

How and Why did Geography in Himachal Pradesh grow to be a Subject that is largely Neglected?

Dr. Ramesh Chand

Associate Professor in Geography

Rabindranath Tagore Govt. Degree College, Sarkaghat, Distt. Mandi (H.P.) 175024

Email - dhalariarc@gmail.com

Abstract: *Geography is one of the most prized and essential subject in everyone's life. In the last three decades, it has gone through many phases and the syllabus changed three times to date in Himachal Pradesh. Earlier geography was one of the essential subjects in every college, but in the last decade, it has lost its eminence and now it has been kept in a non-essential category and finds no place in the list of subjects introduced for newly opened colleges. Despite the introduction of many advanced branches like Remote Sensing, G.I.S. and Computer Cartography in the syllabus. but, one of the important aspects of the study of Geography like - the detailed study of maps and field surveys have been thoroughly neglected.*

This paper makes an inquiry into the neglected aspect of geography in the undergraduate colleges of Himachal Pradesh despite advancements in its subject matter at the national or global level over the last four decades.

Key Words: *Domains, Prized, Remote Sensing, G.I.S., Computer Cartography.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Geography is the only branch of knowledge in which we study various aspects of the mother earth like- its land features, the inhabitants and the various phenomenon that occurs on its surface. For the description of the earth, a single word 'geography' was used first time by the *Eratosthenes* and its literary meaning was 'writing about the earth'. But now geography is considered much more than writing about the earth and has become a very extensive and attractive branch of knowledge. "It reveals all the wonderful changes and activities that have been going on in the world since the beginning of time. Geography draws from across the physical, cultural, economic & political spheres to the local and the global" (Harichandan et.al., 2012). Therefore, it is known as the science of synthesis, which integrates Physical Sciences on the one hand and Social Sciences on the other. Owing to this fact, geography is known as the mother of all the sciences.

"Nowadays geography is considered a composite source of Human Society" (Narule, 2019). It is one of the most prized and essential subject in everyone's life. It is one of the core subject for the competitive point of view for every aspirant. "Through geography, we learn to appreciate the diversity of landscapes, peoples & cultures; geography is, therefore, become a vital subject resource for 21st century global citizens, enabling us to face questions of what it means to sustainably in an interdependent world" (Harichandan et.al, (2012).

During the second half of the 20th century, many changes took place in its subject matter. "The geographical thinking took a critical turn after the Second World War when geographers started exploring 'spatial science' both quantitatively and qualitatively. During the 1950s and 1960s, the quantitative revolution in geography placed an inordinate emphasis on quantification and empiricist methodology associated with positivistic approaches which the behavioural and humanistic geographers found unacceptable due to its assumption of value free science inherent in quantification" (Moinuddin, 2021). Besides this, the study of Aerial Photographs and the most advanced field like Remote Sensing were introduced into the domains of geography. However, the environmental studies in which man-environmental relations were the core aspect of the subject matter of geography were fully ignored by the geographers and consequently, the flag of environmental studies was taken away and raised by the biological sciences. During the

1970s and 1980s, Computer-aided techniques were introduced in geography and Thematic cartography took a new dimension. After the 1990s with the introduction of GIS, the domains of geography completely changed. Now geography has been considered one of the most scientifically sound subject of knowledge in the domains of earth's sciences.

2. MAJOR QUESTIONS OF INQUIRY:

Geography is one of the most significant and lively subject that has not been given due importance as it should have been deserved in a state like Himachal Pradesh. This paper attempts to underline the various aspects of the neglected attitude of geography in the undergraduate classes in the degree colleges of Himachal Pradesh in the last four decades. In this paper an attempt has been made to answer the following questions of inquiry:

- What are the main reasons why geography couldn't become the most important subject in undergraduate classes in Degree Colleges of Himachal Pradesh during the last three decades?
- Why does geography lose its eminence as one of the most essential subject during the period of study?
- Whether geography loses its importance due to making irrelevant changes in the syllabus over time?
- Are we producing geographically incompetent rather than geographically sound or perfect students?

3. GEOGRAPHY AS A CORE SUBJECT OF TEACHING UP TO THE 1990S:

Up to the 1990s, geography was one of the core subject in every degree college in Himachal Pradesh. The syllabus of geography taught in undergraduate classes was framed with very logical thinking. In the Arts stream, the students who opted for geography were offered very interesting theory papers like Physical Geography in 1st year, Economic Geography of the World in 2nd year and Geography of India in 3rd year with one compulsory question on map filling in 2nd and 3rd-year students. In a practical part, basic principles of Map Reading, Scales, Representation of Relief features by Contours, the study of Topographical maps/sheets along with Chain and Tape Survey for field study was taught to the students of 1st year. For 2nd year students the interpretation of Weather charts, Representation of Socio-Economic and Climatic data by different diagrams and graphs, preparation of Distributional charts/maps and Plane Table Survey was taught. Detailed study of Map Projections along with conducting Field Survey by Prismatic Compass was introduced to the students of 3rd year. To make the sanctity of the practicals, question papers were even set up by the university and students were assessed by external as well as internal examiners.

The very motive of teaching these geography papers to undergraduate students was to make them familiar with the basic principles of how the earth is originated and various physical forces acting and affecting the landscape of the earth; in-depth knowledge of economic and human activities performed by humans in different parts of the world, and finally a systematic study of Geography of India makes the students a perfect geographically sound citizens. Care was also taken to impart the basic skills of map making and field surveying practically to the students.

4. GEOGRAPHY STARTS LOSING CREDIBILITY DURING THE 2000S:

During the 2000s, geography remained one of the essential subject, however, some modifications were made to its existing syllabus. Now each theory paper that was taught earlier had been bifurcated and divided into two separate papers, but one of the most interesting part is that the compulsory question of map filling was removed. The decision of removing the compulsory question of map filling has put geography in such a situation that the students are now passing the course without having the basic knowledge of maps. Moreover, practical papers were kept unchanged, but the surveying part was abolished. Another interesting thing observed during this period was that the university has stopped setting up practical papers for all the subjects having practicals. Now students were assessed by external as well as internal examiners by setting up question papers for practicals in the concerned laboratories. The decision of the university to do away with providing the question papers for practical examinations had lost the credibility of the practicals in general and the subject in particular.

5. CRITICAL PHASE OF CREDIBILITY ISSUE IN GEOGRAPHY TEACHING DURING THE 2010S:

During the 2010s, geography has now started to lose its credibility and the government put it into the non-essential category. Earlier when any new government college was opened in any part of the state, all the subjects were introduced and requisite numbers of posts were also sanctioned or created. But now, new norms were framed by the government and if any new college was opened, it was started with just seven subjects in the Arts faculty, and geography couldn't find its place in these seven subjects.

6. Introduction of CBCS Under RUSA:

Himachal Pradesh became the first state in the country which introduced CBCS under RUSA and adopted a Semester system over the Annual system during the session 2013-14. Under this system, the syllabus of geography was completely overhauled and many new branches were introduced. However, the syllabus was framed with the motive to offer much-needed and relevant fields to the students to attain specializations, but there were no clear-cut guidelines from the UGC regarding the syllabus to be framed and taught to the undergraduate classes under this newly introduced system. Due to this ambiguity, the UGC has framed a model curriculum for all subjects in the year 2017, so that a similar syllabus was to be taught throughout the country. Himachal Pradesh University has also adopted this curriculum and the entire syllabus was once again changed. One of the major drawback of this newly introduced syllabus was that it's not proper, systematic and homogeneous. The topics were just chosen on a pick-and-choose basis without any cohesion or link in them both for theory as well as practical. By studying this syllabus, students are not able to understand many topics and, therefore, they are being imparted with incomplete knowledge of the subject. Again, the surveying part was ignored and Remote Sensing and GIS papers were introduced for practical purposes. Moreover, no computer labs for geography were set up for the analysis of Remote Sensing and GIS data. For the sake of the surveying part, only field study was incorporated in the syllabus of the third year. Maps are the basic tool of geographers, but once again these have been completely ignored. In 2018, the Himachal Pradesh govt. has again switched over to the annual system and the university clubbed the syllabus of odd and even semesters and make them different papers for the annual system only.

One of the most important problem everyone faces is that maximum colleges in the state are running with a single faculty and the teachers have to teach and handle all the pressure of the students of all the classes. But neither of the state governments, whether it is the Congress or the BJP, have paid any heed to creating the second post in the single faculty running colleges to date. Presently, in Himachal Pradesh, geography subject is taught only in the 61 government colleges, out of the total 137 government colleges, which account for about 45 per cent of the state. However, the situation is very grim in the case of government schools in Himachal Pradesh where geography is taught only in 13-14 per cent of schools.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The decision of the government to place geography in a non-essential category is a great setback to all the stakeholders in the state of Himachal Pradesh. The sheer neglect of such an important subject in this state is not logical, because geography is a very essential subject from a competitive point of view for every aspirant. Moreover, the syllabus of geography which is being taught presently is not up to the mark and the neglected aspect of maps and surveying part is not good for future generations. Therefore, we are just producing geographically incompetent rather than geographically sound or perfect students by teaching such an unrealistic, unmatched and undesired syllabus. Now a ray of hope is seen with the implementation of National Education Policy 2020 in which a new syllabus of geography will replace the existing one.

The decision of keeping such an important subject in a non-essential category is need to be revisited at the government level at the earliest for the very survival of geography. In this regard, the *Geographical Society of Himachal Pradesh* is persuading very hard for making geography one of the essential subject in every college and even in the schools, by taking up the issue with political leaders and government functionaries at different levels.

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