

## WHITHER GEOGRAPHY : SOME OBSERVATIONS FROM THE U.S.A.

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**ABSTRACT:** Geography has been disappearing from the educational scene in the USA since the late 1940s. American geographers have, of late, become painfully aware of the decline of their discipline. One manifestation of this concern is the fresh debate on the direction and content of geography in various professional journals and organizations. To make geography relevant (to the students & teachers) once again multifarious efforts are being made. Two major avenues — the development of scholarship and the creation of competent teachers through teacher-training — are being emphasized. Describing this contemporary scenario, the paper raises some basic philosophical issues which are pertinent to Indian geography and geographers.

'Thirty-nine per cent of high-school seniors tested in Boston could not name the six New England States'.

'Forty per cent of high school seniors tested in Kansas city could not name three countries in South America'.

'Forty-five per cent of high-school seniors tested in Baltimore could not correctly respond to the instruction, 'On the attached map shade in the area where the United States is located'.

These are excerpts from a CBS Affiliated Survey made in January, 1987. Surprising, but true. Geography as an academic discipline in the United States of America has lost much of its meaning in recent years. The process perhaps started with the end of colonial expansion, or with the Munro doctrine gaining prominence in cotemporary thought. Geography was being taught in the U.S. from elementary schools through liberal arts colleges till World War II. Since then, in the late 1940s and 50s, as Elliot (1988, p. 329) puts it : 'there was a

trend to "integrate" it into the social sciences, along with government, history and political sciences, and a lot of other things. It largely disappeared as an individual discipline. He elaborates further, 'there was a feeling in those years that geography was a part of history, that if you were studying the era of Charlemagne, you would normally look into the geography of that period. So geography was lost, and when it disappeared in elementary and high schools, it disappeared also in the college curricula, because there weren't professors being trained to teach geography'. People in the US have now realized that their 'children didn't really know much about the world', and in the true American spirit have sat up to do something about it.

Similar feelings could be detected elsewhere too, particularly among the academicians, albeit in a different garb. Hart (1982, p. 17) believes geographers in recent years seem to have been riding off in all directions'. The Annals of the Association of American Geographers

has just carried an article by Neil Smith which seems to be much relevant on this issue. It dwells on the widely publicized affair of the sudden termination of the geography programme at Harvard, member of the Ivy League, one of the most haloed institutions on the other side of the Atlantic. Most would agree with Jean Gottman when he said in an interview (Smith, 1987, p. 155) that the closing of the Harvard geography department in 1948 was 'a terrible blow . . . to American geography', one from which 'it has never completely recovered'. The blow was all the more severe not only because of Harvard's position in American education but because in the course of the closure the President of that university suggested that 'geography may not be an appropriate university subject'. Reference to that incident is being drawn here because the episode 'is not just a case study of a particular important event in the history of American geography . . . but an opportunity for reflection and an invitation to learn from history and to apply these lessons to the present' so that no more 'myths about why geography departments are closed — then and now' — are encouraged (Smith, 1987, p. 155, 56).

The article makes us confront squarely the problems as well as the potential of academic geography. It highlights an important aspect that we geographers have to encounter irrespective of time and place. The elimination of geography from Harvard took place in late 1940s, but it was in no way a singular attack on the discipline as a whole. Geography is still considered to be nothing more than a marginal technical input by the average layman and even a part of the intelligentsia.

The conventional explanation of the Harvard affair focuses on the personal

aspects of the controversy that is somewhat characteristic of a discipline's collective understanding of its own recent history. The larger meaning and significance of events, however, become clear only in hindsight. In providing an archival reconstruction of events and actions of specific individuals, the article cleared 'the ground for a broader, more critical, and more profound soul-searching about the value of the discipline to the larger society' (Smith, 1987, p. 156).

The problem of geography is caused by factors which are rooted both within and outside the discipline. Geographers have been ambivalent about the subject matter, and hence the 'usefulness' of their discipline. Examples of a self-pitying attitude are aplenty. Abler (1987, p. 515) cites only two of them; that of William Morris Davis ('Geography as a subject of mature study has little recognition in this country') and Douglas Johnson ('In America, as abroad, geography is a weaker brother, its claim to a place among the sciences is not yet assured and its prestige in general is low') Abler contends that geographers themselves project a 'negative image' which is an unjustified result of 'our collective fetish with our alleged inferiority'

At the same time, it is true that geographers have really not been significantly able to contribute in a substantially positive way to the various physical and social issues confronting the modern world. And this fact renders our discipline denuded of much of its appeal to the outsiders (Harvey, 1969, p. 485). It is an eternal dilemma of the geographer to know what to say when asked the dreaded question. 'And what do you do?' (Abler, 1987, p. 511).

Well, much of this has been mentioned in the article as well as in several previous books and journals. The contention here

is what happened at Harvard four decades ago, though history now, cannot be said to be an isolated incident. When viewed in a wider perspective, it will be observed more vividly that similar cases of truncation, if not altogether elimination, of geography from universities have been taking place for quite some time since the Harvard incident. The geography department of Harvard was the first, or the most prominent, one in a series of casualties. It is time we take a look at the realities of contemporary academic life in the United States or, for that matter, in the world.

Bureaucratic rigidity and discipline are incompatible with scholarship, which requires a flexible imaginative approach to teaching and the freedom to explore original ideas. But as education expands, the administrative machinery needed for organizing and coordinating it also proliferates, and since they are polarized in extremities — their interests clash and contradict. But why? Why are they incompatible?

The answer lies in the roots of the dilemmas of academic life. A strong business mentality pervades much of higher education in the United States. There is a heavy emphasis on technology and efficiency, to make education economically feasible. As a result, there prevails a pre-occupation with marketable skills, practical training and accumulation of fragmental information rather than stimulating in the students a deeper understanding of scholarship. Judging from this viewpoint not only geography but any discipline that does not fetch immediate gains, such as greater financial benefits, is not deemed fit to be a university subject. The case is worse for geography because of the internal and external weaknesses of the discipline mentioned before, and its resultant

marginal position between science and arts. Hence the contempt of the authority structure, the 'hostile dean' syndrome of Smith (1987, p. 156), be it Harvard or the smallest institution of higher learning in the remotest corner of the world.

But at the same time it is true that nowhere else in the world have geography departments had to close shop altogether. Why so in the United States only, A probable answer is because in that country higher education is often run in a more business-like, profit-oriented manner. Sadly, the scramble among students to get admission in a particular department largely determines the longevity of that department ! True academic achievement is, however, intangible and its fruits often come very, very late. Yet, the perception of the student community is largely influenced by short-term, immediate gains. The bureaucracy will have to realize the fact that lack of student demand does not make a discipline irrelevant as or 'unfit' to be, a university subject. The geographer's responsibility in this context is to try and change the philosophy of higher education from a profit-orientation to scholarship development.

Professor Jordan, the new president of The Association of American Geographers while agreeing upon the fact that American Universities are downgrading scholarship in favour of 'job training', however, suspects something wrong exactly on this Point. He points out that geography departments are being abolished at the large and distinguished state and private universities of the United States — precisely those which remain dedicated to research. He cites (personal communication, 1987) the examples of Chicago, Michigan and Columbia Universities where this has happened in the recent past. The reason,

he believes, lies in the realm of scholarly research in geography. As a result, geography is surviving and even growing in undistinguished universities oriented to the development of vocational skills that too sometimes as an adjunct to the business school or some such other department.

Professor Jordan voiced the same feelings in his first ever column as the president (AAG Newsletter, Vol. 22, No. 7, P. 1) : 'I believe priorities in the AAG are dangerously confused. The membership of the AAC is, and always has been, composed preponderantly of professional academicians and students in higher education. The central purpose of such an association should be to promote and disseminate scholarly research in the discipline. All other activities in the profession — college teaching, K through 12 instruction, and the various applied fields in geography — rest ultimately upon our ability to produce a substantial body of scholarship in the form of publications. Without this ever-expanding base of knowledge, we have nothing to teach, nothing to apply'. To facilitate this, Professor Jordan also envisages 'regionally based' journals for geographers at smaller institutions without graduate assistant help, large libraries and labs, massive financial supports, and other infrastructural support for publications.

'Since budgets reflect priorities', he could 'not detect an adequate concern for research and publication in AAG budget, either now or in the past'. . . He goes on to show how the annual budget allocations on the *Annals*, the major scholarly journal of the AAG, have remained more or less the same since 1975. He suggests more expenditure on scholarly publications and in the process, revival of the resource papers series,

'Spotlight' publications and inducting fresh blood in the moribund monograph series.

Not everybody, however, liked his ideas and consequently there was a tremendous response in the form of protest letters as well as sympathetic ones. Some geographers, Brooker-Gross (1987, p. 2), for example, said Jordan was creating a false adversarial relationship between scholarship and educational groundwork. She also did not believe that all 'other activities' rest upon scholarly publications. According to her, scholarship in turn, depends upon all those other activities cited above. Firing the imagination of potential scholars early in their lives or careers is essential to maintaining and upgrading the quality of the work done by geographers. Others, for example Jackson (1987, p. 2), believe that timely dissemination of research findings can strengthen the discipline. Molyneaux (1987, p. 2) thinks this excessive importance on the 'academic core' could be unwarranted. He feels that the AAG has always focused narrowly on the academic; that it almost died from neglecting its constituent parts. He suggests that if geography is to survive and grow, 'it must focus outward and not withdraw into a void where only "true" geographers speak to themselves'.

The call, however, did not go to waste. In his presidential column Professor Jordan writes (1988, p. 1) : 'The budget addresses in several ways my concern about inadequacy of support for our association publication programme. Approximately \$ 10,000 in extra funds were shifted to the *Annals*, with the result that the net anticipated profit from that Journal will decrease from \$ 13,800 in 1987 to \$ 4,150 in 1988. The *Professional Geographer* received only a modest increase of \$ 1,900, but it is noteworthy

that our expenditures will exceed income on the **PG** by some \$ 18,600 for 1988. We will, then, be spending more on our scholarly journals than we realize in income from them. I would prefer a still large deficit, to bring us more in line with other scholarly associations and to allow our editors still greater flexibility. but the 1988 budget should nevertheless be regarded as progressive on this issue.

Not only this, but the budget has also allocated funds towards the possible resurrection of the **Research paper** series. Moreover, sales of back issues has continued to be substantial, yielding sufficient income to make the programme economically feasible. Professor Jordan expressed hope that soon they could reach a break-even point with regard to the publication of scholarly works. All this would mean a concomitant promotion of the continued intellectual development of the discipline as the most essential and central in AAG affairs.

Meanwhile, the government of the USA has also become aware of the present state of geography in that country. The National Science Foundation has invited proposals for the National Centre for Geographic Information and Analysis (NCGIA) to be set up in the summer of 1988 (AAG Newsletter, Vol. 22, No. 7, p.). The AAG has also received grants from the US Department of Education to help improve the quality of teacher preparation in geography. The programme — 'Improving Pre-service Training in Geography for Middle School Teachers : A University/School Partnership' — aims at alleviating the problem of geographic illiteracy. Here college and university professors of geography, school district personnel, and in-service teachers will work together at eight designated 'centers of Excellence' to develop new introductory college geography course

syllabi (AAG Newsletter, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 1).

The US Government also announced a 'Geography Awareness Week' which, according to the Newsletter, (Vol. 22, No. 10, p. 5) was such a success that it 'swept across' the country. Even the National Geographic has recently instituted an 'Education Foundation' so that American children could learn about other lands and cultures. According to Elliott (1988, p. 329 B) : We must all understand the physical and cultural dynamics of the earth if we are to be responsible citizens of the world'. Only a serious, long term commitment would help to restore geography to the prominence it deserves. And remember, we are not talking about the multitudes of high-brow committees and programmes taken up at the top level.

As an overview, I would like to clarify one point of our original premise. We have seen how geographers in the US have become aware of the problem of their discipline. Years of neglect has been pushing geography inch by inch to a natural death. As such the subject is large; of late the individual specialized branches themselves have grown into separate disciplines with more or less well - defined methodologies. The huge conglomerate, that geography has become nowadays will possibly suffer from the same fate of natural history of yesteryears. Geography has been described as the 'Los Angeles among academic cities . . . it spreads over a very large area, it merges with its neighbours, and we have a hard time finding the central business district' (Pattison and Natoli, 1977). To check the inevitable, the academicians as well as laymen in the US have come forward together. They have devised two major means for this purpose. **First**, the development of scholarship and basic

research in geography, hopefully not the kind carried on in the Academy of Arts of Lagado (Swift, 1726, reprinted, 1983, p. 225)! **Second**, the propagation of geography teacher-training and popular programmes. After all, 'Geographers are made in the classroom and not born' (Jordan, 1987, p. 1).

This discussion on the recent debate on the field of geography and its direction in the United States is relevant and pertinent to many of us, here in India. Along with 'what shall we say'? Abler (1987, p. 517) raises another question: 'To whom shall we speak? I am speaking to you, dear elders. Are you listening ?

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