

## An Overview of Geography Teaching in Secondary Schools of India

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### Abstract

*In India, geography is taught as a compulsory subject in secondary schools (class 6th to class 10th) affiliated to all of its school boards. The subject is considered as a part of social science, yet many differences can be found in the way it is practiced in schools across the school boards. By using literature survey as well as primary data, the paper provides an overview of geography in secondary schools with particular focus on its place in school curriculum, qualifications of teachers of geography, its pedagogy, teaching aids and resources, and its general image. Further, it identifies major challenges of geography in the opinion of teachers of geography, principals of schools and officials of school boards and State Councils of Educational Research and Training (SCERTs), and makes certain recommendations. The paper argues that the variations in the teaching geography in secondary schools of India are essentially due to its vast field and complex nature.*

**Keywords:** Geography Education, School Geography, Geography Curriculum

### Introduction

In India, matters pertaining to education are managed by the central as well as state governments. The Government of India recognizes a number of international, national, state, autonomous or affiliated school boards. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) is the apex body created by the Government of India to assist and advise Central and state governments in academic matters pertaining to school education (starting from primary level up to higher secondary level). The NCERT prepares course curriculum, syllabi, textbooks, and supplemental reading materials for schools from primary to higher secondary level.

Among the traditional school subjects, geography retains its place in the school curricula of all the national and state school boards. At primary level, elementary topics of geography are taught as a part of either environmental studies or social studies in most of these school boards. In contrast, geography is a compulsory subject in all secondary schools affiliated to all the school boards. The subject is taught as a part of social science either in an integrated manner or independently. At the level of

higher secondary school (class 11th to 12th), all the school boards have kept geography as an optional subject but a majority of higher secondary schools deny opportunities to students to opt it as an optional subject.

Geographers and educationists generally agree that the teaching geography is essential and that it should be imparted throughout school education. However, they disagree on issues of what geographical topics should be taught and how should those topics be taught. Hence, there are differences as well as similarities between school boards as regards to the importance attached to geography in schools, place of geography in curriculum, geography syllabus and pedagogy. In view of this, the paper aims to present an overview of issues of geography teaching in secondary schools in India. It also seeks to identify important challenges of geography teaching at school stage.

### Literature review

A plethora of studies has reported on the status of geography in schools in different countries of the world. In India also, several studies have been published on various aspects of school geography covering different states of India. For example, in 1963, G.C.P.I. (cited by NCERT, 1987) made investigation into the level of the students'

understanding of some common terms of geography. This study was designed to measure the cognitive outcomes to teaching geography.

In his study, Sukhwil (1984) compared the teaching of geography in schools of India and United States of America. He identified absence of participation of all stakeholders in the development of school curriculum in India: 'The university professor frame curricula, write textbooks, and conduct refresher courses; and teachers who teach the students only carry out the policies framed by university professors...It is obvious that teachers lose their interest in the educational system and feel themselves outsiders.' Brar (2004) critically evaluated teaching and learning of geography with special reference to its objectives in primary and high schools of Punjab state. The author reached a very gloomy on the state of geography teaching. He found out that a large number of teachers of geography were unaware with the objectives of teaching geography in schools. Inamdar (2014) studied problems in the teaching of geography in the Marathi medium secondary schools of Maharashtra state. She identified limitations of traditional method of teaching geography. She found that most of the students were not able to grasp the basic principles and cannot apply them in their daily life, because teachers make maximum use of lecture method while teaching. Students become passive listeners instead of active learners; often doubts of the students remain unanswered.

### Objectives

This aim of the paper is to provide an overview of geography teaching in the secondary schools across different school boards of India. More specifically, the paper aims to:

- Evaluate the status of geography in secondary schools of India by examining its syllabus, pedagogy, availability of teaching aids and resources and teachers, and
- Identify major challenges of teaching of geography in secondary schools affiliated to different school boards of India.

### Methodology

The paper is mainly based on data collected from school teachers, principals and officials of school boards during the years 2013-14. These schools were affiliated to 21 school boards of India.

Questionnaire-based surveys for collecting primary data for this study were conducted at three levels. This paper makes use of data collected through questionnaire-based survey of officials of State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), State Institutes of Education (SIE) and various school boards to find out teaching-learning process of geography in affiliated schools. The opinion of geography teachers and principals of 170 secondary schools of 21 different school boards were collected with the help of two different sets of questionnaires. Selecting representative samples of geography teachers and headmasters from large number of secondary schools spread all over the country was indeed a challenging task.

### The study area

India is the second most populous and geographically one of the largest countries of the world. The country is incredibly diverse with a distinct flora and fauna, diverse physical and socio-cultural environments. Its physical environment is amazingly diverse with regard to both geological structure and landforms - the Peninsular Plateau and Hills, the Indo-Gangetic plains, the Himalaya and associated mountains, the East and West Coastal plains and numerous islands of the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea. The climate of India is often described as a tropical monsoon type but the country experiences climate ranging from tropical desert to sub-polar type. A great variety of soil, flora and fauna characterize the Indian landscape.

The Indian society is not only ancient but also highly diverse and variegated. There over 780 living languages and 66 scripts in India (Devy, 2017). People of all major religions inhabit India. The Scheduled Tribes constitute 8.5 per cent of its total population of the country. The Indian society is also hierarchically organized along caste lines. Considerable diversity is found in terms of agricultural practices, food habits, dresses, house types and life styles of people. As the largest democracy of the world, the constitution of India provides spaces for every group and community to live with their unique social and cultural distinctiveness. These variety and diversity are, to a large extent, reflected in the education policy of India and its states. The Constitution of India gives right to both union and state governments to develop their



education, including school education. As a result, many similarities and differences can be observed in the way school subjects are taught across India.

### **Importance of Geography in Schools**

Geography for Life (1994) considers geography as an important school subject because of four values – intellectual, utilitarian, ethical and symbolic (National Geographic Standards Project, 1994). All teachers who participated in the survey emphasized the continuing importance of geography as a school subject in India but a very significant proportion of them failed to spell out the usefulness of the subject to individual, society or state. Geography teachers were of the view that by studying geography students:

- Obtain knowledge about the earth and the world.
- Become aware about their surrounding and the world environment.
- Acquire values regarding awareness and concern for the conservation of ecology and environment and resources, sustainable development and concerns for growing population.
- Acquire specific skills, such as map reading and observation.

Most geography teachers felt that students found geography valuable in their day-to-day life. Curiosity of students in geography was intact due to use maps and field observation. Though teachers were able to identify certain values specific to the discipline but those were not very clear.

### **Place of Geography in School Curricula**

Geography is taught either as an independent subject or is taught in some kind of integrated framework. School curricula in the case of geography is still dogged by questions of where the discipline is located, whether in the natural science or in the social sciences ( Bhog, Bharadwaj and Mullick, 2012: 39-61). The place of geography varies considerably across different school boards and across various stages of schooling (from primary to higher secondary). The nature of school geography itself has not been clarified by geographers and curriculum planners. Therefore, its role in schools, even if well recognized, is not clearly defined. In India, there is lack consensus on the place of geography in school curricula. In some school boards, the place of geography is being marginalized by inserting subject

matters of geography into new subjects such as world studies, environmental studies, etc. As there is lack of rigour in integrated social science, the teaching of geography is worst affected. Integrated social science means geography is also taught by teachers who may not have graduate degree in geography but in some other disciplines of social sciences (i.e. history, political science, and economics).

### **Geography Syllabus**

A syllabus is an abstract giving the headings or main objects of a course of teaching, a conspectus or programmed of hours of work (Long and Roberson, 1966: 267). During the survey it was found that the idea of geography syllabus among teachers varied with their education and training. Those who had studied geography as earth science in the university viewed it as earth science, while those trained as social scientists viewed it as social science. It was quite perplexing that most teachers did not articulate the holistic nature of geography. Viewing geography exclusively as a part of either earth science or social science reflects a narrow interpretation of a subject.

Geography syllabus in India draws from all three branches of geography - regional, systematic and practical geography (i.e., tools and techniques). The focus of the geography syllabus not only varies with time but also from one school board to another. Earlier, regional geography dominated school geography curriculum. But there were some problems with teaching-learning of regional geography. Kumar (1996: 246-253) considers that the treatment of the subject is very encyclopedic in form. There is focus on facts and figures about starting from geology and landforms to populations, society, polity and economy of regions.

### **Teaching Method**

The NCF (National Council for Educational Research and Training, 2005: 53-54) states that ‘the teaching of social sciences must adopt methods that promote creativity, aesthetics, and critical perspectives....’ the effectiveness of teaching method profoundly influences pupils’ learning outcome in geography. It has been empirically observed that in the case of poor teaching of geography, pupils of geography would merely cram up materials from their textbooks or from class-room notes, without understanding their meaning and implications (Brar, 2004: 18-19). They remain unaware of elementary

objectives of learning geography and fail to acquire proper and adequate knowledge of the subject and right attitudes and orientations.

An effective teaching geography/social science at secondary school level needs use of multiple teaching methods. But most geography teachers were found applying mostly traditional teaching techniques (lecture and note giving method) with only a few teachers using modern teaching methods (e.g. games and simulations). A particular teaching technique can be more productive to teach certain topics. But most teachers were found randomly using teaching techniques to teach a topic. In other words, they were not logically using specialized teaching technique to teach geography topics.

**Objectives of Teaching Geography**

“The point of view of the geography that is taught in schools today centers in the study of the relationships between man and his environment. The aims for the subject should lead to an understanding and appreciation of how people live and work; how environment affect their lives, ideas, and customs; and how those in one region affect those of another. The study should promote a better understanding among individuals, groups, and nations of the world. The development of skills necessary to sound geographic thinking and needed for an understanding of social data should also play a part in the specific aims of geography.” The object of teaching geography incorporates almost all dimensions of learning – knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, values, etc. The objectives of teaching geography change with time and vary across school boards. The survey points out that the geography syllabus mostly focused on the theoretical understanding of the earth as a human habitat. The focus was on knowledge acquisition, both conceptual and factual. Emphasis was also placed in the syllabus on the application of geographical knowledge and skills in day-to-day life. School boards of Odisha and Assam emphasized more on skill development while awareness component is emphasized in the school curricula of Rajasthan. There was greater focus on value component in syllabus of Assam.

**Use of Teaching Resources and Aids**

“Geography teachers should try to convey how notions of space and time have changed as a function

of technology. From the first irrigation systems to the internet the human race has reinvented the world.

**Table 1: Extent of Association of Teaching Resources with Teaching of Geography**

<b>Teaching aids and resources identified</b>	<b>Names of teaching aids and resources</b>
<b>Exclusively with geography Atlas,</b>	Globes, Maps, Satellite imageries, GIS
<b>Mainly with geography Globes,</b>	Atlas, Maps, Satellite Imageries, GIS, photographs,
<b>Exclusively with subject other than geography</b>	Diagrams, graphs,
<b>Not specifically identified with any subject but used by almost subjects including geography</b>	Newspapers, photographs, posters, textbooks, computers, internet

As indicated in Table 1, their responses were on expected lines. They identified atlas, globe, maps, satellite imagery and GIS either exclusively with geography or mainly with geography discipline. All the school boards identified atlas either exclusively with geography (7 school boards) or mainly with geography (3 school boards). Nine out of ten school boards identified globes either exclusively with geography (5 school boards) or mainly with geography (4 school boards). Similarly, six out of ten school boards identified maps and satellite imageries either exclusively with geography (3 school boards each) or mainly with geography (3 school boards each). On the other hand, modern tool such as GIS was identified either exclusively with geography (3 school boards) or mainly with geography (2 school boards). Thus, teaching tools like atlases, maps and globes were found to be most closely associated with of geography.

**Teaching Handbooks**

Several institutes and organizations in India, such as NCERT, SCERTs and research departments of school boards and non-governmental organization have developed teaching modules for geography teachers. Their teaching modules pertain to both content and method component of school geography.



The teaching modules help in improving the quality of teaching-learning process. It was found in the study that most school boards do not develop geography specific teaching modules. Geography is covered in modules developed for social sciences or environmental sciences. The focus of module pertains to content of subject as well as method of study. Geography-specific teaching modules had been developed only in Tamil Nadu.

Field Teaching Geography is defined as a field discipline and field is central to teaching and learning in the discipline. 'The field is any place where supervised learning can take place via first-hand experience, outside the constraints of the four-walls classroom setting' (Lonergan and Andresen, 1988: 64). However, the importance of field is yet to be fully realized as a teaching-learning technique. It was found in the survey that a large number of schools did not organize field trips. Most of the schools which organized field trips did not take it sincerely. From the point of view of organizing field trip, schools' management considered geography as an important subject but did not enjoy exclusive right to organize the field trip. In most schools, field trip was not associated with teacher of any particular subject. Only in few schools, geography teachers were assigned the responsibility to organize field trips. Field trips were mostly organized to visit local sites for one to two days. Natural wildernesses as well as man-made features were preferred sites of field trips.

### Challenges of Geography Teaching

School geography faces many challenges pertaining to curriculum, pedagogy and resources. The study has identified the following problems and challenges in the teaching-learning of geography in secondary schools of various school boards.

- In school curricula of many states, geography is merged into a more general social science.
- Geography textbooks in schools mostly focus on the subject matter that is taught and students do not receive knowledge about how the discipline of geography has evolved and changing.
- There is no agreement amongst the teachers of geography as to what the discipline actually is or even what it should be.

- Geographers and geography educators who are involved in geographical research in institutions of higher education have little input towards development of curriculum and writing of textbooks.
- Differences in perceptions of geography among school teachers and principals and professional idea about the discipline came out very sharply during the survey.
- Since most teachers of geography were non-geography graduate, they did not have any stake in the discipline of geography, and did not have much liking for discipline.
- Most teachers of geography have very little opportunity to improve their knowledge of how to teach the subject, and as a result, the quality of geography teaching and learning suffers.
- The teaching of world geography is undermined in syllabus of some school boards.
- Field-based teaching is a highly neglected component of school geography. In most schools, field visits are hardly organized for geography students. Geography teachers are also poorly trained to undertake field-based teaching of geography. As a result, school children fail to develop taste for geography.
- The quality of assessment in secondary schools is generally weak in many school boards.
- School boards of some states had specific problems regarding school geography: lack of qualified geography teachers and lack of in-service training programmes (Odisha); teachers' inability to teach geography and lack of teaching and learning materials (Nagaland). Textbook of geography published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (New Delhi) are written by a number of content writers and therefore harmonization among chapters is lacking. There is less focus on teaching of world geography in NCERT geography textbooks.

### Conclusion

Summarizing, geography is taught as a social science subject in schools of India. Most teachers teaching geography were not qualified to teach the

subject. The teaching resources and aids were lacking in most schools. In recent time, though, emphasis is placed on the learning of geographical concepts and skills; geography syllabus in most of the school boards still contains lots of facts and information. Geography textbooks were not student's friendly and there is no serious attempt to produce subject specific teaching manuals for geography teachers. Even though geography is widely considered as a field science, field teaching is grossly ignored. School geography has poor image in society and academia.

The main objective of geography teaching should not be merely to accumulate facts and information. Instead, it should help in developing an attitude of mind and a mode of thought characteristic of the subject. Appointment of qualified teachers to teach geography would improve the profile of the subject in schools. Teacher quality training and regular orientation courses of geography teachers are very much needed. Qualified teachers would help in advancing the interests of geography in an increasingly competitive and congested curriculum. Production of quality textbooks of geography would help the students and teachers alike. Finally, the training of geography teachers in skills of field-based teaching should be made mandatory, and geography classrooms should be equipped with teaching facilities, resources and aids including information communication technologies (ICT)

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