

GEOGRAPHY IN THE UNIVERSITIES OF INDIA

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Abstract

This paper traces university education of geography in India, which is heavily influenced by British school. Syllabus and training are two important factors in geography education. Often there are debates about philosophy and methodology in geography. Widening gap between physical aspect and social science tradition of the subject need to be filled, stimuli for which may perhaps come from the practicing geographers.

Introduction

The university education in India, in the modern sense, started during the colonial period when the universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras were established in 1857 by the British in these three port towns. The purpose of higher education under the British rule was to prepare graduated cogs and wheels to be used in the administrative machinery. The courses were devised in a way that the educated persons can be employed to render help in the administration at the lower rungs. The geography teaching at the graduate and post graduate levels was formally started after almost 67 years of the establishment of these three universities. Geography teaching in the undergraduate classes was started in 1924 in the University of Panjab and Lahore in British India. Geography as a subject in the undergraduate classes was introduced in Aligarh Muslim University in 1927. The postgraduate course was introduced in Aligarh Muslim University in 1930 but the course was not accorded recognition by the Government of India. The same students had to repeat their M.A. /M.Sc. course in 1931

and finally obtained their M.A. /M.Sc. degree in 1933. The age of Geography teaching at the P.G. level in India, thus, is 79 years. There has been unprecedented expansion of the subject after the independence in 1947. The subject is now, being taught in many colleges and universities across the country. The discipline of Geography has been placed in the faculties/Schools of Sciences, Arts and Social Sciences in different universities of India. The new students opting for the course in Geography get confused with the baffling question whether this subject is Science, Social Science or is Arts and Humanities. There are three Central universities in the city of Delhi. Delhi University has Geography located in Delhi School of Economics. Geography, in JNU, is located in the School of Social Sciences while it is part of the Natural Sciences in Jamia Millia Islamia. Calcutta University is the oldest University of the country which also chose to locate the Geography Department in the Science faculty, perhaps it followed the example of the Department of Geography of Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh which happens to be the oldest Geography department in the

country. All the three Central Universities of Delhi have Geography curricula and it is also being taught in a number of affiliated colleges of Delhi University at the under graduate level. There is no teaching of geography at the undergraduate level in J.N.U. except that it is a subsidiary subject given to 5 year integrated course in the School of Languages, Literature and Culture. The Natural science and Social science dualism of Geography has widened in India in the name of specialization. Though both areas are complimentary to each other, the geographers doing research in social science segment of Geography have greatly outnumbered the segment of Physical Geography. It has become difficult to get qualified physical geographers at the Assistant Professor level. The phenomenon of this dualism is common with British Geography. *'In part, this divergence is actually a product of success-as Physical Geography has moved firmly into the sciences and as Human Geography has become more markedly social and cultural-some divergence was probably inevitable'* (Thrift, 2002). This divergence may be expected to certain extent.

Geography Teaching in India

Two important factors have affected the geography teaching in India. These are: (i) syllabus and (ii) training. The syllabi of geography in Indian universities initially were a transplant from the British universities and most of the senior geographers were trained in the subject from the British universities under the guidance of British Professors such as Dudley Stamp, Smailes and a few were trained by O.H.K. Spate.

These UK trained Indian Professors continued with the British tradition of

scholarship in their respective departments in terms of designing course outlines and following the pedagogy of the subject. They maintained absolute neutrality in teaching even the human and social Geography. Initially, there was nothing known as Indian Geography rather we had Geography in India with varied courses and varied standards with which these courses were being taught. However, Geography teaching witnessed not only the spatial spread but has also gained depth in the subject matter as well as the methodologies used for imparting the knowledge of Geography.

Two major concerns always were there with which the Geographers had to negotiate: (i) The Philosophy of Geography, if there is one, and (ii) the methodologies used in the study of Geography which have undergone sea change within our life time.

The Role of Logic

Logic cannot be segmented according to the disciplines. Logic is a common element across the disciplines which lead to the development of philosophical attributes in each discipline. Even if there is philosophy of Geography, the discipline has been weak in theory building though it has been very strong in empiricism. I still remember the remark which Prof. Moonis Raza (1972) once made in his one of the lectures, *"Geography is like a dinosaur with a huge body long tail and small head"*. The remark was to highlight the paucity of theory building in Geography. Most of the theories which we have appropriated as theories of Geography, have actually been adopted from the sister disciplines. It may be argued that there is no harm in having an osmotic relationship with the sister disciplines in an interdisciplinary or trans-disciplinary approach of study.

Unfortunately, we have not been able to transfer some of our theories to the sister disciplines. In spite of a lot of empirical studies, generalizations based on them have not been properly placed. The geographers have many missed opportunities to their credit. The studies related to environment-human interaction, initiated by them, were abandoned somewhere on the way to be picked up by other sister disciplines with greater vigour and applicability. This area would have demanded greater training in both Physical as well as Human Geography.

Geography, no doubt, is a science of spatial synthesis as it has always been a science of spatial synthesis as History has been the science of temporal synthesis. This role has made geography an inter disciplinary and trans disciplinary subject. Geography studies the space in all its dimensions and manifestations. Hartshorne (1959) thought that "*Geography is concerned to provide accurate, orderly and rational description and interpretation of the variable character of the Earth's surface*". The subject of Geography has evolved through centuries, from a descriptive field of study into a well developed scientific discipline. Its origin is traced back to the ancient Greeks, from where it reached to its present form. It has witnessed the paradigm shifts all along its historical development. Thomas Samuel Kuhn defined 'paradigm' in his work 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions' as "*the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community*" (Kuhn, 1970).

The space over the earth with all its components is highly varied but all of them are defined entities with specific locations. The space with location of different features along with their variations has always

fascinated geographers. The mountains, the rivers, coasts, beaches, cities are identifiable entities with names and defined locations over the space. These are also associated with certain defined territory which accommodates the population with the cultural traits associated with the people inhabiting the space. These identities are multiple as well as multi-layered but they are embedded in human perception and in their memories and get expressions through their cultures. The mystical understanding of the natural phenomena of the earth has given rise to *Geosophy* (*Geo-Earth +Sophia-wisdom*). The concept has been introduced by J. K. Wright in 1947 which means "*the study of the nature and expression of geographical knowledge, both past and present*". It includes not only the core area of geographical knowledge but also the mystical and peripheral understanding of space by even common people. Thus, it includes the knowledge about the mythical spaces as perceived by human beings. This understanding may be true or false but it is embedded in the consciousness of the people. In such cases, it is the faith which is deciding factor not any logic or rationality.

Thus, Himalaya is a mountain and Ganga a river with a specific location in India but besides being what they are, the people of India understand Himalaya as a protector of Northern plains of India from the cold winds from Central Asia, providing orographic rainfall by obstructing the monsoons and accommodating numerous glaciers which provide water to north Indian rivers. It is also the part of the faith of the majority of the population of the country as it houses five *Prayags*, five *Kedars* and five *Badrīs*. Ganga, no doubt, is a river but it is associated with alluvial plain, fertile

soils, rich agriculture, navigational artery and many important cities and villages are associated with the space it occupies. The Ganga, the Godavari, the Cauvery have their cultural importance. Hardwar and Prayag (Allahabad) on the banks on Ganga, Ujjain on the bank of Shipra and Nashik on the bank of Godavari attract thousands of pilgrims on the occasion of *Kumbh* fair every sixth and twelfth year. The space provided by nature is given many socially constructed attributes which become the part of its identity. The Indian *Village* is a place in India with location attributes but it has its *raison de tre* due to a village deity (gram *devata*) belonging to the lesser tradition of local significance and a dominant caste. These are real attributes of a geographical entity known as Indian village.

The socio-cultural elements of a society occupying a particular space over the surface of the earth are as important elements as mountains, hills and rivers which shape these elements and ultimately get intertwined with each other. The civilizations can not be separated from the river valleys as these are rooted in their physical environmental niche. The geographical understanding, like other sciences, has been continuously evolving and that is the strength of the discipline.

The Issues in Methodology

Geography, as a discipline of study, has evolved over time and expanded its horizon with the development of science and technology. The human knowledge about the land and people located at large intervening distances could be comprehended with greater details with the scientific and technological development, which reduced the dependence on the travel accounts of the travelers and traders. The simplistic

understanding of the earth as the abode of human beings got transformed with the enhanced knowledge of the spatial variations in both natural and socio-cultural phenomena. It is true that space in its natural state is neutral to territorial identity. While the land had generic identity, the people inhabiting the land provided socio-cultural identities. Geography from being the study of similarities and dissimilarities in phenomena in response to similarities and dissimilarities in other influencing phenomena shifted the emphasis to the study of spatial organization. The development of links provided opportunity to the nodes to consolidate and becoming the hub of activities; economic, social and cultural. The idea that geography is the study of Man-Land/Environment relationship gave rise to both Environmental Determinism as well as Possibilism. The perception of over arching influence of environment on human activities provided a paradigm of nature controlling all the human activities leading to the Ratzelian concept of determinism. The idea of human influence on environment through the processes of modification, on the other hand, provided the basis for the concept of Possibilism ascribed to Vidal de la Blache in France. The balance between the two was envisaged by Griffith Taylor by propagating the idea of neo-determinism (Stop and Go determinism) which showed that there are necessities but at the same time freedom is also available to the human beings. There is no hard shackle but in spite of the possibilities, there is no unbridled and unlimited freedom. The shackles were loosened by technology and it provided a lot of freedom to the human endeavour.

We are not only concerned with the spatial organization but also with the spatial

integration. The technology has reduced the space in terms of time. The present world has become a global village and one has, now, been technologically enabled to see any part of the world sitting in front of his/her computer. The economic interdependence of the countries and the interventions by the market forces have increased. Market areas of products are constantly widening and some of the ideas such as *distance-decay* and the *minimization of effort* have been losing their relevance. The segmentation of market has become very strong phenomena. Some of the branches of geography are witnessing very significant changes. There have been a number of missed opportunities. Now, there is opportunity to re-orient the subject and note the paradigm shifts for adopting these changes.

The Shifts in Methodologies

The geographical studies earlier were based on the methodology perceived as: traverse-observe-record-and describe. The geographical studies provided long narratives. The descriptions were devoted to single elements of a selected area/region. Analytical tools were weak. The Fifties witnessed great emphasis on quantitative techniques. The Geographers coined a term, 'Quantitative revolution' to describe this phase of the development in Geography in spite of the fact that the methods applied were simple statistical tools. The paradigm shifted again from the quantitative approach to humanist and behavioral approaches. The philosophical moorings were responsible to introduce the Marxian methodology for the interpretation of social reality which was termed as radical geography. These approaches were based on the idea that human decisions are based on many choices which can not be counted in numbers. This

is the unique nature of the studies in social sciences. It is easier to create controls in physical sciences but such control is difficult to be enforced in social sciences.

The social science aspect of geography has to depend on the methodology of Social Sciences. Maps have been the tools of Geographers and they will continue to remain very important tools for studying space. The traditional cartography has give way to computer cartography. The process of making maps has become quicker. Techniques in general have undergone unprecedented change. The Remote Sensing has made the data collection easier and GIS has provided large scope for searching explanation. These tools can be very effectively used, provided the researcher has clear theoretical understanding of the phenomena. Unfortunately, there are not many theories in geographical studies. The traditional studies in geography were more of empirical and descriptive nature. But empiricism also requires some theoretical format to proceed. We know that geography in India has greatly been influenced by the British geographical tradition and the subject is relatively young. The need for developing rigorous Research Methodology Course is urgently felt to train younger Geographers. Many Geographers are not available in Physical Geography. The gap between the social science and physical aspects of the subject has also to be filled for a balanced development of the subject.

Now the basic question is related to further consolidation and strengthening of the subject of Geography to make it socially more relevant. The stimuli have to come from the practicing geographers who have to show the direction of development of the subject.

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