

CURRENT SCIENCE

Volume 107 Number 11

10 December 2014

GUEST EDITORIAL

Who owns India?*

Continents are nature's work; countries that of man. Continents are made by time working on land and sea, ice and rock. Time uses a very blunt chisel and a heavy hammer. Subcontinents are made by time using those very instruments in minus two size.

The earth owns continents. And countries? Countries are shaped by human hands, very deft, well-trained, using the nail-file of geo-politics.

Who owns countries? Who owns India? Do its 'sovereign' people, does its government? Does the Constitution of India with its XXII Parts, 395 Articles, Twelve Schedules, its Union, States and Concurrent Lists of 'subjects' dividing India's life into so many dimensions, tell us who owns India? Or is the question idle?

It cannot be, for no one 'has' or uses something that is tangible except as an owner, or a user in which case the thing belongs to someone else. And 'India' is tangible.

In my New Delhi school's geography class, we used to be given a bunch of maps. The one that said 'Minerals of India' interested me not at all, because while I had heard of and got used to Tilakite, Congressite, Swatantrite, Lohiaite, socialite, parasite, to describe political and other types, I had not heard of and I despaired of all the rocky 'ites' – tonalite, migmatite, granite, ilmenite, magnesite, charnockite, fluorite. No one quite took the trouble of explaining why rocks have to end in 'ite', how each rock type tells a story of the greatest fascination, why they have a value, and how they can help me or someone else in this my country.

The map that said 'Rivers of India' was no better, for the lines on them going from everywhere to everywhere like the lines on my palm, with the Ganga resembling the head line, the Yamuna just below it saying 'me too', and though their being several riverine claimants to India's footloose fate line, none flowing clearly from the north-east to south to make up India's life line. No attempt was made to explain what these rivers were about, why did we have rivers, riverbeds, floods, flood plains. Why was there this thing called a river basin, was never well explained. We were to mark the rivers on a blank map,

and we all ended up by doing from the sea end, up to the catchments. No one seemed to regard that as stupid.

The one that showed 'Mountains of India' was less daunting because I saw in it the great reassurance that my maternal grandfather's home in Madras, where I hoped some day to repair to, was safe from the earthquakes that the Himalaya were said to be prone to.

One question that did occur to me then was: Who do all these belong to, who are they meant to be used by? Are they for those who live near or on those mountains, rivers, mineral deposits? Or, in some mysterious way, for all of us 'Indians'?

My grandchildren are starting school now and I think they will learn more and better than I did, but on the larger question of ownership and use we, as a people, as Indians, remain in the same darkness as I was in.

Is that acceptable? It is not. We must know who owns India's resources, which are part of, an essential part of, what makes India 'India'. And before we learn about the 'ownership' of India, we need to know about what that thing called India is, in its plain, physical aspect.

And the answers are not in hiding. They just need to be brought into the light of general awareness. And the place to start are with the Surveys of India.

The oldest of these, the Survey of India (SoI) started operations ten years after the Battle of Plassey, in 1767 to serve the plans of the British Indian army. But it has given us through trigonometrics the best geodetic control services that can be had, enabling us today to use geosciences in a manner best suited for our land resource requirements. Then we have the Geological Survey of India (GSI) which started out in 1846, 11 years before the first War of Independence, to study our coal deposits, but led us to a much wider and deeper understanding of our mineral wealth and gave us the tools and results of earthquake studies. We have the Botanical Survey of India (1887), the Zoological Survey of India (1916) and the Anthropological Survey of India (1945).

There are more. All of them have done pioneering work in plotting the assets of our soil, our life forms. The data they have and keep collecting are formidable by world standards and would be the envy of any data collection exercise in the world.

But do we, as a people, know about these data? The answer to this cannot be: 'Those who need to know,

*Based on a public lecture given at the Annual Meeting of the Indian Academy of Sciences at Chennai on 7 November 2014. The text also draws in part from the author's J.N. Tata Memorial Lecture at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, on 24 September 2010.

know'. Not in a democracy that is trying to overcome its ignorance, its illiteracy. Not in India that is taking ownership of itself, after centuries of servility to others, other powers, and to its own ignorance.

The British kept us, the people of India, in the dark about our wealth, our poverty. Is the Republic of India doing that? No, it is not, but it not dispelling the ignorance. That is not all.

'Those who know' are not an imperial power. But certainly the knowledge is there with those who are tapping into India's resources, not with illegal intent, though sometimes that too has happened, but often with a card-player's 'close to his chest' ness.

That family is a coherent one in which the head of the family takes its members into confidence not as an 'owner' but as parent.

Not just water-extracting companies but the country as a whole must know how much water there is, in assessable stock and in expected freshes for, say, the next ten years. The GSI cannot only inform us about this but educate us, caution us, through its study of hydrological cycles.

We need to know how our forests are likely to be utilized, by deforesting and re-foresting over the next ten years in a manner that vouchsafes our developmental requirements and also the critical need for conserving our biodiversity.

The SoI and GSI, working with the National Disaster Management Authority must take the peoplehood of India into direct confidence about their earthquake database and their glaciological studies to tell us, in lay terms, what 'tectonic discontinuities' mean, what the Gora Dongar fault in Kutch signifies and what is really meant by the 'maximum ablation' in the Hamta Glacier, off Spiti?

We need to be advised on how our subsoil minerals, our rock and geological deposits are faring in terms of the rate and purposes of extraction? Are we over-mining? Is anyone keeping a tab on how much of, say, our granites are there for our needs? Are we optimizing the use of these finite and non-renewable resources? Or are we letting the market pull out what it sees profits in? Are we meant to mine more and more or mine more prudently than before? Is our mineral wealth, in other words, under close observation or not? We need ownership of these data.

Science and technology need not be as Sanskrit was of old, held tight in the *Acharya-mushti* of the learned; they need to be enfranchised. Not for any theoretical reasons of pedagogy's purpose, but because we now live in an age when shortages and outages, disaster and destruction are becoming the rule.

In the matter of energy alone, we are intertwined in crisis. Likewise, our hydrocarbons. The Ministry of Petroleum knows it all. Oil India knows it all, as does Bharat Petroleum. But what about the peoplehood of India? Because of the Supreme Court we now know more. We have been cautioned, warned, assured, reassured.

We need to be informed about land, that most precious resource. What is the strategy for the use of this infinitely finite resource, over which developers and envelopers keep an onyx eye? What is our land use policy, if we

have one at all, at a national level? 'Land' may be a State subject, but does India and its peoplehood not have an entitlement to know?

Will our Anthropological Survey, a mine of knowledge on our indigenous people, tell us, please, what the Jarawa and the Onge, the Sentinelese and the Minicoyans think of their future? Are they merely children in the kindergarten of developmental studies, or are they postdoctoral teachers themselves, in the Open University of Human Heritage? Unless someone from the West tells us of our possessions, we do not quite appreciate it.

Will that Survey also tell us, with its knowledge of ancient medical wisdoms and its awareness of the vulnerability of tribal populations to so-called 'civilized' diseases, what are the forms of pestilence that have hurt us as a people over the centuries, so that we can now anticipate and prepare ourselves against the menacing prospect of new zoonotic diseases that are spreading themselves through vectors and the air we breathe?

And beyond Surveys, we now need to revive the Survey methodology of observation, analysis and explication to assist in conflict resolution, in preference to the ways of disputational argumentation, one-upmanship and political leveraging.

This knowledge will make us, the general body of Indians, the peoplehood of India, owners of India as nothing else. I must also appeal for another, literally the highest, ownership that we must have.

There is the internationally accepted Law of the Sea. Through that salutary Law, coastal states have acquired considerable extents, lawful extents, seawards. Now that we have moved into the sky, we need a Law of the Skies, an international one, to tell us about how much of the firmament can be used by who for what uses, spectrum-wise, bandwidth-wise. We need to know where our ownership of the skies starts and where it ends, what the rules are for its use. That will give us ownership of our proportionate and proper slice of the skies. This acquires urgency in the context of what has come to be seen as unauthorized surveillance over nations by certain powers, infringing international laws and infracting sovereignties. Which country can 'own' itself that cannot think, write, communicate without being spied upon?

'Who owns India?' has much to do with 'who knows India'. Knowledge is a resource. It cannot be captive to a techno-commercial entrepreneurship, any more than skills can be captive to the owners of the tools. Knowledge is also a great protector, which is why companies have general body meetings where every shareholder and stakeholder, including increasingly now, the worker-representative, know all that they have a right to know. We have not travelled miles towards self-ownership only to change our destination to new colonizations.

Gopal Krishna Gandhi

Centre for Public Affairs and Critical Theory,
Shiv Nadar University,
New Delhi 110 022, India
e-mail: gopalgandhi@yahoo.com