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Geography in India: Some Reflections

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Abstract

Geography in India has come a long way since the establishment of first under-graduate department in 1924 and post-graduate department in 1926. It has expanded both spatially and vertically. All along with increase in the number of departments offering courses in geography, the number of available options for teaching and studying various sub-disciplines of geography has also increased. Placing this expansion at the centre-stage, progress of Geography in India has been analysed here. The discussion covers four crises: understanding the field; publications and geographical societies; use of new technology, and marginalization of geography and geographers. Although some solutions are offered but a joint venture is called for making geography "a people's geography".

Since the establishment of the first UG department in 1924 and PG department in 1926, both at Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Geography in India has covered a long journey. With more and more colleges and universities offering courses in geography and with more and more availability of options for students and teachers, Geography has experienced both horizontal and vertical expansion in the country. This expansion is considered as success story of Geography in India. The other aspects in this story are increase in the number of students opting geography at UG/PG level, articles and books published, geographical societies, conferences organized, and participation in regional/national/international conferences etc. However, quantitative growth does not always mean success story. Nevertheless, this does not rule out the serious work done by geographers and different geographical societies in promoting geographical knowledge in the country. Not all such contributions can be discussed here due to the limitations posed by the nature of present write up. Interested persons can go through various presidential addresses (available in Kapur, 2002); ICSSR sponsored Survey of Research in Geography and also the writings of Chatterjee, (1962,64,68a&b), Deshpande (1974), Singh (1980), Misra (1983), Sinha (1986), Diddee (1991), Karan (1992), Thakur (1994), Tiwari (1999) and Dikshit (2002). Besides discussing the developments and trends of Indian Geography, the article by Thakur (1994) also provides ample research frontiers to work. More recently, Raju (2004) has strongly discussed the slowly expanding, but promising, canvas of critical geography in Indian geographical

studies. Similarly, the contributions of S.P. Chatterjee, Moonis Raza, A. Ahmad, C.D. Deshpande, VLS Prakasa Rao, M. Shafi, R.L. Singh, R.P. Misra, Jasbir Singh, P.S. Tiwari, R.D. Dikshit, and K.R. Dikshit are worth mentioning in promoting geography in the country. List is endless. Special mention deserves the contributions of Moonis Raza, Aijazuddin Ahmad and M.H. Qureshi in producing good geography books at school level and R. P. Misra as series editor of various volumes on "Contributions to Indian Geography".

In the discussion, which follows, a critical examination of Geography in India is attempted. The present attempt is not first in this direction. In fact, such frequent assessment is the most salient point for celebrating the success story of Geography in India. Sometimes, I question myself that whether the present course structure is adequate for a student to understand even the locality where he/she is living—leave alone the national and international scenario—the changes taking place there and the processes working behind the scene.

In the process of thinking about Geography in India, I have found certain problems/crisis. Although the discussion on "crises" is accompanied with some possible solutions but being an individual construct these are not enough. We all have to work together to make the discipline a relevant one, i.e., answerable to the problems of the society. In the present write-up, I have identified four crises which are inter-related.

Crisis One: Understanding The Field

The scrutiny of the literature coming from the West has revealed that the field of geography has changed a lot recently. Rapid changes in the global economy have huge and varied impacts on space and social groups. The recent global recession has revealed that the changes taking place in one part of the world can have wide implications in other parts. Some of the other issues that have been given priority by geographers at the international level include global climatic changes; global terrorism; nationalism and globalization; food security; global vis-à-vis local; cyber communities; voices of marginalized people etc. With globalization on the scene, questions of "space and time compression", "geometry of power relations", "death of distance", "death of geography", "death of state" etc. have repeatedly been raised by geographers and social scientists.

Are we able to understand these changes and ultimately the direction in which the field of geography is moving ahead with the present course structure? Do we keep updating ourselves with the changes taking place in the field? Studies have highlighted that we are less enthusiastic about incorporating new concepts, theories etc. The CDC report on UGC Model Curriculum in geography in India (2001) had highlighted that out of the 96 universities offering courses in Geography at UG and PG levels to which sets of questionnaires were sent for accessing the status of geography in India, only 38 universities (39.58 %) had furnished the required information It

was noted that even some of the prestigious universities like Allahabad, Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Madras, Patna had not furnished the information (p.31-34). Sharma (2004: iii) in the preface to the "Country Report" prepared for 30th IGU wrote, "...the Indian Geography is yet to make a mark and it is a matter of serious concern to all of us. This is not the natural nemesis, but the result of persistent neglect by Indian geographers in this direction". Nayak (2008:11), in Introduction to the "Country Report" for 31st IGU wrote, "Indian Geography does not feature prominently in the international arena...the geographical enterprise has failed to reap dividends nationally or internationally". Thus despite concerted efforts at the top desired results are not coming from below. Where is the fault? To my mind, the answer lies in the training imparted to the geographer.

Misra(1983), in his foreword to "Contributions to Indian Geography" wrote that the progress of the discipline lies with the geographers themselves.... It is their responsibility to strengthen it to construct a new edifice. Let us compare the conclusions drawn from two studies conducted on progress of Geography in India at two different time periods: One, by Chatterjee (1964, quoted by Tiwari, 1999:74-75) and the other by Nayak (2008). It is to be mentioned here that Chatterjee's work on the progress of Geography in India was one of the most comprehensive works of the time. It was a 50 years progress of Geography in India, based on some 1,400 research papers, books and monographs. It emphasized that there was little original work by geographers in climatology. Similar was the case with pedology, plant geography, medical geography, and paleogeography. Regional geography was found to be the least developed branch of geography. The other branches of the subject, like historical geography, cartography, and philosophy of geography including concepts and techniques, too, were quite weak and needed much greater attention. Nayak (2008), has noted "Climatology finds little proportionate weightage in the hands of Indian geographers...soil geography leave much to be desired....Biogeography continues to be less emphasized. A serious lack of integrated techniques and approaches to study vulnerable environment was found. Similarly, there is a dearth of empirical studies evaluating the impact of globalization on environment and resource management. Despite tremendous potential, not much work was done in the field of Industrial geography. Same was the case with Historical Geography, Cultural Geography, Gender Issues, and Political Geography. In case of usage of GIS and remote sensing technologies, only a few elitist centers were found to be able to use these techniques.

Our awareness of the meanings of geography, concepts, hypothesis, theory, patterns, location, place, space etc. basically starts from our post-graduation course. Learning of philosophical issues at PG level with almost no prior background confuses

us and many avoid them. Besides lack of personal urge, the course structure does not allow to do so. When they come across the philosophies of David Harvey, Derek Gregory, Y.F. Tuan, E. Soja, Peter J. Taylor and others during the PG course they are not conditioned to understand their contributions even though these contributions are very helpful in understanding the functioning of the modern world system. The different philosophies look at the world differently. For example, the two core terms of geography, "space" and "place", convey different meanings if analyzed through ideographic, nomothetic, behavioural, humanistic and Marxist approaches. If we are not able to understand how the world functions how we can give direction to our discipline? This hinders the real growth of our discipline.

This has been going on along with the crisis of the threat to social science disciplines including geography. Bureaucrats and others have attacked the social science disciplines in terms of their relevance in the contemporary capitalist world. They want to measure relevance of geography in relation to its value in market economy only, rather than the overall understanding, which it is competent to provide. They question whether a student of sociology, public administration, history or geography can get a job in the open market. If not, they treat those disciplines less important or even irrelevant. Debate on these issues is going on and we geographers are required to participate actively in the same. We also have to think seriously that in case, "teaching" is excluded from the job opportunities available for geographers, what is left for the budding geographers. "Every year with a rolled post graduate degree in hand, 5000 geographers head for the streets to earn a livelihood" (Kapur, 2004:9). Their number is going to increase rapidly with more and more universities offering PG courses in geography. Finding job opportunities for up-coming geographers is certainly a challenging task for senior geographers. The task is becoming a difficult one as the job-opportunities meant for geographers (as we felt) have largely been availed by non-geographers particularly in the field of environmental issues, surveying, cartography, remote sensing and GIS. In fact time does not wait for anybody and geographers are no special class. "It is not that the things that the geographers were supposed to do were not done. They were done by more informed and alert social and environmental scientists" (Ahmad, 1998:7). This clearly indicates that geographers have not taken-up their jobs seriously.

Though globalization has been on the scene for some time now but not many geography departments are having course contents in the name of "Globalization", globalization vis-à-vis local culture, economy, polity; Special Economic Zones and the responses of local people; effects of new economic policy and its spatial implications; problems of sub-regionalism etc.

Remedy to Crisis One: Re-Structure the Syllabi

There is need to update the syllabi regularly keeping in view the changes taking place in nature, economy, society and polity. This need of changing the syllabi is more demanding in the present times than what it was in the past. The changes on space today are more rapid due to advancements made in transport and communication technologies. Capitalism with its inherent character of spatial expansion is the fundamental structuring force in the world today. Its understanding has become more important after the end of the cold war when we have retreated from socialistic economic strategies and looked forward to market solutions. Certainly, there are some departments in the country where such changes are made in the course contents, but we have to think about the remaining also. Updating ourselves and updating course structure is the need of the hour. We have to be creative enough to imbibe new thoughts geographically. In the words of Kapur (2004:7,9,14), it is only the "creativity" which can revitalize the Indian Geography and narrow down gap in the supply and demand in terms of employment scenario for geographers.

The requirement is to structure the syllabi of geography in such a way that it is more close to ground realities and help the students to face the real life encounters. It should be constructed in such a way that a student can relate the text with the real life situations. For example, teaching of post-modernism in a class. Students as well as teachers find it difficult to understand. However, after a theoretical discussion on the same in the class, if a field trip is arranged to a town where the differences in the living style, architecture etc. of modernism and post-modernism can be identified, the idea can easily be understood. It appears, we are keeping many past topics in the syllabi to keep intact the colonial legacy of geography in India.

Although many attempts have been made to restructure the geography syllabi at the national level, the results are not up to the mark. To quote, how many departments have changed their course contents keeping in view the recommendations of the UGC Code Curriculum Report? The model course structure was not implemented to a large extent. Should we wait until the UGC makes it mandatory? The task of restructuring the syllabi for both UG and PG classes can become easy if major geography associations in India work together. Special Geography Congress should be organized for the purpose. Special sessions for framing syllabi for different branches of geography under the able leadership of senior geographers can lead to construction of good syllabi. Repetition of topics in UG and PG classes can be avoided. In this way, we can construct syllabi, which can be implemented throughout the country. With this, new issues will be available for teaching and research, which in turn, will enhance discussion among geographers and promote quality work.

Crisis Two: Publications and Geographical Societies

By the year 2000, there were about 17 geographical societies in the country (Kapur, 2004a:8). These societies are doing commendable job in terms of publishing articles and organizing conferences so that geographers at the national and regional levels are able to share their thoughts. Majority of the journals, published by these societies, fall in the category of "general geography journals" covering the entire discipline. We have given American and British touch to our journals while naming them, so that we have "Annals, National Association of Geographers, India", "Transactions, Institute of Indian Geographers", and "Geographical Review of India". However, comparison of articles published in our journals (begin with national ones) and those in foreign journals, will force us to think about the quality of our research papers. In addition to the overall quality, the point of difference, which I want to focus and share, is the debate on the nature of geography and on various articles in foreign journals. Here, we hardly find any correspondence. In such academic correspondence who is benefited? It is certainly the writer, the commentator and the whole (western) academic world. We are looser on this front. Why do we lack such kind of debates in Indian geography journals? We do not have a tradition of commenting on research papers. It means that we are not reading the articles or we are reading, but we have no comment to offer. This apathy certainly hinders the academic growth and we are deprived of ideas, which crop up from such debates. If we see the foreign geography journals, we find that even articles of stalwarts like R.J. Johnston, Peter J. Taylor, Derek Gregory are published after revision. Is it not strange enough that "Geography in India: A Languishing Social Science" by Anu Kapur, published in a non-geography journal (Economic and Political Weekly), was followed up by two very good discussions, one by Prasad (2005) "Geography in India: Marginal 'Space'", and the other by Lahiri-Dutt (2005) "Geography as a Marginal Social Science" in the same journal. Why discussion on the status of Geography in India can only take place outside the realm of geography? We have to give a thought to the feelings of Lahiri-Dutt (p.689) as she wrote "The two welcome and timely pieces in EPW encourage me to reflect upon ***many fluid thoughts that have intensely bothered me during my teaching career***...[and] hope that these two pieces may lead to ***a welcome debate on the identity of Indian Geography that will spread out into the academia from EPW pages***" (emphasis added).

What is happening during the conferences? To some, the objective is to meet people, to some see new places, and to some only to get a certificate. How many of us go to conferences well prepared for sharing "new ideas" and getting "new knowledge"? We do not have general discussion on the nature and scope of geography and we do not have presentations on the progress reports of different sub-branches of geography in India.

Remedy to Crisis Two

We should promote comments on research articles published in our journals. In this process, senior geographers should come forward in initiating a series of debates, say on status of geography in India particularly to engage those who are not closely involved in it. Similarly the geographical societies should publish low cost pamphlets on new themes, say Geography and Post-Modernism; Geography in the period of globalization, and on research methodology. Such quality work will clear the doubts of many geographers especially those working in interior parts of the country where quality books are almost inaccessible. These pamphlets should be made available in Hindi and other regional languages to bridge the gap between main centres and the hinterland.

These societies can be helpful also in exploring the identity of "Indian Geography", i.e. building Indian Geography with inspirations from Indian philosophy. For example, we can explore the possibilities of the application of Gandhian philosophy in spatial perspective, like the Marxian concept of capital. In case, it is found relevant, pamphlet like "Gandhian Philosophy and Geography" should be brought out.

During the conferences, a technical session should exclusively be organized on the changing nature of geography, progress reports of Indian geography, nature of syllabi at UG and PG level.

With so much privatization going on in the field of education, our geographical societies like NAGI can have their own institutions in collaboration with the corporate world. Say, "Institute of Urban and Regional Planning" under the leadership of R.P. Misra, P.S. Tiwari, H. Ramarchandran, K.V. Sundaram; "Institute of Remote Sensing and GIS" with P.Nag, S.M. Rashid, R.B. Singh leading the show, "Institute of Resource Management" with M.H. Qureshi and B. Thakur. Similarly we can have "Institute of Agricultural Studies", "Institute of Political Studies" etc.

Crisis Three: Use of New Technology

Remote Sensing, Geographic Information Systems and GPS are new technologies, which can take geography to the market. In these fields also, we geographers are lagging behind. Only selected departments of the country are using these technologies. It has been noted that "...of the 78 post-graduation departments at the university level [in the country] barely 10 have laboratories equipped with faculty and infrastructure to sustain this computer assisted cartography" (Kapur, 2004b:4192). Majority are devoid of not only these technologies but even computers. Who is caring for them?

Remedy to Crisis Three

Geographical societies have wider audience in terms of organization of conferences and circulation of journals. These societies should come forward and guide various

departments of geography by way of publishing information about the availability and accessibility of software, training, other databases and hardware. "State of the Art Report on Remote Sensing, 1998" by Dhabriya (Annals, NAGI, 2000) was quite informative and helpful. However, keeping in view the advancements made not only in remote sensing but also in GIS and GPS technologies, much more is required. We are left much behind by civil engineers, hydrologists, soil scientists etc. in the usage of these technologies. The wider use of these technologies at the grass-root level can help geographers and planners in data creation and decision making process. In the usage of these techniques, there is caution also that, their use should not block our critical thinking regarding the space.

Crisis Four: Marginalization of Geography and Geographers

This crisis is about our "discipline and its scrutiny by outsiders. In the eyes of society, what is the meaning of geography? It simply means a discipline concerned with fields like mountains, plains, plateaus, cities, directions etc. For some who know a little bit more, it deals with the construction of maps. The grossly incomplete information creates unfavourable image about the field. The other social scientists and decision makers are largely unaware of the geographers' contribution. How to deal with this? Whether it is in ignorance or our work is not up to the mark, or they think it is not relevant for their understanding? We have to think over these issues seriously. However, the reality is that the decision makers and even social scientists are not giving weightage to geographers and this creates frustration among geographers. This point was also quite rightly highlighted by Cole and King way back in 1970 when they wrote "...geographers seem to feel frustrated that the findings of their subject have not been more widely applied. Decisions about spatial matters such as the location of new railways, roads, industrial plant and so on have usually been made by non-geographers, and often without the advice of geographers. Geographers ought to be able to make sensible recommendations about spatial aspects of planning decisions, but in planning they are often thought of merely as the people who compile the maps"(p.16). These words of Cole and King are still true. How many geographers have manned the Planning Commission of India, State Development Boards etc. Interestingly, the advice of economists and sociologists are sought in socio-economic planning, and planning the space is going on without consulting the specialists working on "space". Whereas, the concept of "space" has become more important among the social science disciplines (e.g. sociology) in recent times, the experts on spatial matters are kept on the margins.

Remedy to Crisis Four: Empower Geography and Geographers

Geographers have to define their approach: we are satisfied with the descriptive geography as a part of colonial legacy in

the country or we want geography as an explanatory discipline answerable to social problems. In order to build our image among social scientists and the public, we are required to publish not only in journals but also in newspapers and magazines. We can take up various general issues relevant to daily life situations. If required we must question various state policies and their implications at the local level.

With liberalization of education, more and more universities are offering courses on M.A., M.Phil and PhD programmes through distance education mode. Every year numerous M.Phil, PhD, research projects are submitted in the field of geography. These are dumped in the university libraries or research institutes. The point is how to make them relevant. Unless and until, researches are made available for wider reading and used in the related departments, their relevance cannot be judged. In fact, there is no co-ordination between the researches conducted and the related departments (public/private), where these can be used. For this, research reports should be sent to related departments so that these can be helpful for knowing ground level realities for planning purposes. Submission of researches can be associated with the unit of analysis at which the work was done, e.g. village/city, block, district, state, country and the related department. Also the related department (for example agriculture) can be requested to forward subjects of their interest to geography departments. Geographers can choose relevant proposals from the list. This will certainly enhance the quality of research due to constant scrutiny by others.

In this way, the geography departments will be able to show their capabilities and this will certainly enhance the respect of geography and geographers. This will also create job opportunities for geographers. Similarly, university departments should prepare a detailed geographical inventory of their areas. The same can be submitted to the administration for better decision making. Affiliating universities can play a great role in it. College and school teachers should also be involved in updating the spatial data at regular intervals from local to national level for proper planning.

Geography and Social Sciences

Geography should be integrated with other social science disciplines. Geographical patterns are created not in isolation. They are the product of processes operating in a particular area in time. Restricting ourselves to describing patterns means presenting only a part of the story. We have to move from "description" to "explanation" for constructing a "people's geography". We have to understand the processes operating behind a pattern. The only way to enhance our capabilities of explaining patterns is through integration of geography with other social science disciplines and through making them part of geography curriculum from the very beginning. The sub-branches of geography cannot flourish without knowledge of their related social science disciplines. Teaching and learning of economic geography without

basic knowledge of economics, social geography without sociology, and political geography without politics will always remain incomplete.

Now that "space" is back on the agenda of social sciences, we are provided with another opportunity to integrate ourselves with social science disciplines. It is significant to mention that most of the writings of 2008 Nobel Prize Winner in Economics, Paul Krugman on international trade are spatially embedded.

Not all the issues regarding Geography in India could be discussed here. Issues like neglect of physical geography (Dikshit, 1995:145-163); integration of physical and human geography[1]; improvement of infrastructural facilities particularly at school and college level; incorporation of new course contents and the related training of teachers[2]; lack of good text-books and abundance of sub-standard edited books etc. need serious consideration and debates.

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Notes

1. The point under reference was debated at length in 1986 at the annual conference of Transactions, Institute of British Geographers. One can go through (Freeman, 1986), (Taylor, 1986), (Johnston, 1986), (Goudie, 1986), and (Douglas, 1986).
2. It has been observed that at times new techniques and concepts are incorporated in the syllabi without rendering proper training to geographers. The inclusion of statistical techniques was a headache for geographers who were the product of pre-quantitative phase. Similarly, aerial photography and remote sensing are made part of geography practical syllabus in many colleges without imparting proper training to teachers. Teachers should be properly trained to teach new techniques and concepts.

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