

## INDIAN GEOGRAPHY : A VIEW ON THE STATUS AND CHALLENGES \*

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First of all, I would like to express my grateful thanks to the General Body of the Institute of Indian Geographers for electing me its President and thus reposing confidence in me. I am fully aware that this Chair had been occupied in the past by eminent geographers. I am conscious of my limitations, but I will endeavour to discharge my duty as President to the best of my ability.

The annual meetings of academic societies aim inter-alia at continuous appraisal of the intellectual trends within the discipline and search ways and means to strengthen the coping mechanism of the discipline about the various changes occurring in the world. My address is a humble attempt to touch upon certain aspects of the status and prospects of Indian Geography. This is neither a clarion call nor a sermon lecture. It only contains some ideas and feelings which have been agitating my mind for quite some time.

I want to start my address with the question : If the geography being practised in our country deserves the label 'Indian Geography'. What is Indian in it? Does it have a distinctive character, as many national schools of geography have, with respect to philosophical viewpoints or methodological approaches or constitution? L. R. Singh's lament seems to have some substance when he writes : "Unfortunately it (Indian Geography) heavily subsists on the

foreign ideological imports which exercise a mythological influence on the geographical rituals of teaching and research in our universities and counteracts the process of evolutionary thought" (1996, 28).

Although geography as a University discipline in India had taken its root before the independence, its expansion occurred during the plan period. However, for a long time the senior positions were few and only about half a dozen Professors dominated the scene and were responsible for guiding the fate of the discipline. These doyens were trained in the West and hence the western influence on the character of Indian Geography was natural and obvious. They were scholars and hard working people who tried their best to develop the discipline, although in their own ways. Barring a few, most of them encouraged geographical researches in their respective Universities and had a large band of disciples.

The key leaders (see Johnston, 1984, 4) pursued their own research programmes and disciples followed them faithfully. The obedient disciples were showered favours while dissenters if any were marginalised. Personal egos leading to covert rivalries reduced these scholars to intellectual islands. They could not sit and put their mind together to plead for greater role of geographers in the programmes of national reconstruction. However, one great

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achievement of those early years, i.e., the establishment of the National Atlas Organisation at Calcutta, is worthy of praise.

Overdominance of the leaders inhibited scepticism which is a precondition for the development of a science. The obedient disciples were committed to personalities than to the discipline. Inbreeding which hampers the growth and innovation became the vogue. With the passage of time the research programmes became stale and the declining academic fervour landed the discipline into the trap of mediocrity syndrome.

In the late 1960s Indian Geography experienced the wave of quantitative revolution and scientific movement. Gradually more senior positions were created. A few geographers with new philosophical viewpoints entered the arena and a process of democratisation set in.

The quantitative revolution of 1950 s brought with it the philosophy of positivism which alongwith its methodological associate the scientific method, pervaded geography in the West until late 1960s when it was severely criticised as it was felt by many that this philosophy had dragged the discipline away from 'Man', which should be the real focus of all geographical enterprise. However inspite of its limitations it generated a lot of philosophical debate and its reactions manifested in a diversity of alternative philosophical viewpoints, some in line with it while others diametrically opposite to it, viz. pragmatism functionalism, phenomenology, existentialism, idealism, realism, dialectical materialism (Marxism) and so on (for discussion see Harvey and Holly, 1989).

Usually there is a time lag of about a decade or more in the arrival of the western intellectual trends in Indian Geography. From late 1960s to early 1980s the quantitative techniques were

used on a large scale, in many cases 'as mere embellishment to conceal lack of thought or judgement behind a facade of formulae and symbols' (Dayal, 1995,5). But now the things have stabilised and both the utility and limitations of the quantitative techniques have been realised by Indian Geographers. In spite of this methodological stirring, the community of Indian geographers could not participate in the philosophical debate which has been going on in the West. Only some impact of Marxism may be seen in the writings of a few Indian geographers.

The constitution of geography may differ from one country to another, but it is widely accepted that it studies man-nature interrelation and provides knowledge about the earth as the home of humankind. This is a special type of vertical division of knowledge and to treat it as par with other social sciences will only belittle its stature. To treat it as a bridge between social and natural sciences will also amount to underestimation of its importance. It does not touch these two major branches of knowledge at their margins. Rather it cuts across all of them and is concerned with the study of interaction among all the human and natural elements which manifests into spatial systems. This all embracing horizontal expanse provides the discipline a holistic or at least near holistic character (as true holism is beyond the comprehension of human mind) whose ultimate role is integration and synthesis.

Geography suffers from some weaknesses which have led to what Bartels (1982) has identified as geography's hidden self contempt' (also see Taylor, 1985). Since true holism is too difficult to our brain power, it degenerated into a generalist approach in which naive and simplistic description took

the place of synthesis. Some improvement was brought by the quantitative revolution which emphasised analysis and explanation in geography. Synthesis is a stage ahead of analysis. But unfortunately the Indian Geography has not been able to come out of even the stage of simple deterministic description.

Lack of commitment to society is another major weakness of geography, particularly Indian Geography. The development of a discipline needs nurturing by the society via state, and for this the society makes certain demands upon it. The society is the paymaster. Therefore it promotes disciplines which are profitable or useful to it. It does not mean that only applied researches should receive attention. The growth of fundamental understanding is no less important, as it is necessary for the solution of problems in the longer term. Therefore success in both activities is necessary for the long-term survival of the discipline. Unfortunately the ideas and structure of Indian Geography have not developed in response to complex social, economic, ideological and intellectual stimuli. Either good quality problem-oriented researches were not conducted or if conducted they were not properly communicated to the user.

Geography has a long tradition of environmentalism. But today when the environmental issues have become so pressing, geographical researches have not been able to come out of the stage of environmental determinism and they hardly fit in the priority list published by the Government of India (1987). Likewise population studies constitute an important part of geography, but population geography is still concerned with the description or at the most explanation of growth and distribution. The implication of growth and distribution

and the problems related with the various elements of population change are hardly addressed. Other branches of geography also play only peripheral role when it comes to problem identification and solving.

To attain respectability, Indian Geography is to compete at two fronts : One, at the international front with the other national schools of geography, and the other, at the national front with other disciplines, and for this, contributions and improvements are necessary at all, i.e., philosophical, theoretical, methodological, technical and pedagogic levels.

The ancient Indian philosophical traditions and the Gandhian philosophy may form the focus of our philosophical debate. I want to remind about the slogan of 27th International Geographical Congress, i.e. 'Geography is Discovery'. What is to be discovered by the Indian Geographers? Perhaps, first of all, India itself, and no individual or institution can be of greater help than the Mahatma's view in this venture. The major tenets of the Indian philosophies and their potentials for geographic study need be evaluated. The Indian philosophical contribution will strengthen the philosophical basis of the discipline.

The Indian Geography must have a commitment to the society, lest it fades away into insignificance. In this respect I would like to quote Daniel Dory (1996, 83) who "expresses strong convictions about geography's need to develop more integrated theories about society and milieu on the one hand, and also to develop sensitivity to the material realities of concrete situations, particularly those involving ecological and environmental crises." The geographers should be able to formulate integrated concept of development, a development which will involve not only economic growth but also

social justice and environmental quality and aim at the improvement in the quality of human life. Peter Nash' 'hopes regarding geography's potential contribution to the resolution of humanity's problems in the future' (1996, 81) should and can apply to Indian Geography also. Researches need be oriented towards burning and pressing problems of the country, such as population problem, mass poverty, human welfare issues, gender inequality, resource use and conservation and other environmental issues, and so on.

An important objective of geography is to build an informed society. The geographers fulfil this responsibility through teaching from school to post-graduate levels. Continuous appraisal of syllabi and need of good books have been emphasised in almost all Presidential addresses delivered in the annual meetings of the different geographical societies. What has never been emphasised or even mentioned is the evaluation of the potential of the discipline in extension services particularly for creating awareness among the public about environment, population problem and so on. Recently the Union Minister for Environment and Forests declared for inclusion of environmental education in the school curricula. This is a

right time when the Indian geography must assert its utility in this venture.

Good quality research is another, rather the most important, issue. It must be understood for certain that specialisation or reductionism and holism are not contrary to each other. They are rather complementary. Geography has a great horizontal expanse. Therefore, to achieve depth in the study, the researcher will have to have some working knowledge in the discipline related with the field of study.

Remote sensing satellites have tremendously broadened our data base. Their data products provide a powerful tool for the study of the earth resources. It is really commendable that 'Remote Sensing and GIS applications in Spatial Sciences' has been chosen as a focal theme for this Conference. Holding of training programmes and workshops has become necessary to train the researchers and teachers of geography in this latest art.

In the last, I would like to emphasise that we all should strive for widening the market of users for the intellectual product of geography. The Institute of Indian Geographers may play a role in this respect.

I once again thank you for giving me a patient hearing.

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