12 Geography in Daily Life

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Sometimes I think Olympics, FIFA or even IPL is God's way of Teaching us Geography

The other day as I was walking back home I overheard a conversation between a young mother and her seven/ eight year old daughter. Ahead of them two African young men were walking, the little girl asked her mother, 'Why do these men have such coil like curly hair, we don't have such frizzy hair?' Mom replied, "All Africans have such hair"; very much ignoring the reason. The mother's answer was like a stab at all such queries made by children, at all things they see around them and learn in their own space, in their own ways. I was so inclined to give the reason. The question was very much a geographical query.

Where is Geography?

To me, geography is a way of life; a day's journey for all of us starts with sun rising in the east, which a child already knows; she knows it sets in the west every day; likewise she knows about seasons, onam, pongal, vegetation, landforms, tsunami, temperature, food habits, culture, types of clothes, some diseases locally found and some are not, but she is not aware of the geographical connections to these.

Besides the mother tongue, I believe geography is the other subject for which the child has an innate capacity to learn. She learns it continuously all her life. Let us examine some questions a four to fourteen year old might ask.

- If the globe is like a round ball Mama, then why don't we fall off?
- Can Santa be as comfortable in Brazil as he is in Mongol?
- Why do the Arabs wear 'Thoub', Mama, and papa does not?
- If April- May is so hot, then why December is not?
- Why do I wear a cotton dress in Kerala and not a woolen frock?
- Why in Delhi I see the shadow a little longer at noon, while in Pune its not?
- Why do people say monsoon comes and goes, where does it live?
- Can we save some mangoes for my birthday in December, please?
- How can the moon wax and wane, appear full or disappear?
- Will the sun walk from dawn till dusk and yet remain the same forever?
- Why does Chennai have a single season, while Agartala has all the four?
- Why are we off to mountains in summer and in winter to the sea-shore?
- 'Why some prefer chole- bhature, and some idli-sambar?'
- Why chicken pox or yellow fever are not heard of in U.S.?
- Can a rainbow be a circle ever, like the bangle, I wear?
- Why can't I see snowfall in Hyderabad, but run to Himalayas?
- After sunset, how fast does the sun run to rise up in the east?
- Doesn't the cloud come down in winter to make the fog and mist?
- Why are Deodars bell-shaped and not the Neem tree?
- Here, we see deer and tiger and not the Krill and Kiwi!
- How does the pilot fly in the sky and never lose his way?
- Where do I get the answers of these problems and many more, so to say?

Grand-parents, parents, and teachers can answer many of these from their own experiences, I am sure. Answers from them are very believable and convincing to a child. Certain questions may need explanation and knowledge and concepts of other things. Let's ask some leading questions and help the child find her own answers. Let's take the first question, 'If the globe is like a ball mama, then why don't we fall off?'; we can really take a football and put an ant on it, let the ant move around, show this to the child and ask her if the ant would fall off or can be comfortable; make the child move the ball and see it herself.

Let's take another example 'Why do the Arabs wear 'Thoub', Mama, and papa do not?

To help her find an answer for herself, we can ask her why she is wearing clothes, sweater, shoes etc, or she requires an umbrella on a hot summer afternoon? Her answer may be to look good / to feel warm, protection from the sun etc.

To this we can bring in the idea of keeping away dust/ sand, I am sure she would agree. To this we can add that Arabia is a place which is dusty, sandy and hot; then ask her if it is a good idea to cover the body from head to foot, when out in the sun in such a place.

We can stop at that point and let the child continue forming her own knowledge which is age appropriate, meaningful and above all no rote learning is required at all.

Like the mother tongue, the child builds up the geography of the locality unbiased, and without much effort; the only conscious effort needed here, is guidance; the facilitator can provide leading questions and give viable answers to lead the child's thought process logically from her elementary classes, so that as she also develops thinking, observation, verification, validation, understanding, relating etc.

As a geography teacher, almost always I have connected the lessons with the materials found in the class room, the sari I was wearing, height, skin color of students, things in their bags, the lunch that they have brought, including the chalk and the board. I used to bring in topics like the sky, wind, temperature, clouds, rain in correlation with what the students were experiencing then and there outside the classroom - especially while teaching 'climate'. geography is always connected to everyday life; the teacher's job is to bring in the skill or help in developing the mental faculty of the child to see or identify the connection or link present between the experiences of life and the geographical concept behind these.

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Krishna Kumar strongly believes in conversation amongst children to be a very effective tool for learning. Children, when they observe a new thing, be it a caterpillar, a moth, a new place, a movie or read a book, they would run to share with others, here both the parties are learning. Conversation amongst friends help children learn, especially if the conversation is after a vacation; children may have travelled to places in different directions and come back with many new experiences and observations. These, when shared amongst themselves, would help the listeners to build up their imagination of these places and would motivate them to learn on their own. Here teachers can reinforce the learning with the photographs brought by the child, maps, pictures etc.

Bigger children have a wider spectrum to navigate; they are exposed to newspaper, TV channels, movies, songs, storybooks, travelling, trekking etc. When each experience is pitched in, a huge resource is generated.

Do concepts of geography really need to be learned to live life better? Do these concepts help us in our daily life? Are these a kind of life-skill so to say? Do our children need to hone this skill?

Can these experiences, which are based on, rooted to, or tied to happenings in real life or directly influencing one's life, also be called as geographical experiences? Isn't our learning of geographical concepts, as a life skill, very much needed to survive, enjoy life, solve problem in everyday life, to make decisions, to understand other subjects, to understand happenings around us, to make a profession out of it? Most of the questions can be answered with a monosyllable, 'Yes'.

While writing this article, I asked my sister-in –law about the subject 'geography', her opinion about its importance in day to day in life. By the way, she is a bank employee and she studied mathematics, tricks for making bank balance grow is her cup of tea and not 'geography' in any way. Interestingly, the moment, I asked her the question, she without any hesitation responded as if she has been harping on this question long enough and has already come to a conclusion. She said, "If only I had known that the understanding of geographical concepts would be so necessary for understanding today's life-style, problems, world situation, then I would have taken more interest during my school days, sure I would have been better equipped today. Now to know the problem well enough is an uphill task for me".

What do we Conclude from this Conversation?

My friend's son, found geography interesting, and many

a times we discussed and debated on various concepts of geography; once it was on latitude and longitude and its necessity; years later I met him as a handsome young pilot; as we were mulching over our times spent, he told me, how the concept of latitude and longitude has helped him in his understanding of the location of a place while flying. I learnt my lesson- it's so important to make a child curious.

Does the Present (geography) Syllabus Help the Child to Learn?

Here I think we need to make some changes, in two areas in particular:

- Content
- The way we facilitate the content

Let's believe that children already know many things and are in a position to develop, add, alter, refine, speculate, understand, and imagine. Then we as facilitators need to add to their already existing schemata. Let's begin from what they know and give inputs in a way that helps them to learn through experiences. For example in I, II, III/ IV grade it's difficult to understand the abstraction of the globe, and theories of rotation, revolution, the relationship of these movements with the occurrence of 'day and night' or 'seasons'. Instead, if we can make them take note of their already existing knowledge of east and the rising sun, west and the setting sun, different positions of the sun during the day and the various lengths of the child's shadow, the difference in temperature with the changing position of the sun, etc. and then in higher grades the same information can be added to facts about the globe, rotation, revolution etc.

Let's help the child to find the house with the help of an address:

House #5B, 1st Main, Pai Layout.
Let's ask her which two pieces of information has been given to the postman to find the house. Her answer may be house number (5B) and the road (1st Main, Pai layout). Now let's ask her if she were the postman then what would she do? Help her by a simple drawing to show the road and the house number. Highlight those two references that are needed to find a place. (Here the references are the house number and the name of the road). Then may be in the next session we can bring in the two reference lines on the globe to be latitude and longitude and then connect the position of a city with the help of latitude and longitude.

Netra and Preetam love to eat 'Aliva', biscuits that are triangular in shape; now whenever Netra sees anything with a triangular shape she calls it as 'Aliva', when Preetam sees the biscuit 'Aliva', he calls it as 'triangle'. Actually both have identified the shape with or without the name to describe it. Both of them had the notion of triangle based on their real experiences. Thus when the child says 'Aliva' is 'triangle', the teacher may explain, 'yes Aliva is a triangular biscuit, but so is a mountain peak or a Christmas tree, thus they all belong to the category called 'Triangle'.

How does a Child Learn About her Surroundings or the World Around her?

A child learns by touching, eating, experimenting, observing, imitating, asking and so on. The theory of 'constructivism' says these are schemata; the individual learner keeps on building her knowledge on these experiences, lifelong. A teacher needs to take care of the situations she wants her students to experience for building up their own knowledge. The National Curriculum Framework – 2005, has identified these objectives. Now the question is how does the teacher go about it?

What Should the Teacher do to Make Children Construct their Knowledge?

'Asking' is one very strong tool which can be used by the teacher. 'Why' questions from the learners may be a request for 'reason' or for 'explanation'. Giving reason is not the same thing as explaining. Reasons are given for holding beliefs or believing something to be true. Explanation is of events and processes in the course of nature like, "Why are some mountain peaks, and not all, covered with snow?" or "Why do we experience sunrise (local time 5am) at Namdhapa, Arunachal when it is still very dark (local time 3 am) at Dwarka, Gujarat?"

Here both theories and laws are involved in explaining. Sometimes teacher needs to telescope the process i.e. explaining events and then explaining laws.

Many a time the teacher/parent offer "explanations" which do not really explain. For example

1. Why Savanna is called a "Park land"?
   Because this natural grassland is dotted with a few trees, just as in a park.
2. What makes artesian well special?

Because you need not draw water from the well, water comes out of its own accord.

3. Why is Sahara a desert?
   Because this region receives very little rainfall.

These are apparent explanations. In none of the answers have we gone to the root of the actual query like: why would few trees grow in savanna to give a park land view, (in the first question); why would water come out of its own accord instead of being drawn out, (in the second question) and why won't it rain much in Sahara (in the third question) have never been addressed.

> *Geography is an anchor to live today's life; most of which we learn by our own experiences, hence takes a long time; if only the school/the teacher could instill in us the skill then amongst other things, taking decisions, for where to live, where to build a house, which flat to choose, whether to buy a diesel or a petrol car, would have been easier.*

The teacher must make use of the explanatory principle in such a way that it should have the predictive power to enable children make accurate predictions on the basis of it. Knowing that water cools and heats at a slower rate than the land, children can predict that seaside would have moderate climate.

Similarly knowing that artesian well is limited to a region whose underlying rock structure is saucer-shaped, is easily subjected to hydraulic pressure(water) the students can comprehend that a well dug on such a structure will have the water gushing out on its own.

Can we not think of an outdoor geography classroom? The teacher and the school have to plan in advance, clubbing certain topics together (soil, soil erosion, natural vegetation, agricultural, occupation of the people etc) and sometimes clubbing science and geography class together (solar system, minerals). Some topics like weather and climate may be taken throughout the year season by season, what's the hurry? Or two seasons can be taught in grade VI and the other two in the grade VII. Beside there can be group-work, watching movie, reading travelogue, concept mapping; Students can make their own curriculum, based on the topics they would like to learn, some of the topics they themselves or students from higher classes can teach; selective readings from the latest books on relevant topics can be introduced in the class, or library class, making a scrap book using newspaper cutting on relative topics, can be a good learning source.

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Geography is needed for all these, and more, to keep 'life' throbbing on this planet.

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