

ARE WE LOSING REGIONS AS FOCUS OF OUR STUDY? SOME REFLECTIONS ON REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE IN GEOGRAPHY

Devendra Kumar Nayak

ABSTRACT

There are concerns at various levels about the diffused nature of geographical research in India. While pluralistic nature of the subject is considered as one of its important characteristics question is often raised about the boundary. Rediscovering regional perspectives in geographical studies may be useful in this context.

Geographical Research in India

For a pure Critic, nobody is above board including the critic himself- Aijazuddin Ahmad, XIX Geography Congress, Thiruvananthapuram, 1997.

It is a pity and quite embarrassing that ever and again geographers need to explain their aims and methods to neighbor specialists and layman. It is rarely indeed...that one faces an audience of which the members realize clearly both what geography is and what it might be- said S. W. Wooldridge some sixty two years ago (Wooldridge, 1950). Unfortunately the situation remains unchanged even today or perhaps has become even more nebulous. This is not to say that geographers in India have not been sensitive to this state of affairs in geography. There have been passionate appeals to make geography more relevant. Some have very critically analysed the reasons for geography losing its focus. While some sound optimistic in changing the face of

geography in this country, others have not been able to hide their frustration and disgust at the state of the discipline and feel the discipline is lacking academic respect as the things stand today. Even a cursory reading of all the presidential addresses delivered in successive Indian Geography Congresses since the year 1979 bears testimony to these perceptions regarding the state of affairs.

That the discipline suffers from serious debilities in earning respectability within the array of natural and social sciences pursued in India is something that even the optimists tend to agree. That the geographical tradition is pluralistic is undisputed (Ahmad, 1997). It is needless to spend time here to go into the very nature of the discipline that has contributed to a lack of narrow disciplinary

focus. There may be some truth in even disregarding the conservative boundary between ‘what is geography and what is not’ that still ‘require constant negotiating and reworking’ as Raju (2004) puts it. This is a natural process in any discipline that is constantly evolving in response to changing needs of the society and as the academic discourse becomes more vibrant. ‘Negotiating and reworking’ the disciplinary focus is certainly welcome as long as it contributes to its growth but is also replete with the danger of negating the very basis of the academic discourse if unrelated to social reality. As Ahmad (1997) very rightly observes; “what is not understandable in the geographical academy of the Third World is the distance between the multiple theoretical positions taken by practitioners of the subject and the prevailing social reality. The urge to receive the currency of paradigms in circulation is so great that often the gap between the ground reality and its portrayal in theory is completely ignored (p.11).”

Geography today, as in other university-based disciplines, is confronted with the problem of retaining its discipline-oriented structure as against problem-oriented structures. In practice however, the former is still pursued through teaching while the latter is yet to gain currency in university curricula. Inter disciplinary research is imperative and desirable to the extent there is a give and take between disciplines, but becomes a fashion and often an escape route for undertaking research in an area without necessary training and with a journalistic approach that borders on often collating and reproducing theoretical positions directly borrowed from another discipline. Such efforts are interdisciplinary in form but certainly not in content. Much

research in geography in India today reflects this tendency and hence is ignored by researchers of other disciplines. It is not surprising that we continue to ask ‘what ails geography’ or why geography is languishing or marginalized.

The issue is not whether geography should be interdisciplinary or problem oriented or for that matter should engage in extending its frontiers or confine itself to strictly defined boundary. A bigger issue is how do we practice what is so significant about the discipline that ensures a give and take between disciplines. In my considered opinion, it is the geographical imagination manifested most lucidly but much denounced regional concept. Unfortunately geographers in India have lost regions as their focus in undertaking research and have perhaps forgotten the power of a geographical imagination intrinsic to this perspective which enables geographers to a dialogue with other scientists from a position of strength rather than strenuously defending their works as interdisciplinary or outright rejection of disciplinary focus as contested.

I may now draw attention to the following Ph.D. titles awarded degree in India during the last four decades from various universities.

1. Trends and problems of urbanization in Birbhum District
2. Changes in cropping patterns in Narnaul Tehsil, Haryana, 1966-88
3. Agricultural productivity of Maharashtra: A spatio-temporal analysis
4. Spatial organization of periodic market centers in Solapur District: A geographical appraisal
5. Land utilization in Ballia District, U P

6. Evolution of rural settlements and their spatial variations in Aligarh District
7. Ahmednagar District: A study in regional planning
8. Post independence rural transformation pattern in Darrang District, Assam
9. Horticulture and rural development: A case study of Ghazipur Tehsil
10. Problems and prospects of agricultural developments in Dakshina Kannada District, Karnataka
11. Landscape evaluation for regional recreation: A case study of Khammam District A P
12. Geographical study of rural water supply Pratapgarh District UP
13. Impact of institutions on Agriculture in Burdwan District, West Bengal
14. Warangal district: A Study for regional planning
15. Periodic markets and rural Development, A case study of Karimnagar Dist. of Andhra Pradesh
16. Demographic structure and settlement system in Mahbubnagar district
17. Spatial development: A study of Karimnagar Dist
18. Town country interdependence in Bijnor Dist
19. Geographical perspective on market centres in Kolhapur district Maharashtra
20. Population characteristics and agricultural development in Jorhat District of Assam

These constitute a fair sample of the type and kind of Ph.D. theses awarded. All of us have guided such or similar titles and many of us might have examined such titles

without ever questioning the rationale for accepting an administrative unit as adequate basis for understanding the problem at hand. I am not arguing that a taluka, development Block, a district or a state cannot and should not be taken as a spatial unit in geographical studies; but not uncritically just because it suits the researcher, the researcher belongs to the district or the development block. Many of my doctoral students take pride in selecting their own districts purely driven by their commitments to solve the problems confronting their dear district! An administrative unit may be chosen if the study demands and not merely because the researcher belongs to the one.

More serious question is however the excessive use of administrative units as if they conform to geographical imagination. I am a little concerned and disturbed with the present trend of research in Geography which banks heavily on administrative units. A cursory glance at the titles of Ph. D theses (or even books published) submitted in India during the past 30 to 40 years bears testimony to my claim that administrative units, namely Tehsils, districts, states are increasingly used as units of empirical investigation fast replacing geographer's earlier concern using regions as units of analysis. This in my humble opinion seriously undermines the role geographers played in adding a perspective that made geographical studies attain respect for its holistic understanding.

Geography as a subject and as a discipline admittedly has centrifugal tendencies and that convergence from wide periphery towards our central objective has to be strenuously sought. But what is this Central Objective? Despite serious problems and objections from learned colleagues,

I consider this to be regional geography. Regions matter and are a central concern of Geography. "To that great majority of us who have been brought up to a belief in the essential unity of our subject, the aim of regional geography seems not only defensible but of great intellectual attraction" (Wooldridge, 1950).

Concept of region and theorizing of space has emerged as a major intellectual exercise since 1980s both within and outside geography largely in response to the challenge of interrogating difference, plurality and disparity recognized as important categories reflecting social reality across the world. A regional approach/perspective appears even more relevant in the context of India with all its diversity, plurality and complex spatial organization of its society. It is expected that strengthening of both teaching and research with a clear regional perspective holds tremendous possibilities for a deeper understanding of the social world in India.

Regional Geography

The regional idea is a commonplace one. Its analysis was deepened by geographers from the 18th century, especially in Germany, and led to the regional revolution which occurred at the end of the nineteenth century and was best exemplified by the works of Paul Vidal de la Blache and the French School of geography. The central concern in regional geography was its emphasis on uniqueness and specificity. The problem with regional geography was not so much with its aim but its execution-degenerating into descriptive and un-theorized collection of facts. The movement away from the regional geography approach was stimulated by three factors (Marshall,

2006); firstly, the practical demands of the war led to geographical research that produced generalizations; secondly, non-geographers became involved in human geography research, most notably the social physics school of the 1940s applied natural science methodologies to human geography research and the above points exacerbated the final factor, the growing frustration that some geographers felt towards the regional approach which was increasingly considered non scientific and outdated. This led to Fred Schaeffer, a professor at the University of Iowa, attacking regional geography in 1953. He argued that objects in geography were no more unique than in other disciplines and that a science should search for laws. He urged geographers to study systematically, using quantitative methodologies, providing the stimulus for the quantitative revolution.

Geography positioned itself to become scientific in a strict positivist sense and became a spatial science, of spatial analysis and spatial interaction. Theories, empirical laws began to be constructed out of generalization from vast data sets. Things which could not submit to quantification disappeared from geographical agenda. Space in most cases was reduced to distance and earlier interest in uniqueness and particularity was replaced by a search for spatial regularities. While it encouraged a flurry of activities, the distinctive flavor of geography was the net casualty. While geography claimed to break new ground after becoming a science, it could not answer 'science for what?'. Geography as a science of the spatial was never adequately defined. It posited the notion of purely spatial process. Spatial effects were explicable by spatial causes. There

were spatial laws and spatial processes. The subject then required little input from other social science disciplines and in the process, the latter forgot about space altogether. The radical critique forcefully argued against this conceptual separation between the social and the spatial and understood the spatial as a form determined by social causes, laws, interactions and relationship. The stage was set to intrude into other disciplines. Space was conceived as a social construct. Geographers learnt to understand other disciplines while other disciplines continued to believe that the world operated and society existed on the head of a pin! (Massey, 1984). Geography was merely viewed as cartographer of the social sciences.

As a serious scientific analysis and as a framework for college or university work, the value of purely regional approach can be seriously questioned. Many studies of this type may be characterized as lengthy, undemanding intellectually, and dreary to varying degrees if read straight through. A common format is often repeated for different continents, countries or parts of the country leading to fall of interest among teachers and the taught.

Ambrose (1969) however raised an interesting point. By using regional approach, "the student has no sense of progression; no feeling that he is passing from easier to more difficult and thought provoking concepts. The regional method exists, simple and undemanding. All that need to be done is to apply it to whatever region is specified by syllabus. Thus it is not new concepts that are discovered; only new facts" In this context Ambrose makes a valid comparison with history which uses 'periods' as units of time quite analogous to

'regions' by geographers. But the analogy ends here. "History, almost by definition, does give a feeling of progression....the methods may be static but the material studied is essentially dynamic since it develops in the time dimension. By contrast, *too much (emphasis added)* of regional geography is concerned with applying a relatively static method to differences occurring in the spatial dimension and with only limited emphasis on evolutionary aspects."

Ambrose was only echoing the progressive criticism of regional geography being too descriptive and its emphasis on uniqueness which may be 'an aspiration of faith rather than a fact of observation' (Wooldridge, 1950). A great proponent of regional geography, Wooldridge (1950) did express his dissatisfaction with much that passes for teaching in regional geography. But regions as the single most important geographical imagination has been underscored by even its most ardent critic. What one is seeking to do is to convey a geographical thinking. If periods are units for historical analysis, regions do serve a similar purpose in geography- a fact that can be ignored only at geography's own peril.

But do administrative units conform to regions? Do periods conform to any arbitrary slice of time? Unlike administrative units, regions, more particularly natural, cultural and historical regions are not subject to short term changes and hence are more stable units for analytical purposes.

Regional Approach Hijacked?

While (Indian) geographers seem to have forgotten regions and regional approach, non-geographers appear to be more concerned on a regional perspective to

their disciplinary concern. I am tempted to quote Prasad (2011) in this context:

“While the regional approach has been central to geography, today, there are others claiming to both theorize and do regional studies. Among other disciplines, economics had a long tradition of doing development studies using a regional economics and regional science approach. In fact most research on regional development and planning is dominated by Economics and this has adversely impacted on geographers, many of whom attempt to become regional scientists/economists and fail. Regional analysis by Economists has a sectoral bias and is premised on tools of measurement and quantification, which is different from the spatial approach of regional geography. A close reading of the studies done under regional geography, development and planning by geographers suggests that the obsessive engagement with measurement continues and not much changed in the content of these studies. As a result geographers found that their work was seen as not rigorous enough as that of the economists (whose training and approach is different) and hence its acceptance and validity is low. This resulted in regional geography not receiving the kind of attention it deserved in India, not only in geography but also from the other disciplines... The construction of regions in India is an outcome of the inter-play of various factors that demands recognition from scholars. Geography has to take cognizance of this expectation and take a lead role in the framing of a new regional geography or regional studies.”

Increasing acceptance of administrative units as geographer’s unit of analysis, whatever be the compulsion-availability

of data, mapping (read choropleth)- steals the intellectual rigour which is expected and makes geographical studies vulnerable to be treated with contempt from other sciences. It is no wonder therefore that economists undertake a geographical project with equal ease and geographers feel that economists can make a better geographer. It is no wonder that regional development and planning which was a planning priority in the five year plans following Independence held out a great promise for geography and geographers to play a significant role in policy making but soon slipped into the hands of the economists.

Ahmad (1997) puts it rather more bluntly. In his words, “the process of marginalization begins when it is generally perceived that you are a useless lot. If more geography is done outside the geography departments then geographers will be the last people to be consulted on any things under the sun”.

It is a pity that Indian geographers rarely recognize the power of intellectual and analytical strength that regions provide when they are accepted as units of analysis. Regions-abstract or real-are geographer’s imagination just as periods serves as historian’s imagination.

Geography Languishing?

It is not uncommon to read informed articles on the status of Geography in India as ailing (Mukerji, 1992) languishing (Kapur, 2004), marginal (Prasad, 2005, Lahiri-Dutt, 2005). As the adjectives reveal themselves, one is naturally drawn into a state of pessimism regarding the state of health of Geography in India (and elsewhere?). Most of these scholars have blamed both external influence and internal factors for the current state of

affairs. The issues range from relevance of the disciplinary focus to questioning the basis of what makes a particular piece of research so distinctly geographical. Questions are also raised regarding Indian geographers reluctance to theory and particularly social theory and continued adherence to positivistic methodology. That geographers are not taken seriously by social scientists, social science institutions and reviews are routinely cited as factors of neglect of this important branch of knowledge which has been suffering in India. There are important internal problems to this tragic state of affairs too which include the dualistic nature of this discipline, continued reproduction of deterministic ideas, placement of geography departments in the university system either under science or arts, bad curriculum and even male domination of this hapless discipline!

Valid arguments indeed! All or many of these issues are worth introspection. But why is it that we are quick in responding to these issues moments after they are raised, but fail to respond with same alacrity to research articles published by our colleagues in a journal? How many of us send our papers for comments/preview from our peer? It does not matter whether geography is treated under science or arts as long as we produce scholarly research. It does not matter whether the scholar is working in a metro or in margins of the margin. It does not convince me that only with a good library and with more women in the discipline geography can emerge as a true social science out of its moribund status.

I suspect geographers in India secretly enjoy a lack of focus to their discipline to pass anything and everything under the sun as geographical research because *they* are doing

it. There is a tendency, taking advantage of diverse phenomena that geography studies, to undertake such researches which scholars in other disciplines would be scared given the complexities inherent in the problematic. And all these in the name of geography being truly interdisciplinary in nature and that after all the problem studied is for a place, an area, a district, or a state-all confirming to one or other attribute of space! Geography as a discipline has a monopoly over space, so what is wrong if one studies empowerment of women in Jhabua or PDS beneficiary in Sriperumbadur? Why should not geographers study spatial variation (read inter-district) in generation of surplus-a study in radical geography or of labour productivity? Of course nothing in the material world exists on the head of a pin and hence qualifies to be studied under the aegis of geography. I personally feel that this attitude among many Indian geographers has done more harm to geography which flows more from lack of scholarship among the practitioners than the inherent weakness of the discipline itself. This brings forth the original claim I had placed in the beginning that our strength lies in situating and theorizing the problem of our investigation in their regional context and not by an uncritical reference to administrative units either as universe or as units of analysis.

The Way Forward

This is perhaps the most difficult issue. How does one make geography more intellectually satisfying? I have only suggested one very glaring aspect of geographical research that renders geographical studies trivial. But the problem is generic and it requires both specific as well as generic interventions on our part. The specific suggestions are inherent

in the arguments placed. In order to make geographical research more intellectually satisfying, there is an urgent need to replace administrative units by regions which I consider constitutes a geographer's project not to be easily comprehended by other disciplines with equal measure of success. Regional perspectives to the problems undertaken will surely open new windows for a meaningful dialogue with other disciplines with different perspectives of their own. Increased interest in and recognition of the value of the region and particularly the 'ordinary region' as opposed to more glamorous 'exceptional regions' encourages us to re-explore the nature and purpose of regional studies which may have been dismissed as 'merely descriptive'.

The generic solutions may lie in a curriculum development that recognizes this fact and reaffirms geography's commitment to regions and regional study which are slowly going out of geography syllabi or is treated with marginal interest. The new curriculum must avoid the mistakes of what made regional studies so uninteresting, repetitive and descriptive.

There are new hurdles in this endeavour too. At what level, and to what extent? A possible solution to this is inherent in a recent article by Dikshit (2010) who advocates calibrating the courses of study. By calibration it is possible to "rearrange the contents of the courses in such a way that the one covered earlier provides the base to, or at least proves helpful in understanding the subsequent courses" (Dikshit, 2010: 7-8). Understanding of regions can be integral to this calibration by adding courses on different regions at post graduate level and by removing many courses which simply repeat what has been understood

at under graduate level. All these require a reorientation of not only curriculum but also our attitude to accepting regions and regional perspectives central to geographical understanding.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad Aijazuddin (1997) Fifty Years of geography in India and abroad, *Presidential Address, XIX Geography Congress, Thiruvantapuram.*
- Ambrose Peter J. (1969) *Analytical Human Geography: A Collection and Interpretation of Some Recent Work*, Harlow Longmans.
- Dikshit, K. R. (2010) 'Reorienting Geography at University Level' *Hill Geographer*, vol. XXVI, no 1 & 2, pp 1-12.
- Kapur, Anu (2004) Geography in India: A languishing social science, *EPW*, Vol. 39, no. 37, September 11-17, pp 4187-4195
- Lahiri-Dutt, Kuntala (2005) Geography as a marginal science *EPW*, Vol. 40, no. 7, February 12-18, pp 689-691.
- Mukerji, A. B. (1992). 'What Ails Indian Geography? Some Statements', *National Geographical Journal of India*, Vol. 38, pp. 205-218.
- Marshall Alan, (2006) 'A critique of the development of quantitative methodologies in human geography', *Radical Statistics* vol. 92. <http://www.radstats.org.uk/no092/marshall92.pdf> visited 20th Dec. 2012.
- Massey Doreen (1984) 'Introduction: Geography Matters' in, Massey Doreen

and John Allen (ed.) *Geography Matters: A Reader*, University of Cambridge, Cambridge. p. 4.

Prasad, Sheela (2005) 'Geography in India: Marginal Space' *EPW*, January 1, Vol.40, No.1 pp.79-80.

Prasad, Sheela (2011) Regional Development and Inequalities, *Sixth ICSSR Survey in Geography* (2003-2009) (draft)

Raju S. (2004) 'Teaching and Researching the Geography of Gender: A Journey of Negotiations and Contestations', *WGSG, Geography of Gender Reconsidered*, August, pp 64-67.

Wooldridge S. W. (1950) Reflections on Regional Geography in Teaching and Research: Presidential Address, *Transactions and Papers*, Institute of British Geographers.

Debendra Kumar Nayak

Professor, Department of Geography
Northeastern Hill University
Shillong-793022
dknak@rediffmai.com