

A Geographical Study of Indian Geography in the Eyes of Geographers

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Abstract – Geography as a discipline, in India, has the processes of liberalization, privatization and globalization have left its imprint on the persona of geography and its identity, image and relevance are being debated at various forum. In the last 24 years since NAGI has made its appearance there are roughly around 15 presidential addresses focusing on relevance of the subject, its role in making of the society, area of strengths and weaknesses and role of geographers in the nation building endeavour. Within this background purpose of the paper is not to evaluate anyone's scholarly contribution in the field of geography but to highlight and critically examine the changing views of the geographers of two generations; the one focusing on contents, methods and techniques and the other showing concerns about identity, image and space of the discipline in the academic world.

Keywords – Discipline, Content, Philosophy, Image, Perception, Identity, Geography, India.

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INTRODUCTION

Geography is the field of knowledge which relates to the temporal and spatial dimensions of the processes and pattern that shape the Earth's surface. Implicit in it is the ways in which diverse systems interact over time, producing particular landscapes at particular places. Man has been interacting with environment right from the early stage of human civilization and its spatial expression has been the focal theme of geographers. A perusal of Sanskrit literature (Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, Ramayana, Mahabharat, Meghdoot, Abhigyan Shakuntalam and many others) reveals that geography as a concept has been in existence since ancient times. These literatures contain beautiful geographic description of a place (region) and phenomena (man nature symbiotic relationship) which still form the foundation base of geography. The precise calculation of the circumference of the earth and the treaties of Surya Sidhanta by Aryabhatt are the testimony to the advanced state of geography and astronomy in the country. Looking at such historical dimension of man-environment relationship Malviya (1956) rightly remarked that ancient hermits and sages could be termed as the geographers of ancient India. Practitioners of Geography have been mostly concerned to use it as a tool to measure, collect, organize and document the geographical facts of India since British time. Survey of India was established in 1767 with an objective of preparing maps and providing greater details of resource availability, potentiality and connectivity with the international market. Seeking precision in locating and measuring the land, the surveyors imported instruments like plane

table (1793), prismatic compass (1815) and theodolite (1819) from their homeland but no Indians were either trained or involved in this large venture. In the same vein many other departments with an objective of appraising the country's resource potential were set up but geography's education and training never got required attention in spite of the fact that knowledge and understanding of local geography is essential ingredient for any such endeavour. However, geography as a discipline in India is only around hundred years old initially introduced at the school level in the last quarter of 19th century. It took around 75 years to set up a department of geography since the first geography came into existence in India in spite of its applied value, presence in European universities and establishment of Indian universities. Such delay speaks about the step motherly treatment right from the very beginning and is still continuing in one form or the other; sometime from within and sometimes from outside the discipline. In the time span of less than 100 years geography as a discipline has witnessed massive change in its contents, methodology and philosophy and there is a shift from qualitative to quantitative approach and from conventional cartography to computer aided cartography, remote sensing and GIS under the guidance and leadership of foreign, indigenous and American and European trained geographers. There has been a change in the perception of practicing professional geographers about the discipline which have been reflected through writings, discussions or even during their gossiping. Such perceptions range from 'geography as a mother of all sciences' to 'geography going to the hell (gadgha))' and many other metaphors. Such perceptions have instigated

me to academically examine the theme that how our old and new generation geographers are looking at the discipline which is means of livelihood for most of them and how their perspectives have changed. With this background, the paper aims at highlighting the views and concerns expressed by professional and practicing geographers in the last six decades on the academic and perceptual aspects. Purpose of the paper is not to evaluate the geographic contribution of our senior geographers or to be judge mental or to come up with some concluding remarks rather it tries to put the view of geographers as they perceived geography as a discipline.

GEOGRAPHY TEACHING, TRAINING AND RESEARCH:

Geography as an independent discipline at the higher education level started in the early twenties of 20th century. Since then there has been constant change in its content, philosophy and methodology as a consequence of changing paradigms which has been stressed and emphasised at different fora in different forms. The first conspicuous effort in this direction was in Aligarh Muslim University (Jan.1956) where an international seminar was organised by the department of geography. The first session of the seminar was focused on problems and constraints of geography teaching. The seminar explicitly accepted a shift from traditional to modern approach. 'Mere enumeration of facts in their sequential order might have been the scope of geography in the past, but as geography is understood by us, it comprehends all the sciences, opens all vistas and embraces all knowledge and is essentially based on the synthesis of the observed and analysed facts of the landscape-humanized or natural in relation to man. These facts are dissected, analysed and correlated to obtain an appraisal of the landscape in its entirety which makes it distinctive personality different from others (Alam-1956).' Sircar (1956) in the same seminar very categorically spelt out three aims which any discipline is supposed to fulfill. First, it educates the people with their surroundings and environment. Second, it prepares man for certain specific profession. Third, it prepares specialists in various branches of geography who would advance the geographical knowledge by taking place in universities. Any appraisal of geography as discipline needs to be examined in this context because ultimately it is job opportunity which attracts students towards any subject. The UGC set up first Review Committee in Geography in 1965, with Professor S.P. Chatterjee as Chairman. The Committee made a critical analysis of geography syllabi taught in Indian Universities and Colleges at post-graduate and under-graduate levels, examined the existing facilities for teaching and research and recommended introducing field training in geography and improvement in examination system. The second Review Committee, appointed in 1986 under the chairmanship of Prof. G. S. Gosal with an objective to modernize and restructure the curriculum in the light of further developments in the knowledge and the need

of the time, made certain recommendations like introducing semester system of teaching and credit system of evaluation and home assignments, list of books and journals to be consulted, list of equipment's for geography labs and introduction of 'refresher' courses for the teachers to upgrade and update their knowledge for effective teaching of new course-contents. In 1999, the U.G.C. appointed a panel of experts which examined the course-contents of thirty universities; reviewed the existing academic and infrastructure facilities and recommended and developed a Model Curriculum at the UG and PG level as per requirement of the time.

Geography:

Teaching In the last five decades the teaching of geography as a discipline has witnessed a slow but gradual shift in its contents, methodology and philosophy. There has been a shift from qualitative to quantitative approach, from conventional cartography to computer aided cartography, from optical-manual to digital technology driven remote sensing and GIS under the guidance and leadership of indigenous and American and European trained geographers. The ailment from which Indian geography is suffering is mainly caused by the distortions of the British and American geographies that were imported by the Indian geographers trained in two different traditions which were different in the approaches and methodologies from where Indian geographers have received training. Gosal (1980) states that physical geography is suffering from unjustifiable neglect both in teaching and research. The curriculum in physical geography needs to be broad based and sharpened so that it may provide a comprehensive understanding of the physical resource base. An understanding of the totality of the nature is necessary for developing sound methods of analysis and synthesis in geography. Misra (1983) has a mixed feeling about the state of geography teaching in India.

Geographical Training:

Training may be understood as a planned process aiming towards knowledge input, skill development and change in attitude for the sake of better performance. Training of geography teachers involves much responsibility. Future status of geography is largely determined by the effectiveness and skill with which it is taught in the class room environment. But unfortunately training in geography in India is neither rigorous nor systematic because of several reasons like high teacher-student ratio which hinders the skill development process, poor infrastructure and less commitment of the teachers and students both leading to further downgrading of quality of teacher. These poorly trained students when join the teaching community follow the same path. In such case, a newly appointed teacher, coming from different academic and research background, going for delivering lecture is not at all

concerned with the entry behaviour of the students, surprisingly not even aware of the contents to be covered and usually talks about what he has learnt or prepared for himself. But there is no specific module for such courses, hardly any attention is paid to the skill development aspect and it remains only knowledge input. Indian Institute of Remote Sensing, Dehra Dun organizes eight weeks training programme on Remote Sensing and GIS for the teaching faculty of universities and colleges with a view to make them aware about the new technology. Some training programmes are organised by NATMO, Kolkata on payment basis which focuses on map making with the help of Remote Sensing GIS technology.

Geographical Research:

Research is a continuous and relentless process of enquiry and discovery. It is an endeavour to discover intellectual and practical answers to problems through the application of modern concepts and scientific methods. It is an essential ingredient for the survival, development and progress of any discipline. Status of any discipline can be assessed on the basis of quality of papers published in journals and books. Future of any discipline depends not upon the quantity but the quality of research. Gill (2003) opines about the flood of research in geography in India during the post-1950 period because of factors like entry of number of foreign trained geographers in various universities which ensured quality research product, introduction of post graduate teaching in many universities and colleges of the country and acceleration in the pace of research output. However, when the research output is put to a close scrutiny, it becomes apparent that our geographic research is encountered with a series of theoretical, conceptual and methodological shortcomings. One important shortcoming of geographical research is "our tendency to pursue the subject without engaging ourselves on questions regarding its spirit and purpose" (Dikshit-1991). Geographic research conducted in such a vacuum are bound to fall short of their objectives. The reason for such type of research is the availability of data which act as inspiration in this regard and helps in publishing research papers or books (Mukerji 1991). Singh and Prasad (1956) while discussing on the content and method of geography stated that 'geography students are suffering from spoon feeding syndrome to the extent that they fail to carry out independent research work even after their post graduation'. Gosal (1980) remarks that we must make use of all the secondary data available to us but the same time we should not shirk the need of supplementing it with primary information collected from the field. Of course the methods of field work have to be evolved in line with the nature and objective of our discipline so that we are able to clearly understand the dynamic organisation of the phenomena in space. Misra (1983) expresses his concerns on the nature and quality of research being carried out in major Indian universities and lists out the responsible factors. There has been a growing tendency to apply foreign models to the Indian setting whose context is unique and as such the

methodology and constructs have to be validated in an Indian frame of reference so that the interpretation would carry a sense of realism and relevance for planning and policy. Raza's opinion in the context of development and research in the light of geography is very significant. He states 'We have paid a heavy price for ignoring the spatial dimension of the development process. It is the task of geographical research in the country to focus attention on this. With the identification of this crucial task, let's look critically at the emerging research landscape of Indian geography as a response to the development imperatives of recent years'. Arunachalam (1990) has shown his concerns for urban bias in Indian Geography which seems to be specialisation for convenience rather than utility. Indian socioeconomic circulation like the periodic markets and rural fairs deserve a greater focus for working out the strategies for planning of rural development. The things have changed in the last two decades. India is being urbanised rapidly, urban sectors are contributing to two third of the GDP and 90per cent of the tax collection and is considered as engine of growth. Hence in the age of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation the focus on contemporary urban issues are equally important, valid and relevant. Another problem faced by Indian geography is the rampant use of sophisticated advanced statistical techniques for the last fifty years without understanding the philosophy, spirit, purpose and rationale of such techniques. There is still dearth of teachers who are fully acquainted with its intricacies, niceties and pitfalls and many institutions do not possess the necessary infrastructure and staff to train students and to meaningfully apply quantitative technique in research'(Dayal1994). Another general shortcoming in doctoral research is repetition of more or less the same research theme under different titles. This is more commonly seen in the studies related to urban morphology, demarcation of umland, land use pattern, distribution of population taking case study of any spatial unit (block/tehsil/district). Even the thesis writing pattern remains similar starting with location, geology and relief of the area under study followed by socio-cultural aspects and ends with some policy recommendations. There are repetitions of contents in terms of data shown in table, carto/graphically represented and finally described in words.

IDENTITY, IMAGE AND SPACE OF GEOGRAPHY:

A cursory glance of literature available on the state of geography in India reveals that our relatively older generation geographers were concerned more with the issues like what is being taught(contents), how is it being taught(philosophy and methodology), what are the techniques used in geographical studies, how the researches are being carried on and what are the infrastructure and resources available in imparting geography education at school level and higher education level. Worth mentioning names in this context are Prakasa Rao, Dayal, Arunachalam,

Reddy, Mukerji, Misra, Dikshit, Gill and many others. Advent of 21st century witnessed a new dimension in the facets of geography. Professional geographers in the postmodern age started talking about the identity and image of the discipline and the space it occupies in academic world. These issues are basically the issues of survival as it determines the identity and image of the professionals who are working in the field. The issue of identity and space of geography is related to the degree to which it helps the society in resolving its problem and the position held by its practitioners in intellectual circles, government set up and policy and planning bodies. The image of geography as a social science/humanities or natural science seems to be an endless story and has been discussed without any outcome. Dikshit (2001) has listed out the reasons responsible for isolation of geography in the academic discourse. In 2004 issue of Economic and Political Weekly, Kapur wrote an article "Geography in India: A languishing Social Science" which revolved round the theme that why geography is not recognised by social scientists, why it is sidetracked and ignored. She raises several questions like Is it that other social sciences have a blurred perception of geography? Is it the absence of geographers from social science institutes? Or is it that geographers could not establish their credentials as social scientists? Reacting to the views of Kapur, Dutt (2005) states that instead of asking such questions from others it is high time to introspect ourselves academically by asking few pertinent questions like Is Indian geography indeed a social science. Is it a 'relevant' social science capable of solving real world socio-cultural problem? Are Indian geographers being able to communicate and convince about their contribution in shaping the society. Finally how our works are different from others. If the question is yes then why universities like Sagar, Banaras, Chennai and many others include geography in the faculty of science and take pride of claiming a pseudo science status. Why geographers are absent from different types of institutes of social sciences, policy making bodies and planning organisations.

GEOGRAPHERS' RESPONSIBILITY:

In India, with numerous additions to its techniques and research methods the "tree of geographical knowledge" has grown both at the core and the margins. 'Geographers make their own discipline of geography, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it in circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past (Johnston-1985 quoted from Sharma-2006). The statement initially starts with the creativity and vision but land on inheritance and legacy of the older generation. Swartzberg (1983) and Mukerji (1992) openly acknowledged how the dominance of old geographers has overshadowed the young geographers by virtue of their seniority. Sundaram (1998) in his NAGI presidential address spoke 'young geographers should develop those skills which will make them reality-

oriented, environment-sensitive, globally-adaptive, and professionally-innovative and vision driven qualities which will render them capable of pro-actively responding to the increased uncertainties of our time'. Misra(2004) commenting on the future of geography remarks 'geography must not deviate from the middle path..... it should be scientific in approach and humanistic in perspective'. If a discipline has to exist with full time and academic vigour, youngsters will have to be given due space, opportunity and support (Singh 2009). With this dictum Singh came up with a volume entitled 'Indian Geography in 21st Century: Young Geographers Agenda' in 2009. The volume organised into five parts and nineteen chapters is an attempt to establish dialogue between past, present and future Indian geographers and purports to see how geography is going to shape the society in future. Mishra (2009) visualises contemporary geography as discipline which deals with the emerging regional spatial dynamics. The geographers are urged to reorient their research work towards ensuring justice to the people and their welfare. Alam (2009) stresses on the need of reflecting the rapidly changing world in school education curricula and urges young geographers to develop understanding of the politics behind curriculum development. Ryngnga(2009) tries to analyse, the prime position of geography in primeval days of its emergence, hallmark of Indian geography, quality in school education and so on, rejuvenation of the subject, job market and its relevance and potential in society making. Singh (2009) finds great opportunity for geographers in the era of decentralized planning and governance for which he advocates theme-based need-based short term training. Choudhary (2009) after examining the theories of regional development at macro level advocates for deconstructing some of the myths and stresses over contextualizing them highlighting the role of geography and geographers.

CONCLUSION:

Geography as a concept and a tool for resource mapping and utilisation has existed since long. There has been constant but gradual change in its content, philosophy and methodology as a consequence of changing paradigms. Geographers have expressed their view on different aspects of geography i.e. teaching, training, research, identity, image, space and demand of geographers in the making of society. At the teaching front because of shifting focus from physical base to economic base geographers in India failed to contribute in understanding and solving the environmental problems. It is also weak in the teaching of disciplinary structure i.e. philosophical and methodological base. Another problem which has ailed Indian geography is lack of field work. At the training front there is an absence of induction course at the entry level so there is lack of skill development accordingly it has been suggested with proposed components. Orientation and Refresher courses

needs to be module oriented. At the research front, problems have been highlighted as lack of originality, lack of clarity of the problem and objective and dependence on secondary data. The discipline is also facing the problem of isolation, invasion and identity ultimately culminating into exclusion at the name of interdisciplinary from the mainstream. Finally, discussion on young geographers' agenda put the discipline in the form what it would be in future.

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