

GEOGRAPHY AND SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The discipline of geography has been undergoing changes 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.

Introduction

The role and functions of geographical knowledge, and the nature of that knowledge have changed over time in relation to and in response to shifting societal change and needs. The history of the discipline cannot be understood independently of the history of the human society in which the practices of geography are embedded. Geography is the discipline that attempts to explore the nature of environmental changes by natural processes, how societies create, organise, use and misuse environments, and how societies themselves are in turn influenced by the environments. Accordingly, geography aims to study both natural and human realms and their interactions focussing on space, places, and regions both on short-term and long-term perspectives including the emergent patterns and outcome.

The influence of geography upon the human society commenced from time immemorial since the homo-sapiens appeared on earth. Early man settled in places by acquiring geographical characteristics of the territories and their suitability for settlement. This fact shows the antiquity of the relationship between

geography and human society. There are innumerable instances in history that points out the influence of geographical knowledge that helped man in the site selection for the development of ports and harbours that fostered their trade activities. During the course of history, geographical knowledge also enabled the many societies to liberate themselves from the clutches of superstitions that prevailed related to various natural phenomena like earthquake, volcanoes etc.

Recent Developments

The discipline of geography has been undergoing a renaissance during the past 50 years. The overall number of stakeholders of the discipline of geography in the society has increased phenomenally in the recent past, especially with the development of geospatial technologies. The contribution of geography to society is manifold. Growing economic disparity, poverty, over centralization and gradual but perceptible degradation of environmental resource base pose major challenges to the modern society. Local level planning and development emerged as a felt need of the society. It further provides the spatial as well

as integrative dimension and holistic perspective to various types of planning, forecasting and decision making process. It is also well realized that non-availability of micro-level data offsets the successful and effective drawing of comprehensive developmental plans. The role of geography in this context is remarkable. There are evidences of geographers' contribution in generating micro level data to cater to the need of the society. Kerala witnessed such an experiment beginning 1990s with initiation of State level Panchayat Resource Mapping programme (CESS, 2004). This methodology has been effectively made use of in the programmes associated with the various developmental processes like watershed -based development programme, disaster vulnerability mapping etc in the national and international level. This has been cited to make it clear the magnitude of relevance of the discipline in human society today.

Geographic research focuses on the study of human society and the environment through the perspectives of place, space, and scale. It is finding increased relevance in fields ranging from ecology to economics. At the same time, many of its research tools and analytical methods have gradually shifted from the research laboratory into other fields of the mainstream of science and business. Currently, research at the frontiers of geography encompasses diverse fields such as planning, economics, finance, social theory, epidemiology, anthropology, biotechnology, ecology, environmental history, conservation biology, and international relations. There are several literatures highlighting importance of geographic perspectives (Giddens, 1984; Cliff et.al., 1986; Forman and Godron, 1986;

Krugman, 1991; Soule, 1991; Ruggie, 1993 to cite a few).

Presently geography is not only undergoing a rebirth in education but has also become an organizing framework for presenting a wide variety of classroom subjects. It is recognized as an important subject in schools, right from the primary level, the world over. Enrolments in geography programmes in the colleges and universities are increasing in accordance with galloping demands from employers for geographically literate students with specialization. Perspectives and tools of geography are being used by educators, business people, researchers, and policy makers to address a wide range of scientific problems and societal needs. In many developed countries geography has been identified as a core subject on par with science and mathematics.

To most laymen, geography is a subject concerned mostly with place names. Concerns about geographic ignorance usually focuses on people's inability to locate cities, countries, and rivers on a world map, and geographic instruction is often equated with conveying information about remote parts of the world. From this perspective, it may seem to be a surprise to know the fact that geography has great relevance in understanding and solving many of the critical issues facing modern society. Numerous geographers, the world over, are engaged in valuable research and teaching on matters ranging from environmental change to social conflict, using their geographical expertise. This fact emphasizes the importance of the subject in the need of creating a scientific awareness about the interactions and interrelationships between physical processes and human sphere.

Addressing the questions such as “How should societies respond to the accelerated pace of environmental degradation in many parts of the world?”, “What are the underlying causes and consequences of the growing disparities between rich and poor?”, “What are the mechanisms that drive the global climate system?”, “What causes the severe floods that have occurred in recent years, and how can society cope with such natural disasters?”, “How is technology changing economic and social systems?” etc; goes far beyond the abilities and insights of any one discipline. Yet such questions embody fundamental geographic dimensions. Geography also provides answers to the questions “Why is a particular phenomenon found in some places but not in others?”, “What does the spatial distribution of vegetation or homeless people or language traits tell us about physical and human processes at work?”, “How do processes that operate at one geographic scale affect processes at other scales?”, “What is the importance of location for efforts to effect (or avoid) political, social, economic, or environmental change?”.

The importance of the geographic perspective to many contemporary “critical issues” for society is illustrated by a few selected examples in the following sections.

Geography ensures a flow of accurate, timely, and useful information about the world. It can provide a reliable answer to the questions such as “How and why do commodities, money, information, and power flow from one place to another?”, “Which of the characteristics of a place cause it to do better economically than another?”, “What actions are best taken at national, regional, or local scales to improve economic development?”, “How does

global economic change relate to global environmental change?” etc.

During the past two decades, ethnic conflict has undermined the existing social and political orders in several countries in Africa and in other continents. Conflicts between ethnic groups are manifested at a variety of scales, and in some cases they are precipitating major humanitarian crises. Consequently, ethnic conflict has increasingly attracted the attention in scientific and policy making fields. Efforts are being made to understand the causes and consequences of ethnic conflict and policy makers are grappling with ways of mitigating inter group hostilities. Geography has an important role in this malefic issue as well.

In the case of health care services, effective decisions about where a particular service should be located must take into consideration the spatial organization of people, health problems, and related services. By focusing attention on locational efficiencies, a geographic analyst can point to specific ways of providing needed health care services cost effectively. Beyond the question of infrastructure provision, geographic analysis has much to contribute to an understanding of the nature and mode of spread of communicable disease.

Geographic perspectives that consider place and scale are essential for understanding in the field of climate change studies. For example, geographers have been leaders in contributing to our understanding of large-scale changes in climate patterns, especially those associated with the hydrologic cycle. As one instance, geographic research has shown that considerably more precipitation reaches the earth’s surface than most of the

previous estimates indicated (Willmott and Legates, 1991).

Geographers world over are working and serving the society in many and varied positions that includes: Cartographer, Climatologist, Environmental Scientist, Geographic Information System Specialist, Sustainability Coordinator, Water Resources Analyst, Regional development Specialist, Land Economist, Recreation Planner, Locational Analyst, Conservationist, Urban Planner, Transportation Planner, Aerial Photo Interpreter, Remote Sensing Specialist, Community Development Specialist, Land Use Planner, Demographer, Teacher etc.

The branch of the discipline, Environmental-Societal Dynamics reflects, perhaps, geography's longest-standing concern and is thus heir to a rich intellectual tradition. The relationships that it studies—the dynamics relating society and its biophysical environment—today are not only a core element of geography but are also of increasingly urgent concern to other disciplines, decision makers, and the public. Although the work of geographers in this domain is too varied for easy classification, it includes three broad but overlapping field of research: human use of and impacts on the environment, impacts on humankind of environmental change, and human perceptions of and responses to environmental change. Geographers have long-recognized that human-environment relations are greatly influenced not just by particular activities or technologies but also by the very ideas and attitudes that different societies hold about the environment. Some of the geography's most influential contributions have documented the roots and character of particular environmental views (Glacken, 1967; Tuan, 1974). Geographers

have also recognized that the impacts of environmental change on human populations can be strongly mitigated or even prevented by human action.

Geographers studying natural and other kinds of hazards have made important contributions in understanding how perceptions of risk vary from reality (Tuan, 1974) and how communication of risk can amplify or dampen risk signals (Palm, 1990; Kasperson and Stallen, 1991).

Geographers who study societal processes in place have tended to focus on micro- or meso scales. Research on cities has been a particularly influential area of research, showing how the internal spatial structure of urban areas depends on the operation of land markets, industrial and residential location decisions, population composition, forms of urban governance, cultural norms, and the various influences of social groups differentiated along lines of race, class, and gender. The impoverishment of central cities has been traced to economic, social, political, and cultural forces accelerating sub-urbanization and intra-urban social polarization.

Researchers have also attempted to understand the economic, social, and political forces reinforcing the segregation of poor communities, as well as the persistence of segregation between certain racial and ethnic groups, irrespective of their socio-economic status. A geographical perspective on such issues ensures that groups are not treated as undifferentiated wholes. By focusing attention on disadvantaged communities in inner cities, for example, geographers have offered significant evidence of what happens when jobs and wealthier members of a community leave to take advantage of better opportunities elsewhere.

Geographers have studied nationwide shifts in the location and agglomeration of industries and inter-urban migration patterns. These studies have revealed important factors shaping the growth prospects of cities and regions. Geographers recognize that social differences from place to place reflect not only differences in the characteristics of individual localities but also differences in how they are affected by societal processes operating at larger scales.

Geographic research also has focused explicitly on the spatial manifestations of institutional behaviour, notably that of large multi-locational firms; national, state, and local governments; and labour unions. Research on multi-locational firms has examined their spatial organization, their use of geographical strategies of branch-plant location and marketing in order to expand into or maintain geographically defined markets, and the way their actions affect the development possibilities of different places (Scott, 1988b; Dicken, 1992). Geography contributes to science as a part of the broad, creative, multidisciplinary effort to advance the frontiers of knowledge. Geographic research on integration in place is also important to scientific understanding of important societal issues. Three examples are given below—on economic health, ecosystem change, and conflict and cooperation—to illustrate this importance.

Geographers have applied systems theory to help understand the complex interactions between nature and society that are caused by natural hazards, including multiple adjustments and attendant feedbacks (Cutter, 1993). They have also examined the mechanisms of ecosystem stability and change, especially human and other agents of short- and long-term

ecosystem change (Zimmerer, 1994). Other geographic researches have been directed toward the identification and description of patterns that may have emerged from nonlinear, complex, or chaotic dynamics. Ideas about chaotic behaviour or catastrophic events within places, additionally, have contributed to research on growth within and among cities (Allen and Sanglier, 1979; Dendrinos, 1992). These studies illustrate geographers' contributions to a more fundamental understanding of environmental and social systems in ways that should engage ecologists, geologists, engineers, mathematicians, physicists, and other members of the scientific community.

Contributions by geographers to our understanding of the interdependencies between places are illustrated by studies of spatial economic flows, human migration, and watershed dynamics. Geography's long-standing concern with the evolving spatial organization and material character of the earth's surface is of great relevance to decision makers in business and government. Whether the issue at hand is the location of a new public facility or the development of a stream restoration project, decision makers must consider such geographic matters as location, the relationship between processes at different scales, and the changing character of particular environments and landscapes. As such, geographic expertise can be of great importance in helping organizations and individuals to operate more efficiently and make better-informed decisions.

Geographers contribute to policy and decision making in a variety of ways (Wilbanks, 1985). One contribution is through the publication of research findings in professional journals and other open-literature outlets. These insights usually

influence decision making processes indirectly, both the private and the public sectors. Although most geographers believe that published research is more valuable before decisions are made, it is often more visibly used in justifying decisions made on other grounds, at least in public policy making (Wilbanks and Lee, 1985). One area of contribution in geography, incidentally, has been in understanding how geographic circumstances fundamentally influence decisions made by public policy makers (Clark, 1985; Murphy, 1989; Wolch and Dear, 1993). Geographers serve the public sector in many different roles, as government employees, consultants, private citizens, and volunteers for public advisory boards at various levels ranging from local to international. Private sector companies frequently use geographers and geographic knowledge to make location, routing, and marketing decisions and for the management and analysis of spatial information in support of business decisions and communications at a variety of scales.

The role of geographers in private sector decision making is growing rapidly, with improved technologies for decentralized Geographic Information Systems (GISs) use and increased access to geo-referenced information, and these roles are becoming strategic as well as operational. These include retail marketing chains, railroads, electric power and gas utilities, international import-export firms, transportation and travel service organizations, publishing firms, and real estate planners and investors. Realizing geography's potential requires more than addressing the problems presented by the discipline's small size and limited diversity, however. In several critical areas, geography's intellectual foundations

need to be strengthened to ensure that its contributions to science and society are solidly grounded. Moreover, geographers need to work to overcome the misunderstood view that geography is simply a descriptive subject with little analytical or technical depth. This is particularly critical given the growing demand for technical expertise on the part of geographers entering the labour market. The appreciation and use of geography by non-geographers need to be fostered, so that the capacity to make use of the discipline's perspectives, knowledge, and techniques grows along with the capacity of the discipline to supply them. This includes enhancing geographic competency of the general population and promoting better geographic training in colleges and universities.

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