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CONTEMPORARY DIRECTIONS IN GEOGRAPHY AND OUR OPTIONS IN INDIA*

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INTRODUCTION

In the course of last six months or so, I have come to know of several Indian Universities, which have organised debates and discussions on the contemporary direction of trends of thought in the field of Geography. This is indeed an encouraging sign for a healthy academic community, who are wishing to assess themselves in terms of what others are doing. Such a review can certainly offer opportunities to those interested to opt for roles that are expected of them. It is with this understanding that I am venturing to place my views before a learned society.

It is necessary that I state the source of my anxiety at the very beginning. I have had the misfortune of meeting a number of fellow professionals in Geography, who are too eager to consider their own engagement in the subject-discipline as directionless. It is certainly possible that, at least in some instances, their views may have been reflecting some personal truth. But, my anxiety is rooted in the fact that many other workers in this subject-discipline find their own convictions rather ineffective to deal with the expressed feelings of their co-workers on purposeless engagement. Seen from this angle, any review of contemporary directions in Geography must lead us to opt for values and this cannot be done without examining our primary role as educators and as organisers of knowledge.

OBJECT OF EDUCATION AND STRUCTURING OF KNOWLEDGE

I consider that the object of education is to provide the willing learner with opportunities to become aware about his own orientation in his world. If this view is accepted by the members of this learned society, then they may find that the study of history and geography is essential. I am arguing for these two subject-disciplines, primarily because orientation starts by recognising one's own location in a given millieu. Without knowing how I have become what I am, which is given by history, and where and how I am surrounded by other objects of reality, which is given by geography, it is almost impossible to make meaning of what we otherwise experience. History and Geography jointly make us aware that we are time and space bound, which define the basic reality of our existence. For this reason, no system of education can avoid admitting these two subject-disciplines as fundamental components of liberal education. As long as the society retains its preference for liberal education, we, as professional educators, must continue to develop our knowledge in these two subject-disciplines. This also means that in our own interest we must make efforts to convince the larger society to uphold the merit of liberal education.

Considering that the majority of the present membership belong to the Uni-

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versities, which is the highest echelon of a national education system, it is necessary that we state the special role of a University. In any hierarchical educational system, the Universities play a highly specialised role. It has to provide support to the entire educational system. This is met by developing the art of pedagogy by delving into the fundamentals of the theory of learning, by abstracting the essence of observed or verified experiences, by defining the attributes of the objects composing the reality and by establishing relational linkages between the so defined objects. By pursuing such tasks, the great fields of knowledge have come to be recognised.

The University has, however, no obligation to put a label on any enquiry conducted therein into which of the great fields of knowledge it should belong. Nevertheless, we do classify enquiries by subject-disciplines as belonging to physics, economics, chemistry, sociology, etc., primarily due to the historicity of conventions and convenience. This has proven its advantage to mankind in the sense that specialised knowledge about a section of reality went hand in hand with increasing specialisation in the interactions between man and environment and in organising societal responses to resource utilisation. These three elements, i.e., organising awareness about the details of reality, adopting the usage of specialised tools and structuring social actions for specialised resource-use, emerged in history almost simultaneously. This means that the utility of any or all conventionalised fields of enquiry or subject-discipline is assessed by the society against what it expects from the scholars to give in order to enrich actions for diverse specialised objectives. This defines the ambience of all institutions of learning and more so of the Unversity for the special role it performs in sustaining the national system of education per se.

Within many conventionalised disciplines or fields of enquiry, there emerged many specialised sub-fields as scholars delved deeper into their respective realms by way of measuring elaborately and sharply the attributes of some chosen objects. For example, within the conventional discipline of economics, we may discern now-days, which were not there before, a number of sub-fields like macroeconomics, microeconomics, international trade, money, banking, development economics, etc. Instead of declaring these sub-fields as seperate disciplines, their pursuers chose to retain the status of sub-disciplines under the umbrella of the great discipline of economics. Their choice need not be seen as arbitrary or as a hangover of some earlier emotional attachment. I think that they chose to remain together, because they could thereby address themselves better to the primary task of their mother discipline, which in the context of economics has been to explain the economic rationality of man in its pursuit to create greater economic opportunities. Similarly, within the great discipline of physics, the ever emerging sub-fields have chosen to remain together as these found convenient and necessary, for their primary task has been to explain the physical properties of matter. Examples can be multiplied to demonstrate that the same rationality prevailed within many other great disciplines as their respective sub-fields chose to remain together. Looking at the complexities of the works carried out by the scholars in their respective sub-fields, one could certainly wish to describe many of the great subject disciplines as multi-disciplinary fields of enquiry. However, such feelings have not been institutionalised as long as the scholars in these sub-fields recognised the meaning of their relationship with the primary task of their mother discipline. This suggests that the scholars in different sub-fields of Geography have to review periodically how by remaining together they are

responding to the primary task of their mother discipline.

It would be wrong to assume that specialised enquiries on sections of reality did not produce any interface between them. As enquiries on the relation of two different phenomena belonging to two different but conventionalised subject-disciplines progressed, explanations of the observed attributes of both became rich in quality and content. Through convention once again, a large number of interface-disciplines came to be recognised. We thus have subject-disciplines like bio-physics, geo-chemistry, agri-climatology, political-sociology, and many others. Almost everyday, we are coming across scientists who are interested about a section of reality that straddles across two or more conventional fields of enquiry. In the process, the reality around us is getting increasingly described as systems.

It is difficult to explain how and when development of sub-fields within the ambit of great disciplines will be preferred to development of interface-disciplines. At least, it is not possible to predict through a single theorem. Both may be seen as natural response to optimise intellectual efforts for meeting the demands put on the scholars subject to their personal preference.

One could certainly argue that the development of sub-fields within great disciplines came in response to the felt needs of the society, in the sense that as the society got increasingly stratified to pursue a variety of limited objectives, each stratum needed more and more knowledge and understanding about less and less, but relevant segments of reality. In the economically developed countries, the business houses are known to provide research grants to academic institutions to develop knowledge in fields pertinent to their economic pursuits. It is also known that many scholars of highly specialised fields have gone out on their own initiative to make available their acquired knowledge to the pertinent business house. All such facts merely suggest the existence of market forces, the impacts of which the academic institutions can gainfully utilise for acquisition and development of knowledge. This can also contribute towards development of interface-disciplines.

I can argue that the demands for enquiry on the interfaces of great disciplines came from the very impacts that the specialised sub-fields produced upon social practices. Application of specialised knowledge can happen only when social practices become equally specialised. However, people or organisations accustomed to specialised practices generally develop somewhat segmented appreciation of the reality, which is otherwise a continuum. They generally become less and less sensitive to the consequences of their own actions upon an otherwise unsegmented reality. Especially for the societies indulging in the production of private goods in preference to public goods, more and more issues tend to fall between the task domains of specialised economic institutions and are neglected. This impinges upon the society and produces special protest or unrest, calling for political intervention. Such situations provide opportunities for scholastic work on the interfaces between specialised disciplines and individual researchers sensitive to such events engage themselves in such works.

We can recall many instances of inter-disciplinary works that took place in the course of last forty years or so. We had interdisciplinary works on post-war reconstruction of Europe, for handling urban problems of the U.S.A. in the sixties, for designing territorial production complexes in the U.S.S.R., for controlling pollution of environment across the countries of the world over the last fifteen years, for biomass management as means to regenerate degraded land to secure access to alternative energy sources in India and many

African countries, for genetic engineering to address world hunger, for defining the law of the seas, etc. All these have produced very useful funds of knowledge and equipped the participating disciplinarians to appreciate the larger social relevance of their respective area of specialisation.

We may admit that directions in every science can emerge in response to the two types of processes mentioned above. This, I consider, has been the historicity of education or the processes governing acquisition of knowledge. If such a view is shared by the membership of this learned society, should we not use it as a framework for reviewing the contemporary directions in geography as well ?

UNIQUENESS OF GEOGRAPHY AS SCIENCE

Our subject discipline, i.e., geography, is often described by ourselves as a peddler's bowl full of rags and bones collected from other disciplines. I hope, we say this to tell ourselves that we should know more about other great disciplines. Otherwise, nothing could be more impolite a remark about what other disciplinarians are doing. I agree that we collect and use ideas of others regarding the objects that we are concerned with and these are gems of ideas and certainly not rags and bones. We have to continue to collect and make use of these. The symbol of a peddler's bowl appears real only when we do not know what to do with our collection.

It is necessary that I explain why our subject discipline must necessarily draw from the wisdom of many other disciplines. Shorn of all protentions, ours is an interface-discipline, because ours job is to establish the relationship obtaining between the elements of physical and cultural landscape. The elements constituting the physical landscape and the laws governing these are handled by many other disciplines like geology, hydrology, glaciology, botany, zoology and what have you. None of these disciplines individually cover the whole gamut of the constituent elements of physical landscape. Similarly, elements of culture of human beings are handled by anthropology, political science, sociology, economics, history and what have you. None of these disciplines individually cover the whole gamut of the constituent elements of culture. Therefore, none of these subject-disciplines have chosen, as we have done, to establish the relationship between all these constituents of reality. When they try to do so, invariably some interface discipline emerge, like political-history, social-anthropology, edaphology, etc. and support such interface disciplines by borrowing freely from the participant mother sciences. Seen against such experience, we need not be taken as strange animals.

One may, however, ask us to state the necessity of sustaining such a mega-interface-discipline as geography may appear to be. Frankly speaking, our discipline is not that boundaryless. This we can realise when we examine what constitutes our facts '. By fact we mean the object as also the associated event. Our objects are given by the tangible or manifest attributes of physical and cultural landscape. Our concept of event presupposes a stage in a time oriented process. We classify these facts to partition the surface of the earth according to observed similarities or dissimilarities and the so partitioned spaces are called regions. Since our objective is to show the relationship between the constituent elements of landscape, our regions simply state that rationality is time-space specific and their variety is large. What other discipline can be more humanistic and liberal than ours ? Are we not trying to tell ourselves to accept the reality of variations as sine qua non of life itself and to discover the true contents of rationalities therein ? If we decide not to pursue this

as an ideal, then our world may turn truly illiberal and be torn a sunder by egocentric and ethnocentric intolerance. This alone should justify the necessity of our subject-discipline as a vehicle of liberal education for any society other than the most illiberal.

I have often been asked by my students to consider whether geography should at all be called a science. It is certainly a science, if we recall that our job is to explain a fact in terms of its relationship with the other constituents of landscape where it is located. Job of science is to establish the relationship based on dependable measures and to explain. We as geographers attend to both, at least we should. Science also predicts. Geography refrains from predicting and in that sense it is not like many other sciences. This choice is exercised by geographers consciously. Predictive ability is a function of the law of causation, which accepts some variables as determinants of other facts described as explained variables. Geographers have experienced the danger of importing the logic of determinism. They have also experienced the disutility of ignoring determinism altogether for they know that the range of possibilities are extremely limited in any given region. Hence they are open to accept change, if it takes place, and reticent to recommend change. If this makes geography a science of empiric validity, then let it be so. In the world of education, our disposition is not unique in this regard.

Geographers know that their manifest facts are products of interplay of laws governing three distinct domains of reality. One of these domains is governed by the law of nature, where enquiries may produce in scholars some predictive abilities. The second domain is governed by the laws of society, which are already differentiated by the respective historicity of the societies. These laws may tell us what the reality ought to be, but not whether it will necessarily be. The third is governed by the law of the mind of the given culture group, which influences the process and structure of perception about the other two domains. About the third set of laws, our understanding is least developed. Such is our state of knowledge in this regard that even the psychologists cannot predict the functioing of mind. How can we then predict the nature of interpretation that the mind of the given culture group would make of the rationality of the laws of society and of the processual orientation of the laws of nature? The importance of this question will reveal itself as we define the meaning of cultural landscape.

We know that cultural landscape is the habitat of man. He has created it by responding to environment in terms of the bevaiour of the group to which he belongs. Such behaviour depends on acquired habits, which is the culture of the group. We also know that culture is a collection of activities that are learned, i.e. admitted by the individual mind, and conventionalised, i.e., accepted by the collective mind after expelling individual indiosyncracies of a group that lives in an area. This tells us that the logics of causation does not apply to social groups and that cultural landscape is a term referring to appraisal by mind.

OUR TASK

The derivatives of what has been said earlier should produce the tasks that await us. Before we start that exercise, I would like the membership of this learned society to appreciate that unlike many other sciences as practised in our Universities, we the professional geographers cannot exclusively depend on the intellectual outputs of other societies. The reason is easy to understand. Ours is an empiric science and the task is to explain the relationship between our physical and cultural landscapes. This we cannot do unless we try to discover the laws of our physical

world, society, and mind. It is difficult to explain the reality of one place by the laws of other places within the philosophical premises of geography, because the laws of society and mind are not truly universal. Social scientists have demonstrated that the laws of the society of ancient Sparta was not the same as those of contemporary Athens. Neither was feudalism at any given period of history everywhere the same in Europe. Nor do we see capitalism of Europe producing indentical social behaviour to what capitalism does either in the USA or in Japan. These facts of life tell us that we have to learn about ourselves in sheer response to optimisation of intellectual efforts.

The above observations should not imply that I am asking the membership to shut their eyes from what our fellow scholars are discovering in other countries. What I am suggesting is simply to use their models, their ideograms, their explanations to understand the relationship between their physical and cultural landscape. We may not, however, rule out the possibility of adopting some of the laws of their society or their physical world to modify our habit and to change our habitat in the process. This we can hope to achieve only after assessing our adaptive capacity in terms of the laws of our society and physical world. No society has ever escaped this responsibility. Why should we ?

Given the above governing principle, we should note that at the level of the University, it is difficult to escape borrowing knowledge from the other great disciplines. We may not forget that geography has been admitted in Indian University rather late in the day. Therefore, by virtue of their earlier start, if some of the other disciplines have discovered some of the laws of our physical world (as geology has done), our social world (as economics, political science and history have done) and our mind (as philosophy, religion and literature have done) before us, there is no point in rediscovering these laws by geographers once again. We should, instead, try to test these discoveries within the ambit of our science. Such testing will, however, be difficult to organise without vulgarisation unless we train our students on how to appreciate their contextual relevance. Hence, a University department of geography has no choice but to invest on the studies of such subject-disciplines whose laws appear relevant to explain the relationship between physical and cultural landscapes. At least, the philosophical premises of these subject disciplines and the relevance of some of their chosen laws in the context of geography are to be covered. This world equip our students to pursue studies of any or all these subject-disciplines, if they so desir later in life.

I can feel your anxiety in accpeting my above proposition. You may wonder what will happen to our science if our students pursue the other subject disciplines concerned with the laws of physical world, social world and the world of mind exclusively. I can only assure you that thereby they can be useful to the society without becoming a scholar in geography. In order to be called a geographer, he has to use his learning to explain the relationship between physical and cultural landscape.

I can only request you to find cut what has happened to the scholars who engaged themselves in the past in the interface-disciplines to deal with say, urban problem, biomass management, environment management etc. Some of them left our tribe and continued to develop these interface-subjects. But those who came back within our fold enriched our science with new concept-frames, new methods of measurements and newer kinds of explanations. If our science is designed to produce liberal value of tolerance, then why be intolerant about our potential prodigal sons ?

Why not instead accommodate some of the problematics that confront our society today within our own departments ? How about exmining the phenomenon of dwindling per capita availability of natural resources consequent upon growing numbers of people and its impact on cultural and physical landscape ? Why not examine the issue of shelter to discover the laws of society perpetuating the problem ? Why not examine the phenomenon of informal-sector for the same purpose ? Who prevents us to study the perception of our own people about the laws of nature ? I can only assure you that once you engage yourselves in any or all such problematics, the threat of my earlier suggestion producing a disparate congerie of multiple disciplines in the name of geography will disappear and the meaning of our subject as an inter-disciplinary field of study shall emerge. You may discover that one or the other great discipline would appear irrelevant in the context of one or the other problematic. You will also discover that all the laws of the so-grouped disciplines are not equally useful to a geographer.

I have presented my views in the form of formulating our tasks. But I believe you will find it useful as a framework of explanation on how and why contemporary directions in geography have been different between the countries of the world. It has been so, because the demands of societies upon geography have been different between the countries.

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