

Uprooting Geographic Thoughts in India

Uprooting Geographic Thoughts in India:
Toward Ecology and Culture in 21st Century

By

Rana P. B. Singh,

with three essays by
Oskar Spate, David Sopher, and A.B. Mukerji

Foreword by David Simon

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P U B L I S H I N G

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and Oskar Spate, David Sopher, and A.B. Mukerji for their respective essays

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VIEWS ON THE BOOK

"This book presents a compassionate and rational critique of the 'Roots of Indian Geography', and opens new ground for the younger generation and those interested in the understanding of the stories of the evolution and practices of geography in India, narrating both the sides, 'insider' and 'outsider'. ... This is possibly the first attempt in the history of Indian geographical thought to explain and expose ancient thought linked to the present, and presenting a balanced critique of the achievements and weaknesses of each historical phase."

—*Prof. David Simon* (from the foreword)
Royal Holloway, University of London, U.K.

"There come times in the evolution of all institutions when critical assessments of past and present achievements need to be made, with a careful and caring eye on future developments. Imbued with a long and honourable institutional identity, the study of geography in India is fortunate to have in this volume just such an assessment at a crucial time in the history not just of the interdiscipline of Geography in India, nor even of the wider academic matrix within which so much valuable geographical work has been accomplished in India, but of the intellectual traditions of India as a whole. In matters academic as in so many other realms of human endeavour, the twenty-first century is India's time on the global stage, and we can expect to see still more of India's scholars and Indian scholarship, geographers and geography among them, stage front and centre. This volume helps to explain how and why."

—*Prof. Jamie S. Scott*
Institute of Advanced Study for Humanity,
University of Newcastle, Australia

"This is a national geography with a difference. Much more than a history of geography in India or a description of the work of Indian geographers, it is an insightful account and interpretation of the Indian geographical imagination as this is informed by the Hindu tradition. Singh's innovative work will be of great interest to cultural geographers, ecologists, and other scholars concerned with our human use of the earth."

— *Prof. William Norton*
Dept. of Environment and Geography,
University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada

"On the line of growing critiques to post-colonialism and post-traditionalism, this book is a pioneering attempt in interdisciplinary manner appraising the 'Roots of Indian Geography'. If geography is a way that interlinks 'locality' to 'universality', this book will serve as milestone for the contemporary generation of social

sciences that embedded with issues of ethics and moral turn in philosophy and practice, i.e. crossing the borders.”

—*Prof. Fukunaga Masaaki*
Director, Centre of South Asian Studies,
Gifu's Women University, Japan

“It was unfortunate that in spite of rich and long philosophical and textual traditions of thought, in Indian geography there was no attempt to produce a book-length study in search of its roots and comparison with the contemporary Western thoughts. This book has successfully filled in this gap by rationally linking ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ viewpoints and also projecting the vision of ‘moral turn’ in geography. This book is a wonderful blending of philosophy and history where geography serves as bridge.”

—*Prof. Gerhard Gustafsson*
Department of Geography and Tourism,
Karlstad University, Sweden

“Working together with the author since over last fifteen years, I realised the comprehensiveness and interrelatedness of geography in Indian classical thoughts that have now taken as a way for ‘new vision’ in the era of New Age. This book is a welcome addition in ‘global understanding’ through the great message of Indian geography for peace and harmonious relationship between mankind and nature.”

—*Prof. John McKim Malville*
Emeritus Professor of Planetary Sciences,
University of Colorado at Boulder, U.S.A.

“On the line of the IGU’s current focus on ‘Bridging Diversity in a Globalizing World’, this research monograph could indeed serve as a beacon for other Asian countries to follow and present a cross-cultural perspective, which is one of the most important aims of the International Geographical Union and its permanent archive at the Home of Geography in Rome. I hope that the message of this book will encourage the young geographers in making their path for creating better world.”

—*Prof. Giuliano Bellezza*
Vice-President: IGU, & Director
Home of Geography, Rome, Italy

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Series editor:

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1. ***Uprooting Geographic Thoughts in India: Toward Ecology and Culture in 21st century.***

Rana P.B. Singh.

2. ***Geographical Thoughts in India: Snapshots and Vision for the 21st Century.***

Rana P.B. Singh.

Dedicated to

my mentor

Prof. R. L. Singh (1917-2001),
the doyen and a craftsman of Indian Geography;

and

my inspirer

Prof. Arne (Dekke Eide) Naess (1912-2009),
the man *par excellence* and founder of ‘Deep Ecology’

from the both, Indian Geography has yet to learn more...

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FOREWORD

I first met Prof. Rana Singh in the International Conference of Development Geography on '*Rethinking Development*' held at Sida-Sando, Sweden in June 1997, which I organised together with our mutual friend and colleague, the late Anders Närman of Gothenburg University. We have subsequently exchanged ideas on a regular basis during our mutual efforts to advance critical appraisal in geographical and development thinking. In parallel ways, we are also exploring how to integrate the 'local' meaningfully into multiscalar analyses and envisionings of contemporary and progressive 'universalities'. Prof Singh's chapter in the book (Simon and Närman 1999) resulting from the 1997 conference is widely cited as a clarion call for the (re)integration of religious and spiritual dimensions into development thinking. More recently, he contributed a short essay on Mahatma Gandhi to my edited volume, *Fifty Key Thinkers on Development* (2006). During the intervening period he further examined the common ground in the 'Nature and identity in Cross-Cultural Perspective', and published the Indian perspective in the GeoJournal Library volume 48 (1999). The initial messages of those papers are now elaborated, expanded and re-assessed in the form the core for the present book. I congratulate Rana Singh this important milestone for himself and for Indian Geography and social science more generally.

It is commonly accepted that religion distinguishes the human species from all others, just as the human presence on the earth distinguishes the ecology of our planet from other known places in the cosmos. Harking back to its ancient roots, Hindu tradition (misconceived as 'Hinduism' in the west) refers to a way of life where humanity and divinity meet in a harmonious way. After defining experiences and revelations, the great sages and saints of India have written hymns, prayers and dialogues – altogether crystallised and systematically arranged in the holy books like the *Vedas* and their interpretive treatises of *Upanishads*, produced between the 15th century BCE and 6th century CE. The basic essence of humanism and the closeness to nature embodied in these texts and traditions have been maintained and passed on to the following generations despite the rise and fall of successive cultures and polities. The resultant mosaic of cultures forms the essence of present-day postcolonial Indianness.

Indian social scientists and especially historians have consistently sought to analyse the synthetic frame of India's identity and distinctiveness. It is good to see that those concerns are profusely and vividly illustrated in this timely monograph.

The origins of the discipline of geography in India can be traced to 1920, since when it has experienced at least seven phases of growth and development, as narrated in the present book. Over much of this period, in common with other former European colonial introductions in India and elsewhere, its concerns have mainly emulated Western approaches, methodologies and fashions. Even today, over half a century since Indian independence, few Indian geographers are seriously engaged in explaining the intricacies of the country's landscapes, cultures and spirits of places. This book should serve to inspire them and social scientists living abroad but studying Indian themes. Future innovation requires good cross-cultural and interdisciplinary collaboration between eastern and western researchers and traditions, as eloquently argued in one of the essays in this book.

This book presents a compassionate and rational critique of the 'Roots of Indian Geography', and opens new ground for the younger generation and those interested in the understanding of the stories of the evolution and practices of geography in India, narrating both the sides, 'insider' and 'outsider'. Prof. Rana P.B. Singh, a dynamic personality in India's geographers' community, has devoted four decades to furthering his geographical vision and practices. This is possibly the first attempt in the history of Indian geographical thought to explain and expose ancient thought linked to the present, and presenting a balanced critique of the achievements and weaknesses of each historical phase. I hope that the message of this book will encourage young geographers to take up the challenge to surpass even Prof Singh's achievements in seeking meaningful integration of local appropriateness and deliberate cosmopolitanism.

David Simon

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London: 11 March 2009, the Hindu festival of colour.

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PREFACE

MUSINGS ON THE PATH OF INDIAN GEOGRAPHY

Generally, the image of geography is derived from the school-level training what one received. It is this background that promoted the image of the subject as 'catalogue book', however the subject has marched a long way and now being part of life considered as a 'way' of understanding in a variety of ways, means and projections, ranging from locality to universality. That is why geography means not the same to all those practice, perceive, project or even profess it. This openness has also helped to put into confusion, but this is not the problem of the subject itself. In fact, this is the issue of context and interpretation. In her recent provoking, IGU former president Anne Buttner (2009: ix) has rightly remarked that, "India, home to one of the world's most ancient civilizations, has a rich intellectual tradition. In this geographically diverse subcontinent of Eurasia, discourses on nature and humanity from the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* led to the development of various indigenous knowledge systems. Geography thus became part and parcel of human personality and everyday life as well as retaining a central role in Indian intellectual traditions. While these historical texts were regarded as merely scriptures by common people, their richness and variety has recently evoked analytical and critical attention by scholars eager to uncover the roots of Indian geographical knowledge". By understanding, awakening oneself and practicing in accordance to those insights are the great challenges before intellectual pursuits.

Geography is at once field science, behavioural ways, nature theology, marketing system in intellectual enterprises, and what not. This is already justified by our leaders and luminaries in the past: "Geography is the world discipline". One of the most valuable aspects of geography is that it matters and explains what is going on the world today and how it is linked to the passage of the past. Therefore, it is more relevant today, in the era of cybernetics and automation, to re-think, re-assess and re-evaluate the pitfalls and achievements of the past, and their relevance and their application today, and also their validity in visioning the future. Geography may be

conceived as a perennial source of flowing thought-process that links the past, analyse the present and project the future. Where does the India Geography stand? Meeting people, interacting with societies, understanding place and its spirit, perceiving the aesthetics of nature, grasping the processes of transformation, realising self as impartial part of culture and society, may be cited as some of the consequential attributes of fieldwork experiences that today we're missing in Indian Geography.

Practicing geography in the era of postmodern and postcolonial discourses involves a trilogy of themes, *meaning* (values), *metaphor* (symbols) and *milieu* (backgrounds) — conceived as framework within which the *contents*, *carriers* and *contexts* have to play the role. *Meaning* refers to professional choice and working ideology in making our identity; *Metaphor* connotes cognitive style what received from the cultural past and as to how we carried and passed on to the followers, and *Milieu* reflects upon the individual's settings and formative years that shaped the basement and the background. That is how meaning is the inherent content, metaphor is explicit carrier, and milieu is covering context. On all the above three grounds, there is scope for dialogue, co-sharing and mutual understanding. Their cohesive and integrated frame together unites the understanding and the personality. The 21st century offers new challenges and opportunities for the practice and making of geography, in India too, what the 30th IGU Congress (2004) had its focal theme "One Earth – Many Worlds", and passed on to the forthcoming IGU Regional Congress (2010) at Tel Aviv projecting the focal theme on 'Bridging Diversity in a Globalizing World'.

Of course the notion of 'integration' is simultaneously ambiguous and daunting, but human life is full of such inconsistencies and complexities that make the world diversified— again reflected in a variety of ways through our emotional responses and perceived images. Should we call such narration as the umbrella of geography where the human spirit is musing in the tune of being happy, harmonious and healthy? On the similar line a great historical geographer John Wright (1947) has introduced a term called 'geopiety' that denotes the human sensibility aroused by human awareness of the natural world and geographical space, converging into an emotional bond between man and nature. The sense of 'piety' means reverence and attachment to one's family, surroundings or home and the invisible spirit that protect them. This way 'geopiety' covers a whole range of terrestrial home. Nature supports human ingénues, but at the same time it requires human care (cf. Tuan 1976: 11-12). This message is thoroughly expanded by Norwegian eco-philosopher (late) Arne Naess, who was deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, and provoked for autochthonous bond between human life and a holistic living

Earth and the moral duty of reverential environmental conduct. This is now called ecospirituality (see Chapter 4).

Thinking on the path of ‘understanding our root in the service of humanity and also making a visionary future’, one gets inspiration from the ‘Prithvi Sukta’ of the *Atharva Veda* (12.1.1-69). Indian students and writers should generate ideas from their own natural soil and cultural heritage. This is a submission and appeal to realise and understand the inherent and eternal interrelationship with the earth. This will be a new education that needs a different meditation, another mind and another awakening. This is also a call and proposition in the *United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development* (UNDESD), 2005-2014. The concept of *Prithviputra* (‘Earth-human’) as narrated by a great Hindi laureate V.S. Agrawal (1960: 23), characterised by integrative thought among the diversities. Those who loose the wish to be away from their earthly root will certainly reach to the grip of decay and death. Inspired by the *Atharva Veda* Agrawal (1960: 91) proposed the frame of needful design that has three apexes of the local environment (earth), human environment (habitat) and their resultant culture. This would be a way of linking ‘locality’ (*laukik*) to ‘universality’ (*vaishvika*), and finally ending to ‘cosmologisity’ (*brahm-andiya*). This is an approach from the ‘bottom to up’.

What once Herodotus (c. 484-425 BCE) said that ‘Circumstances rule men; men do not rule circumstances’, needs revision in the 21st century on the line of catastrophic transformations and globalising society. In the postcolonial discourses the need for mutual cohesive interaction and self-realization and awakening to search, re-search and understand the roots are the popularly accepted way of thought process. Let us return to our ‘home’— a place that offers security, familiarity and nurture for our strength, identity and existence. The present book is an attempt in this direction. Hope that my fellow friends find it useful in making their fancy frame for deeper understanding in the service of geography.

For Stoddart (1986: 39) geography is a uniquely European creation: “In method and in concept geography as we know it today is overwhelmingly a European discipline. It emerged as Europe encountered the rest of the world, and indeed itself, with the tools of the new objective science, and all other geographical traditions are necessary derivative and indeed imitative of it”. Should we call dweller-geographers’ writings Indian on the methodological and conceptual scale borrowed from the West? Do the purviews and contents of regional, cultural, historical or contemporary condition of a country like India can be rationally and relationally be explained and exposed through the Western eyes? These basic questions

help to re-think and re-orient ourselves to know our roots, contents, contexts and the vision.

While there can be no denying the utility of the western paradigm for many purposes, the geographic research to which it has so far led in India has been, for the most part, lacking in originality and of limited interest to scholars in disciplines other than geography. There is, however, much scope from Indian cultural traditions. What is now needed is to enrich geographic research in India through a skilful blending, in appropriate cultural contexts, of the rigor of the western scholarly paradigms and greater application of indigenous culturally relevant concepts (Schwartzberg 1998: 253).

During imperialism the process of absorption has progressively resulted into at least four interpretive consequences: (i) the changed mind setup, resulting to accept and project the superiority and ingenuity of the British that constantly flows from its imperial source to colonised destination, (ii) the establishment of political strategy under which the colonised areas are projected as the destiny to be slaves, (iii) the world is run by a globalised vision of colonialism that takes care of the human well being, and (iv) the mirror of intellectual understanding of the West is the only integrated frame in which the East can see its reflections.

British imperialism has also influenced geographical thought and arena (courses, teaching and products) like the literary world. However, the worst part of it is that even passing sixty-two years that has neither changed, nor realised, and not seriously thought over too. The senior and old grandmasters still pontificate their glorious experience and administrative discipline what they inculcated and inculcated as 'certified expertise' from the West. At the other side the young followers of the grand masters, like opium-edict are busy in their job without feeling for professional ethics and communal harmony. However mere criticism to the imperial strategy and their cultural colonisation would not solve any problem, nor give way to the new awakening.

In case of India the quantitative revolution of the West has certainly done some harm — becoming more dependent, value-laden and identical production, also by producing some half-baked geographers who neither tried to understand geographical problems nor quantification, but proudly flaunted their newly acquired skill, without any valid conclusion or generalisation, but they carried the job of torchbearers of a new geography (Dikshit 2006: 132). This revolution was product of the era that rarely have now instinct at their origin centres, but their ideological rubrics still predominate the scenario in Indian Geography, of course presently under the umbrella of GIS, GPS and RS, this umbrella has promoted good market for jobs, and easy and short-cut paths for mass production that fits to our

mind: 'Don't deserve but desire and get it done anyhow'. In fact, we marched far away from the basic philosophy of any discipline, i.e. to understand social realities and serve the cause of the society. Following paraphrased Shakespeare's saying 'there is nothing like right, or nothing like wrong, these are the conditions evolving according to the need of the society in time and responsibilities of the human intellect'.

In early 20th century the teaching of geography in India was started by British-trained geographers who were responsible for superimposing the colonial attitude, ways and concept while completely neglecting the role of processes responsible for the resultant pattern that records a history of continuity, maintenance and existence. Most of the major geographical works have marginally considered the question of 'Indianness' and identity of 'India'. This question has been raised by geographers like Sopher (1973), and Mukerji (1992), however their appeal has not received the required due attention by fellow geographers in India. Somehow there developed a gap in the thought-process, or negligence among the practicing geographers. Impact of Mughal invasions and colonial stressful hegemony by British were some of the obstructive factors in this respect. Those not aware of the richness of the Sanskrit and *Puranic* literature blame that Indian literature has no perspective about spirit of place and creative thought. In fact, the sense of nature-spirit and spirit of place both are thoroughly elucidated in Indian thought. Metaphysical narration of the mother Earth and the motherly river Ganga (*Ganges*) as identity of unitary principle of Indian culture and civilisation is an example of sublime symbolism and ecopsychological context in search and realisation of ecological identity. However, on the road of transformation we diverted or deviated to other too widened paths that reach to dead end! Thanks that now we are searching the alternative ways that may link the roots.

We (so-called senior geographers of the contemporary era) have developed an unique mindset which rarely tolerate critical-rational remarks, or just ignore it on the name of pitifulness, habituated to be happy by listening false glories and praises together making negative stories about others, never doing our own duty ethically or professionally but pontificating others, fond of secret plagiarism, honourably putting the names as senior authors in the researches carried by students and junior colleagues, stupidly manoeuvring the teaching programmes but rarely teaching, feel proud to humiliate other colleagues, avoiding to waste time in library or on the Google search engine, devotedly visit other centres as external examiner that helps to have good monetary return, always ready sincerely to do other subsidiary work replacing teaching and research, without having experiencing of the field studies as armchair authority

explaining everything, tactfully successful to superimpose their rotten and age-old ideas and knowledge that mostly based on gazetteer-approach and duplication, creating terror among juniors by propagating their powers that required for promotion or fresh appointments, always ready to produce and re-produce the members of the same ideology and behaviour and celebrating their expansion by giving treats of non-vegetarian dinner and alcoholic drinks, and... so on! Opening of post-graduate programmes in various colleges based on self-paid system of education is an obnoxious wound on the health of geography. At such places neither faculties, nor facilities, or even most basic requirements like instruments, maps, topo-sheets are not available. Shame to the educational system and our morality that even MPhil and PhD programmes also introduced at these centres, and according to the rate of revenue generated, there developed good networking for the distribution of the money that all involved people share and enjoy. The teachers not having any experience of post-graduate teaching, or even not having any paper published in research journals, are now serving as supervisor for doctoral theses. The old ethics that 'Only Truth Triumphs' (*satyameva jayate*) has been superseded by 'Only Money triumphs' (*Arthameva jayate*).

Good to have a sweet dream that 'Geography matters', but it's neither a destiny, nor societal acceptance. A quarter of century past when Dorren Massey (1984: 11) has remarked that "It is not just that geography, in the sense of space and nature, matters, but that the way in which we conceptualise those terms in the first place is crucial too". Society has right to ask geographers about their responsibility, credibility and accountability for the tasks they carried within a society or culture (!). It is not the issue of ideology, but a dreadful and shameful reality that we are not close to the society the level which is expected. We know the question, now let us answer it rationally, ethically and above all responsively.

In such a terrible and pathetic situation, one may note that to restore the glory, respect and recognition of Indian Geography from its low image a new awakening and Self-realisation can only help to change the situation. At least in this book such spotlights are presented in different ways, contexts and substances — altogether be considered as a diagnosis in the contemporary era of self-realisation on the path of critique to post-modernism and post-traditionalism where "the production of knowledge and its designation and acceptance as legitimate and useful often constitute important sites of struggle" (Henderson and Waterstone 2009: 3). No way the reflections presented in this book, are to be taken as bias or with reference to any group or ethnocentric in a personal way. The emphasis is given on the embeddedness (always-already) but set at margin, mostly by

the imperialistic mindset and lack of devotion to the subject. Let us “begin to contemplate geographic thought more specifically, we are mindful of the social as irreducibly spatial and power-laden and of individuals as irreducibly social” (*ibid.*: 3). Let variety of flowers bloom in different gardens, but there should also be a soothing fragrance. Let geography flourish where the roots are to be searched through the present, but envisioned it into the better future. Let us hope that this publication may help for exploring new visions of alternative ways of thinking, alternate ways of practicing, alternative ways of life-philosophy, and alternative ways of reflecting upon the societal responses. As a part of global community, let’s face this noble journey with courage, hope, and vision.

Of course, most of the people think of the inside first, rather than thinking of the outside, it has been tragic that to inside we have been using lenses of outside. One should always think of physical environment as purview or passage for the cultural environment that matters more than we think. We are what we think and as we think. “With our words, we subconsciously conflate geography and happiness” (Weiner 2008: 16). This book is an attempt to assess and get experience about the ‘good spots’ and making ‘good places’; the inherent sensibility behind geography what Lowenthal (1976: 3) said so eloquently, “The lineament of the world we live in are both seen and shaped in accordance, or by contrast, with images we hold of other worlds — better worlds, past worlds, future worlds. We constantly compare the reality with the fancy. Indeed, without the one we could neither visualise nor conceptualise the other”.

The structure of the book

Under the cultural turn and transformation the new intellectual discourses started in the 21st century to search the roots, have cross-cultural comparison and to see how the old traditions be used in the contemporary worldviews. On this line the present book is the first attempt, consisting of seven essays dealing with roots of Indian geographical thoughts since its beginning in 1920, emphasising identity of India and Indianness and consciousness among dweller geographers in India in search of common grounds for the 21st century, development and status of geography and its trends during the 20th and 21st centuries in various periods, Gaia theory and Indian context in search of cosmic integrity between man and nature, ecospirituality and global message taking organic vision and interrelatedness, Hindu pilgrimages and the holistic frame to understand the oldest tradition of human quest and contemporary importance as illustrated in literature, Mahatma Gandhi and his contribution to sustainable environmental

development taking ethical values and harmonious life as a way for global peace and humanism, and new vision to see meeting grounds of the East and the West on the line of reconstruction and reconciliation in the globalising world. These essays are selective and thematic, therefore overall view of comprehensiveness is lacking. But this book is not the end; obviously it is a beginning as already other volumes in sequence and continuity are in progress. At the end, the lead essays, representative of the three eras, by Spate (1956), Sopher (1973), and Mukerji (1992) are reprinted with new references in support of the statements and with a humble thought to assess the relevance of their challenging message even today, rather more relevant today than the period of their original publication.

Let me close this introduction by the two prayers, representing the two eras but having the spirit of interconnectedness:

‘Uttistha jāgrataprāpya varannibodhata
ksurasya dhāra nisita duratyāya,
durgam pathas tat kavayo vadanti’.

Arise ! Awake ! Try to understand the boon that
you now have in this human form.

The path of spiritual realization is very difficult;
it is sharp like a razor’s edge, difficult to tread
and hard to cross, so say the learned sages.

—The *Kath Upanishad* (1.3.14).

I thought that my voyage had come to its end
at the last limit of my power,
— that the path before me was closed,
that provisions were exhausted and
the time come to take shelter in a silent obscurity.

But I find that thy will knows no end in me.
And when old words die out on the tongue,
new melodies break forth from the heart;
and where the old tracks are lost,
new country is revealed with its wonders.
—Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gitanjali* (1913).

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