

# Pandemic, people and place: Looking through a geographical epistemology

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At the outset I would like to thank the President of IIG Prof. Sachidanand Sinha, General Secretary Prof. Ravindra Jaybhaye and editor, Prof. D. K. Nayak, Transaction IIG and also Convenor Prof. Kaylan Das, Head, Department of Geography, Cotton University and his colleagues for inviting me to deliver Prof. A. B. Mukerji Memorial lecture 2024. I also place on record my deep gratitude to Prof. K. R. Dikshit who has been a source of inspiration and motivation for me to remain connected with geography. I pay my respect to Prof. Atiya Habeeb Kidwai who taught me at JNU, present today in this August gathering for her encouragement, and also thank several other distinguished geographers and friends present here as a mark of respect to the late Prof. A. B. Mukerji.

It is indeed an honour for me to deliver Prof. A. B. Mukerji's memorial lecture. Prof. Mukerji has been a pioneer in the study of cultural geography in India. He studied the rural settlements of various cultural groups; at the same time, his contributions to the fields of physical geography and geomorphology have been seminal. Prof. Mukerji was an excellent teacher and I had an opportunity to listen to his lectures when we as students of CSRD undertook a study tour to the Himalayas under the stewardship of Prof. Harjit Singh way back in the year 1984. Prof. Mukerji was

a great personality and insightful geographer who followed Carl Sauer's (1889–1975) tradition of cultural geography (Singh 2009).

Carl Sauer believed that the cultural landscape expressed in the form of human settlements, agriculture, workshops, markets, fields, and lines of communication are the objects of geographical investigation. The cultural landscape evolves historically fashioned from a natural landscape by human agency (Solot 1986). This led to the emergence of Berkeley School at the University of California from the 1920s to 1950s. Since then, several approaches and perspectives have emerged and the research in geography has been highly fragmented. However, this is not unique to geography but also happening in other disciplines as well. In this lecture, I would like to share some of my thoughts on space, place and region as key unifying concepts of geographical epistemology, and also try to understand the pandemic crisis through it as a tribute to the late Prof. A. B. Mukerji.

While our economic, social and political lives are increasingly interdependent and interrelated, the disciplines and disciplinary knowledge remain by and large rigidly separated and proliferating within their respective confines. The quest

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for interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary and beyond-disciplinary has been elusive, to put it mildly and has met with limited success. This has been happening under the assumption that we need specialised knowledge leading to rigid drawing of boundaries among disciplines. This has created not only a visible divergence among the disciplines but increasing fragmentation within each of them as well. Needless to emphasize, almost all researchers experience this; sometimes zealously defend this and also claim an identity which distinguishes them from the others. Fragmentation in social sciences and the search for an identity is an issue of status and a longing for recognition. Little did we recognise that this hampers our consciousness, limits our capability and promotes a system of *casta*.

Geography like any other discipline also suffers from huge fragmentation in numerous sub-branches of so-called physical and human geographies. Various types of dualism and dichotomies such as systemic vs regional and physical vs human geography are well known in geography, and the search for an identity straddling between physical and social sciences has been perpetual.

Further, the tension between nomothetic vs idiographic, positivistic vs humanistic and local vs global are also apparent in geography, although this is found in other social science disciplines as well (Bhagat 2006). However, this tension within geography has a positive side too. Geographers have been constantly searching for their identity defining and redefining geography in the past. Geography has been defined as a subject of the study of human and environment relationships or the subject of human ecology, a study of the physical and cultural landscape, a science of

areal differentiations, and a science searching morphological regularity. In its various forms, Hartshorne's idea of geography as a study of areal differentiations has been more predominant despite criticism by Schaefer pleading for a law of geographical regularity similar to the natural sciences (Hartshorne 1939; Schaefer 1953).

Some leading geographers also tried to bridge the divergences calling 'Geography as a modern synthesis' (Haggett 1972). It demonstrated the importance of space and time, spatial organisation, diffusion, models and maps in understanding a phenomenon from a geographical perspective (Smith 2004). Geography has passed through many phases embracing quantitative revolution, and humanistic and radical perspectives, however more recently its relevance to address the question of spatial and regional inequalities embedded in the socio-economic inequalities continues to be increasingly recognised.

The spatial and regional inequalities are not only confined to the economic processes but also sociologically and politically important as seen in the resurgence of place-based identities, social networks, inclusions and exclusions. Geography is not only the study of spatial forms but also the processes shaping spaces and places determining who gets, what and where, how places widen freedom or subjugate, and how places promote fraternity or enmity. As people's life is shaped by places, place has emerged as the starting point of theoretical, political and social inquiry (Merrifield 1993). Thus, the purpose of geographical epistemology is 'to provide us with important political tools to identify the new forms of inequality and the hardships that are unfolding, prompting questions about how we should collectively

respond to shape the future of place' (Bissel 2021). Places are critical forms of space and constitute the basic elements in the formation of a region. The relationship between space, place and region is central to the idea of geographical epistemology in raising a question of 'where' both in terms of form and process inseparable from the questions of what, how, why and when. Looking this way, it would not be naive to say that geography is too important to be left to geographers. In the section below it is my humble attempt to elucidate how geographical epistemology could provide a better insight to understand the relationship between people and place during the unprecedented times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **A geographical epistemology**

An epistemology is the study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge. It is derived from the Greek *epistēmē* (knowledge) and *logos* (reason), and accordingly, the field is sometimes referred to as the theory of knowledge (Martinich and Stroll, n.d.). In other words, it explains 'how we know what we know'. In a similar vein, geographical epistemology means what constitutes geographical knowledge and how we know it. Epistemology does not stand alone but is closely tied to ontology- i.e., what exists, a science of 'being'. It is about assumptions and beliefs about reality. Much of the history of philosophy is a history of ontological disputes (Simons, n.d.).

Geography as the study of the earth's surface and variations over it using Newtonian, mechanistic and Cartesian methodologies have obvious limitations. Scholars have also questioned the absolute and linear practice in geography. All these assumptions constitute the philosophical foundations of geography

as a study of areal variations or regional differentiations. Alternatively, it may be argued that the idea of region must be linked to the idea of space and place. The space is not absolute, linear or morphological, nor a container of things but defined by the relative location and relational existence of objects, phenomena and events. It is a dynamic and unbounded category inseparably tied with time. We must make a distinction between absolute geography and relative geography. Geographers use the tools of space, place and region to understand the economic and social changes. However, these theoretical tools cannot be looked at in isolation. This requires an alternative epistemology which can integrate space and place with economic and social changes. When our concepts and tools are not static but dynamic then it would be possible to capture the changing reality. It is important to realise that we live in a relative and relational world. While Einstein's ideas on the relationship between space, time and motion are very important to understanding our physical world, space and time are socially produced in our social world deciding our social, political, and economic locations, social structure and changing social relationships.

Space is an unbounded extent defined by the relative location of objects, their relative distance and relationships. When objects are human beings, it becomes a place. The place is related to the people and their life and has a history, culture and social relations. The places evolve due to the changing structure and characteristics of people. Migration, mobility and urbanisation are significant processes shaping the structure and experience of a place.

There also exists a contradiction between space and place. Spaces are produced, but

places are made. In producing space, space becomes resources, means of production, and even wealth. It is controlled and appropriated by the economically and politically powerful class. It is very much evident in the process of urbanisation creating wealth through real estate development and commodification of space. This creates inequality and exclusions and consequently raises a voice for the *right to the city* or right to the space. Space raises the question of 'where' intimately related to who gets what and where. Where we work and live decides about access to resources, income and employment, access to education, healthcare and finance. The question of 'where' is a powerful dimension determining chances of life both in terms of access to good or bad.

The scaling up of space and place forms a region. Regions are spaces and places of relationship which converge or diverge in terms of one or more characteristics. The formation of regions is a significant historical and spatial process unleashed by the centripetal and centrifugal forces. Region is about drawing boundaries; boundaries are not confined to geographic boundaries alone but also include social, economic and political boundaries; Inequality redraws social, economic and political boundaries and shapes the experience of a region. However, the region alone is not an adequate tool of geographical epistemology. As Hartshorne himself admitted '*the emphasis on regions as distinct objects, as though complete each in itself, has apparently led to neglect of one of the most fundamental of geographic factors – the significance of the location of phenomena on the earth surface in relation to each other*' (Hartshorne 1939:xii). Thus, it may be emphasized that the understanding of the region is closely tied to the understanding of

space and place. While the region is a form, space and place constitute the underlying processes resulting in the formation of a region.

When we want to understand the structure of space, I think there are three important attributes namely- location, relative distance and relationship. Location can be determined by geographical coordinates like longitude and latitude with reference to zero-degree meridian passing through Greenwich and zero-degree latitude assigned to the equator. Further, location is not only geographic but also social, economic and political as well showing the respective locations in the social, economic and political hierarchy and structure. The same is also true for distance as well. The distance could be geographic distance, social distance or political distance in human space. The location and distance among phenomena also constitute relationships reflected namely in the spatial, economic, social and political relations. The true nature of location and distance indicates that neither of them is absolute but relative and relational in character. Further, the relationship is not static but dynamic shaped by various flows namely the flow of goods and services, capital, people (migration) and information on the geographic and human space. These flows show the relationship of space and place with time. With increasing development, expansion of transportation and innovations in communication, various types of flows have been increasing. These flows are shaped by time-space compression or the annihilation of space by time (Harvey 1990). It looks like a flattening of space, but various socio-economic boundaries and divides either remain intact or recreated. Digital technology is one such emerging dimension shaping space, place and region. Various

flows also generate the spatial forces of centripetal and centrifugal forces leading to regional outcomes and regional inequalities. Production and commodification of space as a means of capital accumulation enunciated by Henri Lefebvre (1991) and the role of location and agglomeration in production and economic growth by Krugman (1991) are highly accepted theoretical and geographical epistemologies practised even outside geography. The conceptualisation of the *production of space* was an important contribution by Henri Lefebvre in understanding the survival and expansion of capitalism driven by urbanisation. On the other hand, Paul Krugman – an economist by profession was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2008 for bringing a geographical perspective to economics.

To conclude, Geography is the study of space, place and region and their relationship with people. It is about how spaces are produced, places are made and regions are formed shaping social relationships and human well-being.

### **Pandemic, people and place**

On 9<sup>th</sup> January 2020, WHO reported that Chinese authorities had determined that the outbreak was caused by a novel coronavirus. In India, the first case was detected on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2020, and WHO declared the Pandemic on 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2020. By that time, it had already spread to 114 countries with 118,000 infections and 4,291 deaths. Lockdown in India was started w.e.f. on 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2020.

The spread of COVID-19 manifested as a spatial process with metro cities as epicentres. Fear of a public health crisis to avert COVID-19 spread led to a severe lockdown

creating a *mobility crash* immensely affecting economic and social life. Numerous studies also documented the loss of livelihood, lack of access to food, unavailability of health services, violence and conflict resulting from lockdown and immobility. During the lockdown period, due to a lack of adequate attention from the government initially, police atrocities, hunger and accidental cases increased which resulted in the death of hundreds of migrant workers (Bhagat *et al* 2020; Khan and Arokkiaraj 2021; Kumar and Patel, 2023).

The lockdown was a *space crunch* leading to the devastating experience of place. People were visibly desperate, disappointed and felt decimated. A tension between space and time was central to the devastating experiences of life unleashed by the pandemic. People wanted to recreate their past and were desperate to reach *home*- a place of belonging, a place of family and friends, and a place of security and survival. The exodus of millions of migrants from the big cities and the scenes of walking on the road to reach their homes a thousand miles away a testimony to this fact (Bhagat *et al.* 2020; Lusome and Bhagat 2020). In the words of Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) *space is freedom, and place is security*. Studies in social sciences generally emphasize individuals and households ignoring the fact that people are deeply connected with place with a sense of belonging, security and well-being. As Seamon and Sowers (2008) explained ‘... *space and place are dialectically structured in human environmental experience, since our understanding of space is related to the places we inhabit, which in turn derive meaning from their spatial context*’.

As the pandemic of COVID-19 was not only a health crisis but also triggered a huge

economic and social impact as well, the poor and marginalized people from lower social and economic strata were disproportionately affected due to loss of livelihood and lives. The existing social and economic inequalities were visible but also manifested their embeddedness in regional inequalities and dimensions seen in the visuals and news about infections, testing, vaccination, and lack of health facilities, death and migration appearing both in the print and electronic media. As scores of migrants walked towards rural from urban areas, and also from the southern, western and the region surrounding the National Capital of Delhi to central, eastern and some parts of north-eastern areas, the rural-urban divide and regional disparities were very much evident (Rajan and Bhagat 2022). Therefore, it would not be inappropriate to underscore that socio-economic inequality in general and regional inequality in particular was pivotal to the experiences of COVID-19 in the wake of lockdown.

The pandemic should be understood as a socio-spatial process because origin, spread and mitigation, all, reflect the socio-spatial process. Lockdown, social distancing, quarantine, and containment zones are geographical categories that reshaped the experience of space and place. The close association of the pandemic with space and place also highlighted that the development is not simply economic but spatial as well. Spatial process manifests in the form of mobility. According to Massey (2005), mobility has been a vital component in theories about space, place and the human world. It is about changing social relations, production of space and place, and shaping the human experience and meaning (Cook 2018).

The mobility is not confined to migration alone but also the flow of goods and services, capital and information. More mobility means more development and it works in an accelerating mode to achieve more and more GDP. It is like running on a treadmill with increasing speed entailing the potential risk of heart attack. While mobility was seen as a reason for the spread of COVID-19 disease, mobility cessation was believed to be the most important mitigation strategy of the COVID-19 pandemic which brought so much suffering to the people. The visuals of the urban exodus of migrants from big cities of India brought the geographical issues at the centre of social inquiry and vindicated that the nature of space, place and region cannot be ignored in addressing social and economic problems.

The COVID-19 pandemic was essentially an urban crisis as it spread from the core urban centres to other parts of the country. The infection and death rates were higher in urban than rural areas, and regionally more concentrated in south, west and north India. The more urbanised areas are usually the destinations of migrants who returned to their places of origin mostly located in central, eastern and parts of north-east India. The pandemic revealed not only regional inequality but also vindicated how much our urbanisation has been exclusionary and dominated by big cities. The exclusionary nature of urbanisation has been the driving force of widening regional inequality supported by economic and urban policies based on neo-liberalism and globalisation. Neo-liberalism takes the form of privatisation, formalisation, legalisation, digitalisation and so on under the assumption that economic

growth will trickle down. Economists supporting neo-liberalism and globalisation argue for more reforms for economic growth to be undertaken by the state, but the empirical reality continues to show polarised regional development and increasing inequality at various spatial scales. At the state level, the inequality in the per capita income of more urbanised states compared to less urbanised states has widened in recent years (Mundle 2023). Inequality limits the human ability of freedom and jeopardises the idea of fraternity i.e. sense of belonging and inclusion. A lack of fraternity was evident during the exodus of inter-state migrants. A question was raised whether the migrants belonged to the state of origin, or the state of destination or the centre. The pandemic also made pronounced the digital divide, opportunities to work from home, clean air and be with family. It brought varied and paradoxical experiences of exuberance and sorrows rooted in class, caste and gender dimensions.

### **Imagining place and shaping space: A strategy for sustainable development**

The sustainable development goals laid down the roadmap of our common future. It is about making space a place- a home of love, security, and well-being. It depends upon the recognition that space and time are integral and inseparable entities as shown by the great physicist Albert Einstein. Our future, an embodiment of time, cannot exist outside space. Shaping space means shaping the future. However, space and time are socially produced and appropriated leading to wide social, economic, and spatial inequalities reflected in the form of power, wealth, and identities. It was evident in the exodus of migrants yearning for their homes,

the nature of exclusionary urbanisation, and the emerging digital divide during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. It is a political issue. Our political imagination must match our geographical imagination. It is about being *vocal about local* recognising the role of diversity, decentralisation and democracy in fulfilling the aspirations of people for development. ‘One size fits all’ needs a critical evaluation in shaping the outcomes and experiences of the geography of human well-being.

### **Competing interest**

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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