

July 2019

Obituary | Pradyumna Prasad Karan (1930–2018)

Rajiv R. Thakur
Missouri State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Thakur, Rajiv R. (2019) "Obituary | Pradyumna Prasad Karan (1930–2018)," *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 39 : No. 1 , Article 21.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol39/iss1/21>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized

Obituary | Pradyumna Prasad Karan (1930–2018)



Rajiv R. Thakur

Pradyumna Prasad Karan (also known as Paul to many), one of the most influential South Asian geographers in the United States, has passed away. He was born on Feb 9, 1930 in Gaya, India, a few miles from the site where Buddha attained enlightenment over 2500 years ago, and left us on July 19, 2018 in Lexington, Kentucky. From 1956, his academic base was in the Department of Geography at the University of Kentucky, where he was Professor between 1964 and 2017 and held a distinguished University Research Professor position (2010-17) during his last few years. He also served as Department Chair from 1967-1975, during which he oversaw the establishment of a doctoral program and the expansion of the Department's faculty during the mid-1970s. Following this, he remained active as Professor Emeritus and maintained contact with national and international research communities.

Professor Karan was an internationally recognized scholar of environmental management and sustainable development in the Himalayas. The focus of his research was on the applications of geographic theories to social and economic problems in the non-western world. Professor Karan was also interested in the disciplinary history of Geography in the 20th century.

Professor Karan hailed from a working-class family, where education was the key to moving ahead. Pradyumna received his early education in Patna, and obtained his Bachelors with Honors in Economics from Patna University (1948). He then moved to Benares Hindu University to pursue his Master's degree in Applied Geography, and studied with such luminaries of Indian geography as the famous Ram Lochan Singh and Harbans Lal Chhibber.

It was in Benares where the foundation of a young Pradyumna's interest in applied geography was established, and he honed his understanding of the connections between economic development and the environment throughout the rest of his academic career.

Pradyumna began his research career studying the Chotanagpur region and the dynamics of manufacturing and industrial location in India. A major focus of Karan's early research (1956-70) was on the Himalayan landscape including Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and Tibet, to which he would devote the bulk of his scholarly career. Through his research he would provide pioneering geographic survey data and findings based on archival and field research of these mountainous regions of the world.

Karan came to the United States in 1954 for his doctoral studies at Indiana University, Bloomington where he worked with Norman John Greville Pounds, the famous economic geographer who was not only instrumental in shaping the intellectual curiosities of a young Karan, but also influenced his articulations around the connection between economic development and the environment for more than seven decades. Karan's doctoral dissertation examined the geography of mineral production and manufacturing in Chotanagpur, India. Following the completion of his PhD, he embarked on a teaching position at the University of Kentucky in 1956, where he would serve until his passing. He also held the position of Lecturer of Geography at Patna University, his *alma mater*, between 1950-54, and lectured extensively for the United Nations Center for Regional Development, Nagoya, Japan, t

he United States Foreign Service Institute in Washington, D.C., and for the Asia Society in New York.

In recognition of the geopolitical strategic significance of his research in Nepal, Karan's research was supported by the Ford Foundation, The Population Council, and the American Philosophical Society, while later field studies in Sikkim and Bhutan were supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, the National Geographic Society, the U.S. Army, the East-West Center, the Japan Society for Promotion of Science, the Association of American Geographers and the Kentucky Research Foundation. Karan's interest in the Himalayan landscapes also led him to work with international agencies such as the United Nations in Nepal (1957-58) where he participated in planning development activities throughout the country.

As important as research was to him, Karan valued teaching even more. He enjoyed the challenge of the classroom interaction, and taught undergraduates and graduates alike with a deep, abiding commitment to the process of education. Karan also contributed to non-western curricula and international programming at the University of Kentucky by introducing field trips to India in the 1970s before the concept of 'studying abroad' was common. His other major initiatives included: the development of new programs in Japanese studies and Indian Studies; initiation of two successful grant applications to Japan Foundation to support two faculty appointments in the Japan Studies Program at the University of Kentucky; establishment of a University of Kentucky Summer Field Station at Yatsushiro, Japan to serve as a research base for students and faculty at the University of Kentucky; enhanced support for Japan-related research for graduate students in Geography; and the establishment of a graduate Research Fellowship in Geopolitics with funding from the estate of G. Etzel Pearcy, a former Geographer of the U.S. Department of State.

During his lifetime Karan was awarded numerous honors and distinctions both at home and abroad. He was the recipient of University of Kentucky Alumni Award for Excellence in Research (1961) rather early in his career in recognition of his extraordinary dedication to scholarship. In further recognition of his deep commitment to and knowledge of the Himalayan region, he was also awarded the Sir George Everest Gold Medal for cartographic, environmental, and resource mapping in the Himalaya (1982). In 1985, his colleagues also recognized his extensive research contributions and the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky elected him Distinguished Professor, the highest honor at the College. These recognitions were soon followed by a Distinguished Service Award

(2002), and a Distinguished Scholar Award (2010) from the Asian Geography Specialty Group of the Association of American Geographers. Between 1998 and 2016, Karan published numerous titles on Japan—*The Japanese City* (1997), *Japanese Landscapes: Where Land and Culture Merge* (1998), *Japan in the Bluegrass* (2001), *Japan in the 21st Century* (2005), and *Japan After 3/11: Global Perspectives on the Earthquake, Tsunami and Fukushima Meltdown* (2016), all of which proved that he was a superb ambassador between Japanese geographers and the rest of the world. Indeed, the Association of Japanese Geographers presented Karan its Special Award at their annual meeting in March 2009, which honored his research in development and environmental geography of Japan and the Himalayas.

Retirement had not slowed Karan and he continued working on research that blurs the boundaries between the social science and humanities, always seeking fresh ways of preserving environment and local cultures. At the time of his passing, he had five research projects in progress simultaneously—(a) Regional Assessment of Environmental Change in Tibet, (b) The Indian Subcontinent at Crossroads, (c) The Japanese Megalopolis, (d) Ellen Churchill Semple: The Making of a Scientist and (e) Field Research in American Geography.

Karan has written or co-written numerous publications. He authored several books on the Himalaya and Japan, and contributed one or more original chapters to 25 books, edited seven books including the *Atlas of Kentucky*, and authored nearly 90 research papers in professional journals such as *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *Economic Geography*, *Journal of Geography*, *Geografiska Annaler*, *Mountain Research and Development*, and *Human Ecology and Focus on Geography*. Other significant works included *The Changing Face of Tibet: The Impact of Chinese Communist Ideology on the Landscape* (1976), *Sikkim Himalaya: Development in Mountain Environment* (1984), *Bhutan: Development Amid Environmental and Cultural Preservation* (1987), *Bhutan: Environment, Culture and Development Strategy* (1990), and *Nepal: A Himalayan Kingdom in Transition* (1996).

Pradyumna Prasad Karan will be remembered as a man of strong personality, wide sympathies, and unselfish enthusiasm by family, friends, students, and research collaborators alike. He was a loving and devoted husband to his wife Hazel, and a great Uncle to his niece and nephews both in India and the United States. His influence and inspiration have not only been shared through the written word, but perhaps to an even greater extent through personal conversations, lectures, in meetings with visiting researchers, and at seminars and conferences. His students and colleagues can testify to the intellectual radiance that always surrounded him.

Rajiv R. Thakur is an economic geographer. He has published and presented within the context of applied economic development and is exploring new research at the intersection of economics and environment through the lens of sustainability with regional interests in the Terai region of Nepal and Mithila region in Bihar, India. His policy interests include economic policy, environment and climate science, and international development. He is currently Associate Professor of Geography at Missouri State University, West Plains, and former Chair of the Westlakes Division of the American Association of Geographers. He is the lead editor (with Ashok Dutt, Stanley Brunn, Baleshwar Thakur and Ramesh Dhussa) of a *festschrift* in honor of Pradyumna Prasad Karan titled *Environment, Development and Culture in South and East Asia: Local, Regional and International Perspectives*.