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A Critical Appraisal of the Micro Practices of Everyday Life by Geographers : Now and Then

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Abstract : *On identifying the discipline of geography as an emotionally barren terrain, new interest grew in describing the topographies of everyday life evident through the writings on people and places, through the presence of emotions in the interpretations and understandings of the world: specially in the discourses of the developed countries. An attempt has been made here to demonstrate a new area of research in our country exhibiting the spatiality and temporality of emotions: accounting thus for an ecology of emotion, memory, self and landscape by focussing on particular sites- the sites being the academic departments in general and the department of geography in particular. The spatiality and temporality of emotions can be applied in many contemporary issues of geographical concern. The approach used here to examine the effects of micro practices of everyday life is inspired by the work of Joanne Sharp (2008) who focussed on the ethical issues at work place.*

Key Words : *emotional geographies, micro practices, 'created space', 'activity space'.*

Conceptual Background

Academically and traditionally Geography is an unemotional discipline, described as an emotionally barren terrain by Davidson, Smith and Bondi (ed 2007). However, there is a recent rise in interest in emotional geographies (Sharp 2008) and concepts, drawing upon inspiration from geographies of identities and social relations, concepts of social space, the inclusive and exclusive, daily survival strategies enacted, etc. The interest in emotion may be a reflection of changes in contemporary society where neoliberal notions of the internalized individual have made emotion a commodity to be used. Emotions are contextual, embodied and socially constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed in fluid, plural and emergent processes. Emotions are relational across relational spaces (Askins, 2009).

Geography is the science of place and space. Humanism in geography emphasizes the study of meanings, values, goals, and purposes. Within this humanist perspective the concept of place is defined as a center of meaning or a focus of human emotional attachment (Entrikin 1976). The concept of place has received more attention from humanist geographers than any other traditional geographical concepts (viewed by Relph) as cited in the work of Entrikin, 1976 places are foundations

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of man's existence, providing not only the context of all human activity, but also security and identity for individuals and groups. Space is not only a physical entity it is also a created entity. This 'created space' is a social product: created, shaped and transformed by humans. The concept of 'activity space' has a long and interdisciplinary history with traditions such as geography, public health, sociology, transportation studies, time space studies, and human environment interactions. It can be defined as all the locations that an individual has direct contact with as a result of his or her daily activities (Miller, 1991). It represents an index of an individual's daily or routine spatial movements. More broadly, activity spaces are the manifestation of one's spatial lives, representing their routine locations and all the accompanying related experiences of these places. The emotional journeys through the emotional landscape are an untapped social (or academic) resource; emotion being situated within our working and social lives.

Significance of the Study

There is a recent rise in interest in emotional geographies (Sharp 2008) thus accounting for a plethora of studies on the affectual/emotional geographies in the Anglo- American countries termed as *westnocentric* but devoid of in the developing nations like India. This study intends to reconstruct the concept of space of a particular group the group being the students who have graduated with geography as their honours subject, scaling up to the Masters' and the doctorate degree. This spatially engaged approach to the study of 'Emotions' as existing /embedded in the academic arena is capable of bringing new insights to geographical research in several issues of concern. I have studied the emotions, meanings and symbols associated with place (after Tuan) who had stated that all places are small worlds, the small world being the Department of Geography. Hopefully each geographer will be able to identify with this spatio-temporal account as this has been drawn on my own experiences along with the emotional journeys traversed by other contemporary geographers. The physical spatial entity, the scope and content of the geography 'department', accounted by me through the use of time as an abstract dimension, justifies the dynamic discipline in which we are involved either as students or as teachers.

Approach to the Study

Once the sole preserve of psychology, the study of memory now extends to anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, literary studies, communication, history and, increasingly, to geography as per Hoelscher and Alderman (2004). They drew upon the work of Pierre Nora (1989), for whom memory is attached to 'sites' that are concrete and physical as well as to 'sites' that are non-material. Here in this study incorporated the material and the non-material 'sites' of memory across various age cohorts (and thus across time: i.e., temporal) and space (spatial) have been incorporated. The two concepts spatiality and temporality, may be defined as 'the conception and use of time and space by society (or an individual). In doing so in this study the cross sectional and a longitudinal study, from the 1980's till date have been considered. Longitudinal research is particularly valuable in research areas when the focus is directly on change which has been documented.

Adopting the qualitative technique in this in depth study is appropriate considering the issues taken up. The approach used here to examine the effects of micro practices of everyday life

is inspired by the work of Sharp (2008) who focussed on the ethical issues at work place, using the work place as a site of memory. The spatial signature (Mason and Korpela, 2008) of memory used is the department of Geography as encountered by me across the state of West Bengal.

Discussion on 'Created Space' and 'Activity Space' of Geographers

Time-Space Study of the Library:

The space of the library used by me and many others like me, extended beyond the four walls of the Departmental one; scaling upwards to the Central Library of the University, the Library of the British Council, the American Library, the Library of Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, the National Library, to mention a few. Some small reading rooms /associations like the Bandhav Samiti were also utilized by the geographers. Institutes like the NATMO, the Census Office, the Indian Statistical Institute, the Survey of India, etc., were the 'hot spot' locations of geographers in general and researchers in particular. An access to these meant sharing and sparing our pocket money towards the membership fee to fulfill our craving for knowledge of the subject. The emotional space which we shared with the library is little to be experienced by the present generation. We availed books (names of which was referred by our learned teachers) from the library or even from our generous teachers. Rivalry with regard to availing a particular book in demand, sometimes went to such an extent of stopping conversation with those who managed the priceless book for days at a stretch!!:time slot for a book was only 7 days. Standing in a long queue in front of the library to avail a book which has been referred by our teacher was a universal phenomenon on the day fixed for lending of books by the library. Sometimes we had to coax the staff of the library holding our ego to get a book.

In the early 1980's the technology used for having a copy extracted from a book was actually a dot pen, plain normal paper and a blue or black 'carbon paper'. Carbon paper is an inexpensive reprographic device used to make a single copy concurrently with the original. To have three copies of a particular topic of study, two such carbon papers were used, the original kept with the student (learner) referring from the book and the other two shared with friends. In this way there was a social networking for referencing work done. There was a healthy understanding and a distribution of referencing work done amongst the students for all the theoretical papers in particular. The referencing was done by the student reading in between the lines, through the pages meticulously, thus extracting from the book all the relevant literature and becoming clear in thought and writing conceptually as well. No wonder the outward appearance of the books most frequently used reflected its demand by the budding academicians. In fact in those days we were truly globalized having priceless books written by eminent British and American geographers in particular, which were used as text books and reference books by us. Several 'hard copies' of international journals of repute were stacked in the library for research use in particular. Sadly new books lie in the stacks now untouched, unexplored, yet bought by the Institution from several grants for availing of accreditation by the UGC. The ones in demand now (i.e., in common use) and the ones which are used as text books and reference books are in the vernacular language or by Indian authors who heavily borrow from the international versions. Many of these authors are unethical to such an

extent as not to even acknowledge the source from where they have adapted and adopted their writing skills and knowledge. With the arrival of the photo copier stacks of print outs or teachers' write-up lie on the student's table, extracting little out of it as reflected in the answer scripts. This photo copying too will become outdated : students using the tab or the mobile for gaining access (from google search engine) to their knowledge –no waste of paper –no waste of wood to be specific. Well some may critique that with change in technology our approach do change and should change. But in reality, how many of the wonderful e- books, reputed journals, articles which can be downloaded at home (some being free of cost, without actually having to travel to the institutes) are fruitfully read and understood to be tapped as a resource by the geographer?

Time-Space Study of the Laboratory

In addition to the theoretical papers, geographers are to devote considerable time on the practical papers. My experience; so also those belonging to my contemporary age cohort as well as my seniors, will strongly agree with me that the maximum time we devoted to was in this arena. Stooping over the light tracing table kept in our laboratories for hours at a stretch to complete a drawing sheet, was one of the significant and conspicuous micro practices of everyday life by the geographers. One had to literally draw the outcome of the study learnt in the class room –the map neatly labelled with definitely a north line, the scale , the legend using conventional colours and signs , the appropriate cartogram : conceptually understanding the applicability of the methods used. There was no scope of the cut-copy-paste with the click of a mouse. The tools used were the eraser , the pencil, the crow quill pen later on replaced by the Staedler pen ,a foreign equipment. The Indian version –the rotring pen qualitatively was not that upgraded, yet used when there was a cash crunch. Sometimes the pen was temporarily lent out for a few hours and in rotation among the students from the department. The individualistic possession of the much needed Staedler pen was a bit non conventional then – perhaps a class distinction- as the costly pen could not be used lifelong . It was often susceptible to wear and tear by the weathering caused by a diverse handling of agents (individuals) on it.

So in the laboratory room too there existed a shared networking of the pen, the brush and paint, the drawing sheet, etc., exemplifying the group(friend) mechanism in consonance with the individual's emotional space. The sharing of space of the tracing table was according to one's adjustment with time and with one's friends' circle. It also showed a core-periphery relationship: those residing far off from the institute usually were given the opportunity to make use of the table until and unless they had the privilege to have a miniature one at home. In summers we had to fret and sweat while trying to trace out the map : be it a portion of a topographical map or a geological map or a weather map or maps drawn on various projections . One can find the light tracing table even today in the laboratories, but used with much lesser frequency: the soot on it is the indicator ! Instead installation of Personal Computers (PCs) with enabled LAN connections, Wifi and other means of internet connections, Air Conditioner machines (cooling the room inside-locally while adding globally to the rise in temperature). Well this is the need of the hour as without the ICT one

cannot upgrade oneself up to the global standards. Whenever there is an inspection of the department the first place and space shown to the visiting team is this GIS Laboratory emphasizing on the number of PC's and AC's installed, the software used (along with its valued price). Nowadays however the emphasis on the use of the open software is diminishing the privilege once earned by the software suppliers in the open market: a considerable portion of the fund had to be allotted to it. The students take immense pleasure in working in this GIS Laboratory : no sweat ,comfortably seated clicking, dragging the mouse as instructed with the output of very bright colourful maps with various shades.

Space of the conventional geography laboratory (as a physical entity) also incorporated display of rocks and minerals, surveying instruments such as the plane table, the chain, the planimeter, the pantagraph, the transit theodolite, the prismatic compass, the dumpy level, with their accessories (such as the ranging rod, the levelling staff, the tape , the ground pins, the plumb bob), to mention a few. Stacks of various types of maps (topographical map, geological map, weather map), aerial photographs with the stereoscope mirror, were sincerely used to add to the geographical book of practical knowledge. With the change in technology the requirement, use and availability of some of the instruments have also become senile.

Time-Space Compression of the Laboratory Note Book

The hypothesis of : 'why to work hard just for about 5 marks?' if quantified statistically will stand out to be significant amongst today's geographers but nullified by those of the past. Computer printout or xerox (photocopying any one student's effort by all the students) is the universal option today thus accounting for a loss of diversity in the drawings, the originality, the feeling of satisfaction with one's own achievement. Not only that, the use of colours with the help of the computer without applying the conventional schema is sometimes shocking. It is horrifying to see an aspiring geographer pursuing higher education had depicted a map showing density of population in shades of blue. On enquiring upon why this particular colour has been used, pat came the answer: click of the mouse of my computer. Well the answer truly reveals the focus and epicentre of our discipline as of today. We were not that (marks quantitative) conscious in the sense we never thought of 'why to work hard just for about 5 marks?' We were emotionally attached to our laboratory note book . It was a thick and hard bound book reflecting our voluminous industrious work . Our academic related details inscribed (in golden) on the hard bound black/navy blue book, a neatly arranged presentation of our daily toil as a geographer is still kept neatly stacked in our residence. Today the present day semester- wise laboratory note book rarely has the hard bound copy as fewer prefer it , replaced by the spiral bound one ; some even going for channel filing of the laboratory note book without any content, etc details on it. If we compare the work of the same age cohort of today with those of the 80's and 90's , we will see there is a loss of diversity, loss of individualistic style and expression. Is it because of cultural globalization which is bent upon the loss of the unique local?

Time-Space Study of the Stationary Shop

Many students - geographers of the last century will reflect upon the rushing to a small shop near Gariahat (in South Kolkata) - the Kumar's Concern - for meeting all the little demands of the student geographer. Similarly in north Kolkata shops exclusively visited by the student geographers were the 'Students Corner' and the 'Bharati Stationers' to name a few. These were our student's corner - our spatial identity. From here we accessed the 'scholar paper' i.e., the paper which was our drawing sheet for our laboratory note book, the drawing pens, the coloured ink, the tracing paper, the calculator etc. The list seemed to be endless when we queued up in front of the Kumar's Concern shop with its very small floor area ratio served by two gentlemen only. The uniqueness of these few shops of the past is now lost out to the multiplicity of shops existing even in the neighbourhoods of one's institute or residence .

Conclusion

Once the sole preserve of psychology, the study of memory now extends to anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, literary studies, communication, history and, increasingly, to geography. We are heading towards virtual geography , the landscape of our departments are spatially being transformed by the agents of IT. To predict the future we have to gauge through the present , the relics of which is in the past. The discipline is facing an identity crisis in both the social sciences and in the earth sciences and we have to develop some coping strategies for our own future. For this our own space -the Department of Geography- has to be emotionally significant and qualitatively graced by us. Hierarchies continue to exist in the work space of all departments across the country and so also across our state. Power geometrics (linear top-down) exist between full time and part time research scholar, between full time faculty and part time faculty, between guest and part time faculty, between faculty appointed against a substantive post and contractual full time faculty ; between head of the department and other faculty, between the head of the institution and faculty members , etc . Even between a single girl student and a single boy student, between a student belonging to a general caste and that of the categories enjoying special reservations and scholarships there exist a corner of 'envy'. These power geometrics are to be managed efficiently and holistically, increasing the discoverability of our work as a mitigation measure for a better academic outreach of our discipline at the individualistic and group level for the survival of our discipline and of course ourselves.

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