

## Geography education in Indian schools

### *Abstract*

*Geography as a regular school subject was introduced by the British in the early part of the twentieth century. Thereafter it has gone through several changes and evolved with the evolving history of education in India. The author tries to track down the evolution and to explore the dynamics, popularity and utility of geography as a school subject in India.*

Geography is a compulsory school subject in India. When did the self-motivated or self-conscious study of human environment started in India is difficult to say with authenticity. Geographical knowledge existed in pre-British India. But formal education of geography, as a course of study, took shape in the early part of the twentieth century under the British tutelage. First steps in this direction, however, were already taken in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of introducing geography had, to some extent at least, its root in trade and business interests. It was partly the value of geography for surveying and mapping of the resources, which gave imperial rulers its precise image and substance as a tool fundamental for the statecraft. This concept of using geographic knowledge as a tool was conceived and nourished in European environment with Napoleon founding the first Chair in Sorbonne. Since the later half of the nineteenth century, geography became a regular part of the elementary school curriculum in Britain and came in the purview of the secondary schools in 1902.<sup>2</sup> In India, the British introduced geography in schools along with arithmetic and English. This initiative became more serious with the establishment of the first geography department in the Punjab university in 1928.

As a result of this initiative, the format of geography curricula was very much similar to the British one. In the absence of much knowledge about India, courses had a huge component of the geography of United Kingdom. In the initial stages, the textbooks were that for British schools or were written by British authors.

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1 In this context, observation of 24 years old Director of Public Instruction (D.P.I.), Punjab, William D. Arnold, is quite interesting. 'We found a people ignorant of the geography of their own province, ignorant that there is such a science as geography and therefore prepared to reject geography as men are inclined to reject whatever is strange or new to them' (J.A. Richey (ed.): *Selection from Education Records*, Part II, 1840–59. Calcutta: Superintendent Government Press, 1922, p. 301). Geography and natural history were included in the curriculum in some of the English public schools. After Arnold's two years stint as D.P.I, 'he said in his second report, there were boys, [...] who could "pass a good examination" in the geography of India, Asia and the globe' (Krishna Kumar: *Political Agenda of Education*, New Delhi: Sage India 1971, pp. 56–57).

2 For the British system, see Norman Graves: *School textbook research. The case of Geography 1800–2000*. London: Institute of Education, Univ. of London 2001, pp. 8 & 29.

The colonial system ruled out any possibility to include indigenous knowledge in the curriculum. With the foreign content and foreigner teachers teaching in a foreign language, education became so remote and dissociated from the real life experiences of Indian pupils that teaching and learning process of geography was largely reduced to rote memory for passing the examinations. An Indian child had to learn about landscapes, climates, foods, dresses and society, or memorise the examples which s/he has very little or no affiliation to. As a result, the practice of rote learning intensified with the inevitability of minimum emphasis on developing practical skills. Since geography was one of the subjects for the Indian Civil Service Examination (I.C.S.) or the other state level Public Service Examinations, pupils, nevertheless, had to study geography seriously. And this process continued till independence.

### Post-colonial initiatives

Education being the focal concern of the new government, it was felt necessary to have an indigenous system of education for the citizens of the new nation. Education Commissions were set up. In 1966, the education commission headed by Prof. D.S. Kothari, popularly known as the Kothari Commission, submitted its report on “Education and National Development”.<sup>3</sup> Main focus of the commission was to promote national consciousness, tolerance, democratic values and international understanding through education. This Commission recommended geography to be a compulsory component of Social Science in school curriculum, be it independent disciplinary or integrated in approach. In India, the National Curriculum is subject-based. Therefore, the syllabuses of geography were designed separately like any other subject within the social science curriculum.

After the independence of India, a different kind of boost came to recognise geography as a subject of utility. Though crippled with tremendous poverty, surging population, mass illiteracy, very weak infra-structure and fragmented economy with the partition; the young nation wanted to open up all kinds of possibilities to reach education to its masses and was thoroughly charged to accelerate the processes for social and economic developments. In such a situation, for the newly born State, the geographical knowledge was found necessary for its role towards achieving a planned economic development. Geographic knowledge was found useful by the Planning Commission of India for a balanced regional development. From the mid-1950s (Second Five-year Plan onwards), departments for teaching as well research in the area of geography multiplied. These exercises have had a trickling-down effect on school geography as well. But during this period, in the absence of textbooks written by Indian geographers, the geography textbooks that were used in English medium schools continued to be by foreign authors, while in regional languages they were either based on those books or were translated versions. The focus of the school geography syllabus was mainly on regional and economic geography, though physical geography had a substantial content in the syllabus. The geography curriculum adopted the spiral method in the content of

3 Kothari, D.S.: *Education And National Development, Report of the Education Commission 1964–66*. National Council of Educational Research and Training 1971, pp. 349–350.

study. Some of the concepts as well as topics were dealt within the curriculum at different depths through the various stages of school education.

Till 1976, pupils were free to choose elective subjects from class IX in the academic system of 8 + 3 school years. In that system, pupils could study geography as an elective subject from class IX and the approach was disciplinary with some focus on physical geography and the development of practical skills. Moreover, the state governments were free to take decisions on all matters pertaining to school education, including designing the curriculum. In 1977, the national curriculum has undergone a major change introducing a new academic system of 8+2+2 school years. In this system, pupils have to study geography as a component of social science till class X. In this ten years of school, environmental studies (EVS) had inputs from geography from classes III–V, while from class VI geography was taught as a part of the social science curriculum but was disciplinary in approach. National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT)<sup>4</sup> prepared the textbooks of geography. The syllabus was huge with components from physical, economic and regional geography. The learners had to memorise names of the continents, countries, their capitals, hills, plateaus, rivers, seas, gulfs and so on, both from near and far. Additionally, they had to remember (*sic!*) them on maps. It was obvious enough that pupils did not find the subject interesting. This promoted the general practice of rote memory to pass the examinations. But some pupils went beyond the secondary stage and chose to opt for geography as an elective subject in the higher secondary stage. In this stage, they could get some flavour of geography as a subject of serious study and perhaps found worthwhile to pursue the subject in higher education.

In 1986, the National Curriculum was revised again and a National Policy of Education for the entire country was recommended. Education was put in the Concurrent List<sup>5</sup>. But there was not much changes in the scopes and content of school geography. The main focus was on regional and economic geography with spectrum of the syllabus very broad but without much depth. World geography was introduced in the upper primary level with geographical account from countries belonging to different continents. The books prepared by National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) in 1988 mainly were authors' text and descriptive in approach. Another aspect was language incomprehensibility. This was because of the absence of educational-psychological/pedagogic inputs in the texts. The language of the texts (be it in English, Hindi or any other language), for geography, history or in other subjects, was far more tough than the language instruction at that level. The syllabus being huge, teachers were too keen to complete the syllabus in time rather than enthusing the pupils towards geographical inquiry. The textbooks were not much liked by the pupils for obvious reasons, but

4 NCERT, as an apex institute in the area of school education, advises the Govt. of India in educational policies, planning and is responsible for designing the National Curriculum Framework for School Education and the preparation of detailed syllabuses for all stages as well as writing model textbooks.

5 For administrative purposes, under the Constitution of India, various subjects were brought under the Union list, the State list and the Concurrent list (Joint List). The Concurrent list has subjects like education, newspapers, economic planning, etc., which could be of common concern to both the central and the state governments. Therefore, both the central and state governments cooperate and take decisions in agreement.

some used them later to pass in the Indian Administrative (formerly Civil) Services Examinations. Some states, i.e. West Bengal or Kerala, had geography syllabuses somewhat different and retained the emphasis on teaching geographical concepts along with economic and regional inputs.

- In 1999, the National Curriculum was revised again. This time the National Curriculum of Geography was really overhauled. Three very important changes were
- The rationale to teach social science was changed from disciplinary to “thematically integrated” approach. “At the primary school stage, children are introduced to ‘Environmental Studies’; [...] from the immediate environment, the children get familiarised gradually with distant places, state, and country.” In the upper primary stage geography, within the social sciences, targets to “develop an understanding about the earth as a habitat of humankind; [...] its natural and human resources and their potentialities for a better tomorrow; acquire a positive attitude towards conservation and preservation of environment, resources and heritage; an awareness of the various social and economic challenges before the country”<sup>6</sup>, (ref. Table 1).
  - Descriptive regional and world geography was replaced by inquiry based emerging concerns as inputs like environmental studies, sustainable development or disaster management and education along with “India” as a theme in global context. To put more emphasis on developing practical skills, “projects” were prescribed to be evaluated in examinations.
  - To make geography vocationally attractive to the students, Computer Mapping, Geographical Information System (GIS/LIS), Disaster Management etc. were included in the geography syllabus at the higher secondary stage instead of continuing with the Davisian theory of “cycle of erosion” or Plane Table surveying. In one word, perceptible changes were brought in the geography syllabuses for all stages of school education.

### New features in the recent National Geography Curriculum

The changed National Geography Curriculum of 2000 certainly aimed to include emerging concerns and issues of local, national and global levels, within the parameters of geography teaching. But the rationale also very clearly states to inculcate in the pupils certain values that are enshrined in the Indian Constitution,

*“observing India’s common cultural heritage, equality of sexes, protection of environment, observance of small family norm and promoting scientific temper along with Fundamental Duties like promoting harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood among all the people of India transcending religions, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities, renouncing practices derogatory to the dignity of women, value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture, protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife [...] higher level of endeavour and achievement”*.<sup>7</sup>

6 National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE-2000). New Delhi: NCERT 2000, pp. 62–64.

7 Guidelines and Syllabi for the Higher Secondary Stage: Geography. New Delhi: NCERT 2000, p. 45.

After the new books came out as a follow-up of the National Curriculum 2000, a Comprehensive Evaluation Exercise of the syllabuses and textbooks for all stages was taken up by NCERT. Some of the reports were ready, when the government changed in India and the process of another revision of the curriculum started. The changes in the curriculum brought in 2000 were welcomed by the majority of the geography teachers for the following reasons:

- the syllabus was lighter and more focused on general geographical understanding than the rigours of the disciplinary approach till the secondary stage
- Teachers, not trained in geography, can teach the geography component till class X without having much difficulty
- some emerging issues and concerns found place in the syllabus, which seem to be interesting to the pupils
- emphasis on developing practical skill
- emphasis on projects and making them a part of examination, thereby giving importance to do the projects seriously
- easy language, better visuals and better production quality of the books.

### Common perceptions about geography

Geography being a compulsory subject till the secondary stage, it has importance. But the common perception about geography (as per personal experience in long years of teaching) had been and maybe still is:

- Its boring.
- Its only about remembering names of countries, capitals, rivers, hills, mountains or which river comes from where and falling where. Not really interesting.
- Maps are like triangular *parathas* (Indian flat bread).
- Save us from maps!!!
- Its cool but only for general knowledge tests or to win in Quiz.
- Helps in competitive exams for jobs.

In the above-mentioned circumstances, geography became a subject one has to study but wants to get rid of quickly.

### Geography teachers and the fraternity at large

Geography in schools is taught by social science teachers till the secondary stage. They might have studied geography or – in many cases – history, political science, economics, sociology in their B.A. courses. A survey done in the end nineties showed that in many cases the teachers did not study geography after their own secondary stage. This had created a serious problem in geographical understanding. In the absence of adequate knowledge, the teachers, in most cases, refrained from explaining the concept part or the diagrams. A common practice was to switch over to the descriptive part and ‘complete’ the syllabus. Practical skill development was largely out of reach. This practice over the years has created a kind of fear/avoid psychosis among pupils about geography, maps and map reading.

School stages	1986–2000		2000–2006		2006 onwards	
	Content	Remarks	Content	Remarks	Content	Remarks
<i>Primary I &amp; II</i> (Classes III–V)	<i>Environmental Studies (EVS)</i>	Integrated approach	<i>Environmental studies</i>	Integrated approach	<i>Environmental studies</i>	Integrated in the curricular areas
<i>Upper Primary</i> (Classes VI–VIII)	<i>Lands and Peoples:</i> earth in the solar system, globe and maps, latitudes & longitudes, motions & four realms of the earth, Africa, S. America, Australia & Antarctica.  atmosphere, hydrosphere, N. America, Europe  Asia and India	Subject approach, separate book  Principles: simple to complex and remote to near  Studying India in the backdrop of the world.	<i>The Earth – Our Habitat:</i> solar system, maps and globe, four realms of the earth, major relief features and India in the world. <i>Our Environment:</i> natural and human; land, air & water, flora and fauna; human and natural environment interaction: settlement transport and communications, various case studies <i>Resources and Development</i> natural and human & their utilisations	Integrated approach, geography as a unit within Social sciences, one book for the entire Social sciences.	<i>The Earth – Our Habitat:</i> earth in the solar system, globe and maps, four realms of the earth, major relief features and India in the world. <i>Our Environment:</i> natural and human; land, air & water (1 case study each of earthquake, cyclone & tsunami respectively), natural vegetation & wild life, human environment. settlement transport and communications, <i>Resources and Development</i> natural and human & their utilisations	"Disciplinary quality is understated with open boundaries"  separate book.
<i>Secondary stage</i> (Classes IX–X)	<i>Humans and Environment</i>  land, air, water  maps as an aid to understand environment, human impact on environment with case studies  <i>India: Economic geography</i>	Subject approach, separate book for geography  Focus: knowledge input on geographical phenomena	<i>India – Land and the People</i> location, physiography, climate, drainage, flora-fauna and population <i>Resources and their Utilisation</i> types, natural and human resources, infrastructure and industries of India.	Integrated approach, geography as a unit within Social sciences, one book for the entire Social sciences  Focus: awareness about pollutions, conservation of resources and sustainable development  project and activities	<i>India: Land and the People</i> location, physiography, climate, drainage, natural vegetation, wildlife and population <i>Resources and their Development</i> types, natural and human; land, forest and wildlife, agriculture, water, mineral, power, industries, transport & trade	Focus: disaster education, pollution study and conservation and judicious usage of resources  project and activities

School stages	1986–2000		2000–2006		2006 onwards	
	Content	Remarks	Content	Remarks	Content	Remarks
<i>Public examination</i>	Compulsory unit within Social Science Paper	35 of 100 marks	Compulsory unit within Social Science Paper	35 of 100 marks	Compulsory unit within Social Science Paper	35 of 100 marks
<i>Higher secondary stage</i> (Classes XI–XII)	<i>Physical geography:</i> lithosphere, atmosphere, biosphere and human and economic geography  <i>India: General geography,</i> its resources and regional development  <i>Field-work and laboratory techniques in geography</i>	Disciplinary approach 4+1 books	<i>Fundamentals of Physical Geography and Practical work</i>  <i>India: Physical Environment and Practical work</i>  <i>Fundamentals of Human geography and Practical work</i>  <i>India: People and Economy and Practical work</i>	Disciplinary approach, 4+2 books,  Emerging concerns: global warming, green house effect, natural hazards and disasters: causes and consequences, use of computers in mapping & data processing, Spatial Information Technology or GIS and Field-survey	<i>Fundamentals of Physical Geography and Practical work</i>  <i>India: Physical Environment and Practical work</i>  <i>Fundamentals of Human geography and related Practical work</i>  <i>India: People and Economy and related Practical work</i>	Disciplinary approach, 4+2 books,  Emerging concerns: global warming, green house effect, natural hazards and disasters: causes and consequences, use of computers in mapping & data processing, Spatial Information Technology or GIS and Field-survey
<i>Public examination</i>	Elective or optional subject	200 marks	Elective or optional subject	200 marks	Elective or optional subject	200 marks

Table 1: A comparative and temporal overview of the content of school geography in India (National Geography Curriculum)

The lack of clarity about the concepts of geography was partially responsible for a certain degree of unpopularity of geography among the pupils.

In the higher secondary stage, teachers are post-graduates. Besides the M.A. (or Ph.D.) degrees in the subject, they have to qualify in Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) or Masters of Education (M. Ed.) examinations before getting jobs as teachers. But these courses are not offered in the subject departments. Neither is there Geography Didactic as an item in the Bachelor or the Master Courses in Geography. The same is true for other subjects as well.

As a result, not only dialogues or links between a school teacher and a university faculty are quite rare, but some practical problems or experiences in class room situations remain outside the focus of research in the subject. In national level annual conferences, organised by the National Association of Geographers of India (NAGI), there are very few research papers in the *School Geography Forum*. There is an association of Geography school teachers. They sometimes organise national level geography quiz contests. But of date there is no journal of geography didactics or school geography as such, which can promote discussion on geography education at school level or can be a platform for school geography teachers. The only national level discussion platform, if any, is provided by NCERT during its exercises on the revision of the national curriculum, syllabuses or textbook preparation.

The National Curriculum of 2000 invoked a lot of debate for various reasons and remained as headlines for a long time in all national dailies as well as in international press. People from all walks of life talked about it from various view points, debated, argued, quarrelled. The academics as well non academics along with media of all kinds discussed, debated, protested on rewriting of history, *saffronisation*(!)<sup>8</sup> of education and so on, except for the geography community.

There was not a single article or letter or comment in the media or otherwise on the changed syllabus from the geographers. No comments, be it appreciation or rebuke. There could have been an effective discussion forum on the changed school geography syllabuses, but here was none.<sup>9</sup> A solid and inexplicable basaltic silence prevailed all through the national debate on re-writing history or the integration of social science or no integration achieved whatsoever. This attitude perhaps answers the frustrations of some geographers who complained in articles on the low status of geography/geographers in Social science teaching in India. Or this passivity can explain, at least partly, the *step mom attitude* of the social science research institutes towards geography and geographers in India.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Sages and monks in Hindu religion wear saffron colour robes as a mark of sacrifice. The Left opposition used the expression '*saffronisation*' in their ideological/political confrontation with the Bharatiya Janata Party led Government to accuse Hindutva (Hindu Nationalism) input in education.

9 Later changes were brought in the geography syllabuses at the university level as an aftermath of the revision of the school geography syllabus.

10 A. Kapur: *Voice of Concern*. New Delhi: Concept 2002.

## Geography, gender and jobs

In the early years of geography, departments were started in many cases by geologists and were dominated by men. But eventually, geography became quite popular among women in India. The percentage of women students in most of the colleges and university departments surpass that of their male colleagues by several leaps. Behind this popularity, societal priorities and choices play a crucial role.

In the 1970s, women surpassed their male colleagues in numbers. One of the reasons being, a teacher's job was not difficult to find, if one passed with geography. Geography being one of the major school subjects, there were opportunities in schools and in university departments. For practical reasons, this job was preferred by women as well as their family for two reasons: first, the long vacations, which are useful to manage domestic chores as well as back-logs and secondly, a respectable source of second income to run the family chariot smoothly, though the salary was not very commendable as the primary source of income.

But for men, teaching geography had a tough competition with engineering, medicine, business management, banking, law or economics. For those who nonetheless studied geography, the Survey of India, the National Planning Commission or comparable institutes or research organisations<sup>11</sup> were the targets. These institutes and organisations have indirectly assisted the promotion of geography and geographers. Another sphere for geographers was to get jobs as cartographers or in tourism. But now, with better pay scales, even for teachers, men are getting attracted to study geography. With the revolution in the Information Technology (IT sector) in post-1990s India, geographers have openings in fields related to Remote Sensing and Geographic Information System (GIS). These additional scopes for jobs attracted young men towards geography, making the ratio somewhat better. But still now, women dominate the geographic space! This situation has its obvious impact on school geography, especially in the enrolment pattern in the higher secondary stage. In classrooms, though girls still are the majority, more boys are opting for geography as one of the elective subjects.

## Conclusions

School geography in India started within a colonial framework with disciplinary approach. Its content had huge input from physical and regional geography like elsewhere, especially in Europe. After the independence of the country, priorities were re-defined and education underwent changes in different time phases.

But the approach of the 21 century marked some perceptible changes in Indian education, both in the school and the universities. One of these changes in school education was the integrated approach in Social Sciences till the secondary stage. The ideas behind had been, all pupils, when they leave schools, should have some knowledge about geography, history and the functioning of the government of the country they belong to. Keeping the grass root level situation in view, where at

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11 E.g. National Atlas and Thematic Mapping Organisation, Census of India, Central Arid Zone Research Institute, National Remote Sensing Agency, various urban and metropolitan development authorities like Delhi Development Authority (DDA), Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA), etc.

times, there is only one teacher to teach all social science subjects, the syllabus was designed in consultation with experts from all the areas, in workshop mode. Care was taken so that it can be taught by a teacher without much problem of incomprehension. Thematic integration was tried, in which geography was treated as a theme of study within the social science syllabus.

The revision which followed the 2000 National Curriculum in 2006, kept geography as an integral component of social science. According to the new curriculum, "Geography will be introduced [in upper primary stage] to promote the understanding of interdependence of various regions and countries. The child will be introduced to the contemporary issues such as economic resources, gender, marginalised groups, environment and the on-going process of globalisation".<sup>12</sup>

The major themes and most of the content remained the same as that of 2000 with a few additional case studies. The new syllabus aimed also towards the reduction of the curriculum load and the load of the school bags. But it will take some years to understand the effect of the changes in the curriculum on the teaching and learning community. It can only be hoped that geography will be a better understood and interesting school subject in the years to come.

## Zusammenfassung

Nach ersten Anläufen im neunzehnten Jahrhundert wurde Geographie als Schulfach in Indien von den Briten zu Beginn des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts eingeführt. Nach der Unabhängigkeit wurden die Prioritäten des Erziehungswesens neu definiert. In diesem Rahmen wurde auch das Geographiecurriculum mehrfach verändert. Die Autorin zeichnet in diesem Beitrag die Entwicklung nach und geht auf die Stellung von Geographie in Schule und Gesellschaft ein.

## Résumé

Après une première amorce au XIXe siècle, la géographie a été introduite en Inde comme matière scolaire par les Anglais au début du XXe siècle. Après l'indépendance du pays, les priorités de l'éducation ont été redéfinies, et le programme d'enseignement de la géographie a connu dans ce contexte plusieurs remaniements. L'auteur en retrace ici l'évolution et montre la place qu'occupe la géographie à l'école et dans la société.

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<sup>12</sup> National Curriculum Framework-2005, Higher Secondary Stage, New Delhi: NCERT 2005, p. 12.