should necessarily be controlled; rigorous by following procedures that are relevant, appropriate and justified; systematic; valid and verifiable (by any one); empirical; and critical as well.

India moves ahead with the issues never confronted in the past. The new emerging research questions of identity, exclusions, deprivations and justice cannot be handled efficiently using the conventional modern research tools. In such a situation, as students of Geography, we can look towards the qualitative research approach for making 'quality' inputs to revitalise our research work. Though, the critics express doubts about the reliability and validity of qualitative research and also downplay its value. For addressing the quality concerns in Indian geographic research, a wise blend of both the qualitative and quantitative research approaches would be most suitable together with the support of MICT based technical inputs.

Acknowledgement: I am thankful to Dr. Srikumar Chattopadhyay, Convener and Dr. Mahamaya Chattopadhyay, Co-convener of the National Workshop for inviting and giving me the opportunity to participate and interact with select learned Indian geographers; and, indebted to Prof. K.R. Dikshit (Pune), Prof. D.K. Nayak (NEHU, Shillong), Prof. M.H. Qureshi

(JMI, formerly at JNU, New Delhi), Prof. B. Thakur (Delhi) and Prof. P.S. Tiwari (MU, Chennai) for their enriching comments. Usual disclaimers apply.

References and Select Bibliography

- Adams, John, et al (eds.) (2007): *Research Methods for Graduate Business and Social Science Students*. New Delhi: Response Books.
- Bailey, C. White, C. and Pain, R. (1999): Evaluating qualitative research: dealing with the tension between science and creativity. *Area*, 31(2): 169-178.
- Baxter, J. and Eyles, J. (1999): Evaluating qualitative research in geography: establishing rigour in interview analysis. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 22 (4): 505-525.
- Burns, Robert B. (1994): *Introduction to Research Methods* (2nd edition). Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
- Dikshit, K.R. (2006): The changing western perspective on geography and the Indian context. *Transactions of the Institute of Indian Geographers*, 28(2): 123-155.
- Halfpenny, P. (1979): The analysis of qualitative data. *Sociological Review*, 27(4): 799-825.
- Hay, Ian (ed.) (2000): *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- James, Preston E. (1972): *All Possible Worlds: A History of Geographical Ideas*. New York: The Odyssey Press.
- Kaiser, Karen (2009): Protecting respondent confidentiality in qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 19 (11): 1632-1641, DOI: 10.1177/1049732309350879.
- Kapur, Anu (2004): Geography in India: A languishing social science. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39 (37): 4187-4195.
- Kearns, Robin (2000) Being there: research through observing and participating. In, Ian Hay (ed.) *op.cit*, 103-122.
- Lawson, V. (1995): The politics of difference: Examining the quantitative/qualitative dualism in post-structuralist feminist research. *Professional Geographer*, 47(4): 449-457.
- McRanor, Shauna (1997): Maintaining the reliability of aboriginal oral records and their material manifestations: Implications for archival practice. *Archivaria* 43 (Spring): 64-88.
- <http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/viewFile/12176/13186> (accessed Feb. 23, 2012).
- Misra, R.P. (1989): *Research Methodology: A Handbook*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Co.
- Raju, Saraswati (2004) Contextualizing critical geography in India: Emerging research and praxis. *GeoForum*, 35: 539-544.
- Singh, Rana P.B. (2009a): *Uprooting Geographic Thoughts in India: Toward Ecology and Culture in 21st Century*. Newcastle upon Tyne (UK): Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Singh, Rana P.B. (2009b): *Geographical Thoughts in India: Snapshots and Vision for the 21st Century*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

- Singh, Ravi S. (2008): Challenges to Indian Geography: A contextual analysis. *Geographical Review of India* (Platinum Jubilee Volume), 70(1): 57-70.
- Singh, Ravi S. (ed) (2009a): *Indian Geography: Perspectives, Concerns and Issues*. Rawat Publications, Jaipur/ New Delhi.
- Singh, Ravi S.(2009b): Identity and image of Indian Geography: The people's perspective. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 33(3): 375-391.
- Singh, Ravi S. (ed.) (2009c): *Indian Geography in the 21st Century: The Young Geographers Agenda*. Newcastle upon Tyne (UK): Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Stoddart, D.R. (1986): *On Geography and its History*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Winchester, Hilary P.M. 2000. Being there: research through observing and participating. In, Ian Hay (ed.) *op. cit.*, 1-22.

Ravi S. Singh,

Associate Professor, Department of Geography
Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi 221 005, UP

Email: ravisingh.geog@gmail.com,
ravi_geog_bhu@yahoo.com