



Professor R. P. Misra

(1929-2021)

It has been some days, the count of which is irrelevant now since I have slept peacefully and fulfilled my circadian rhythm. It's difficult to pinpoint the exact cause, and though, I blame the constant buzzing of this mobile phone, and forever evolving external conditions around me, something nudges and tells me that I am hopelessly blaming, these inert objects and events to avoid facing the deeper reality. There is a grey cloud of indolence that I don't seem to leap over, despite the years of experience, penance, and mental fortitude.

The deep-seated reason for this behaviour is the dilemma imposed upon me by the huge task that I have been entrusted with. I've been asked to write the obituary of Professor R.P. Misra. The onerous task of scripting an obituary for a "near mentor" and inspiration for me compounds itself and becomes heavier thinking about the loss, the community of geography has been exposed to.

I open one eye to check whether it is "daylight enough" to write something and then close it back again... Imagining, visualising, and recollecting fondly the humility, wisdom, dedication, and commitment of Professor R. P. Misra. I wonder and pity at the same time. What should I write about? How much should I let go? And how much will the punishment for making mistakes in narration and description

Bhagwadgita came to my rescue like the oar of a rudderless boat. Lord Krishna says-

जातस्य हि ध्रुवो मृत्युर्ध्रुवं जन्म मृतस्य च ।

तस्मादपरिहार्येऽर्थे न त्वं शोचितुमर्हसि ॥

("For one who has taken his birth, death is certain; and for one who is dead, birth is certain. Therefore, in the unavoidable discharge of your duty, you should not lament.")

I shed the remorse and grief and deep dive into chronology. I unwind the mental clock and skip and hop, decades of my archives to the days of my springy youth when I heard the name of this Super Phenomenon Prof. R. P. Misra. The reason I adjudicate the term “Super Phenomenon” to Professor R. P. Misra is because of the sheer breadth and depth of his labour, futuristic vision, and handling of uncertainties in his career.

Born on 18th January 1929, in a respectable family in the Pratapgarh district of Uttar Pradesh, he had his early education around his village and Prayagraj. He completed his graduation from the University of Allahabad and then secured 4th rank (First Division) in his Post Graduation. It is after this that his journey towards grandeur started!

He, in his lifetime, scripted a monumental 56 books and 110 papers, besides providing research guidance to many scholars under him. His areas of interest include diverse themes such as Research Methodology, Medical Geography, Regional Development, Urban Studies, Environmental Ethics, Sustainable Development, and Gandhian Thought. So much so that his last few hours were spent on his writing desk, completing his autobiography!

All of this happened while he served multiple institutions across the world, in different capacities. Let me walk you through some.

Being denied the opportunity to pursue a D. Phil. at the University of Allahabad, he joined as Assistant in Lok Sabha Secretariat from 1954 to 1957 and then moved to NATMO as Field Officer (1957 -1960). But destiny ushered him back into the folds of education and research. He did a brief stint

in Banaras Hindu University as a lecturer for 6 months but left that to pursue Ph.D. at Maryland University in the USA, after getting a Fulbright Travel Grant. Upon his return in 1964, he joined as a Reader Head in Mysore University and became Professor in 1968. The International Geography Congress held in Delhi under the Presidentship of Prof. S. P. Chatterjee provided Prof. Misra the apt platform to display his ability by arranging a Pre-Congress Symposium on Quantitative Geography where a very large number of foreign and Indian delegates participated in the deliberation. Indian geographers were for the first time exposed to positivistic underpinnings and quantitative revolution in Geography. Prof. Misra became a member of the Commission on Quantitative Geography headed by Prof. B. J. L. Berry. He served the Mysore University till 1979. It was here only that he set up the prestigious Institute for Development Studies in 1971, a futuristic institution, dedicated to developing geography as a mainstream subject for Planning and Sustainable Development. This Institute was funded by Ford Foundation with a matching grant by the State Government. The large number of national and international seminars, symposia, and workshops were conducted under his leadership. He was instrumental in arranging an exchange programme of faculty members with several universities of the world. He ensured relations with American, European & African universities to the great advantage of the institute. His Master’s degrees in Geography and Economics were instrumental in developing a world-class institution with a multidisciplinary approach. IDS started its teaching programme with a master’s degree in urban and regional planning. In addition to this, there came a master’s degree in development planning.

Another path-breaking idea of IDS was to introduce a course in environmental planning. This was before the subject acquired the importance it has in recent times. If anything, else, this alone could mark him out as a visionary.

In 1979, he got the Vice Director's position in United Nations Centre for Regional Development (UNCRD), Nagoya, Japan. He served for 4.5 years as a consultant and advisor to several developing countries. The then Director of UNCRD, Masahiko Honjo goes on record in appreciating his initiative of starting a journal called Regional Development Dialogue and publishing 10 volumes on Regional Development.

He came back to India in 1984 as the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Allahabad. He then became Professor of Regional Planning in 1987 at Delhi University, where he was chairman of the Gandhi Bhawan and Chairman of Gandhian Peace Research until 1998. His intense desire to make ground-level changes in Indian societies inspired him to contest the Member of Parliament election in Pratapgarh. One draws a blank when looking for similar calibre, commitment, and conviction in his contemporaries or the current crop.

He worked very hard to promote the cause of Geography by unearthing paradigms rooted into India's socio-economic fabric, as against the Anglo-American-European thought processes. He brilliantly combined the ideographic and nomothetic nuances in his thought and expression. The penultimate objectives of all his works were to achieve socio-economic equality, peace and sustainable development. Such was the intellectual might of Prof. R. P. Misra that he customised the internationally acclaimed

Growth Pole Theory and made it India centric, by suggesting a Growth Centre Theory which suited to the Indian conditions. I would like to invite all scholars to read his paper on the Diffusion of information in the context of development planning in India. (Lund studies, series B, Human Geography, volume 37, 119 -136) to get a feel of his comprehensive thought process and religious rigour.

He foresaw the future trends and started multiple courses, the relevance, and potency of which is visible now, after two decades. I am taking the liberty of skipping the awards and accolades he won at various institutions because these would be mere numbers in front of his persona.

But I would certainly want to highlight the core values he stood for throughout the various responsibilities and challenges he faced in his career and after. He carried the spirit of the 3-H principle he had learnt from Shree Naresh Bahadur Lal Srivastava, his Headmaster at High School which stood for Head (open knowledge), Heart (Human Welfare), and Hand (Skill Development). He was a Gandhian in true earnest and believed in practising control over anger, self-discipline, and non-violence in all dimensions of his life.

He was always inspired, and I am reminded of a poem in Hindi he used to quote, which has helped many of his colleagues face adversities of life, with a smile.

वह पथ क्या, पथिक कुशलता क्या, जिस पथ पर बिखरे
शूल न हों,

नाविक की धैर्य परीक्षा क्या, जब धाराएं प्रतिकूल न हों ।

- जयशंकर प्रसाद

(What merit would a path hold, what skills would the walker hold, if the path is not laden with thorns? What patience would the boatman hold if he doesn't paddle upstream?)

I have run the mental imagery of Prof. R. P. Misra multiple times in the mind's eye, his career, his personality, his beliefs, and his writings and end up remaining awestruck every time. I think I want to remain like that, inspired and energised. He was a continuum and will remain so, forever shining and showing light to everyone around him

जहाँ रहेगा वहीं रौशनी लुटाएगा,
किसी चराग का अपना मक़ाँ नहीं होता।

- वसीम बरेलवी

(Wherever it may be, it will radiate light for everyone. A lamp does not limit itself to its address)

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