

Professor Ravi S. Singh (1971~2021): The Legacy and Memorials

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1971-2021

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Personal Lament and his Carrier

With severe pains and in a devastating situation, it is informed that I lost my dearest one — ‘son-in-law’, my old student, the best friend, academic partner, field collaborator and co-author — Professor Ravi S. Singh, a Senior Professor of Geography, Banaras Hindu University, who after passing a week of illness at home, was admitted on 19 April 2021 at 07:30pm in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU, Corona Ward, Institute of Medical Sciences, S.S. Hospital) of the Banaras Hindu University, due to seriously afflicted Corona Positive and complicated ailments like high blood sugar, blood pressure, loss of oxygens carrying capacity, and infection of kidney. In spite of all the medical care and emergency services under senior doctors’ supervision in the hospital, Ravi had ultimately passed away on 21 April 2021 at 10:50 AM IST (Chaitra Shukla 9th ‘Rama Navami’, Vikrama Samvata 2078, when Hindu devout were busy in celebrating the birthday festival of Rama). The cremation rite was performed at the bank of the river Ganga at Harishachandra Ghat on the same day, and his son, Abhisht, had served as chief mourner. After the passing of ten days, on 01 of May 2021 the post-cremation ‘*Dashagatra*’ ritual and on 04 May 2021 ‘*Trayodhasha*’ Shraddha rite were performed. Due to dreadful crises of pandemic corona in the Banaras region, friends and relatives were requested not to visit us to attend rituals. For the second time in the history of the Department of Geography at Banaras Hindu University (BHU), since its foundation in 1946 under the patronage of Professor Harbans Lal Chhibber (04 December 1899 – 25 February 1955; aged 56 years), it happened that a faculty member has died young (only 49½ years) while he was in full and regular service.

Professor Ravi left behind his suffering wife Pratibha (my daughter) and the only lovely son Abhisht Adityam (a student B.A. pt. III Psychology Honours at BHU— my grandson). Professor Ravi Shankar Singh (born: 08-09-1971; village Mukrera, Saran district, Bihar; died: 21-04-2021) had degrees of B.A. Honours (1991,

BHU), M.A. (1993, JNU), M.Phil. (1996, JNU), Ph.D. (2000, JPU), and D.Litt. (2020, BHU) – the first and the only one in the history of 75 years). He had been my student in the 3-years B.A. Honours courses during 1989-1991, and I had taught him four papers, viz. Human Geography, Three Southern continents, Geographical Thought, and Development Studies. During the period of 19-27 September 1990, a field study tour for the B.A. Pt III Honours students to north India was organised under my direction, where Ravi served as my coordinating assistant and monitor, when I got impressed by his literary understanding and landscape interpretation, and also his management skill of social binding and cultural insights. This resulted in developing an intimate and academic relationship that continued till his last breath. This relationship had been further strengthened with the addition of family ties when Ravi got married to my daughter, Pratibha, on 22 May 1997. After passing his M.Phil. from JNU he had joined as JRF research fellow (1993-1996) for a doctoral degree under myself at BHU in 1996, but due to parents’ wish and to support the family, passing a year he left to join as a Lecturer in Geography at a Degree College in Arunachal Pradesh, and later submitted his dissertation at J.P. University (2000).

Thus, his employment career started as a Lecturer in Geography at Rang-Frah Government Degree College at Changlang, Arunachal Pradesh (1996-2001), followed by serving as lecturer in Kisan P.G. College Bahraich, Uttar Pradesh (2001-2005). Ravi had returned to his *alma mater* and joined as a Reader (Associate Professor) in the Department of Geography, BHU, on 29 October 2005 and was promoted to full Professor on 29 October 2011. He was also serving as Adjunct Professor at Bhojpur Research Centre at Banaras Hindu University. His services at Changlang and Bahraich had provided a field laboratory for him that resulted in several publications on Arunachal Pradesh (1999, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2008), and the perception of geography education (2009).

Institutional Interfaces and International Meets

Professor Ravi's contribution to institution building is enormous. He was a member of several professional bodies of geography in the country. In all of these bodies, Professor Ravi was actively engaged in different capacities. He was a life member of the Indian Science Congress Association (ISCA), Kolkata, National Association of Geographers India (NAGI), New Delhi, Institute of Indian Geographers (IIG), Pune (where he also served as Secretary IIG, 2013-2016), North East India Geographical Society (NEIG), Guwahati, Geographical Society of India (GSI), Kolkata, National Geographical Society of India (NGSI), Varanasi, Society of Heritage Planning & Environmental Health (SHPEH, served as Secretary), Varanasi, and International Research Forum, IRF, on SAARC (Tokyo). He had been the Vice-President of the Indian Society of Spatial Science (Kolkata). He had also served as an Associate to the NYSICCSI Program in Varanasi during 1996-2005, the programme directed by Rana P.B. Singh. He has presented about 70 papers in the national and international (USA, Sri Lanka, China, Poland, and Nepal) seminars and delivered around forty-five invited lectures in different universities and institutions in India. While associated with several academic societies, Ravi had also served as a member of the editorial board of several research journals, including *Space and Culture, India* (an open access online, ISSN: 2052-8396, ACCB Publishing, England), where he has published two innovative papers examining geographical contexts of folk music (2020c) and pilgrimage in Islam (2021a).

He had received 'Enrichment Fund Award' by the Association of American Geographers (USA) to attend its *Annual Meeting*, the biggest gathering of geographers: 12-16 April 2011, held at Seattle (Washington), where he presented a paper on the 'Changing Cultural Landscapes in Rural India: A Case Study of Vernacular Houses', in the session 4130 (15 April morning) on "Rural Prospects in a Globalizing World", co-organised by his class-met and old friend Pratyusha Basu (then at University of South Florida, Tampa).

During this period of stay, he met and interacted about the trends, perspectives and vision of Indian geography with several geographers of Indian origin, including Ashok K. Dutta, (late) P.P. Karan, Rajiv Thakur, B.L. Sukhwai, Falguni Mukherjee, and Neera Singh, etc.

In the year 2014, Ravi had participated in three international seminars. He was awarded travel and hospitality grant to deliver a lecture as a special invitee in SAARC Regional Seminar on "Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Sustainable Development (CHTSD) in South Asia": 28-29 April 2014, Colombo, Sri Lanka; where he provoked for the role of cultural heritage in sustainable development, illustrated with the indigenous heritage of tribal people of North East India. This has further resulted in developing close interaction and friendship with scholars from Sri Lanka. The Chinese Academy of Sciences awarded him a travel grant and coverage of hospitalities to attend the GSC/AAG/IGU International Workshop on *Geopolitics in Changing Southeast Asia: Boundaries and Borderlands*, Kunming and Jing Hong, P.R. China: 20-24 July 2014; he was accompanied with Rana P.B. Singh. In this workshop, he had presented a paper on *Cultural Heritage in the North-Eastern Borderland of India: A case study of Indigenous Religious Belief Systems*, which became a base for some of his followed-up publications on Arunachal Pradesh. Professor Ravi was also a special invitee in the IGU Regional Congress on *Changes, Challenges, Responsibility*, Kraków, Poland, 18-22 August 2014. In this meet in the session on *Urban Challenges in a Complex World*, organised by the IGU Commission, he had presented a case of peri-urbanisation and its impact on the future urban sprawl and development in India, illustrated with the case study of the holy-heritage city of Varanasi and its comparison with other similar towns. In the Kraków meet, Ravi had played an active role together with Professor Benno Werlen of Germany in the proclamation of the UN International Year of Global Understanding (IYGU), and the formation of a new IGU Commission on this theme, which came into existence during the IGU 33rd World Geography Congress, Beijing, China: 21-25 August 2016; but

Ravi could not get chance to attend. During 2015-2016, at the invitation of his old friend and colleague Padma C. Poudel, Ravi also paid two times visit to the Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal, and delivered lectures in the Central Department of Geography.

Let me put on records while co-sharing the remarks by Professor Ravindra G. Jaybhaye, the Secretary-General IIG, Pune:

He was a life member of the Institute of Indian Geography (IIG), and enthusiastically participated in all the activities of the institute. He was appointed as a Secretary of the IIG for two consecutive terms, from 2013 to 2019. He had always taken keen interest in the activities of the IIG. He had undertaken a difficult project of compiling all the Presidential addresses of the IIG since its inception and had plans to publish in a book within a year. His untimely death, however, snatches the promised book away from all of us. ... As a person, Prof Ravi was always cheerful, charming, humble, but augmentative and dynamic. Anyone who has come in contact with him has been mesmerised by his unflinching patience and gentleness as well as his intellect and productivity. It is hard to believe that Prof. Ravi is no longer with us. He has been a real gift and talent to the world. His untimely demise is a huge and irreparable loss to the IIG fraternity and geographers of the country. [*personal communication*].

Professor Ravi's contributions to academic extension activities were no less remarkable. He was selected as a research methodology expert on the research pool of ICSSR, New Delhi. He had also served as the Visitor's Nominee in JNU, New Delhi (2019-2021), a Member of the Higher Education Council, Uttarakhand (2017), the Treasurer of the National Geographical Society of India (2018-2021), an Academic Advisor of the United States-India Educational Foundation (USIEF): 2015-16, and the Secretary of the Institute of Indian Geographers, Pune (2013-

2019). He had also served as a consultant to two major research projects of the Ministry of Culture, Government of India.

Major Contributions

An exemplary scholar and the kindest of friends, Professor Ravi was a trained social and cultural geographer. The seeds of critical appraisal and interdisciplinary approaches germinated in his bachelor studies at BHU under the guidance of his teachers, to name a few— (late) Professor Kashi N. Singh, Professor K.K. Dube, (late) Professor P.R. Sharma, and Professor Rana P.B. Singh. This march has been further enriched, extended, and polished in his Master studies (MA, MPhil) at Jawahar Lal Nehru University in New Delhi under the supervision and interaction with teachers like (late) Professor Aizajuddin Ahmad, Professor M.H. Qureshi, and Professor Sachidanand Sinha. Marching straightforward and enthusiastically, Ravi had developed critical insights into several branches in geography and interdisciplinary discourses, which included Geographical Thought, Social and Cultural Geography, Development Geography and Geography Education, Peri-urban Geographies, and Qualitative Research Methods—all illustrated with his innovative research publications appraising critical observations, exemplified with field studies. Extremely caring, intense and popular, Professor Ravi had established himself as an outstanding teacher and mentor to his students. Eight students have earned their PhD degrees under his supervision (2013-2019). He had encouraged his doctoral students to work on diverse themes, as most of the faculty members are inclined here, thus covering specific themes like Land use and Livelihood in Periurban zone of Varanasi, Common property resources in Awadh Tarai, Well-being in the North Malabar Region, Service Centres in Rural Development in Chandauli, Water crisis and development in Bundelkhand, Impact of MGNREGA scheme on the living standard of SCs/STs in eastern Uttar Pradesh, Crime against women in Varanasi, and Impact of Agricultural Change on Rural Well-being in Bahraich Plain. Following Carl Sauer, he also encouraged his doctoral students to prepare an

analytical and critical review of some other areas that not directly concerned with their topics—resultantly with his theoretical constructions, several such papers were published, for example, *Geography in Higher Education* (2008d, 2009d), *Status of Water in India* (2015e, 2021b), and *Landscape and Culture Interfaces illustrated with Cinema* (2019h).

In a short span of only 25 years of his profound career, he has to his credit of publishing around 100 research papers, which found their way into reputed national and international publications, including prestigious research series from Germany, Japan, Singapore, Sweden, Switzerland, and U.K.; and also, six appraisal reviews, twenty-four book reviews, and six popular articles. His first paper (co-authored) was published in 1997 that presents a critical appraisal of urban heritage in India. And, the first independent paper published in 1999 discussed the issue of ethnic minority groups of Arunachal Pradesh, which was based on his field experiences when he was employed in Arunachal Pradesh, an easternmost part of India (1996-2001). This study has been advanced and comprehended in a monograph, entitled '*Paths of Development in Arunachal Pradesh*' (NBC, New Delhi, 2005)—of course, it is the first of its kind. He has also published two edited anthologies on Indian geography: *Indian Geography: Perspectives, Concerns and Issues* (Rawat Publications, Jaipur & New Delhi, 2009), and *Indian Geography in the 21st Century: The Young Geographers' Agenda* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle u. Tyne, UK, 2009). Moreover, he has edited four other anthologies, viz. *Environmental Concerns: Third World Perspectives* (YS Books International, New Delhi, 2014), *Quotidian Urban Challenges: Development, Environment and Health* (YS Books International, New Delhi, 2014), *Resource Use, Development and Environment: Interfaces and Implications* (YS Books International, New Delhi, 2015), and co-edited *Changing Agriculture and Rural Environment: Issues, Processes and Patterns* (R.K. Books, New Delhi, 2015). His forthcoming anthology, together with Arun K. Singh, Bharat Dahiya and Padma C. Poudel, entitled *Indian Cultural Geographies: Local*

Realities, Global Horizons, is in process (in the series, *Advances in 21st Century Human Settlements*; Springer Nature, Singapore; f.c. 2021).

His doctoral research entitled, *Goddesses in India: A Study in the Geography of Sacred Places*, the first attempt in geography was inspired and structured by his then supervisor at B.H.U., Rana P.B. Singh; however, as mentioned, it was submitted at J.P. University (2000). Based on this, some papers have been published in international and interdisciplinary series and are widely cited. As a theoretician and critical analyst, he has appraised and examined development thought (2008b) critically, and the identity and image of Indian geography (2009d). Thinking of the present scenario and future prospects of cultural geography in India, he raised the issues of marginality and future agenda (2009h). Having a rural background and childhood love and association to the water and waterscapes, he has presented different perspectives of water in India (2015e); this has been further investigated at a deep cultural level illustrated with Islam (2021b). The related issue of Indian water governance has also been his recent concern (2020b). His interest in exposing the vernacular perspective of the cultural landscape further reflected his pioneering studies of folk music and its interfaces with culture, society and space (2020 c). His latest research has emphasised 'geotourism potential of coal mines, appraising the Sonapur-Bazari open cast project', developed as part of research by one of his students (2021c).

Professor Ravi's scholarly contributions to geography and allied subjects earned him much respect and appreciation from the academic community from all over India and abroad. Such was his reputation as a prolific writer, speaker and commentator that even at a very young age, he was invited to deliver special lectures across the country as a Chief Guest, Keynote Speaker, Lead Speaker and Resource Person in seminars, thematic symposia, conferences and academic programmes. In addition, he had the honour of delivering distinguished memorial lectures. His first such lecture was as the 31st memorial to

Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose (GSI, University of Calcutta, Kolkata, 2014), which deals with the 'Changing Vernacular Houses in India with special reference to *Āngana*' (inner courtyard; published in 2017a in GRI Kolkata, Vol. 79: pp. 1-22). This paper has revised the classical tradition of understanding the vernacular landscape as envisioned by Professor Bose, and continued by Professor Anath Bandhu Mukerjee (1960). Similar memorial lectures delivered are Professor Enayat Ahmed Memorial (Ranchi University, Ranchi, 2015), Professor R.N. Dubey Memorial (University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, 2019), and Foundation Day at Cotton University (Guwahati, 2020).

Ravi's mega project, having collaboration with Professor Bharat Dahiya (Thailand), Professor A.K. Singh (BHU.), and Professor P.C. Poudel (Nepal), had been to prepare an anthology, *Practising Cultural Geographies*, representing an in-depth varieties and distinction of the cultural landscapes of India, which was initiated on the 22 September 2014, through a call for papers from scholars from different parts of the world those working broadly on the six themes, covering trends and coverage, landscapes, religion, heritage, pilgrimage and tourism, and human settlements—altogether consisting of 23 chapters. Following the advocacy of Sauer's dictum, "The geographic bent rests on seeing and thinking about what is in the landscape...called the content of the earth's surface" [Carl O. Sauer (1889-1975), in his 'The Education of a Geographer', *Annals AAG*, vol. 46, no. 3, 1956, p. 289], Ravi had started this journey. In February 2017, all the main chapters were collected, and their editing and synchronisation started; however, primarily due to personal whims, gaps in inter-personal communications and ideological contradictions, till June 2020, the project had not taken a formal shape. Somehow, it has got final form only by the end of January 2021 and was submitted to Springer Nature Pte Singapore, after passing around five years. Let us see as to when this will be released?; alas! Ravi is no more to see the final product (2021)!

In the first week of April 2021, Ravi had planned to have an anthology on '*Water in Cultural Perspective: the Global Scenario*', and requested Professor James L. Wescoat Jr. (an Emeritus Aga Khan Distinguished Professor of Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge MA- USA) to join him as a co-editor, which Jimy so gladly accepted while honouring Ravi's works and reputation; unfortunately, this project has ended before its start.

Imagination and Vision

In his D.Litt. Thesis (2020), may be conceived as his *magnum opus*; he implicitly narrated his academic journey and themes captured; let me put this in his own words:

My primary research focus has been on unravelling the neglected issues, analysing emerging dimensions and revisiting ailing older issues in Indian geography. Thus, my recent research has covered 21st Century trends in Indian geography, methodological problems, role of geographical societies in India, mainstream practices and the problems of exclusion in them, futuristic assessment of Indian geography; cultural geographies, especially their neglect and potential with special reference to culturally rich India, studying the weakening socio-cultural traditions, etc., etc. The other area of my research has been people-centric studies, on which I penned a few articles and delivered lectures on environment-development-displacement as well as urbanization related contemporary issues. Among them, peri-urbanisation as an emerging phenomenon with its typical characteristics in the Global South, particularly India and its impacts needs special mention. Also, theoretical as well as empirical papers with special reference to Varanasi with my students as co-authors on urban growth, expansions and sprawl, land use and livelihood changes, gender implications, urbanization and urban governance

issues, participatory urban planning in the million-plus cities in India are a few to mention.” (Singh, Ravi 2020, p. xi).

Ravi’s vision and prophecy may be taken as a guidepost for the coming generation that he summarised as:

Methodological crisis still tends to badly affect research enterprise in Indian geography in the absence of proper recognition to alternative methods and training students in the same; and, doing away with the over-riding fads—earlier with quantitative techniques and contemporarily seen in case of RS/GIS. One of the crippling problems of Indian geography is the missing voice of stakeholders, especially students who form the centre around which the academic system exists and develops. Their role is either entirely neglected or poorly conceived, amounting to inconsequentiality. Their common concern regarding employment is primarily restricted to teaching, which is quite small compared to demand. Expansion of job opportunities requires skills the job market demands. The image and identity of geography in India appear to be dilemmatic—good compared to the disciplines of liberal arts, including social sciences and poor compared to pure/hard sciences. The future does not appear promising if seen in terms of the present state of affairs no matter whatever yardstick is used. However, there is huge potential to brighten it provided the diagnosed ailments are suitably attended to (Singh, Ravi 2020, p. xiv-xv).

The Prayer

We all pray the Almighty ‘Shiva’ for being kind and blissful to grant peace to the departed noble soul of Geography, and solace and energy to the family members to bear the pain and try to continue the path of academic legacy and human services that were paved and strengthened by Prof. Ravi S. Singh. ... We have received a deep sense of condolences from

different parts of India and the world. ... O dear one Ravi!, we will follow the path you have shown to us in the sacred vision of the Vedic text, the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* (1.3.28.):

असतोमा सद्गमय । तमसोमा ज्योतिर्गमय ।
मृत्योर्मा मृतंगमय ॥ ॐ शान्ति शान्ति शान्तिः ॥

Asato mā sad gamaya; Tamaso mā jyotir gamaya; Mṛtyor mā amritam gamaya; Om Shānti Shānti Shāntih.

“From ignorance lead me to the Truth, From darkness lead me into Light, From death lead me into Immortality, *Om Peace, Peace, and ultimate Peace.*”

Selected Publications (as referred)

(i) Dissertations

Singh, Ravi S. (2000). *Goddesses in India: A Study in the Geography of Sacred Places*. Unpublished **Ph.D.** dissertation, submitted in the P.G. Department of Geography, Faculty of Social Sciences, Jai Prakash University, Chhapra (Bihar), India. 7 chapters: 211-pp, 39 figures, 25 tables, 3 appendices, and bibliography. [Supervisor: Prof. Babu Lal Sinha].

Singh, Ravi S. (2020a). *The Status of Indian Geography in the 21st Century: A Contextual Analysis*. Unpublished **D.Litt.** dissertation in Geography, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi (Enrol. No. 411846, awarded on 20 June 2020). 11 chapters: 20 figures, 12 tables, photo plates 8, xv + 336-pp + 5 appendices (reprints of five papers) +16-pp list of his publications and short bio. [Supervisor: Prof. R.S. Yadava]

(ii) Books

Singh, Ravi S. (2005). *Paths of Development in Arunachal Pradesh*. New Delhi: Northern Book Centre.

Singh, Ravi S. (Ed.) (2009a). *Indian Geography: Perspectives, Concerns and Issues*. Jaipur/ New Delhi: Rawat Publications.

Singh, Ravi S. (Ed.) (2015). *Resource Use, Development and Environment: Interfaces and Implications*. New Delhi: YS Books International.

Singh, Ravi S.; Dahiya, Bharat; Singh, Arun K.; and Poudel Padma C. (Eds.) (2021). *Practising Cultural Geographies: Essays in Honour of Rana P.B. Singh*. Foreword: Prof. Yukio HIMIYAMA (ex-President IGU, Japan); Foreword: (late) Prof. Sung-Kyun KIM (Founding President ACLA, Korea). Advances in 21st Century Human Settlements series (ISSN: 2198-2546). Singapore: Springer Nature Pte Ltd., forthcoming.

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- Singh, Ravi S. and Roy, Dipankar (2020 b). Service Level Benchmarking: Some Emerging Global Lessons for Indian Water Governance. In: *Globalisation, Environment and Social Justice: Perspectives, Issues and Concerns*, ed. Manish K. Verma. London & New York: Routledge, pp. 319-337 (chapter 14).
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