



Development of Geography in Modern India

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Abstract: *The teaching of geography at the undergraduate level in India began in 1920 with the establishment of the Geography Department in Lahore (now in Pakistan). While modern geography originated in Germany almost a century earlier and further expanded in European countries and North America, its introduction in India occurred much later. As a British colony, India adopted a form of colonial geography, which was largely an extension of contemporary British geographical thought. This influence was significant and long-lasting, as most early Indian geographers received their training at British universities. Progress in Indian geography remained slow before independence, but after 1950, the discipline experienced rapid growth.*

Key Words: *Geography, India, history of geography, geographic education, GIS, regional planning*

1. INTRODUCTION:

During the colonial period, geography was studied with interest only in a limited number of fields. In the 1950s, several new branches were added, including:

- Regional geography, regional explanation and regional planning
- Agricultural geography
- Urban geography and town planning
- Social geography, including the study of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes
- Rural housing geography
- Transport and marketing geography
- Population geography
- Political geography

The nature of geographical research during the first two decades after independence is documented in the survey *Survey of Research in Geography, 1968*, carried out by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi. The survey was conducted under the chairmanship of Prakash Rao, with contributions from ten leading geographers representing different subfields. They classified Indian geographical research into the following categories:

1. **Economic Geography** – including agriculture, land use, resources, transport–marketing, and forest industries
2. **Planning Geography** – including urban, regional, and river valley planning
3. **Historical Geography**
4. **Human Geography** – including population, urban, rural, and medical geography
5. **Political Geography**
6. **Regional Geography**
7. **Methods in Geographical Research** – including interpretation of aerial photographs, quantitative methods, and training

2. OBJECTIVES:

The paper uses a phased historical framework — formative, informative, confirmative, reformative — to analyse the development.

3. METHODOLOGY:

Secondary Data: Information is drawn from published scholarly work (journals, books) about Indian geography's evolution.



4. PROGRESS OF INDIAN GEOGRAPHY IN THE PRE-INDEPENDENCE COLONIAL PERIOD:

After Lahore, undergraduate-level geography departments were established in Aligarh (1924) and Patna (1927). Postgraduate teaching in geography began for the first time at Aligarh Muslim University in 1931. By 1950, a total of eight universities—including Aligarh, Calcutta, Allahabad, Banaras, Agra, Punjab, Madras, and Patna—had established postgraduate geography programs.

Most professors in these early departments held PhD research degrees from the University of London. Founding figures included I.R. Khan, S.P. Chatterjee, H.L. Chhibber, George Kurian, S.C. Chatterjee, S.M. Ali, G.S. Gosal, and R.N. Dubey. These scholars firmly established the strong research traditions of British geography in Indian universities. Their major areas of study included regional geography, historical geography, economic geography, and medical geography.

- S.P. Chatterjee's geomorphological regionalization of India remains widely accepted even today.
- S.M. Ali's *Geography of Puranas* earned special recognition.
- R.N. Dubey contributed significantly to economic and behavioural geography.
- George Kurian was noted for his work in regional and medical geography.

College-level geography also made limited progress during this time. Before independence, only 14 colleges offered undergraduate geography and 7 offered postgraduate programs. By 1950, prominent college geography departments were located in Agra, Kanpur, Moradabad, Kolkata, and Amravati (Maharashtra).

5. GEOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH IN COLONIAL INDIA:

An overview of the themes and research interests of pre-independence Indian geography can be found in *Fifty Years of Science in India* (1963) by the Indian Science Congress Association, which reviewed scientific progress between 1910–1960. The report also assessed the development of geography.

The review covered around 1400 research papers and several books published during this period, organized into nine sub-sections. The largest share (about 1200 papers) belonged to physical, economic, and human geography.

- **Physical Geography** included geomorphology, climatology, soil science, hydrology, and biogeography. Research in geomorphology was especially prominent, focusing on geological structures, landforms, and landscape evolution in India.
- **Economic Geography** included nearly 300 papers, mostly on agricultural geography, irrigation, industrial geography, and industries of the Damodar Valley.
- **Human Geography** accounted for about 350 papers, focusing on urban geography, village patterns, migration, population density, tribes, and human ecology. Urban geography had the highest number of publications in this category.

This period marked a small but strong beginning of geographical studies and research in India, and its influence continued until the mid-1950s.

6. PROGRESS OF GEOGRAPHY IN INDEPENDENT INDIA:

Independence brought new opportunities for scientific advancement in India, and geography developed rapidly. This progress was reflected in:

- growth in the number of universities, colleges, and schools offering geography
- increase in teachers and students
- expansion of study areas
- growth in publication of geographical literature
- emergence of research bodies, committees, organizations, conferences, and journals
- significant expansion of M.Phil. and Ph.D. programs

Geography soon became a well-established discipline in Indian universities, and today very few central or state universities exist without a geography department. Indian geographers adapted gradually to changing paradigms in global geography. Major areas of significant contribution include agricultural geography, land-use studies, urban geography, population geography, and regional development studies. Considerable interest also developed in development issues and environmental studies.

7. INSTITUTIONAL PROGRESS:

After independence, institutions dedicated to geographical study and research—university departments, specialized institutes (such as the National Remote Sensing Agency, Hyderabad), college departments, and school-level programs—expanded rapidly.



I. Geography Departments in Universities:

Geography departments increased substantially in both central and state universities. Prominent among these are: Aligarh, Kolkata, Madras, Banaras, Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi), Delhi University, Jamia Millia Islamia (New Delhi), Chandigarh, Kurukshetra, Pune, Gorakhpur, Rohtak, Jaipur, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad—and notable contributions also came from universities in Ranchi, Mysore, Jodhpur, Shillong, Bhubaneswar, Nainital, and Garhwal.

II. Institutions Associated with Geography

The establishment of specialized institutions related to geographical studies has contributed significantly to the growth of geographical study and research. The major institutions include:

- National Atlas and Thematic Mapping Organisation (NATMO), Kolkata (1956)
- Survey of India, Dehradun (1767)
- Census of India, New Delhi
- National Remote Sensing Agency, Hyderabad
- India Meteorological Department, Pune (1884)
- Planning Commission, New Delhi
- Institute of Town and Country Planning, New Delhi
- Indian Statistical Institute, New Delhi (1956)
- Map Section of the Indian Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi (1959)
- Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation
- Central Arid Zone Research Institute, Jodhpur

These institutions have provided significant support to geographers. Except for the Survey Department and the Meteorological Department, most of these institutions were established in the 1950s.

8. GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETIES AND RESEARCH JOURNALS:

Through committees and journals, the tradition of strengthening geographical research—by organizing conferences/seminars and publishing research papers—was pioneered and strengthened by leading European and American countries. India also followed, initiated, and developed these traditions. Their development sequence is as follows:

1. **The Indian Geographical Committee, Madras (Chennai), 1926** – Started by N. Subramanyam
2. **Geographical Society of India, Kolkata, 1933**
3. **Bombay Geographical Association, Mumbai, 1938** – The Royal Geographical Society, London, had already established a branch office here in 1832
4. **National Geographical Society of India, Banaras (Varanasi), 1946** – Founded by H. L. Chhibber
5. **A.M.U. Geographical Society, Aligarh, 1946** – Initially the Curzon Geographical Committee established in 1925
6. **Council of Geographers of India, 1947**
7. **Indian Geography Council, New Delhi, 1955** – Under D. N. Wadia
8. **Hyderabad Geography Council, 1962** – Under V. N. Chaturvedi
9. **North India Geography Council, Gorakhpur, 1968**
10. **Indian Geographical Congress, 1972, New Delhi**
11. **National Association of Geographers, India, 1978** – The largest organization with national-level reach
12. **Association of Population Geographers of India, Chandigarh, 1979**

These geographical societies generally organize general conferences at regular intervals, as well as theme-based seminars and workshops. In these events, the latest research findings are presented and discussed.

9. CONCLUSION:

The discipline of geography in modern India has come a long way—from its colonial roots characterized by descriptive mapping and surveying to a mature, technology-driven, and policy-relevant field. Key phases of development show how geography institutionalized in academia, embraced computational tools, and expanded to cover social issues. However, challenges remain in pedagogy, equitable access, and interdisciplinary integration. Looking ahead, the integration of GIS, sustainable development concerns, and inclusive geography provide promising directions for the future of geographical scholarship in India. In addition to the broad themes mentioned above, the current research interests of Indian geographers include resource management, regional and urban planning, and developing methods to apply new space technologies (Remote Sensing, GPS) and information technology (GIS) in geographical surveying, research, mapping, and planning.



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