

## A NOTE ON ENRICHING INDIAN GEOGRAPHY

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A perusal of literature on progress of geography in India brings out a number of glaring facts. Geographical studies in India generally lack generalization and theorization. Concepts and models developed in the West have been used indiscriminately to explain Indian situations. Little efforts have been made to develop indigenous theories and models. Thus, the need for good grounding in the philosophy of geography and for developing an Indian school of thought cannot be over-emphasized. There is also a need for refining the tools and methodologies of analysis. The tools and techniques developed in the West may not always prove adequate to analyze Indian settings and may sometimes result in misleading conclusions.

Quite often Indian geographical studies lack intellectual depth. This could be mainly due to waywardness of a majority of researchers. Individual scholars seldom stick to a particular sub-discipline long enough to be able to master the subject and make original contributions. Academic non-performance and complacency could also be an important reason.

It is also observed that geography courses in India are heavily tilted in favour of human geography; physical geography occupies only a peripheral space. Some vital areas like geomorphology, hydrology, climatology and bio-geography remain

neglected, even though the country is known for fascinating natural diversity. In human geography segment too, there has been an over-emphasis on urban geography, even though India is known to live in villages. The country provides rich material for historical and political geography, yet precious little has been done in these sub-fields. Similarly, geo-strategic research, boundary disputes, international relations, and human migration remain largely unexplored. This imbalance in the subject matter needs to be corrected.

What should be done to make geography play an effective role in meeting the challenges of the twenty first century? First and foremost, geography should identify the areas of its core competence and try to strengthen them. The discipline is basically an integrating science. Its essence is synthesis. Known as the mother of all sciences, geography is in an unique position to coordinate the efforts of different disciplines in solving the societal problems like poverty, inequality, and regional disparity.

Regional planning is an area where geographers can use their training and skills with great distinction. It is really unfortunate that the potentials of regional planning have not been recognized in this country where more than half the population remains poor and deprived even after sixty years of planned development. A beginning

was made in this direction in the late seventies during the regime of the Janata Party Government, but that was only short lived. The initiative collapsed with the fall of the Janata Government. There should be no doubt that regional planning can help immensely in resource management and sustainable development. It will pave the way for inclusive growth and poverty eradication, and will help in bridging the gap between the rich and the poor.

Fieldwork has been the forte of geographers for centuries. Of late, it has been neglected. There is need to encourage Indian geographers to undertake field work and generate reliable grass-root data to highlight the problems of the people, and thus help policy makers arrive at right policy decisions and collaborate with development planners to formulate pragmatic action plans.

Maps and diagrams have been special tools of geographers for spatial analysis. They present graphic view of the ground reality and are means of communication par excellence. Unfortunately, cartographic language is not being mastered by geographers these days as effectively as it should be, and other disciplines have taken advantage of the situation. Thus, GIS, the technique of relating data to the space, has been grabbed by civil engineers and computer scientists, leaving geographers far behind. If geographers could make efforts to regain their lost ground in GIS by intensive training at undergraduate and post graduate levels, a large number of jobs will come their way and their visibility in the society will be greatly enhanced.

Regional geography used to have an important place in geography syllabi a few decades back. It is no longer so.

Now that Indians are evincing business interests in foreign lands, and the country is aspiring to become a world power, it has become necessary to develop a large pool of regional/ area of experts. A number of Indian Universities have already started 'area studies' programmes which are mostly run by political science/history departments. Geography has, no doubt, an edge over other disciplines in developing area studies programmes. Thus, it is time now for geographers to strengthen regional geography courses and come forwards to train country/area experts in large numbers.

Geography courses need to be reoriented and restructured to meet the challenges of the modern world. Priority should be accorded to improve the teaching of geography at the school level. In many states, geography is taught in schools by non-geographers and untrained teachers who fail to do justice with the subject and thus make the subject unpopular. In some states, geography is part of social studies programme and does not figure as a separate part in the school examination, prompting students to skip over the subject, if the teaching is uninteresting and drab. This is the situation in some of the southern states.

Undergraduate courses need to be made comprehensive and balanced with adequate emphasis on physical geography, human geography, regional geography, and the techniques and methods of geographical investigation, analysis and interpretation (including surveying, remote sensing and cartography). Special attention should be paid to geography of India. Science background with good grounding in mathematics, physics and chemistry at the school level could be considered a pre-

requisite for admission to undergraduate geography programs as the same is necessary for proper understanding of geomorphology, hydrology and climatology as well as remote sensing and GIS.

At the post graduate level, proper weightage should be accorded to:

- Physical geography including geomorphology, hydrology, climatology and biogeography,
- Human geography including population, settlements, and economic development,
- Regional geography including economic geography of India,
- Philosophy of geography, and techniques and methods of investigation, analysis and interpretation, mainly remote sensing and GIS, and
- Specializations like GIS and remote sensing, regional planning, area studies, and geo-political and strategic studies.

Specializations should be planned at the beginning of the programme and should take into consideration the undergraduate training of the student. If necessary, courses outside the Department could also be recommended. For example, geology should be a pre-requisite for specialization in geomorphology, mathematics and physics for remote sensing and GIS, economics for regional planning and so on.

Finally, there is a great need to develop lobbying to promote employment for geography graduates. School teaching offers tremendous scope for employment. The decision of the West Bengal government a few years back to have trained geography teachers in all schools has created enormous employment opportunities, so much so that

West Bengal universities find it difficult to cope with the demand for geography graduates, and large number of students are migrating to Uttar Pradesh (Banaras Hindu University and Kanpur University) and Chhattisgarh (Ravishankar University) for postgraduate training. Other state governments could also be persuaded to adopt similar policies.

Geography is a popular subject at the under-graduate level in states like Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Bihar. But same is not the case in Punjab, Gujarat, and the southern states. Efforts could be made to promote geography in these latter states as well.

The most promising area of employment is remote sensing and GIS technologies. Though a number of geography departments in the country have started special courses, some leading to diplomas and degrees, yet a lot more appears to be desired to refine these courses and improve the level of training and instruction, so that these technocrats with geography background are able to compete with civil engineers and computer scientists in the job markets.

Geography is a hot subject for civil services aspirants. More and more geography graduates could be encouraged to enter the civil services, both Central and States. Similarly, there is growing market for area experts, both in the public and the private sectors, and geography graduates could be prepared to take advantage of the same.

Let me conclude with the appeal made by R P Misra during his presidential address to the National Association of Geographers, India (NAGI) in 1996, "We are on the threshold of a new era in geographic teaching and

research. . . . Let us change our ways and pick up new threads to unfold the inherent potentialities of geography. . . . We cannot be perfect, but even a step forward will make our discipline richer and our society better.”

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