

India - A Comprehensive Systematic Geography, (2003)

Jagadish Singh

Gyanodaya Prakashan, Gorakhpur, pp. 425, Tables 90, Figs.57, Price Rs. 195.

There is a general dearth of books on geography of individual countries of the world these days, which was a tradition for a long time, primarily because writing a book of this type involves preparation of maps with the latest data which is not only time consuming but also unacceptable to profit maximizing and sale oriented publishers. The first problem has been partially resolved with the introduction of computers and mapping software packages: this has provided some impetus to writing such books. It is not surprising then that such books are now being published bringing out the profiles of individual countries. For a long time, there was a dearth of books on geography of India and we were primarily dependent on books written by O.H.K. Spate and R.L. Singh. Both these books have now become outdated in approach as well as content. The book by C. D. Deshpande is basically a regional interpretation and has been widely used by researchers but it could not serve the purpose of systematic geography. The situation is slowly changing and the book by Jagadish Singh is one such attempt.

The book under review is cast in a mould different from the one that used to be traditionally applied to such books. It departs from the static, deterministic approach and also accords a proper place to different cultural factors that primarily influence the dif-

ferentiation in regional landscape. The author aims at a wider readership and hopes that the book would be useful not only to the post-graduate students in geography but also to those from sister disciplines like economics or sociology and to those appearing for the competitive examinations conducted by the Union Public Service Commission. The organisation of the book is thus different from that which usually appear in Geography sections in the libraries. The author deserves a word of appreciation for this.

At the beginning, a general introduction provides a comprehensive not only account of the historical evolution but also of the present federal set up. Singh has done well to piece together the relevant information that gives a coherent picture of the present organisation. The author has not forgotten to review the geostrategic situation in which the country stands considering the role played by superpowers in the Indian Ocean. Next two chapters are devoted to population patterns and settlement systems. The author has presented the major demographic trends and analysed them in the light of the policies adopted. The discussion on the settlement patterns gives adequate attention to both the physical and socio-economic space. Physical background comes next, which incorporates sections on relief, climate and drainage; here the author had to

follow the traditional path although he has brought in recent information and concepts that would extremely enhance the value of the book. Among the resources, the book covers most of the important resources like water, forest, soil, energy and minerals. In addition to giving distribution of these resources in space, the author has brought in their present status of utilization, problems associated with their use and the policy measures introduced for their conservation. Singh then comes to the discussion on some activities arising out of resource use, viz. agriculture, industry and trade. In addition to giving the present state of their development, the author has also tried to give some gleam into the future wherever possible. Moreover, he has also attempted regionalisation wherever needed. A section on transport and communication infrastructure serves a useful purpose not only to understand the present distribution but also the problems associated with resource exploitation and related activities found in different regional segments. The final chapter, as the author claims, is a synthesis of the discussions in the previous chapters. This vividly brings out the problems of regional development and the measures adopted by the governments during different periods. Throughout the author has tried to relate the discussion to the impact of various factors operating simultaneously as also the impact of the activities and resource exploitation on the regional environment.

The book is comprehensive because of the meticulous collection and collation of the material carried out so painstakingly by the author. The value of the book is enhanced by incorporation of the results of the latest census to the extent possible. The style of presentation is scholastic which reflects the

experience the author possesses. He is remarkably successful in fusing together the influence of various factors in the evolution of regional landscape.

The structure of the book seems somewhat confusing, and this is not just because it widely departs from the orthodox deterministic framework. For example, the chapters on population and settlement system before the discussion on physical framework is like putting the cart before the horse. Although interpretations of demographic details cannot simply be made in the light of physical factors, it cannot be certainly done without reference to them. To be frank, the author could not do sufficient justice to the interpretation of demographic patterns. While discussing resources, bringing energy resources ahead of mineral resources is beyond comprehension. In the chapter on biotic resources, fauna has not only been given a marginal status, the write up gives an impression that it merely means wild life and nothing beyond that. Moreover, there is not even a mention of marine resources, both biotic and abiotic, which are becoming very vital in the present day context. The author has, therefore, omitted related activities like fishing, animal husbandry and even mining. Organisation of chapters on activities also needs a special mention; among the three activities discussed, agriculture and industries are discussed quite elaborately but international trade is marginalised by sparing only five pages, despite the fact that the author has claimed to have put in all the relevant details. Moreover, between chapters on agriculture and the other activities, he has interposed a chapter on transport and communication; it would have been desirable to avoid physical separation of activities. The final chapter which the author claims, pro-

vides a summary of what has been discussed earlier, does not appear to be so. In fact, an epilogue would have served the purpose.

There are very few tables and maps compared to the size of the book. Moreover, most of the data presented in the book, in tabular or map form, for sections on resources and related activities is at the state level; this conceals reality that is important and needs to be brought out. The map showing the level of urbanisation (p. 41), for example does not serve any useful purpose because it fails to bring out the micro-level variations; the same information is given in Table 2.9 (p. 42). This argument could be easily appreciated if one compares these maps with those borrowed by him (Fig. 18.4; p. 407). Unfortunately, he has not utilized even the borrowed material properly as the illustrations have not been complemented with relevant discussion. Moreover, having used them as they were, they contain unnecessary details concealing the one necessary for understanding the theme represented; in map on p. 195, boundaries of agroclimatic zones cannot be seen properly as the district names are retained. Many a times relevant information is missing; in map on p. 85, for example, subdivisions are not even numbered or named. Why are they shown and how is one to identify them? The legend on the maps using choropleth technique is shown incorrectly; such a key is appropriate for isopleth technique. Even on maps appearing as a full page (p. 172), most of the names are illegible as they are poorly stenciled or handwritten. In this age of computerization, producing simple, clear and legible maps is very easy, practical and inexpensive; although this is not a book on cartography such maps would enhance the quality of the book immensely. After all

maps are an important part and parcel of geography texts as they provide a wealth of information and hence it is necessary to give due importance to this aspect.

The selection of illustrations is based on availability rather than need. In the chapter on settlements, for example, there is not a single sketch to illustrate the pattern of rural settlements, although the author has talked about different patterns such as nucleated, dispersed, compact; illustrative sketches would have helped the users appreciate what the author wants to say. The author has provided a map of the village of Vardha in M.P. (p. 52), but one does not know what for it is given as it is neither referred to in the text nor one finds the purpose in the title of the map. Some of the diagrams are beyond imagination, as they do not give any idea for their inclusion (Fig. 3.2; p. 56). Cartographic representation is very poor and one has to strain one's eyes while attempting to read the maps (Fig. 3.3); in many cases this has happened due to over-reduction (p. 9). Moreover, there is very little verbal information provided which makes comprehension even more difficult. One normally expects a uniform system of numbering of figures; this has not been followed. Sometimes the author uses Egyptian numerals (Fig. 9.2) and at other times Roman (Fig. XI.9). There is no uniformity even with regard to the titles. In some maps they indicate only the area represented (Fig. 3.4) while in others even the purpose has been mentioned along with area (Fig. 2.5). Some titles are shown inside the map frame (Fig. 11.4) and others, outside (Fig. 6.1). No proper differentiation is made between title, notes and legend (Fig. 2.4 (sic); p. 85). Some figures are not numbered at all (p. 121).

The author is well aware of the fact that a work of this magnitude cannot be carried out single handedly and has admitted to have borrowed material from other scholars working in the field. He has also acknowledged this. He mentions in the preface to the first edition that such references have been made in the text and that they would further guide the students to dig deeper in the specific topics. Unfortunately, the author has not included all these references in the reading list provided at the end and hence the readers are left with the task of tracing the original sources on their own. Even the reading list is not properly provided. In the first place, it is too short, compared to the efforts the author has put in. Secondly, it does not give the year of publication in many cases which is vital. Any book of this type requires an index as it would have been useful to quickly locate the material without difficulty. It appears that author was under

tremendous pressure to complete the task and was running out of time. Moreover, it appears that the intention of the author and publishers was to keep the price within the limits of affordability of individuals and students.

The above observations are justified on the grounds that one harbours high expectations from an author like Jagdish Singh whose work is likely to be used as a role model for similar works on the subject. Despite the above shortcomings, which have partly arisen out of limitation of time and resources, the book is a useful addition to libraries for the benefit of post-graduate students and those who aspire to get through competitive examinations. How far the book would appeal to the critical eye of university teachers and researchers is difficult to say.

V. S. Phadke