

Indian Geography: Voice of Concern

Anu Kapur

National Association of Geographers, India, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi 110 059; pp XIX + 438, figures and photographs; Rs 995/-

'Accomplished within as short a span as six months, the book is a sensitised version of excellence' – says Prof. Gopal Krishan, in his Foreword to the book. This is the assessment of the gentleman who, as a President of NAGI, executed the project, to compile and publish all the presidential addresses, delivered (or *staged*, as the blurb says) 'from the podium of the Indian Geography Conference'. His concluding remarks in the foreword reads – 'The future of Indian Geography is not certainly without hope. A discipline that produces such sparks of brilliance, as the present one, is surely headed towards vibrancy of incandescence rather than morbidity of embers'. In the face of such observations, to read and assess the book is not a dauntless enterprise. The author says in her preface – 'I am a chance author of this book'. But author, indeed, she is. One may add, she is both, an author and an editor. Author of what she has written in the first ninety pages of the book, and editor of the presidential addresses.

Undoubtedly, both, Prof. Gopal Krishan and Dr. Anu Kapur deserve our appreciation and even gratefulness, for bringing out this volume. The book running into 438 pages is broadly divided in two parts: the first part containing ninety pages, written by the author is called the 'Voice of Concern' and the second part having 340 pages, titled as 'Concern for the Voice', is the text of twenty two presidential addresses delivered between 1980 and 2000. Each address is preceded by not-so-short a curriculum vitae, which the author calls a profile.

The book has a fictionalised beginning with the description of Ritz Hotel as if some thing momentous is going to happen: and it does hap-

pen; the NAGI is born on 11th April, 1978. The parentage is given as the seventeen founding members. Was it too much to give the names of the charter-members who signed the original memorandum? Within a space of one page, Kapur lets her imagination run riot and summarises the entire pre-colonial geography of India-Vedas, Puranas, Surya Siddhanta, and Kautilya, Mauryas and Guptas, not to omit Al Beruni, whose writing on India she considers popular, and Tuzuk-i-Jhangiri, Ain-e-Akbari. Sentences like 'Waters on the east (sic) coast of India are called the Arabian Sea' (p.5) show inadequate care at the correction stage. Citing chronologically, the beginning of geography associations all over the world, she talks of geography in India beginning with the work of Survey of India and the establishment of a number of geography associations. Dr. Kapur thinks that the thirty-year period (147-78) was a good time for geography, but there was no National Association of Geographers. According to her, 'it took nearly 30 years before a national level association of geographers came into existence'. She is very naive to assume that Indian Geographical Society, Madras, Aligarh.

Geographical Society, Geographical Society of India, Calcutta, started in the twenties or the thirties of the last century or for that matter the National Geographical Society of India, Varanasi, started almost on the eve of independence, were not national associations. All these associations have survived and are still dedicated to the cause of geography, most bringing out their publications more regularly than NAGI. It is, in the opinion of the reviewer, patently unfair to compare or point out the failures of the

associations which survived, did not survive or survived by merger. Here is how she assesses the performance of some of India's well established geographical societies. 'The Association of Indian Geographers' folded shop in two decades, the Saturday Club could not cross its seventh birthday, the Curzon Society of Aligarh hibernated for long and resurfaced after a pause of 22 years' and on and on – NAGI till date has suffered no such aberrations'(sic). Continuing, she remarks 'Geographical Associations spanning across states are the regional associations like the Calcutta, Madras, Pune and Varanasi', and the apex status of Nagi is attributed to the numerical strength of its members. The talk of 'unchallenged supremacy' and 'dominance' of NAGI outranking all other geographical associations in India, smacks of an analogy with corporate world, with intense competition to capture the largest share of market, swallowing some and reducing others to a state of bankruptcy. The culture of the academic world, I am sure, the author is aware, is different and rests primarily on excellence. What she thinks 'worth comparing' is really not worth comparing.

There is considerable numerical information provided in the text about the growth of schools, colleges, universities, geography departments, the number of university teachers, the PhD's in geography that the country has produced. -all painstakingly collected from the Association of Indian Universities. The University of Delhi and its geography department, Delhi School of Economics, the Merit Promotion Scheme, National Eligibility Tests, Unions and strikes, lax Karamcharis and students figure prominently while discussing the environment for NAGI. She expresses her anguish in the following words-'The result, as universities in India today are blighted by short sighted meanness so typical of second rate academics and municipal politicians, one began to notice that teaching was reduced from a profession to a job. Few cared to even understand the distinction. I secured a post as a Lecturer in my own alma-mater in 1998.

The school where I came to learn and the one where I began to teach was a very different place (sic)'. Doesn't it read like unloading of personal frustration and grievances?

One of the head line in the text cries' Trade Embargo'. You cannot speculate, you have to read it. It is neither trade nor commerce. It is about the quality of doctoral dissertations which the author thinks 'were passed in a mood of compromise rather than(on the basis of) competence. Labelling the doctoral work, particularly of sub-standard quality as trade, she expects NAGI to impose an embargo on such trade practices. She observes further- 'Less than 0.3 research articles (per geographer) are written annually by geographers in the university departments of India', and wants to augment research. No one would disagree with either of the two propositions.

While Dr. Kapur is critical of the quality of doctoral research in the country, she is equally unsparing about the quality of NAGI journal. She writes-'Producing the faltering numbers of issues and malnourished contents of the Annals stitched between slices of varied hues of jackets has also been an uphill task. – Plain to shaded, mono to twin, glossy or mat., carrying world maps on some - is the changing cover jacket of the NAGI annals. In the last twenty years ten different types of toppings have arrived in the mail. The result, Annals has lost identity even in looks' This scathing remark, though unlikely to be liked by the editors, is understandable, but every NAGI journal editor, proud of his exalted position, likes to leave his imprint on the journal, if not by his editorial skill, at least by giving it a new look.

Dr. Kapur is her best when she assesses both quantitatively and qualitatively the volume and quality of research. She poses a question-' Why do most geographers in India not research and write? The slate of work and hours the timetable punctured by summer, autumn and winter do give scope to pursue these goals. Freedom from the worry about promotions, assured by

the merit promotion career advancement schemes, and with it to need to watch over the shoulders of competing colleagues, more publications from geographers should have been tabled. But this has not been the happy outcome' or that 'Geographers even with their small number could have seen an exalted status if 'quality outweighs pages' had been their motto. Unfortunately, this has not been the case'. The popularity of the themes, measured by the number of doctoral dissertations produced over the preceding half century follows, as expected, a sequence marked by City, Landuse, Population, and Agriculture with geomorphology, resource and others trailing behind in small bits. She doesn't precisely explain this academic phenomenon, but tries to answer in the following statement- 'Geographers research interests in India have (sic)- fixed to a few themes -does this spell commitment or confinement? Perhaps more of the latter. Geographers in India are ridden by operating within a comfort zone, choosing topics of research which have precedence in terms of methodology and data sources. A check of the titles in doctorates reads like carbon copies; where the area of the study differs but the theme remains virtually the same' She gives the example of land use in a city. The reviewer, at this moment, is reminded of the remarks of his distinguished colleague Prof. A. B. Mukerji who often quoted 'the *Patwari Lal Kitab*, as the eternal source material for doctoral dissertations in land use'. From the diagram on page 79, one can make out that over 60% of the doctoral dissertations are produced in the three BIMARU states of U.P. M.P and Rajasthan. This is contrary to the numerical strength of the departments that seem to vary with development status of the area of their location.

The second part of the volume, reproducing the presidential addresses, does not warrant any comments. These are addresses expressing views about contemporary Indian geography, the progress it has achieved, the level of teaching and research, the gaps in our learning and inadequate emphasis on the bio-physical aspects of

the discipline, suggesting at the same time a change in our philosophical outlook, a shift in our focus, and adoption of better tools and strategies, to be socially relevant and play an effective role in national development. The concern for development is pervasive and disparity in development appears, to many of these distinguished geographers, far more serious an issue than the development itself. Here are a few quotes from the speeches of the Presidents'.

'The regional disparities in the totality of life constitute a crucial dimension of social justice in the present world comprising developed, developing and backward areas. Within regions there are serious inequalities among areas and between villages and towns. Within a settlement, rural or urban, there are contrasts between one section of the inhabitants and another. Even in a genuinely socialistic pattern of society, these disparities are only at low level but never absent (p.97)' or 'The integrity of planet earth as a human settlement is seriously endangered, on the one hand, by the encapsulation of development in a few enclaves of affluence and on the other, by the chronic persistence of under development over a major part of the globe. What is true of the world as a whole is also true of the regions within the developing nations (p.134)'. One finds a remarkable similarity between the two quotes. One appears a simple statement of understandable facts and the other has a global implication. Statements like 'striking regional disparities glare one in the face on the development map of India' echo similar sentiments.

Some Presidents have expressed concern about total neglect of physical geography. This is what a very senior geographer observed- 'One of our first tasks would appear to be reorientation of our course of study to include more of physical geography, to take care of the growing awareness of natural environment and its sustainability. Our courses, at the moment, are too heavily tilted in favour of human geography and physical geography occupies a peripheral position in our teaching and research. This

imbalance has to be corrected (p.318)'. Another president expresses the same sentiment saying – '– the neglect of physical geography, (geomorphology, climatology and bio-geography) in particular has done a lot of harm to our field. It is now time to lay stress on these disciplines and get students with geology, biology and physics/chemistry background to our Master's and Ph.D. programmes (p.361). There are presidents who emphasise social relevance of the discipline as reflected in the following statements- 'The question of relevance will continue to be central to the very existence of the disciplines in the decades to come. No scientific discipline will allow to grow sufficiently, if it does not subserve the primary interest of humankind. Geography, in my opinion, will be an academic redundancy if its value as a utilitarian discipline is not generally recognised (p 368)'. 'Utilitarian value', indeed, seems to be the sheet anchor of geography ship, if liberated from it, it will founder with the excessive load of non utilitarian junk, driven by the inflated and integrated sails of a landscape vintage!. But to effect a utilitarian change, this is what Professor Vaidyanadhan has to say – 'We have to reconcile to the fact that geography, upto a certain stage in the education field, is a liberal art. But beyond it, it can be a utilitarian science only if high specialisation is made in the sub disciplines, which means extra knowledge to be acquired and the effort put in to deserve to be consulted as an expert by an individual, a community or state. It is not unusual for us to lament now and then that our advice is not heeded when we have so much to offer to the community or state! There are only two possibilities: either we do not have any thing worthwhile to offer, or if we have, we are very poor salesmen 'This, to the mind of the reviewer, is the correct diagnosis of the geographers being marginalised in national affairs.

Also observed among the addresses are the concerns for not being fast enough in the acquisition of latest technology, like the GIS, others

virtually ridicule and deplore the adoption of such tools as a matter of priority. In the words of one president- 'The future professional scope of our discipline lies primarily in the promotion of Geographic Information System. A sound base of cartography is a must for the purpose(422)'. The above statement can be juxtaposed with another view which reads as follows-'There are departments with no geomorphologists or those having a grounding in physical geography. One inevitable consequence is that our students don't get the necessary scientific training in the study of environment and its elements, such as rocks, geomorphological processes, erosional and depositional history, paleoclimatology, climate and weather factors, soils and field study of pedogenic processes, hydrology, floral and faunal elements, forest ecology, agronomy and the like. Exceptions apart, expertise did not develop in many of these areas: no laboratories were established. *In this context the current emphasis on Geographic Information system and Remote Sensing equipment appears crazy*. First the theoretical basis has to be created before you can build the methodological nuances. Both the statements are equally valid, the emphases are different (p.371).

Most presidents emphasise the applied aspect of the discipline. Most seem concerned about national development and most want to witness an increasing role of geographers in nation building. Neglect of Physical geography is pointed out by some and some have elaborated on the emerging role of GIS in geographic research. Theory building, and Indianess in our approach are mentioned in a couple of speeches, but excellence in research was not the focus of any of the addresses. There is a great deal of convergence of views, but there are discordant notes voiced with conviction. Certainly, every president has his own perspective and defines the role of geographers in his own way. It may be plausible to have a session or two of NAGI to reconcile the conflicting views to work out a scheme that satisfies all shades of opinion.

Kapur is at her best in writing the profiles of the Presidents. None of them could grudge any inadequacy in her presentation of their life-sketch. This is a real display of craftsmanship (or craftswomanship) of the author. Always positive, she has placed all the presidents of NAGI on the highest pedestal of scholarship. The reviewer appreciated some of her comments about the presidents he is acquainted with, like 'a University Professor 'epitomising the best in a university man'. Added to around 40 to 50 pages, these profiles not only reflect but very eloquently describe the personality of geography professors in India. This also shows how younger geographers in India look at the senior geographers, venerably and even uncritically. This may be an extremely polite gesture of good will, but, certainly, it doesn't represent the spirit of science or scientific enquiry. Let us remember, a critical assessment is far more rewarding than an uncritical acceptance of every things that the elders do.

Dr. Kapur has a non-conventional approach. A long text of 90 pages is broken into 20 long paragraphs, with titles that read like instructions, half statements and observations. The text could have been better organised in three or four short chapters, leaving out reflections on the univer-

sity system or departments. The reviewer finds the style and the language a little too synthetic. Forced intrusion of words, and occasionally phrases, mars the smooth flow of text. The book doesn't carry any index. Some of the maps are reduced beyond recognition; the original drawings should have been tailored to the format of the book. How relevant is the short bibliography? The cover appearance, the binding and the quality of the paper are exceptionally good, the printing is flawless and one must admit Concept have done a wonderful job. But one wonders if all these beautiful features justify a price of Rs 1000/- The overall effort is commendable and we as geographers can only express our admiration for Dr Kapur and the fountain source of the her inspiration, Prof. Gopal Krishan.

Post Script- The reviewer, a life member of NAGI, believed that the late Professor C.D. Deshpande was the founder President of NAGI, yet he does not find any mention in the book. If, he was the founder President, it would have been quite appropriate to insert a life sketch of this distinguished professor from Pune-Bombay region in the book.

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