



PP Karan: Geographer, Scholar, Teacher, and Friend

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On 21 July 2018 the extraordinary life of Pradyumna Prasad Karan ended, to the dismay and sadness of those who had come to know his warm and humble personality and his inquisitive and insightful mind. For 70 years PP Karan explored, photographed, and explained how Himalayan peoples were able to extract livings from the scarce resources of Himalayan environments and how their activities affected those environments.

Dr. Karan, who adopted the name “Paul” to spare English speakers the challenge of “Pradyumna,” retired in 2016, after a 60 year career at the University of Kentucky’s Geography Department. In addition to this incredibly long teaching career, he had repeatedly visited all parts of the Himalaya, written the first books on the geography of Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan, and continued to publish about the cascade of changes coursing through the region. Probably no one had such a wide-ranging and historically deep experience in, and knowledge of the Himalayas.

I first met Paul in the early 1980s, as I began to study the Himalayas, but he remained a mere acquaintance until after I joined Northern

Kentucky University and began occasionally taking the 80 mile trip to share a lunch with him in Lexington. However, I did not come to know him well until 2008, when I recruited him to join me on the Executive Council of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies. This entailed annual meetings of the Council and of the entire membership, usually at the Conference on South Asia in Madison, Wisconsin, so Paul and I drove together from Kentucky to Madison and back six times. During those nine-hour trips we discussed the Himalayas, geography, and numerous other topics, and many of these led back to his extraordinary life and experiences. Much of what I write here came from those discussions.

In 1951 Paul and his family were making a pilgrimage to Pashupathinath temple in Kathmandu and were visiting their fellow Bihari, the Indian Ambassador to Nepal. Fortuitously, their visit was just when the Indian Embassy was facilitating the return to power of King Tribhuvan and the end of the Rana family’s control of Nepal. In the 1850s Jang Bahadur Rana had seized control of Nepal, confined the King and his family to their palace, and for nearly a century severely exploited the people and landscapes of Nepal. The British Raj had supported the Rana family’s goal of keeping Nepal isolated from the modernizing world in exchange for permission to recruit Nepalis for their Gurhka brigades. Ousting the Rana regime was part of independent India’s goal of uprooting colonial domination, and Paul and his family had front row seats to this critical juncture in Nepal’s history. Later, another foundational trip took Paul to Tibet before the 1959 Chinese occupation, and there he observed, described, and photographed Lhasa and the surrounding landscapes as the

manifestations of traditional Tibetan culture and society.

After completing an MA at Benares Hindu University, Paul wanted to go to abroad for a higher degree. He had met a British Geographer in the library at Patna University and impressed the visitor enough that he recruited Paul to his PhD program. However, before that could be arranged, the professor died, so Paul was left without an obvious path to his future.

During his high school years in Patna, Paul attended American movies that the US Consulate presented every Saturday, so now he decided to go to the US, despite the intense opposition of his parents. He booked a trip on a freighter, arriving in Boston with \$200. He was able to get a job on the waterfront, save enough money to buy a car, and embark on a journey to find a university where he could do a Ph.D. Eventually he found the Geography department at Indiana University would tentatively accept him, if he would take the courses required for entering MA students. He convinced the department to give him tests in place of the courses, and he tested out of all but one. Paul had already completed the field work for his dissertation on the origin and development of the Indian steel industry on the Chota Nagpur plateau in southern Bihar (now Jharkhand), so he was soon writing his dissertation.

Because of Indiana’s small department, as he organized a committee, Paul could not avoid having professors from opposing sides of a bitter academic and personal split over environmental determinism. His major professor was Norman J.G. Pounds, who like all but one department member, intensely rejected determinism. By the 1950s only a few geographers still accepted environmental determinism, but Indiana’s



dissident, Stephen Fisher, was one of the holdouts. Paul's research violated the environmental determinist position that, unlike the fluctuating mid-latitude climates of the advanced countries, life in warm tropical environments was not sufficiently challenging to induce technologically advanced industry and society to develop. Paul's research, of course, contradicted that racist interpretation. Fisher said that he would not accept Paul's dissertation without an explanation of how this Indian exception did not contradict general Environmental Determinism principles. In contrast, Paul's advisor and other committee members told him that they could not pass him if he had text supporting environmental determinism.

Paul was stuck. What could he do to escape? Finally, he realized he only had one choice: he would write different conclusions to his dissertation so he could satisfy everyone. He wrote them, distributed the drafts with the desired conclusions, and prayed that no one at his defense would ask the questions that would reveal his "solution." At his defense Paul distributed his final drafts, and the committee members immediately checked the conclusions and found

what they desired. The animosity within the committee and the self-satisfaction from their apparent victories limited discussion, and Paul escaped. After they told him he had passed, he quickly gathered all the dissertation drafts and fled to New Orleans where he typed the final anti-environmental determinism conclusion, which he delivered to the library. His graduate student colleagues begged him to explain how he had passed, but Paul never told anyone until all the professors were dead.

Before the Nepal visit Paul had already completed his BA degree in geography, so he was intrigued by the landscapes and cultures he encountered in Nepal. In the early 1960s Paul got a contract with the UN to analyze, map, and prepare a report on land-use patterns of Nepal. At this point, Nepal was a blank slate, with almost no information on the geographical patterns needed for planning. Paul hired a plane and flew over the entire country, taking thousands of color slides from which he created the first maps and analyses of Nepal's agricultural, forest, and population resources. The only road in the country then was from India to Kathmandu, and because the project

included field checking, Paul spent considerable time travelling on foot through the country. At that time no one in villages would accept paper money, so he had to hire a porter to carry a doko basket full of coins

Paul was deeply curious and always looking for opportunities that presented themselves. During his field work in Nepal in the early 60s, he met and became friends with a Japanese anthropologist Shigeru Iijima. They remained friends and became collaborators, publishing research on Nepal, arranging lectures and sabbaticals for Paul in Japan, and ultimately to publishing a series of books and articles on Japan.

As I mentioned above, Paul was able to travel through Tibet before the 1959 Chinese occupation and subsequent transformation. Here, like all the places he visited, he took many photographs. In the early 2000's he had a Chinese international student at Kentucky whom he got to know. From their discussions Paul realized that the student was a nephew of Jiang Zemin, China's President. Toward the end of the semester the student asked if there was any way he could help Paul. Paul told him he would like to visit Tibet. The student secured a letter from his uncle which allowed Paul to return to Tibet and re-photograph places he had visited in the 1950s. This was only the most exotic of the places to which Paul travelled in the last 20 years of his life, as he returned to most parts of the Himalaya he had previously studied and re-photographed many of the places he had photographed earlier. In his last years Paul was working on a project to combine and analyze the early and recent photo pairs from Tibet, Nepal, and other parts of the Himalaya. Unfortunately, Paul died before he could complete this great project.

Another example of his seizing serendipity was how Paul came to the University of Kentucky. While driving to Knoxville to interview for a job in 1956, his car broke down in Lexington. While waiting for his car to be repaired, he heard that UK had a geography department. Paul went to the department, met and impressed the chair enough that the chair introduced him to the Dean, who offered Paul a job. Paul accepted, and they verbally agreed on a salary. Then, when Paul returned in August, the chair told him that they had reduced his salary to give more to another new Assistant Professor, because he had a family and therefore needed more money. Kentucky, like India, operated on the whims of those in control.

Complementing his ability to seize opportunities, Paul was able to read people and situations and react in ways that allowed him to reach his goals, maintain his integrity, and at the same time watch with wry amusement at what was unfolding before him. Kentucky is fanatical about basketball and although the athletes take classes, their sport takes precedence. One year Paul had a basketball star in a class, but the star did few assignments, and Paul failed him. His Dean called Paul and urged him to change the student's grade, so the student could continue his basketball career. Paul refused, but told the Dean that "if someone else" were to change the grade, he would not object. The student subsequently passed the course and continued to play. Paul then informed the athletics program that his classes might not be a good fit for their star athletes.

Paul was prolific and diversified scholar. His main focus was on how people interact with their environments to create landscapes, but he also wrote on other topics: several books on the history of the

discipline of geography; an Atlas of Kentucky and book on Appalachia; a textbook on the non-western world; edited books on the environmental, economic, and social impacts of the 2005 Indian Ocean tsunami and more recently on the 2010 Japanese tsunami and nuclear meltdown. But his largest contribution was to Himalayan studies, from the earliest articles and books on Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan to repeated articles and books on the changes in the Himalaya. His books and articles on Japan grew from collaborations with Shigeru Iijima and flowered into analyses of Japanese landscapes, a book on Japanese cities, and Japan's connections to Kentucky - from Toyota locating its first US plant 15 miles from Lexington to comparing Kentucky's Bluegrass with Japan's Hokkaido island as sources of elite racing horses

In many of his publications Paul collaborated with other scholars. His multiple projects with Cotton Mather were particularly penetrating and insightful. Collaborators praise his insights and the ways their work together produced publications that were more than the sum of their individual efforts.

Now P.P. Karan is gone. Those of us who knew him well sorely miss his kindness, intelligence, knowledge, wisdom, and wit. He remains for us a model of a scholar committed to his discipline, curious about his entire world, ever ready to follow interesting leads, looking to share his research, and confident of the value of his work.

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