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CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS OF GEOGRAPHY*

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The focal theme of this National Conference is listed as 'Challenges and Concerns of Geography'. This could well be better phrased as 'concerns of and challenges for geography'. It is the concerns that have to be spelt out first and these are the ones which set the agenda of challenges. The two are of course interlinked and my observation is just incidental for your consideration. There is every reason that these two terms be hyphenated in place of using a conjunctive of 'and' between them.

Identification of concerns relating to a discipline involves a deliberation on issues pertinent to its identity, relevance and acceptability at societal level. Challenges define the effective steps that need to be taken for addressing the issues enunciated. Such a process has to be a regular feature in the interest of a sustained desired progress of any discipline. Association of Punjab Geographers is to be congratulated for taking such an initiative in furtherance of the cause of geography.

The task of addressing concerns-challenges facing geography is to be accomplished in the light of three parameters:

(i) evolutionary trajectory of this discipline; (ii) the way it has been responding to the questions of internal debate and external expectations, and (iii) the extent to which it has been absorbing the advancements in knowledge and technology at large. Alongwith, its resilience to competition from other disciplines and its capacity to reinvent itself at every stage are also to be taken into account.

What could be a theoretical framework for an understanding of the concerns-challenges for geography? This basically covers matters relating to the very rationale of its existence as a separate discipline in the world of knowledge, the questions of research which are specific to its nature and methodology, and all things that go in for its teaching. The identity question is linked to its ability to do what others cannot, its competence to resolve the problems of society in a unique manner, and its proficiency to contribute to public policy. Research is to reflect its awareness of the questions of contemporary relevance, a skill in application of spatial approach and techniques and a propensity to debate on questions of public interest. Teaching has to demonstrate an integrated view of knowledge being imparted at different levels,

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effectiveness in pedagogy and proficiency in field work. Further on horizon is an obligation to have a vision and to visualize what could be its concerns-challenges in future.

At the very outset, one has to understand that the concerns-challenges for geography differ at hierarchical scales of global, national and regional levels, and these do not remain the same at different points of time-space. Here a kind of duality between the interests of geography and that of geographers often surfaces itself. One may surmise that these are interlinked but get delinked in practice. Geography at its own level may cry for its constant reinvention, updating and modernization but the teachers of geography may find the status-quo as more comfortable due to constraints of resources, time, and also what would be impolite to spell out here. The point being made is that in our existential world, dreams and action or heart and hand often do not pair together because reluctant as we are to leave our cozy cushions. Nonetheless, in any discussion on the focal theme of this conference, one must distinguish between the concerns-challenges of geography and those of geographers. The overall experience is that the latter prevail over the former in most situations.

For me it will be advisable to remain confined to the call of the conference theme. The current concerns-challenges of geography at the global level can be gleaned from the focal themes adopted by the International Geographical Union over the years. Here a statement based upon a perusal of messages conveyed at the five last congresses held over a span of last sixteen years since 1996 may suffice.

The 32nd International Geographical Congress held recently in August 2012 at Cologne, Germany carried 'down to earth' as its focal theme. 'Down to earth' calls for not only a primary focus on the central object of our study, that is earth, but also makes a plea for being pragmatic by way of ensuring the presence of geography felt at all public fora. Global change and globalization, society and environment, risks and conflicts, and urbanization and demographic change were listed as sub-themes. Two symposia sub-themes were also tagged: schools and educational matters and issues in applied geography. All told, the gist of various concerns-challenges could be summarized under three keywords: global change, school education and applied geography.

The 31st International Geographical Congress held at Tunis in Tunisia in August 2008 had 'building together our territories' as its focal theme. The intention was to highlight the matters relating to autonomy, development, sustainability, and above all inter-dependability of different political territories in the world. It was highlighted that governance at all spatial scales, global, national and local, should ensure efficiency and equity in its effect. Internal development of a territory has to be a priority but this process must be sensitive to the interests of neighbours and beyond.

The 30th International Geographical Congress at Glasgow in 2004 carried the theme 'One earth, many worlds'. 'Living with diversity' was the theme of the 29th International Congress at Seoul in 2000. The 28th International Geographical Congress at Hague in 1996 had opted for theme 'The earth, the sea and human efforts'. And the still earlier 27th International Geographical Congress at

Washington in 1992 had its deliberations under the theme 'Geography is discovery'.

If one carefully pursues the successive themes of the above mentioned Congresses one can discern evolving emphasis on discovery, nature-humankind symbiosis, peaceful political co-existence, management of natural resources, good governance and global change as critical issues for geographic thinking, research and teaching.

At the national level, one may have a look at the presidential address delivered at the Annual Meet of the National Association of Geographers of India to draw the necessary inferences. These are expected to be expressive of current concerns-challenges of Indian Geography. The latest five published in the Association's Journal for the years 2005-09 are available for scrutiny.

Going by the theme of the Conference, the 2009 presidential address at Jabalpur by M.H. Quereshi dwelt on the interrelationship between environment, culture and development. A note was taken of the impact of global warming and climate change on these three keywords. A basic question posed by him was as follows: What type of society in different environments with varying level of development and cultural background will develop in coming future? He called for cooperation among all sections of humanity and for a check over the human infirmities in the form of greed, competition and dominance.

In his presidential address in 2008 at Allahabad, K. R. Dikshit underlined that 'tending the planet earth is the key to human survival'. For this, there is a need to create

awareness about the overstretched human pressure on natural bounties of our earth. Ecology is to be protected and for this appropriate mitigation and adaptation strategies need to be adopted. Earlier in 2007, H. S. Sharma in his presidential address at Udaipur had also stressed the need of repositioning geographical research on environment, development and sustainability. He observed that geography as a discipline is capable of offering sustainable solutions to societal problems. He underlined the importance of cultivating professionalism in Indian Geography.

M. K. Bandopadhyaya, in his 2006 presidential address at Bodh Gaya, had dwelt on the theme of 'tourism, environment and development'. He expressed a hope that in near future eco-friendly tourism will evolve in India not only at the national but also regional and local levels. Sudesh Nangia, in her presidential address at Bangalore in 2005, enunciated issues pertinent to women empowerment. She called for gender sensitization to promote the cause of justice. In her reckoning, the *panchayati raj* institutions, non-government organizations and elected representatives of the people can be most effective agents for the purpose.

Evidently, the prevailing thought process in Indian Geography, as represented by the presidential addresses, places a premium on matters relating to environment, sustainable development, and gender equity.

For taking a stock of the concerns and challenges at the regional level, a recapitulation of the observations and suggestions made at the panel fora of the 10th Association of Punjab Geographers meet at Patiala in 2010 will be in

order. The recommendations organized in their final form by H.S. Mangat, the patron of the Association of Punjab Geographers, were classified under three categories of university level, college level and school level. This was indeed a highly commendable and comprehensive exercise.

To the universities a call was made for modernizing the syllabi, promoting G.I.S. and Remote Sensing, offering professional courses like resource management, and awarding M.Sc. in place of M.A. degree, if not already done at present. At college level, a case was made for introducing this subject in all those colleges where it was missing, for getting approved combination of geography with all other related subjects, particularly the science ones as a part of B.Sc. stream, for ensuring teaching of the subject of 'environmental studies' by a geography faculty, and for encouraging training in G.I.S. and Remote Sensing. At school level, the imperative of making geography compulsory for all classes was underlined as most critical. Introduction of a compulsory course on 'environment studies' to be taught by a geography teacher was also earmarked as important. The need of getting sanctioned additional posts for geography and filling of the existing vacant ones was not missed. In addition, it was pinpointed that District Institutes of Education and Training, which organize training for primary school teachers, must give a special place to geography so that teaching of this subject at school level is made more effective.

As it emerges, the observations made for the universities, colleges and school levels represent sentiment in favor of modernizing geography, equipping the students with the

latest tools of analysis, and raising value of this discipline in the job market. One of the practical ways to pursue all this would be to align the syllabi at different levels to the requirements of a variety of examinations conducted by the Union and State Public Service Commissions, University Grants Commission, Schools of Town and Country Planning, National Council of Educational Research and Training and others. Equally it would be necessary to raise the technical proficiency of students interested in G.I.S. and Remote Sensing. Above all, geography cannot do without its competitive edge in the job market through the quality of its learning and capability to perform best in any situation.

All in all, one gets a feeling that concerns-challenges expressed at the university, college and school levels centre more upon geographers than geography. By corollary, one is yet to come in grips with the concerns-challenges of the discipline at large. Let us move on to that at this point.

The greatest concern-challenge, for us is to establish the creditability of geography among social sciences in general, and no less in the corridors of power, and in the arena of society. A moot question is why geography could not make a dent of which it is capable. 'Geography is often perceived as a small child placed in the school context'. It always gets missed when big children are picking teams. After all, it isn't small child's fault. The crucial question is: "Where are the big children in geography"? "What are they doing?" "How long will they keep shining in their own glory"? Senior geographers owe a response to such questions.

The fact is that we took the literal translation of the term geography as “description of earth” rather too seriously. We felt content with our obligation to 'simply describe' and took a long time to realize that any discipline in a competitive world has to be highly analytical, theory oriented and prescriptive. Such a late realization to our dismay brings us in interface with the next serious concern-challenge.

This is related to the encroachment by other social sciences over themes and methodologies which could legitimately be called our territory. Referred to here are the environmental studies, regional development and planning, area studies, international relations and now G.I.S. We could not adequately cultivate and demonstrate our intrinsic strength in these areas and allowed them to be captured by other disciplines. The plight of geography could be described thus: it is all embracing, hence less deep; it is simplistic in training, hence less specialized; it is soft in temperament, hence non-activist.

Linked to this is our third concern-challenge arising from geographicality of other disciplines, may it be economics, sociology, political science, or public administration and even geology, biology and agricultural science. There is a bold and visible spatial turn to knowledge creation in all such disciplines. How would geographers address such a situation? This is possible only if they make highly specialized and vividly distinctive contribution to themes of contemporary interest and sharpen their tools of analysis, especially G.I.S. and field work. In that context, the sub-themes of regional planning and development, natural resource management, and promotion of green economy listed for

detailed deliberations at the present conference are highly laudable. These provide a platform for geographers to demonstrate the inherent strength of their specialty.

A further concern-challenge is linked to the fact that while geography is claimed by many as most favorite subject at the school level, this interest soon evaporates at the subsequent stages? How are we to explain this? It is also a sad commentary many geographers are not in a position to convince the layperson about the special nature of their discipline. They find it difficult to explain in precise terms, with illustration, the expressions like areal differentiation, spatial organization, spatial diffusion, spatial organization, and spatial planning, the five hallmarks of geography. Equally while working in any multidisciplinary context, a geographer finds it difficult to demonstrate the very specific contribution being made by him or her. We have been carrying on an endless debate on what is geography. But often we have not been successful in showing where is geography?

Still another concern-challenge is rooted in shyness of geographers in interacting with the administrators, politicians and media. They may do so for personal reasons but not in the interest of their discipline. Although we are capable of saying something about everything but we are diffident in going for a public debate even on issues having geographical bearing. General public and policy makers are not interested in what we are capable of doing but rather in actual contribution we are making. For us, it is most critical to snatch a place near the podium and proclaim and demonstrate where our discipline stands vis-a-vis matters relating to local impact of globalization, vulnerability

scenario linked to disasters, spatial networks of terrorism, flow channels of corruption, reorganization of states and districts, and development strategy for a watershed. The list is just indicative, not exhaustive.

Finally, the widening vistas of globalization and intercommunication are being described by some as the death of boundaries and distances, rendering the earth flat, and doing away with the variable character of earth surface. Here geographers have to convince the death-wishers of our discipline that the new technology is not destroying but creating new spaces. A new regional variation

as created by latest technology is taking birth and evolving. What is the configuration of this new map of the world at all spatial scales? This needs to be explored, described, analyzed, interpreted and designed. This could well be a concern-challenge to be spun threadbare by this conference.

Thank you, one and all.

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