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CHALLENGES TO GEOGRAPHY IN THE 21ST CENTURY***P.S. Tiwari**

Esteemed colleagues and friends,

I am very happy to participate in the sixth annual conference of the Association of Punjab Geographers and share some of my thoughts with the distinguished audience present here. I am beholden to the President and members of the Association for inviting me to the conference and providing me this opportunity.

The focal theme of this conference, 'Challenges to Geography in the 21st Century', is of great topical interest. Geography, like any other discipline, has to reorient itself to meet the demands of the new world order, characterized by proliferating human population, shrinking natural resources, growing protectionism, waning bio-diversity, global warming and increasing pollution. Explosion of human population was one of the defining features of the last century. The century began with world population under 2 billion and ended with world population over 6 billion – more than three-fold increase in 100 years. Much of this explosion took place in the less developed countries. It is projected that

rapid population growth will continue in the 21st century and this century's growth will occur almost exclusively in the less developed countries.

The developments in the fields of science and technology in the last century, particularly after the World War II, have revolutionized all walks of human life. Advancements in transport and communication have transformed the present day world into a global village. Globalization and liberalization have brought the world economies close to one another and have made them inter-dependent. China and India have emerged as great economic powers and are in league with the developed countries. Intense competition for natural resources, particularly the limited ones like hydro-carbons, has led to widespread tension and strife. The world today is getting deeply divided along demographic, religious and economic lines. Development disparities among nations, as also within nations, are getting sharper by the day.

India, home to almost one-sixth of the humanity, has experienced rapid

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population growth in recent years, trebling its population in the last 5 decades. The country has achieved commendable progress in agriculture, manufacturing, services, education and health. The achievements in IT, ITES, and BPO services have been particularly spectacular. Indians professionals in the fields of IT, management, medicine and engineering command great respect in the international arena. Unfortunately, the fruits of development have not been shared equitably by all sections of the Indian society, and widespread disparity prevails at family, community and regional levels. A large chunk of our society continues to live in abject poverty and eradication of poverty still remains a formidable task.

Geography, which studies Man in the context of Nature and tries to analyze and explain human activities in terms of environmental endowments and constrains, has to play its role effectively in solving the daunting problems of the world and in making this planet a better place to live. The discipline itself faces a crisis of identity and relevance. Some university departments in the United States were closed in the past due to inadequate student response. In India, we don't face such problem at present due to a large young population entering the portals of our educational institutions every year; yet, waning student interest has been noticed in some parts of the country. It is a well – known fact that better students are attracted by professional courses like medicine,

engineering and management. How to overcome this problem, how to attract good students to geography and how to maintain and enhance the popularity of the subject in our educational system, are some of the questions which demand our serious and urgent attention.

It is gratifying to note that geography is a popular subject all over the country, though the level of popularity varies from state to state. The subject to very popular in the states like Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa and Maharashtra and not so popular in Punjab, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. It is difficult to find a valid explanation for this regional variations, but for the endeavors of some committed individuals and the impact of public policy in some cases. For example, the Government of West Bengal recently made Geography a compulsory subject at the school level with significant weightage in the public examination. The policy change has created substantial job opportunities for geography graduates in the state. As a result, the member of applicants for admission to post – graduate courses has increased many fold, much beyond the capacity of the local university departments, and there has been considerable over-flow of students to universities in the neighboring states.

Geography course at the post-graduate level need modifications to suit the needs of the contemporary society. Physical geography and regional

geography have to be strengthened. Geomorphology, climatology, oceanography and environmental geography require some elementary understanding of the related science disciplines, which our students, most often, don't have. In many universities, geography is part of the science faculty. Even in these departments, the number of students from science stream is hardly 20 percent. Efforts should, therefore, be made to attract larger number of students with science background, so that physical geography could be strengthened. With increasing interaction with the outside world and growing foreign trade, India needs a large number of country / area experts. Geography should prepare itself to meet the demand.

Computer literacy is generally lacking in geography curricula. It won't be surprising to find post-graduate geography departments with no computer exposure to their students. Remote sensing image interpretations, digital mapping and GIS have become indispensable tools of research these days. Many geography departments in the country are yet to wake up to recognize this reality and adopt these technologies. There is, thus, an urgent need to accept and master these technologies without further loss of time, so that our students no longer remain handicapped in the job market.

Another area which requires immediate attention is school education. Geography is not a separate subject in the school curricula in many states. It forms

part of social studies and is taught by teachers who themselves are not trained in the subject and find it difficult to make the subject interesting. There is also need for good textbooks for the school children. Efforts should be made to remedy this situation soon.

The need to improve the standards of teaching and research in geography requires no emphasis. Jobs are in plenty these days. Digitization of land records, Environmental Impact Assessment, analysis and management of natural hazards, tourism, particularly eco-tourism, production of globes, charts and city maps, and above all, educating the young generation are some of the ever-green avenues of employment for geographers. Geographers have only to acquire the necessary skills, and jobs will come to them for asking.

I take this opportunity to salute the members of the Association of Punjab Geographers for their excellent work in promoting geography in this part of the country. Punjab has a very conducive environment for geography to flourish. Punjabis are renowned for their hard work, enterprise and wide reach, have truly national and international outlook and are keen to learn about opportunities any where in this wide world, be it the thick and inaccessible forests of Baster or the vast expanse of cold desert in Canada. They also have the purchasing power to go for quality geographic products. To cap it all, Punjab is blessed with one of the most progressive geography departments of the country at the Panjab

University, Chandigarh to guide the destiny of the discipline. What more could one ask for to promote geography?

I wish the young geographers of Punjab a very bright future and wish you all a very happy Deepawali and the New Year ahead.

Jai Hind

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