

Remembering Professor Ramesh Dutta Dikshit (1939-2019)

Way back in 2007 winter, I visited Lucknow with my wife to participate in the wedding of one of my grand nieces. The wedding over, as planned, we paid a visit to Prof. Dikshit, who by then had settled in Lucknow, and was living in an unpretentious yet well-appointed bungalow, which he had got built for his retirement years, in Gominagar enclave. We were received with a warm and welcoming smile, which I can never forget. Exchange of pleasantries followed, and an enquiry about his health and well-being elicited a gentle and equally polite reply “Aap ki Inayat hai” (by your grace..). The culture of Lucknow had grown over a very Brahmanical Dikshit. Ensnared comfortably in his living room, we had a long chat over a cup of tea which Dr. Dikshit himself had prepared, as Krishna, his wife was on a periodic visit to their children at Delhi. We talked about his life after retirement, his daily routine, and his engagement with geography and other things. At one point, he said rather nonchalantly, “I watch cricket matches and geography comes to my mind only when I receive a royalty cheque”. This was certainly not what Dr. Dikshit was doing. He was busy translating one of his books into Hindi. On a suggestion of his taking up a research project, financed by some funding agencies, his answer was unequivocal. “There is no institutional base for geography in Lucknow, as the University has no geography department”, and added for a good measure that he was not sure of the fate of the research project if he submitted one. Perhaps, Dikshit was a rare example of a geographer who did not approach the funding

authorities to support a research project after retirement. Instead, he devoted his time and energy to writing some badly needed books, which have now become the most preferred university level textbooks. We exchanged notes about our health and the problems of the elderly. As a diabetic, Dr. Dikshit observed a strict dietary regime. To keep fit, he took long morning walks, at a leisurely pace, lasting over several hours, resting a while when needed and finally returning, home pleased and fatigued. The visit over, it was time to leave. Dr. Dikshit came to see us off at the gate while we were leaving and thanked us in his own style for our visit, which we enjoyed. This was the only time I visited Professor Dikshit’s residence. Earlier, I had visited him once while he was at Rohtak.

During all these years we were in regular, though not so very frequent telephonic contact. I used to call him occasionally but unfailingly after receiving a Diwali or a New Year greeting card. Being at least a decade older, I talked to him frankly, completely unguarded and in a very informal style. His occasional remarks, however, based on his observations set me thinking. About a couple of months before his final departure, sometime around Diwali, I called him. During the course of our conversation, he sounded a bit subdued, and on my enquiring about his long morning walks, he answered: “Now, I don’t go out for walks, I walk at home”. That sounded like an alarm bell, age was catching up with my friend. A couple of months later (on 25th Dec. 2019) I received the following What’s App

message from Ashutosh, Dr. Dikshit's son, "My father and your friend and colleague, Ramesh Dutta Dikshit, passed away at my home in Gurgaon, yesterday". That was the end of a brilliant mind, a distinguished professor I loved as a friend and enviously admired.

Professor Dikshit has left behind Krishna, his wife; Jaya, the elder daughter holding a senior executive position in the corporate sector; Ashutosh, the son, with a Masters in economics from Columbia University, presently working as a consultant to a Solicitors firm, after taking voluntary retirement from the Indian Revenue Service where he held the position of a Joint Secretary, and Ila, the younger daughter who is settled in Kumaon, with her husband and engaged in social work - all a well knit loving family, gradually recovering from the shock of Dr. Dikshit's demise. Our heartfelt condolence.

I first met Dr. Dikshit at a seminar in late 1972 or early 1973, organised by the ICSSR, at Delhi, to discuss the "Organisation of Geographical Research in India". Handsome and elegantly dressed, Dr. Dikshit stood out in the crowd. We exchanged notes about our own ideas, and what we were doing by way of research. We were, unfortunately, placed at the opposite ends of the geographical spectrum. He was a serious political geographer while I was struggling with geomorphology. This introductory meeting later grew into friendship and grew further as he extended support to the newly established Institute of Indian Geographers (IIG).

The Institute of Indian Geographers will always remember Dr. Dikshit for the unstinted support during the initial years of its growth. At my request, he joined the Institute. The most significant aspect of this support was

his contribution to the launch of the journal -Transactions of the Institute of Indian Geographers (TIIG). In a state of distress to bring out the first number of the journal in July 1979, I, as an editor, approached several scholars including Dr. Dikshit, who, to our pleasant surprise, contributed a well-written article on "The Geography of Neo-Colonisation: A Third World Perspective". There were other contributors as well, but the contribution of Dr. Dikshit stood apart. It was not a hurriedly written paper, at the spur of the moment. This paper on Neo-colonialism could have found a place in any well-established respected Journal. Yet, he decided to send the paper for publication in the Transactions. His paper occupying the first 16 pages of the First number of the first volume of Transactions of the IIG, published in 1979, gave the journal a head-start. It is a crowning piece among the research papers of the first volume, though the journal cherishes equally the contribution of all those who stood by the Institute in the early years of its growth.

Many would be surprised to know that Dr. Dikshit used to attend the IIG Annual Meets regularly, during the early eighties, travelling by train all the way from Patiala. He was perhaps the only outstation participants to come to Kolhapur and enthusiastically participate in the discussions at the conference. Travelling together from Pune to Kolhapur (250 km and 6 hours) by road, we talked of many things, including the interesting narration of his days at Canberra. Let me recount one in my words.

How a forlorn Dikshit succeeded in getting his family at Canberra could very well be the theme of an interesting love story. With a first class first in the geography of Allahabad University and has won a

Commonwealth fellowship to work for his Ph.D., at the Australian National University, under professor O.H.K. Spate, a very distinguished British geographer, well known in India as the author of "Geography of India and Pakistan" in the early fifties. After initial hesitation, Dikshit landed at Canberra and began his doctoral work in all seriousness. Routinely shuttling between the hostel and the university library - no socialising and no evening parties! He began missing his wife, so much so that he approached Prof. Spate and told him frankly, 'I am returning to India. I don't like it alone here'. Astonished, Prof. Spate advised him not to be impatient and assured him of a visa for his wife so that she could join him. Not only that, he asked Prof. A.T.A. Learmonth to persuade Dikshit not to leave in a huff. Finally, Ms. Dikshit not only got the requisite visa and travelled to Canberra to join her husband, but the School of Pacific studies also sanctioned an additional grant to the family. Ms. Dikshit joined, happiness returned, and Dr. Dikshit finished his doctorate in a record three year period, under a hard taskmaster like Prof. Spate. The bond between Dr. Dikshit and Ms. Dikshit was so strong that left alone he felt lost. Yes, Dr. Dikshit could not live away from the family for long.

On the invitation of the Department of Geography, University of Pune, Prof. Dikshit delivered a series of lectures in social and political geography. These lectures became symbolically known, among the students of the department, as the Marble Cake lectures. Coincidentally, Prof. A.T.A Learmonth was in Pune, on his way from Canberra to London on the invitation of Prof. C. D. Deshpande. On my request, he agreed to preside over the lecture after he learnt that the speaker was R.D. Dikshit. Dikshit's lecture was focused on

India's social structure and cultural diversity. During the lecture, he used the expression marble cake as a metaphor for Indian society. At the end of the lecture, while making some observations, Learmonth remarked that 'Dikshit is one of the very few Indian geographers who write well' but wondered at the same time whether the students, among the audience, were familiar with the marble cake concept used by Dikshit. As a metaphor for 'Indian society with layered strands that combined to make the whole' the phrase could correspond to a more celebrated phrase unity in diversity often quoted as a mark of India's greatness.

Dikshit was one of the invitees to a seminar on 'Teaching of Environment' held at Pune, in March 1985. It was a period when 'not to be left behind', geographers were exploring their possible role in understanding and preserving the environment. Though specialised in the social science stream of the discipline, more specifically Political geography, Dr. Dikshit contributed a very sensible paper on 'Teaching of Environment' where he evaluated the role of society in preserving the natural environment. The paper, subsequently published in the Transaction of IIG evoked many enquiries for reprint. He was, I learnt, capable of writing a paper on any theme or any branch of the discipline. With his theoretical background, he would bring the theme within his reach and use his perspective to evaluate its importance.

For me, the most touching moment was when Prof. Dikshit visited the department and participated in a seminar on 'Tribal Realms of India'. Among the participants were Prof. Suresh K. Singh, Director General of Anthropological Survey of India and Prof. A.B. Mukherjee of Chandigarh. Imagine

Dr. Dikshit came to Pune to wish me well, travelling all the way by train. On a day-long excursion to Mahabaleshwar, a residual lateritic plateau on the crest-line of Western Ghats, I had the privilege of taking Prof. V.N. Mishra, Director of Deccan College, Prof. A.B. Mukherjee of Chandigarh, and Prof. R.D. Dikshit on a guided tour of the plateau. They were, I imagine, really impressed by the awe-inspiring beauty of the Western Ghats and the west-flowing streams.

Early in the present century (2001), on our request, Prof. Dikshit accepted the presidency of the Institute of Indian Geographers and presided over the 22nd Annual Conference of the Institute held at Santiniketan. The title of his presidential address was 'Indian Geography: An Encounter with Reality.' Despite the theme of the lecture being topical and contemporary, the irony in the title of the paper was not lost on the delegates to the conference. The keyword was reality. A large section of the lecture was devoted to the theoretical evolution of geography, ranging from regional geography promoted under "Richtofen-Hettner-Hartshorne dispensation" to "behavioural, humanistic, radical-Marxist perspective" ending with a quote of David Harvey (1985): "the historical geography of capitalism has to be the object of our theorizing, (and) historic geographical materialism, the method of our enquiry". Professor Dikshit believed that "most of the conceptual progress has passed Indian geographers so that as a body of professionals we currently lag behind by almost quarter of a century" and hence "Indian geography today (2001) urgently calls for a thorough overhaul at every level from the lowest to highest. Geography in India is one of the rare examples of an established discipline in which little attention is paid to the students'

training in disciplinary structure", and goes on to suggest a broad course of study for M.A/ MSc. Geography students, adding a postscript on Regional Geography saying "Regional Geography provides the basic foundation of knowledge for life in the world society and should be accorded due weightage in school and college curriculum."

His address was informally discussed among the geographers and evoked a variety of comments. Dikshit's presidential address, rather lengthy for its purpose and content, is cited by many authors and is reproduced in a book 'Indian Geography: Perspectives, Concerns and Issues' [Singh, Ravi (ed. 2009), Rawat, Jaipur, pp.172-192]. Santiniketan was a watershed in the life of the Institute of Indian Geographers thanks to Prof. Dikshit and Prof. Surendra Bhardwaj. It is related to an incidence when the Governing Council of the Institute was on the verge of deciding to discontinue its Annual conferences, as it was proving progressively difficult to find a host institute. On the other hand, the attendance and the enthusiasm witnessed during the presentation of papers, followed by meaningful discussions, were so overwhelming that both Prof. Dikshit, the President and Prof. Bhardwaj, an important delegate, were greatly impressed, and they not only advised but argued for the continuation of the annual conferences, especially in view of the enthusiasm and interest of younger geographers. And, the annual conferences continue to this day.

After Santiniketan, I could meet Prof. Dikshit only once at Lucknow in winter 2007. I could, nevertheless, have long conversations with him a couple of times during the year. It was his gracious gesture that he never forgot to send his Diwali greetings or New Year's

good wishes. The telephonic conversations were often long when we exchanged news about the state of our health, the welfare of the family members, and news about the geography world. The last time I spoke to him was around Diwali in 2019, after which it appears, he with his wife Krishna left for Delhi, perhaps prescient of the event, to be in the midst of his children.

Dr. Dikshit's life revolved around his family, wife Krishna and three children, now grown up individuals and the grandchildren. The family was the sheet anchor of his life. Away from it, Geography was his second love. Reading geography, writing geography, teaching geography and researching geography, to the exclusion of any other interest, were his primary concern. His scholarship rested on his knowledge of much that the Anglo-Saxon geographers have written, especially in his chosen field of political geography. His thorough knowledge and in-depth understanding of the development of geography, from Kant to Soja and Harvey, with many contemporary geographers thrown in, was his forte. His critique of these geographers was rather mute, never strongly disagreeing with any of the ideas propounded by them, nor did he convincingly project his own ideas or one new line of thinking. Most of his writings carry a theoretical background discourse, often too lengthy to the point, that the core issue stood the risk of being marginalized. His arguments, though systematic, were often involved without reaching any finality. Yet, he was an intellectual beyond question, one of the tallest geographers that India produced and an inspiring teacher fully dedicated to the cause of the discipline. He shunned floating wild ideas, considering them unsustainable, without looking at the possibility of it turning into a valid hypothesis worth evaluating.

A brilliant and very knowledgeable scholar, Dikshit shunned the crowd and sparingly participated in conferences and seminars. I have never seen him participate in a heated discussion or fight for the acceptability of his viewpoints. Yet, despite his indifference to promoting the growth of geography in the right direction, by spreading his ideas of "how best to do geography", he remained, unquestionably, one of the most cited and read geographers in India. His textbooks, especially 'A Contextual History of Geographical Thought' remain immensely popular. The popularity of the book gave rise to the demand for a Hindi version of the book. Dikshit rose to the occasion and produced a Hindi version of the book, very popular with the students and teachers alike, in the Hindi speaking areas of the country. His was a brilliance that remained confined, yet we are still inspired by his valuable writings.

Very self-assured, and deeply proud of his intellect and scholarship, Dr. Dikshit was often more condescending than accommodative and indulgent towards his colleagues. This alienated, socially, many of his contemporaries and even professional colleagues despite all the admiration they had for his learning. Here was a talent that remained unacknowledged and a brilliance that remained confined. But, the body of works he has left behind will always inspire a generation of workers.

We admired Professor R. D. Dikshit's scholarship when he was in our midst, enjoyed occasional banter at his expense, grieved deeply when he departed, and now, we miss him.

K. R. Dikshit, Pune