

INDIAN GEOGRAPHY TASKS AHEAD

N. B. K. Reddy*

I am much beholden to the distinguished members of the 'Institute of Indian Geographers' for the high honour they have conferred on me by electing me as the president for a three-year term, 1989-1992. I express my profound gratitude and profuse thanks to my fellow geographers for their benevolent gesture.

The eminent position of geography as an academic discipline and applied science as well as the crucial role that the subject can play in nation-building is being realized all over. It is necessary to assess the weaknesses and strong points of the subject so as to make it more relevant and more useful to society. It is in this context that the contemporary scenario of Indian Geography need be critically perceived and studied. Indian Geographers have not shown any significant interest in theoretical and methodological discussion on the nature of geography. As succinctly observed by Prof. Moonis Raza, Indian geography was not born when the modern geography was well-developed in the Western World. Geography came rather quite late on the Indian scene. Its development is essentially a post-independence phenomenon. So much so, the Indian geographers were not involved in the ideological turmoil on which modern geography built its philosophical foundation through methodological dialectics and intellectual rigour. Having uncritically accepted a complete system of ideas without participating in the making of it, Indian geography tended to develop an Achilles heel in its corpus.

Late K. M. Panikkar the first Indian to study the geopolitical aspects of India lamented that "geography has been at all

times one of the greatest and most regrettable gaps in Indian knowledge. Worse than our lack of interest in things historical has been our utter neglect of geography. Geography constitutes the permanent basis of every nation's history. It is one of the major factors that determine the historical evolution of a people. Today, free India has to realise her position in the world where geography has placed her in relation to other countries. She has also to understand the strength and weakness arising from her geography. A nation can neglect geography at its peril.

Any scientific discipline has four distinct but inter-related components: (1) Philosophy, (2) Methodology, (3) Methods, techniques and tools of analysis, and (4) subject matter or content. These four components occupy the four corners of a tetrahedron and exercise trilinear three-dimensional inter-relationship to promote the interest of the subject. The progress of any discipline warrants the development of these four components. No component is exclusive and independent of the other.

The usefulness of geography as a discipline which deals with space-time continuum can be enhanced by augmenting its basic internal strength which emanates from (1) as a subject of general knowledge and geographical information system, (2) as a subject of specialization, (3) as a bridge subject of integration and synthesis, and (4) as an applied field of knowledge to achieve human welfare. These four utilitarian aspects are unique to geography and they need be strengthened in unison and not in isolation. The pursuit of super specialization suffers from the inherent risk

of drifting apart due to centrifugality. Sufficient care need be taken to safeguard the subject from the centrifugal forces. The process of specialization must strengthen the core and not deplete and dismember the core.

Although there are dichotomies, diverse approaches and different schools in geography, all of them contribute to gain better perspective, insight and understanding of the world. These are not contradictory but complimentary as they help to gain a holistic view of geography. For instance, the regional and systematic approaches, idiographic and nomothetic approaches, inductive and deductive approaches, and empirical and theoretical approaches are not opposed to one another but supplement and compliment to one another. So also, the areal differentiation school, landscape school, ecological school and locational school in geography all help to gain a complete picture of the world. In them, we find more underlying unity than contradictions. Similarly, the deterministic and possibilistic view points are not the opposite ends. In terms of probability both can be conceptually accommodated and integrated. Cent per cent probability is deterministic and partial probability is possibilistic.

The positive and harmonistic approach that 'let hundred flowers blossom and thousand ideas flourish resolves most of the contradictions and butteresses the concept of unity as well as beauty in diversity.

The tools and techniques of analysis in geography have undergone revolutionary transformation and moved up to high level of sophistication. The traditional basic cartographic and field-work techniques, the observation skills in drawing inferences, conclusions and generalizations as well as the techniques of presenting the results in elegant and attractive literacy style are still

valid. However, the doubling of knowledge in about every fifteen years and explosion of data matrix and the development of geographical information system as a result of developments in satellite; computer and electronic technology all in combination have imposed certain compulsions on geographers to gain proficiency not only in statistical-mathematical techniques of analysis but also acquisition of knowledge and skills in satellite imageries and airphotos as well as in computer programming and computer cartography. Lest, the problem of handling data storage, data processing and data retrieval can not be solved. The traditional methods are too inadequate to meet the present exigencies of handling the vast and varied data.

Both as a geoscience and social science the relative weakness of geography is transparent when compared with other sister disciplines. The text book and classics in geography are mostly borrowed from the British and American sources. The uncritical acceptance of western ideas, concepts and models have inhibited the development of any serious internal dialogue. It led to stifle incentives for indigeneous approaches and original creative thinking. It is true that there is no place for chavinism in science, but there can not be development of science and technology unless we observe with our own eyes, develop our own tools of analysis, gain our own experience and think with our own minds. There is a great scarcity of research talent in India which is evident from the scarcity of numerical and qualitative research. Despite the presence of a galaxy of eminent Indian geographers, even today, there is no classic book on the geography of India written by an Indian geographer.

Some of the major thrust areas that Indian geographers need take up for indepth study and research may be the following :

1. Population, poverty and pollution.
2. Regional and social disparities, their consequences and mitigation.
3. Agricultural geography with special reference to optimization of land use and cropping pattern, increasing the levels of agricultural efficiency, development of dryland agriculture and waste lands.
4. Ecological problems, eco-development and ecological planning.
5. Ecosystems mapping.
6. Geopolitical problems of India with reference to frontiers and boundaries, sharing of river water, Defence strategies with reference to Himalayas and the Indian ocean, problem areas etc.
7. Regionalization and taxonomy of regions into dynamic, prospective and depressed regions so as to evolve suitable strategies for their development.
8. Problems of national integration with reference to linguistic, religious and regional diversity.

It would be academically fruitful and methodologically sound, if we broaden our

specialization base by getting training in a group of integrated and interrelated fields instead of confining to one narrow field of specialization in isolation. Such specialization complexes will immensely help to undertake better research with competence and to evolve better solutions to solve some practical problems.

The following may be tentatively cited to illustrate such specialization complexes :

1. Agricultural geography, geomorphology, agroclimatology, agronomy, soil and water management, and biogeography.
2. Urban settlement geography, rural settlement geography, urban planning, regional planning and urban ecology.
3. Economic geography, spatial organization, quantitative techniques of analysis, methods of regional analysis.
4. Industrial geography; locational analysis, pollution studies, and resource base studies.
5. Cartography, map-making techniques, computer cartography.
6. Geographical thought, philosophy of science, logic and theory of knowledge.

With these random reflections I conclude my address with the fond hope that the conference will give a new direction to the Indian geographic community for its betterment and fulfilment.

Address of the Authors

*Presidential address delivered at the 11th annual meet of the Institute of Indian Geographers on 12th February, 1990 at Bangalore.