

# GEOGRAPHY AND SOCIETY: RETHINKING FRAMEWORKS

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That there is a crisis in Geography in India is now accepted by most scholars. The need for a discussion on the future of Geography is therefore, both welcome and long overdue. Geographers world-wide are debating the status of the subject and seeking ways to reinvent both, its theory and content. Today, the way forward for all disciplines is probably to move beyond disciplinary boundaries into interdisciplinary terrains and critical frameworks. This is not to suggest that Geography should dilute or loose its identity, but there is a need to rethink and redefine the present status of the discipline.

Geography in India appears to show reluctance for critical thinking and engaging in meaningful debates on the relevance of the discipline. This has in many ways adversely impacted the quality of research output in Geography and its future in the country. While most other social science disciplines have opened up new analytical categories for interrogation and in the process charted a new discourse for themselves, Geography has been slow to subject itself to meaningful critical self-reflection.

While Indian Geography claims to be studying people, there has been certain opaqueness in its vision in attempting such studies. In the imagination of mainstream Geography, space and people are viewed as homogenous, neutral, powerless and lacking in agency. The positivist domination has been difficult to shake off by Indian

geographers who continue to produce work that is largely quantitative in both methodology and content. The intention here is not to dismiss quantitative research which has its own merits; rather, it is to question its hegemony that prevents new/different ways of asking questions and 'doing' research. There is a need to recognize the politics of power relations that is expressed spatially through hegemony, domination, subordination and exclusion. This interplay of power relations organizes space in different ways that conventional geography largely accepts as 'given' and hence does not question or problematise.

Indian social reality does not lend itself easily to universal models or generalizations because of its complex diversities and disparities that defy any singular disciplinary analysis. Understanding the nuances of Indian society this demands an interdisciplinary approach. This explains to some extent the incompleteness observed in the conclusions of most geographical research in India, which deploy quantitative techniques in large measure. While a new reading of Indian spatial reality is required, geographical research continues to be driven by an outdated and inadequate western imagination of the 60s and 70s. Ironically, much of the critical questioning of the dominance of quantitative research in geography in the West since the 1970s is yet to catch the attention of Indian geographers.

## The Challenges for Indian Geography

In courses on Geography and Society the frameworks of analysis have not changed over the last few decades. The syllabi in most such courses include sections on: Population and Settlements; Urbanisation trends and patterns; Migration patterns; Man-Land associations. While these topics do help us understand certain macro/meso spatial characteristics of Indian society, there are significant hegemonies and absences that they do not address or even recognize. It is therefore important to equip students and teachers of Geography with the appropriate conceptual tools to enable them to read texts and ask questions differently. Critical readings from cultural geography need to be incorporated into the syllabus of such courses that would bring in new registers of enquiry: the politics of identity; representation; and exclusion.

Such an endeavour would require a commitment to engage with social theory. A reading of some key thinkers who have contributed to a critical social theory would be an integral part of such an enterprise. Philosophy in Geography needs to accommodate new theorization that has come from other disciplines to raise questions of relevance to our discipline. Space and Region, the two central constituents of Geography are today claimed and theorized by other disciplines. Both space and region are seen as social constructs that are constantly in a state of 'becoming'. Space is contested and configured through an interplay of power relations and hegemonic control. This new reading of space and region demands an engagement with writings of Lefebvre, Foucault, Harvey, Soja, Massey and others (see reading list). These scholars open up

new registers in the understanding of society and enable the emergence of a new episteme in Geography. Such a discourse recognizes that space is political and has agency. It allows for an inclusive focus and a more nuanced reading of Indian society.

A new course on Geography and Society structured against this background raises questions about methodology. The dominant methodologies do not have the frameworks that this new discourse demands. The definitive statements that are part of objective quantitative research need to give way to more subjective, tentative positions that are largely grounded on qualitative research. Ideally, geographical knowledge should emerge based on both quantitative and qualitative approaches. New kinds of interrogation require new analytical tools and interdisciplinary methodologies have to be accommodated by geographers. A course on Geography and Society will be relevant if it is based on ethnographies, case studies, life stories and village studies that can bring out the multiple dimensions of particularity. Feminist methodologies should also inform such a course to enable a critical gender perspective.

In studies on Indian society, Geography needs to also move away from its largely elitist focus of studying dominant groups to engaging with issues of exclusion and marginality in both a spatial and political perspective. The new registers that can open up for research as an outcome of such an approach include: gender; caste; class; *adivasis*' concerns. Indian Geography has addressed some of these issues, particularly, tribal and backward regions, but largely from a dominant planning perspective. Gender and caste concerns have received very little attention by Geographers.

To push this argument further, one can ask: where were/are geographers in the national debates on Caste Census? SEZs? Mining and Adivasis? Master Plans? Dams and NBA? Sustainable Cities? How does caste play out spatially? Can we map the zones of communal and caste conflicts? What do we know of the gendered spaces in rural and urban India? Have we tracked the spatial trajectory of alienation of adivasis and their homelands? Are Indian metros becoming exclusive urban spaces of gated communities? Can we begin to work towards a caste atlas of India along the lines of the one by Schwartzberg? How much do we know of spatial segregation and discrimination of minority populations? Our geography has to learn to ask questions differently for new understandings to emerge and new constituencies to be represented in research.

Any learning in a course on Geography and Society has to emerge from a questioning and critique of accepted truths, generalisations and norms. The normative should not be seen as 'given' and 'good', instead the attempt should be to deconstruct given norms and understand who constructed these norms, for whom and why these norms exist. This questioning is possible only if our courses are structured in ways that equip a student/researcher to be able to think critically. Most courses in Geography show a certain hesitancy in taking positions that are critical of the dominant development mode. Critiques and questioning of dominant power structures and their agenda that have spatial outcomes need to be built into the philosophy and methodology of Geography. It has to learn to theorise difference and recognize/identify the 'other'. For this to

happen, Indian Geography has to engage more seriously with social theory and changing paradigms and reinvent its notion of interdisciplinary. The possibilities for such research are exciting. These outcomes may challenge existing western concepts and offer a new local/indigenous lens to understand Indian society.

## **TENTATIVE COURSE OUTLINE : GEOGRAPHY AND SOCIETY**

1. Existing frameworks in Geography – Western concepts and Indian challenges
2. New discourses – Power relations; Identity; Multiculturalism, Subaltern (Foucault; Lefebvre; Harvey; Soja; Massey; Guha, etc.)
3. Recognising and Understanding the Spatiality of Difference – Linguistic; Religious; Caste; Gender; Adivasi; Class; Rural/Urban
4. Mapping Difference and Exclusion in India – mapping plurality; marginality; inequality at various spatial scales – local, regional, national
5. Project on Studying and Mapping Difference in India -- Health Centre; School; College; Market/Mall; Police station; Prison; Office; Village

Such a course on Geography and Society will include the following keywords.

**Keywords :** difference; power relations; identity; meanings; domination and control; difference; marginality; representation; plurality; social justice; rights; core/centre – periphery/margin/ borderlands

### **Selected Readings in Critical Geography:**

- Anderson B. (1983): *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso
- Blunt, A. and Mills.J. (2000): *Dissident Geographies : An Introduction to Radical Ideas and Practices*. Harlow: Prentice Hall
- Blunt, A. and McEwan.C, eds. (2002): *Postcolonial Geographies*. London: Continuum
- Cosgrove, D. (1999): *Mappings*. London: Reaktion
- Dear, M.J. (2000): *The Postmodern Urban Condition*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Foucault, M. (1972): *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London : Tavistock
- Foucault, M. (1986): Of Other Spaces. *Diacritics*, vol.16,pp.22-27
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- Harvey, D. (1989): *The Condition of Post-Modernity*. Oxford : Blackwell
- Hubbard, P. et.al (2002): *Thinking Geographically: Space, Theory, and Contemporary Human Geography*. London : Continuum
- Jensen-Hold, A.( 2009): *Geography: History and Concepts*. London : Sage
- Lefebvre, H. (1991): *The Production of Space*. Oxford : Blackwell
- Massey, D. (1984): *Spatial Divisions of Labour*. London : Macmillan
- Massey,D. (1994): *Space, Place and Gender*. London: Polity Press
- Rose, G. (1993): *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*.

Cambridge: Polity

- Soja, E.( 1989): *Postmodern Geographies : The Reassertion of Space in Social Theory*. London: Verso
- Soja, E. (1996): *Third space*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Thrift, N. (1996): *Spatial Formations*. London: Sage
- Tuan, Y.F.( 1977): *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Whatmore,S. (2002): *Hybrid Geographies : Natures, Cultures and Spaces*. London: Sage

### **Selected Readings for A Critical Understanding of The Indian Socio-Spatial Context**

- Agarwal, B. (1994): *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Cambridge: CUP
- Chatterjee, P. (1994): *The Nation and its Fragments : Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Delhi : OUP
- Das, V.( 1995): *Critical Events : An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. Delhi : OUP
- Deshpande, S. (2003): *Contemporary India : A Sociological View*. Delhi : Penguin
- Dreze, J. and A. Sen. Eds.( 1990): *The Political Economy of Hunger, 3 Volumes*. Oxford : Clarendon Press
- Gadgil, M. and R.Guha. (1995): *Ecology and Equity*. London : Routledge
- Guha.R. ed. (1982): *Subaltern Studies 1 : Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Delhi : OUP

Gupta, D.( 2000): *Interrogating Caste : Understanding Hierarchy and difference in Indian Society*. New Delhi : Penguin

John, M., PK. Jha, SS Jodhka eds.( 2006): *Contested Transformations : Changing Economies and Identities in Contemporary India*. New Delhi : Tulika

Raju, S. (2011): *Gendered Geographies*. New Delhi: OUP

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