

GEOGRAPHY AND SOCIETY

D. Nandakumar

Introduction

Reflecting on the legacy of the discipline Geography in the past, Peter Haggett (2001) wrote, “We can understand the character of Geography as an academic field today only if we see it as one scene in a lengthy play”. He divides the play into three acts: *the first act is dominated by isolated research by individual scholars, the second by organized research by groups and societies, the third by the incorporation of research into national and international organizations*

Emerging issues and questions to be addressed in this workshop seems to have a direct bearing on Haggett’s rhetoric: How do geographers respond to problems ranging from geopolitical, environmental/ecological, disaster, competing demand for natural resources, urbanization, growing inequality and poverty? How do we contribute in policy decision? Can research be value free? How do we take geography beyond academics?

Taking cue from Haggett’s reflection, this concept paper would divulge in the spatial diversity and constant transformations that are central stage in all human activities. Earth’s changing landscapes and human relationships to that environment are the enduring problems of the modern world. Recognizing this fundamental principle, this concept paper hopes to bring out a good discussion with a broad perspective on society and the environment in the context

of current debates on policy and regulation, science and social change, globalisation and environmental sustainability. It would be of great interest to lay emphasis on human geography, political ecology, poststructuralist theory and transdisciplinarity.

Early developments:

From the beginning, development of Geography as a distinct discipline has been quite sporadic, particularly due to the demand for its approach than content. Practical problems of that time were confined to method of surveying the earth or measuring distance and directions for navigation. Map making and preparation of atlases became a necessity. Putting spatial information on maps became indispensable to early explorers and navigators. This period in history, named as “Renaissance” in Europe, had many adventurers out and about, exploring the world. Explorations and map-making were complimentary – for example, first known printed map of the world, displayed in the British Museum, was by Italian cartographers, Gio Matteo Contarini and engraved by Francesco Roselli in 1506, after Christopher Columbus voyages, testifies this role in the early development of Geography.

Boundaries of the discipline Geography was as ambiguous as the subject areas of the “known fathers of Geography” - The Greek scholar Eratosthenes, who measured the

circumference of the earth and was the first to use the word “geography,” is commonly called the father of geography, was a Greek mathematician, poet, athlete, astronomer, and music theorist. Similar is the story of other forefathers - Alexander von Humboldt is commonly called the “father of modern geography” and William Morris Davis, “father of American geography.” Trained in Finance, Humboldt’s travels and keen sense of observations particularly viewing nature holistically made a geographer of him. Davis, on the other hand, was a graduate in engineering and a trained geologist/geomorphologist and yet his contributions to science gained him the honour, father of American Geography.

Contributions of these folks and many others risen out of curiosity, adventure and quest for expansion of territory indirectly contributed to the development of the subject Geography and to gain identity as a distinct academic discipline.

Polemics in Methodologies - Quantitative and Qualitative methods in Geography

Capturing the context dependent sites and situations has always been a challenge to Geographers. While large number of geographic research took after quantitative methods and made technological advances particularly in the field of geoinformatics which strengthened the subject to link macro and micro perspective and engage in intricate spatial analysis across the scale, other disciplines such as Sociology and Anthropology made early inroads into qualitative research. For example, Chicago School (1920 -1930) studied symbols and personalities emerging from social interaction. In the 1930s, Willard used in-depth interviews, life histories,

participant observations, case studies/ records, diaries, letters and other personal documents to research complex maze of social interactions. 1940’s in the West saw emergence of women challenging the power in gender relationships. Feminist movement of the later years, particularly during 1970 and 1980’s are outcome of it. This is also the period when feminist geography took firm roots in academia. While qualitative research methodologies integrated theory well into the subject of their research, quantitative research gave little room for it. This is one of the main reason that current Geography syllabus in various Universities across the country hardly gives importance to areas such as Critical Geography but emphasis given to latest technologies. While latter gives a cutting edge over other competing areas of different disciplines, Geographic research lack solid theoretical foundations and theoretical problems remain unaddressed. A case in point is highlighted by Foster (2002), although not particularly referring to Geography, “ *In these days of supercomputer-based global climate models, large ecosystem experiments including Biosphere II, and aircraft-borne sensors of ozone holes, it is often overlooked that many fundamental insights into ecological processes and major environmental issues come not through reductionist or high tech studies of modern conditions but from thoughtful consideration of nature’s history*”.

Strategies to manoeuvre the future course of Geography

While the State in its routine way helps to build institutional capacity for teaching and research, there is a need to bring our own efforts to address issues relating to

environmental problems that have societal origins. Proper understanding and with right tools Geographers could devise meaningful management and decision options. In this regard it is suggested here that the new syllabus that would be flushed out in this workshop gives ample scope for inclusivity in State syllabus. The core concern of this strategic syllabus could be theoretical approaches to computer mapping (digital cartography), environmental and natural resources management and other applications that the geographers have a special role to play in addressing issues that lie within geopolitical, environmental/ecological, disaster, competing demand for natural resources, urbanization, growing inequality and poverty. It is of utmost importance that the strategy adopted take into consideration the conceptual revolutions that had taken place in Geography and influenced by other disciplines, over twentieth century.

The field of geography has been recognized as contributing to the historical process of colonization and of the dispossession of peoples of their lands and rights in India and in other areas of the world. There is a need to structure in a syllabus that would re-examine and help understand the process of globalisation where in flow of capital cuts across earlier clear cut colonial boundaries and current national boundaries. The impacts of which is evident in the people's struggles toward the realization of a variety of cultural, economic, political, land and resource rights both within and outside national and international structures as Johnson *et al.*, (2007). Emancipation need not be the subject matter of feminist geography alone, transformative capacity comes naturally with critical thinking, a step towards emancipation. Current

education system is hardly emancipatory. Neither the academia nor the research has the capacity to transform. This therefore, calls for a serious thrust towards critical geography. Further, as Woodward *et al.*, (2009) pointed out, streams of thought along deconstruction and genealogical analysis have thrown open questions on traditional thinking in Geography and brought forth discussions on everyday usage of terms such as, "community, nature, public/private, identity, scale, experience, space/place, culture, animals, development, history, justice, agency, authenticity, borders, citizen, technology, gender/sexuality, transgression/resistance, memory, and nation".

The training programs that are envisaged here should help broaden participants knowledge and help them make connections to environmental and societal issues, with the thoughtful consideration of nature's history.

Some thoughts that could be tabled for discussion:

- △ Encourage colloquia, seminars and workshops that bring external speakers to various departments of Geography. This would help students and faculties in these departments to hear more about current research and teaching issues of geography and of other issues related to interdisciplinary topics. Holding a series of seminars will also communicate both internally and externally of the interest by the Geography Dept for interdisciplinary topics.
- △ Identify areas of weakness and strengthen interdisciplinary topics in the current curricula. With the cooperation of Geography faculty, Scientists from research institutions, a survey of current

courses can reveal our current depth of curriculum on geography topics. While human and physical geography are the mostly likely themes where there are hardly any topics of interdisciplinary nature in geography module or content.

- ✧ Strengthen field courses in the current curriculum. Where there are labs as part of the course, the labs could draw on field topics, themes and issues for discussion, projects, debates, etc.
- ✧ Explore possibilities for structuring in co-op education in the current curriculum. Alternate academic terms should be an option for the students of Geography. This can be achieved if co-op education can be structured in to current curriculum because, co-op education is learning through work in real world situation. Co-op students get better work experience even before they graduate. Work experience from areas such as National Parks, Sanctuaries and Protected Areas, climate change adaptation, land use planning, scientific research (CESS, CWRDM, KFRI, TBGRI etc), emergency planning (State Disaster Management Cell) and more.
- ✧ Involving students in ongoing projects. From undergraduate level itself students could be attracted to take part in ongoing research projects which would give them a firsthand experience of how theoretical learning's are applied in the field.
- ✧ Encourage associations and science clubs. Often folks with keen interest in Geography hardly get any chance to involve matters that are closely linked to the discipline Geography. Various associations and clubs could play a positive role in bringing like-minds together and involve them in common issues.
- ✧ Green mapping/Community mapping programs. There are various examples from the rest of the world where communities engage in mapping their environments. With a proper guidance and little encouragement, various local communities could be involved in mapping their environment programs.
- ✧ Know your ecological footprint program. School and college children could be encouraged to involve in programs that could assess their own ecological footprints. This would be an ideal exercise to inculcate sense of responsibility towards environment and develop a civic sense.
- ✧ Developing a common ground. There is a need for folks from every section to meet, discuss, refer and resolve issues that are pertaining to geographical in nature. A cyber meeting ground could be envisaged where learning and reference resources could be accessed.

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Nandakumar D

Dept of Geography,
Govt.College, Kariavattom
Thiruvananthapuram