

Discourse and Geographic Enquiry

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Abstract

The paper discusses the academic mis-understandings and mis-placements of geography which largely became a reason for the subject's ill-defined boundaries and in a sense were responsible for its all inclusiveness.

Meaning of Geography

Geography is much misunderstood, much less formulated, and the least formalised. The misunderstandings arise at two levels: (a) at the 'common place', or 'common man's perspective, and (b) at the level of the practitioners of the discipline. Doubtless, the subject is old, as old, perhaps as human history and curiosity, the curiosity of knowing places and people, narrations of human history etched on the landscape he treaded, built his cultures, and in knowing other cultures. So far the boundaries of the cultures were drawn, the places, people, routes and passes were emplaced into the boundaries and the first maps were drawn. The Hellenics did that, so also other cultures, the Mauryans and the Confucians. But it is also a new discipline, unlike History, Mathematics, Law or Physics, its historical roots go not much beyond the nineteenth century. The common place perspective of Geography that deals with maps and information about people and places, mountains and rivers, partly owes its origin in narrations of those early curiosity of man and partly too to Huxley's popularising the subject in English school edu-

cation, and then to the rest of the English speaking world in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, much before it gained access in the British academia (Stoddart, 1986).

Its academic misunderstandings, rather mis-placements owe their origin to the Kantian schemata, all knowledge placed in Cartesian coordinates of time-history and space-geography, therefore its nature of 'all inclusiveness', 'Geography is what the geographer does' (Leighly, 1937). In a sense, it failed to emerge as a discipline because it failed to draw boundaries. The boundaries could not be drawn because the central object. (if there was one!) '.. the study of the relationship of man and his natural environment' as one can surmise from the writings of the first three generation of geographers, till the beginning of the twentieth century, dithered, shifted from one end to the other, the central position of 'man' having been left out of the agenda of geography till the end of nineteen sixties. The boundaries are still unclear and the agenda still all mixed up. As a result, the studies instead of deepening, still widens. Therefore, among the general scientific community, the geo-

grapher's position remains at best on the margins. The success of geography as a modern discipline depends on its success in redefining the centrality of man in its every day discourse, and man's spatiality (cultural) and the study of environment as the principal tool of drawing boundaries of the discipline.

Geography as Science

Is Geography a Social Science, an Environmental Science or an Earth Science? Is it a 'science' at all, or part of so-called 'humanities' as some prefer (or pretend to!) to assign it? It is imperative to steer clear of these questions briefly.

Modern science is not so much defined by the degree of instrumentation or patently obscure issues, rather by its objectives and methodology adopted in reaching those objectives. The objectives could be in the realm of pure theory or derivation of empirical laws. The methodologies therefore, necessarily will be 'analytical' or 'empirical'. Analytical methodology deals by 'setting-up' a theoretical problematic and has necessarily solutions within its own domain without explicit recourse to the external world, as in mathematics or in theoretical physics. On the other hand, 'empirical' by definition deals with the sense percept, experiential and in effect, are all 'historical' because all facts are, essentially 'experienced', thus historical.

However, empiricism has methods of deriving scientific facts through observation (including measurements) and experimentation, methods that are also employed for verification and repeated verification to acquire a certain degree of universality, laws.

No doubt Geography deals with facts and thus, rightfully can be termed 'empirical science'. However, empirical research though deals with facts, are not necessarily with 'truths', but are 'about truths'. i.e., very often develops a 'problematic about the truth' rather than the 'truth itself and it is often the innovative' character of 'setting up of the problem' and developing a 'strategy of solution to the problematic' that drives all empirical or analytical scientific research (Kuhn, 1962).

To the extent geography deals with earth with its natural (physical) attributes, its empiricism draws it closer to other natural (empirical) sciences like the Life Sciences, Environmental Sciences or Earth Sciences. However, Geography being clearly 'ethno-centred', i.e., its objective of understanding of the natural world being towards understanding of man, his space bound activities and habitat (and environment), brings it closer to Social Sciences.

Social Sciences deal by definition with social reality, be they historical. 'judgements on events and processes' Carr, 1964, understanding of social (systems), structures and relations political processes and institutions, or economic or individual or collective behaviour (psychology) or for that matter the study of cultures. They thus, deal with empiricism about man, and no doubt, are empirical sciences as well.

The age-old methodological controversy in social sciences, whether to treat social facts as 'unique events' (in time and space) or there are underlying 'general principles' governing social events, continue. Disciplines like history and anthropology continue with the former position (with the exception of 'structuralism' in Anthropol-

ogy), thus the social reality treated as unique events ('the Uniqueness Theory', see Carr, 1964:62) and therefore, denying possibility of development of general principles. On the other hand, disciplines like Economics, Psychology, to some extent in Politics and Sociology, there are serious attempts on development of general principles, (understanding 'unities' than 'uniqueness'), especially in economics wherein model development and rigorous theory construction is over a century old and has in effect left the controversy way behind and has been greatly successful at that. The principal underlying logic has been treating the so-called unique events, as if they are part of 'replicable universal processes' using 'methodological universality' than universal laws governing social events, this especially after the developments of the Vienna Circle and 'Logical Positivism'. Hypothesis testing and theory development are as much important in Social Sciences now as in other empirical (natural) sciences. The very position of Geography being at an interface between social and natural sciences has made its methodological position somewhat ambivalent between a uniqueness theory and theory construction.. especially the period attributed to Hartshornian influences -- say e.g., 'areal differentiation' as a method of 'intellectual construction of regions' (Hartshorne, 1939).

Whereas in most empirical sciences the courses of research enterprise have gradually converged to one position or the other. In Geography principally four principal methodological strands are still visible: (a) There are geographers (at least in India) who still believe in the uniqueness of spatial events, thus following Hartshorne, try understanding the geographical reality (as if,

there is one) as a discourse in uniqueness of regions ('unique combination' of human and natural factors). (b) There are others, who follow an overtly 'Baconian System' of empiricism (a dispassionate 'positivist mode' of thinking) as in the physical geography, especially in Geomorphology, Climatology etc.. where even some claim, there is neither a methodology, nor any hypotheses but only the 'object of research'. (c) Still there is the growing clan of geographers, especially after Shaefer (1953), which believes in methodological universality and thus, theory construction through hypothesis testing (Harvey, 1969) And, (d) there are still others who have been influenced by Postmodernist Movement in Europe in recent times, which is more 'representational' and 'interpretative', than 'derivative' (inferential) and thus, in a sense could be summarised as an 'anti-theory movement' as a 'Post-structuralist enterprise' ('the break-down of unities' - see Foucault, 1972.1989 : Harvey, 1989).

The Course of Geography, or a Discourse?

What course does geography chart (in the Twenty-first century)? Is there a geographical, even discourse on spatiality of human experience?

First, indeed the popularity of the discipline, in this country appears to be directly proportional to naivete, in the sense that the general theoretical, methodological and empirical rigours are conspicuous by their absence. Second, geographical research including the development of problematic greatly divulges from the problematic in general, i.e., the ones recognised as critical. This rarely happens in other sciences. in-

cluding the social sciences, that there is a complete lack of dialogue within the discipline across nations, and frontiers and seas. Third, among the academics, there exist a great deal of common place confusion as to whether the discipline deals with the 'earth' or deals with 'man', a confusion that assumes the course of enquiry in a certain direction. Fourth, a frigidity, if I may say so, relating our own history of colonialism and geography as a 'colonial subject' and fretting without developing the subject as the 'lived spatiality' of experience of a humanity of one billion or more. Such a construction is not only necessary, but is imperative to our very existence. Fifth is our essential shyness for anything theoretical. The last three decades have been the most fruitful for geography if theory generation and construction is concerned. However, we accept only the narrations and reject the discourse, often summarily, as something of no business of geography. We are still by and large, diehard empiricists of the Baconian kind. As a result, as Moonis Raza once said. 'Indian geography is but a dinosaur with a little head, a large body and a long tail' (Raza, 1972). Indeed.

What discourse to open, in which direction and with what objects? To my mind, there are areas that are critical, and in which natural and social sciences have opened doors to discourse that the Indian geographers can respond and contribute. These are principally three that I try to outline (but, others could be added).

First, is the discourse on environment, population and development, the unities that hold together the hermeneutics of other such countries and cultures as well -- how to reconcile the conflicting goals of economic

prosperity and with those of a growing population and impending (or even experienced) environmental catastrophe. Published literature in geography in recent times indicates a growing interest in the subject, but little in the debate, and still less in the social theory discourse. For example the Green Movement (Der Grunnen) in general and environmental movements in India in particular, from Silent Valley to Sahashradhara and the Chipko has attracted little attention from geographers as such. Also, the gender-environment discourse has little contribution. Is geography to be content with the 'form' only (unravelling the problem), or can it fruitfully contribute to the 'content', i.e. the processes including the social ones that increasingly have assumed critical significance?

The second arises out of the 'multicultural' reality of ours, and the contradictions in gender, caste, and ethnicities, and the manner in which these contradictions assume spatiality in our existence. Cultural and social pluralism has been critical to our history and political existence. But, are socio-political pluralism and multiculturalism explained in terms of only 'history and time'? Much of the 'fixed diversities' of the country that geography assumed are as much processes as well, constantly changing and redefining our spatiality of existence. The forces and structures buried under the debris of history constantly reappear, unravel and even 'reproduce' in a complex web of spatiality of our nationhood. Why geography must be mute, a silent spectator to fertile discourses that other social sciences avidly indulge in, around ethnicities, the myriad identities, the gender issues-all invariably with significant spatial undertones.

Finally is the discourse about the perpetuation of poverty, deprivations and disparities, across regions and boundaries, and across boundaries of social classes and structures. From early seventies Indian geography did address some of these issues with a degree of success, especially with the problem of regional disparities and its historical roots. Many of the early debates have ended (or have taken new turns in international literature) but new discourses have yet to open. New rigidities and stereotypes have taken over creative endeavours--repetitious reaffirmations have become order of the day. The disparity discourses, perhaps need deepening into the micro-fragmentary specificities and broadened into cross-sectoral, fast changing realities of modern India, away from the orthodoxy of historical hermeneutics to the 'living and changing spatiality'.

Possibly, Geography in this country needs to be part of the social and political discourses as well, instead of its orthodoxies of obsession with facts, fact gathering and inadequate theorisation. In this endeavour it would need to look over its shoulders, across boundaries to other social, life and earth sciences at one hand, and across frontiers to debates and discourses that have opened in redefining its objects and methodologies to those areas that have become critical to our existence (of poverty and underdevelopment, and of conflicts of multi-cultural identities of our nationhood).

Much of this vast nation, its territorial and cultural diversities, and its history lay open to (geographical) enquiry. Much has been said about, but little is done. Many of us, irrespective of the tag of social or natural sciences owe the responsibility of

unravelling the (geographical) discourse, the spatiality of existence and progress of this great nation.

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