

CHALLENGES IN GEOGRAPHY TEACHING AND RESEARCH

NINA SINGH and BINU SANGWAN, Rohtak

ABSTRACT : This paper is an initiatory attempt to raise issues regarding response of Geography in terms of orientation of the discipline – its concern and content to the world that is changing fast – perhaps faster than ever before.

Geography concerned with understanding the world distinctively focuses on the study of relations of environment and society and of absolute and relative space. Thus, changes in the external world is one of the major stimuli to change in the discipline. This understanding is then transmitted to a wide audience which includes those who would change the world, at all scales.

Change is continuous, though its rate and direction vary over time and space. Geographers have long been charting, understanding and creating changes. The question before contemporary geography is : How should geographers respond in terms of orientation of the discipline – its concern and content to the world that is changing fast – perhaps faster than ever before? To answer this question we should first appreciate how and why the world is changing? Of particular interest to geographers is the changes experienced in the physical environment; the created environment, and society.

THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Human activity is having a greater influence on physical environment now than in the past, because there are more people in the world, who want to live at ever-higher material

standards and thus are making increased demand on the earth as their resource base. Investment in research into the changing physical world, the transmission of its results and translation of their implications into policy recommendations are crucial to the changing world of the next few decades if we are to ensure a future that will be sympathetic to human needs.

THE CREATED ENVIRONMENT

The created environment which encompasses all aspects of human modification of environment in town and countryside requires investigation. The intensity of demand on the farmed land has increased. The world is experiencing rapid urbanization. The townscape is the most intensively used portion of the earth's surface. Internally, the cities are organized in a variety of complex ways. Not only are the main land uses increasingly segregated with clearly defined areas of commercial, industrial and residential land but each of these component areas are internally differentiated too. For example, the residential area may be segregated on the basis of socio-economic, migrant, life-style and other cultural groups. This encourages inter-group distancing with different groups living apart in separately defined territories

and developing separate vision of society accordingly (Johnston, 1989; 1991). Likewise uneven development is a characteristic of the capitalist mode of production at all spatial scales : both theoretical (Harvey, 1982; Smith, 1984) and empirical (Massey, 1984) investigations have indicated its existence and also the need for its spatial parameters to change. The intensity and pace of change are thus important foci for geographical work, as the 'created' environment is continually 'recreated'. This necessitates studies on land use, and spatial organization which has been one of the long-term strengths of human geography.

SOCIETY

It is only recently that geographers have come to focus their attention on studying spatial variations within society. Most traditional regional studies concentrated (Jackson, 1991) on population numbers, economic activities and aspects of the created environment. Studies of the structure of society and its interactions with the physical and created environments remain the least well-developed aspects of the discipline.

The nature of the state is changing. With the opening of national economies to global forces, the world has become a global market place and a global factory. There is less regulation in the sphere of production and consumption, subsidies are being withdrawn, and welfare provisions are reduced. Even the socialist world has experienced restructuring of its state apparatus. The political map of the world is undergoing changes alongwith economic power.

Recent times have witnessed two particular geopolitical trends. One of these is the Integration. In the light of accelerating process of globalisation the world is becoming small,

small global villages, places, countries coming closer to each other. No country can function in isolation. On the other hand, there is separation. There are many ethnic, regional and linguistic groups demanding autonomy. These are only a few examples. Thus as societies change, so do their interactions with the created and physical environment. These interactions create a great deal of variety across the earth surface which constitutes the subject matter of geography. Regional Geography thus has come full circle.

In order to respond to all such changes being experienced in the world at all spatial scales, geography should take up the following issues in its teaching and research to make the subject more socially relevant.

Geography has been divided and subdivided into a series of specialisms each with its own expertise, techniques and theoretical constructs. Within many of the specialisms geographers study topics which "suffer from the dilemma of conflucting firmities : a focused in-depth approach turns the discipline to non-geography, and an orientation to spatial context reduces it to triviality' (inserted by the editor). The result is that the subject has lost its proper place within sciences. We must reclaim our intellectual heritage.

The application of contemporary geography influenced by social humanism is directed not towards the real environment as expressed in empirical data, not to the perceived environment as expressed in sense data, nor to the cognized environment as expressed in imaginary concepts or rational theories, but to the future potential environment as expressed in values (Grano, 1981). This calls for a substantial reorientation of our disciplinary perspectives and a redrawing of our syllabi and teaching programmes.

Physical and human geography cannot be studied exclusive of each other. Through a study of physical geography we discover the processes by which society relates itself to the environment-perception, evaluation, utilisation and of enriching social/human geography itself. A human geography divorced from the physical environment would be meaningless. Moreover the human geography should be oriented in tune with the culture of times.

Similarly much of the geography that we are teaching is systematic. 'Region' - the traditional core of geography and regional geography the *raison-de-etre* of geography for hundred of years, has taken a back seat.

Today there is a growing public concern over the question of structural inequalities between the rich and the poor, the rural and the urban, and the man and the woman. Some of the new issues are defined as "growth with distribution", "rural-urban integration", "gender equality" and adoption of "people centred world order." The basic thrust is to weave development around people and not people around development (Friedmann, 1992, p. 13). The international agencies such as the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme and UNICEF are increasingly focusing on questions of disparities, poverty, environment, and health. Debate on the priority between social development and economic development is gaining grounds. The recognition of the work of Prof. Amratya Sen by virtue of the award of Nobel prize recently has reasserted the need of development with humane face (See Dreze & Sen, 1998). Above all, the issue of sustainable development, seeking a harmony between development and ecology, is the one which cannot be ignored (Friedmann and Weaver, 1979).

It follows that the regional or regional development studies can contribute

substantially to the enrichment of Geography. Being interdisciplinary these are much more integrative in nature. Besides addressing a myriad of problems at the various spatial scales they are also concerned with the adoption of specific planning policies to redress spatial inequalities arising from regional development. Not only this, they have social relevance since they focus on the problems of life and society.

If we agree that regional and regional development studies are intellectually stimulating and operationally profitable since they expose geographers to varied aspects of relative-development and under-development in different parts of the world, and an inquiry into the processes involved would enable them to make worthwhile contribution to development strategies, then the question is how to promote it in our academic teaching and research.

Likewise the critical role of public policy in influencing the personality and development process of different areas is universally appreciated but rarely subjected to systemic analysis in geographic teaching and research. There is always a need to understand the area specific considerations which went in formulation of any policy, the spatial variations in the seriousness with which a policy decision was implemented, and the regional differences in the degree of success which was met, or the spatial impact of the non-spatial policies and vice-versa. Thus, the discipline needs to open its theoretical perspectives to challenges so that it can contribute to dialogues on policy or education in the world of changing political, social and economic structures – a world which is identified loosely, as moving towards a post welfarist culture of our times.

Interaction at all hierarchical level of teaching is a must. The course at various levels should

be designed with thoroughness and imagination and there should be constant restructuring of courses in keeping with the present day requirement. The scale and scope of geography should be revised and a case for universal geographic literacy should be stressed since the task of geographers is to first understand how the world is changing and then transmitting that understanding widely, as a contribution to the creation of better world.

In fine, the geographers must visualise the kind of world evolving in the 21st century and update knowledge and reinvent the discipline accordingly. It should be geography which

reaches out to the future, which will teach us the realities of the world in which we live, how we can live better on it and with each other. It is geography which will teach our neighbours, students and our children how to understand and respect our diverse terrestrial inheritance. Following John F. Kennedy, we can rightly ask not what society can do for geographers but rather what geographers can do for the society. This will involve agenda setting at an institutional scale, will probably require specialization among institutions and will need geographers to cooperate much more in large research teams than has been the case hitherto.

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ADDRESS OF THE AUTHORS

Dr. (Ms.) Nina Singh
Reader & Head
Department of Geography,
Maharshi Dayanand University,
Rohtak-124 001 (Haryana)

Ms. Binu Sangwan
Lecturer,
Department of Geography,
Maharshi Dayanand University,
Rohtak-124 001 (Haryana)

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