

# Interview of Suresh Chand Rai

by Francisco Klauser



**As the general secretary of the National Association of Geographers, India, what does this role imply?**

I have been working for our association, the NAGI (National Association of Geographers, India) as the Secretary General since 2010. My responsibility is to manage the association activities. I control all of the publications from the national association, and our financial management. Because the whole organisation is managed by the Secretary General, my role is very large.

**Who is part of your organisation? Who do you represent? Is it all geographers in India or specific institutions?**

All geographers in India who are working in the university or college system, and some who are working in multi-disciplinary subjects such as political science, sociology and economics are also members of our association. We also have some institutional members such as University and departmental libraries. So, this association is very large and represents the entire country. We have members from every part of the country and some other parts of the world, and we are the only national level organisation for geographers in India.

**So, do you have an idea of how many members you have?**

Yes, currently we have 2560 enrolled members.

**Wow, that's a big association. In Switzerland, in my own association, we only have institutional members, so universities or other regional associations but not people. It is therefore much smaller and easier to manage.**

I see. Also, apart from Indian members we have over 50 foreign country members from Germany, the USA, Nepal, and others.

**So I could become a member?**

Yes, you can become a member!

**And how much is the membership fee?**

A life membership fee for foreign members is \$150. So, once you pay that fee you are a member for life. And for Indian members it is 4000 rupees. For those who are life members you get our journal, The Annals, free of cost, as well as our circulars such as newsletters. So, if you become a life member you will get all of the information without charge.

**So, what are the main aims of your association?**

The main aim is to promote geography research in the country and secondly to cooperate with professional organisation of associated disciplines and to promote academic interaction within an interdisciplinary frame. Thirdly, another aim is to cooperate with other international organisations with similar objectives and our intention is to collaborate in joint academic activities and share our research. So far, I can tell you that we have four foreign associations who have signed our memorandum of understanding (MOU), declaring that we have similar objectives and that we will work together. We have an MOU with the Russian Geography Association, the Chinese Geography Association, the Vietnam Geography Association,



Prof. Suresh Chand Rai, Secretary-General, NAGI presented Activity report in the inaugural session of 41st Indian Geography Congress, held at Dr. H.S. Gaur Vishwavidyalaya, Sagar, M.P., India, 28th December 2019. Photo: K. Mishra.

and I am about to sign the MOU with the Taiwan Geography Association. Another aim is to improve the teaching of geography at all levels. Our concern is to improve the curriculum and our international status and to train our teachers to teach geography at an international standard. We also meet with Indian geography colleagues once a year. Every year in different parts of the country we organise a national level conference called the Indian Geography Congress. We host it in different parts of the country each year to ensure people can access this. We have also conducted four or five international level conferences for international scholars.

**Yes, I think there was an international conference at the end of December, right?**

Yes, we had one conference at Sagar in Madhya Pradesh.

**Yes, I was actually in India then but I was in the north of the country traveling around Chandigarh and Amritsar and then Darjeeling on the other side so I couldn't go.**

I spent around 15 years in the Darjeeling and Sikkim area, my whole research area is based on the Sikkim and Darjeeling area.

*"In India Geography is very popular so we want to strengthen our knowledge and collaborate with other associations to get their expertise."*

**Yes, it is so beautiful there in the mountains.**

Darjeeling tea is very nice and Sikkim tea is also very flavourful.

**You mentioned collaborations with other national associations. Could you discuss that a little more and also mention whether there could be some scope for collaboration with the Swiss association?**

Yes, we are very open to collaboration with other associations. By collaborating with other international association our people can learn something from what is going on in Geography research in other parts of the world. So we are always welcoming other organisations to join hands with us and sign an MOU.



**PROF. SURESH CHAND RAI**

Professor in Physical Geography at the Department of Geography, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi. His most significant contributions are in the field of land and water resource management, watershed management, biodiversity, ecotourism and microlevel planning. Since 2010, he is serving as Secretary General of National Association of Geographers, India (NAGI).



Life Time Achievement Award received by Prof. Suresh Chand Rai, Secretary-General, NAGI during the 41st Indian Geography Congress, held at Dr. H.S. Gaur Vishwavidyalaya, Sagar, M.P., India, 28th December 2019. Photo: K. Mishra.

### And what would that involve?

Whenever we sign the MOU with other organisations, we make sure we share all our information with them, and we invite them to present papers at our national and international conferences.

One reason for my interview was also to strengthen my own association's links with other associations so that could be an interesting possibility.

Right, in India Geography is very popular so we want to strengthen our knowledge and collaborate with other associations to get their expertise, so this is a good initiative to create links with more associations.

So, what do you think is specific about your association, if you compare it to other ones?

We organise memorial lectures, which are talks given by eminent geographers in the name of other geographers who, in their lifetime, made a significant contribution to Indian geography on an international level. We raise funds for and organise these memorial lectures every year; you may be surprised to know

that we have had 13 memorial lectures already. The other thing is we give awards to those who contribute to the field of geography every year and these have become prestigious awards given to renowned Geographers of our country. This is unique to us, I think.

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These are very inspiring ideas for my organisation. What do you think for your association will be your key challenges?

As you know, geographical pedagogy and knowledge moves very fast at international levels, so we need to keep pace with international knowledge and pedagogy to ensure our students are competitive. We have to have strong collaborations with the world, and with the government also. At school level we are

trying to improve the standard of the geography syllabus, so we are training teachers and trying to improve and modernise their traditional approach. It is very difficult to get the expertise to the teachers working in rural areas, because technology is changing very fast and it is very difficult to distribute the expertise at that pace. So, these are the major challenges that we are going to face.

Our association is not very powerful. We have a lot of members but we don't have any strong say in government policy, and this is a major problem because in other associations like in Russia and in China they have a very strong voice in the government but here in India we don't have any way to advise, or get involved in debates about programmes or policy so this is where we are lacking and we are trying to resolve all of these problems.

*"If our government would take advice from the association and members, I think that would be a very fruitful addition to Indian policy."*

So, you would like to have a stronger impact on public policy?

If our government would take advice from the association and members, I think that would be a very fruitful addition to Indian policy. Our professors and members are working in different parts of the country and if we want to improve the status of geography and the resources across the country that would be useful. We are trying to convince our policy makers to include and engage with the advice of geographers.

Would you be able to question policies? To have a critical engagement with things that happens in India?

We do not have the connections at the moment, we have a limited scope to say anything even in areas such as environmental policy, but I think our expertise could help.

What motivated you to become part of the association?

Well, prior to my current role I was working in the government sector in the Ministry for Environmental Affairs. When I joined, I saw that the condition of the geography association was not very good, in terms of their financial situation and their publications. This motivated me, I felt that as I was working in the field of geography it was my responsibility to improve the association financially and academically to raise the



Release of souvenir during 41st Indian Geography Congress by President, President-elect, Secretary-General, Chief Guest and convener of the 41st Indian Geography Congress, held at Dr. H.S. Gaur Vishwavidyalaya, Sagar, M.P., India, 28th December 2019. Photo: K. Mishra.

standards to an international level. I knew, as I was in government, what these standards were in other parts of the world and I wanted to help the Indian association to reach those standards. Since I took the job we have slowly and steadily improved in terms of governance and structure as well as outputs. Now we are producing an international standard journal which is very popular, has good quality papers and is available both online and in hard copy. We have better finances and the standard of the governance has improved a lot. So, these are motivators, to improve standards of geography in the country. This is why I serve this organisation for free.

You do all of this for free?

Yes.

Wow, so you give a lot of time to it.

Yes, I spend a lot of time managing all our financial work, the governance, communicating with all of our members. I spend my energy and time to raise the status of our association.

So, if you could just share one particular story or anecdote which is funny for you or something special that you experienced.

When I signed the first MOU with the Russian Geography Association it was my responsibility, and this was the first time we had signed an MOU with any international agency. The council was organised in Moscow and I travelled there and stayed there and met international geographers for this collaborative achievement. This was a unique achievement for our association and for me it was a great moment, especially because the Russian Geography Association is one of the oldest geography associations in the world. It was founded in 1845.

Thank you so much for the interview!