A Study on Image & Identity of Indian Geography: The People's Perspective & Re-shaping Geography Education

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Introduction

This paper is an attempt to look at the discipline from the people's side. Against the backdrop of a brief history of Indian geography and current debates therein, various issues are discussed as revealed by ordinary people during a questionnaire-based survey across different sections of society and also focused informal discussions. Geography is among the late beginner subjects at higher education level in India. As revealed in scholarly writings, this discipline had been subjected to discrimination for colonial reasons and continues to lurch even today. There have been many academic writings on Indian geography.

Keywords: Indian geography, identity, indigenization, relevance, ancient roots.

Do Away With the Yayati Principle

All that is achieved by a society do not form the tradition. A tradition is conscious construction by the concerned society. Naturally that can not be fixed for all the times to come. Accordingly, we find changing traditions over time as much as by space. Academic traditions too undergo the similar process. Emergence of criticality in the field of geography, during the last leg of the 20th century in the Western scholarship, proved to be a conformed change and also attested greater role of young scholars in turning the Kālacakra (literally the "time-wheel") on. Interpretation of the past and envisioning the future is a prerogative of the present generation. Hence, questioning past practices should not be taken as malicious and ill-intended; though, in practice both criticism and praise are taken personally. Criticism (and praise too) in any intellectual or academic dialogue is of the ideas not individuals per se. We all know science is the craft of making impossible imagination come true. That is how science never believes in the "eternity of ideas" rather treats knowledge as partial and tentative, and keeps on improving what we know. These beliefs in the scientific world have ensured vibrancy in all sciences and made them highly spirited. If we take pride in calling our discipline "scientific", we need not claim for a "spurious science" tag, merely for a "high image" in the society or ensuring (better) grants for our departments or funding of our research proposals, as already indicated by some (cf. Lahiri-Dutt 2005/2009).

Instead we should look forward to inculcate, encourage, practice and promote the scientific temper which is objective, rationale and progressive in its basic nature. While reviewing an edited volume, K.R. Dikshit did not appear happy with the "uncritical" lot among young geographers which engages in admiring the seniors and reminded them to follow the spirit of

science, "Let us remember, a critical assessment is far more rewarding than an uncritical acceptance of every thing that the elders do (Dikshit 2002, 112). In this spirit, the elders are expected to take younger geographers and their ideas in a constructive spirit and treat their imagination as creative instead of rubbishing away as immature, impossible, and utopian. Students of geography know at least about Bernhard Varenius (1622-150 CE) who exemplifies the generation of young geographers. He is credited with "distinguishing between general and special geography; and, the mutual dependence of these approaches".

He was a futurist par excellence with quite a clear conception of the nature and purpose of future geography (cf. Dickinson 1969; James 1972, 124-126). Faiths in the young voices have been expressed in many contexts even before the onset of the present century. Indian Geography too awaits expression of such a faith in young geographers. After all, how long we can continue with the Yayati syndrome and deny the youth its due. Indian society, badly suffering from the Yayati syndrome, appears emerging out of this regressive problem. And, the upcoming results have also been encouraging. It is not only the young (cricket) team India which have made the nation proud during last few years with its historic achievements; rather it is happening all around—the information technology sector, business, and also the Indian politics which had least scope for representation by youth at the upper level. In addition to the re-elected young parliamentarians, the entry of a good number of youth as the first-timers in Lok Sabha is an expression of faith by the political parties and also the people in the youth. As far as qualification and competency is concerned, they are surely better than many of their seniors when they were youth.

The Contextual Orientation

No endeavour is without a context. Hence, interpreting the context is as much essential as the endeavours. The following portion of the book begins with the introductory part I entitled "Contextual Orientation". As it is self-explanatory, its motive is to provide a comprehensive background for the discussions to follow in other sections consisting of essays on different themes. Though, the tradition of critical appraisal of the progress taking place in Indian Geography has been rather feeble, yet one can now refer to over a hundred of writings of different genre available. They contain statements, generally of the seniors, on the content and purpose of Indian Geography. Chapter 2 is an effort to elaborate Indian Geography's trajectory, in somewhat different fashion. Instead of presenting a general narrative of the evolutionary history, emerging critical points through the battery of musings are projected. General impression is we have "progressed" considerably during a span of over last eight decades forgetting the fact that this word means not merely "growth"—of institutions, students' enrolment, employment and teachers, books and journals published, professional academic bodies, doctorates in the subject, funding, computers and other equipments, etc.—it carries more important value-loaded meaning involving quality. After all, in spite of

these numerical achievements, there is a sense of loss we inherit from the immediate past century. Critics and the concerned feel aggrieved. The loss inherited is immense and varied too attest the works known till date. Worrying truth is, in general, we do not seem interested in the recovery of the loss incurred and identified well. Not knowing the ailment is forgivable but what to say about not taking care even after being informed of that clearly! The second part of this chapter looks for the emerging directions in the present 21st century.

Reshaping Geography Education

The underlying importance of education primarily lies in the fact that it has direct and strong implications for individual advancement. And, in turn, it has immense prospect for the realization of a society's amazing potential and aspirations for economic and technological development. Geography for its direct utilitarian value has been one of the integral elements in the education of a person and also to all human inquiry (cf. McDougall 2000). At many occasions the issue of geography education in India has been addressed. Most of them address the problems at tertiary education level. School education automatically gets neglected. One will have to admit that majority of us have not taken the pain of taking a dip deeper in the water. The sickness reported and solutions prescribed hence prove to be quite general and shallow. Cosmetic treatments do not cleanse the system to make that healthy. And, that is what has happened to geography education in India.

Resurrecting Physical Geography

Physical geography—constituted basically by geomorphology, climatology, and biogeography—is fizzling out in Indian Geography should be taken now not merely as caution rather as a hazard hanging around to become disaster! Except in the specialized

journals like Indian Journal of Geomorphology, feeble and sporadic frequency of research works is testimony to further slumping down of the state and status of physical geography. One should therefore be not surprised to see a regressive pull in this broader and significant field of geography. Pushing physical geography towards the dark corner is complained and bringing it back into curriculum prominently as it used to be is suggested by many. But for A.B. Mukerji perhaps no body else has taken the pain of looking into the problem beyond indicating and suggesting some generalities. Negation by senior and senior-most non-physical geographers is capable enough of relegating it to oblivion and is truly termed as "catastrophic". His prophecy "negligence of physical geography will lead to the final collapse of geography in India" (cf. Mukerji 1992/2009) may prove to be right. However, it can not be allowed to happen. Right at this point, will it not be a worthy question to ask that what has been the role of Indian physical geographers in this relegation process? Did the kind of physical geographies we have doing connect to the society and social purpose, etc.? Jog's (2008, 28) remark summarizes the current craze for a technique and unfound genuine dedication for the problem investigated, "The techniques and tools of research gain importance ...at times one wonders if the original topic of research is getting camouflaged in the description of these tools and techniques". To protect our propriety over the territory of physical environment-society interface, we will have to

resurrect physical geography. Validity of Mukerji's points is unquestionable and awaits response from physical geographers working in India.

Conclusion

This study examined trends in temporary life expectancy and mortality in India and its regions. This is a challenging task due to the absence of fully functioning vital registration system in the country. Therefore, we used data from the Sample Registration System which provides the most complete and representative data on mortality in India (National Commission on Population, 2001). Although some studies based on indirect methods suggest that there is some variation in completeness of the SRS coverage, the completeness of the SRS is generally high. However, we showed that even these data may be suffering from some deficiencies such as significant age misreporting and possible undercount of females at older ages. At the same time, the comparisons between the SRS and alternative sources (NFHS) suggested that the SRS estimates are likely to be accurate for children and adult ages. Thus, we assumed that restricting our analyses to the range of ages from 0 to 59 would allow us avoid significant data quality problems. Therefore, we believe that our analyses describe the major regularities of variation in health correctly. However, it is still worth to undertake more in-depth and systematic studies and checks for assessing the quality of the SRS data across the regions of India.

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