



MY QUEST: RIGHT: PROFESSION: NATION:

CONTROL OWNERSHIP

About the Author:



Sanjay Kumar is a social entrepreneur working towards facilitating and accelerating

growth of the geospatial industry worldwide and raising awareness of the industry's contribution to the global development agenda. He is currently the CEO of Geospatial Media and Communications, a global media organization. He is also the President of Association of Geospatial Industries of India (AGI) and also serves on the Board of Directors of Open Geospatial Consortium.

Information is the key to the 'digital age' we live in today. Availability, Accessibility, and Utility of Information are considered as testimonials and benchmark of human development indicators of a society and nation in terms of societal engagement, inclusive policies, citizen empowerment, and economic advancement. 'Knowledge Economy' and 'Digital World' are determining 'axes' around which civilisations and nations revolve and evolve. Scientific and technological infrastructure that enable innovation and create knowledge entrepreneurs and professionals are the bedrock of progressive societies. Co-ownership of national values, principles, guidelines, and

security is pre-requisite for a mature and participatory democracy.

My Right as a Citizen

As an equal stakeholder in society and the nation (as much a 'duty' and as much a 'right' secured to me by our Constitution) I must co-create an environment, which allows me to pursue my Quest, exercise my Right, undertake my Profession, and build my Nation without any prejudice and presumption, unless and until in doing so I am found guilty of anti-social and anti-national conduct.

Today, I am being challenged to ask myself 'Do I have right to pursue my quest, my profession,

my nation?’ Do I have right to safeguard my integrity and my patriotism without prejudice and presumption? Answer is perhaps, NO! Specially, if I look at how my profession of being an evangelist of geospatial information has been consistently challenged and limited by overhyped restrictive, monopolistic, protective and non-comprehensive policies prevailing and limiting my quest, my profession and my nation. I am as much a nationalist as anyone else in the state mechanism. As a knowledge worker and social entrepreneur I have contributed towards development of the nation through two decades of advocacy and socio-economic engagements with national, regional and global stakeholders of geospatial industry and community.

My Concerns

The proposed Geospatial Information Regulation Bill by Ministry of Home Affairs is the latest and most serious challenge, which is just short of declaring the geospatial profession non grata. To illustrate my concerns let me quote few paragraphs from the Bill to understand its scope and coverage:

‘Bill is to regulate the acquisition, dissemination, publication and distribution of geospatial information of India which is likely to affect the security, sovereignty and integrity of India and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto’

It means that the scope of the bill includes any and every act of research, innovation, business, social, and individual passion associated and linked with geospatial information in terms of its collection, its representation, and sharing. It doesn't specify or limit the scope to geospatial information with reference to national administrative boundaries as well as international boundaries, and or security Sensitive zones of the country.

“Geospatial Information” means geospatial imagery or data acquired through space or aerial platforms such as satellite, aircrafts, airships, balloons, unmanned aerial vehicles

including value addition; or graphical or digital data depicting natural or man-made physical features, phenomenon or boundaries of the earth or any information related thereto including surveys, charts, maps, terrestrial photos referenced to a co-ordinate system and having attributes’

The above paragraph brings almost every kind of device or equipment which is equipped with the capability to create geospatial information including photos, pictures and graphics having reference to coordinate system under its ambit. This means our daily life gazetteers like cameras, phones, tablets, laptops, fitness bands, having GNSS/GPS inbuilt would be subject to monitoring and inspections as all these equipment do collect geospatial information knowingly or unknowingly. Now, in case I need to share a geo-tagged picture with my family and friends it requires me to obtain a license before geo-tagging the picture. In fact, if I choose to add few social attributes to convey the culture of my neighbourhood, I do need to further go and get clearance from Security vetting authority as I added value to that specific picture which also has geospatial coordinates. This also means, if I want to give GPS enabled device to my parents, my wife, sister, daughter and son with an intention of being connected to them and to know their location as a matter of safety, I do need to take license as I am tracking their location - a process which involves constant collection and dissemination of geospatial information about my family and friends.

The Government Officer and the Ordinary Citizen

The Central Government may, by notification in Official Gazette, exempt the Ministries, Departments, Public Sector Enterprises or any other attached or subordinate offices of the Central Government or State Governments from the provisions of this Act to the extent it deems fit.

This clearly indicates that government organisations and of course government employees would be exempted from this bill, which means that it is presumed that government employees and organisations are given full protection and permission to use the same tools and gazetteers from which an ordinary citizen is debarred unless they obtain the required license and go through a recurring process of clearances.

My Quest

So coming back to my quest. Do I have an environment to pursue my quest to engage with geospatial technology, its deployment for my society, and its integration with my business, and above all, develop innovative applications? As per my understanding, the answer is no, because, now I need to take permissions and obtain licenses to even think geospatially. This bill restricts my thought process by threatening me with dire consequences if I choose to play around using any kind of geospatial enabled devices or information.

My Profession

Do I have a right to pursue my profession as a Geospatial Expert? Once again, the Bill scares me at first glance. It seems that the geospatial profession is something, which is associated with a high level of sensitivity regarding security and serious legal liabilities and punishments. While talking to a few geospatial enthusiasts in their early twenties yesterday, I got a feeling that they want to move on to other profession as they don't feel comfortable in pursuing a geospatial profession wherein their every day job is full of risk and subject to security vetting at each step. What about researchers who spend years on academic pursuits to make some meaningful contribution to society through application of geospatial information? More than thousands of researchers would be directly affected as they need to spend extra money and time in getting license to collect geospatial information for supplementing and substantiating their

finding spatially and before getting clearance and approvals from respective professors and institutions, they need to depose before security vetting committee with all value additions being done as part of process of primary research and its analysis and contextualization.

Even if someone takes a conscious decision to persist with this profession, that person will always live under psychological stress of being under a scanner. The Bill will certainly divert existing and potential professionals to move to other associated professions and this would cause serious damage to my own professional eco-system and negate my 20 years of intellectual, social and business assets.

My Right

Thirdly, what about my own right to information as a citizen? Should I seek a license to take picture of my village where I was born and tree under which I studied during my childhood? Can I not tag those locations with pictures for my own reference and share the same with my friends and family? What about emotional values and attachments with places where I have spent my moments of pride? Do I need to feel restricted in sharing my cultural heritage and social roots with my children who 'only' understand the language of pictures and videos?

My Nation

Fourthly, what about my own spirit of my nation? Being a geospatial evangelist I may have enabled directly or indirectly job opportunities for over 50,000 citizens in the country through my advocacy and awareness campaigns, through encouraging several business houses to invest in geospatial businesses, through my international collaborations to bring in multilateral and multinational companies to set up their operations and engagements with Indian geospatial community and industry. An Indian geospatial industry with an esti-



mated strength of more than one million may have contributed significantly in overall development of the nation through its services within the country and outside the country. Should we just allow geospatial industry to exit and leave those workers out of jobs and contribute towards weakening the nation? Shouldn't the Indian geospatial industry, which has been recognized as force to reckon with in the international market, get the opportunity to serve its own country? Are we not encouraging Indian companies to move out of the country, leave alone encouraging overseas companies to move into India? Are we not letting our neighbours cash on this opportunity and outsmart India's advantage?

Let there be no Space between Space and People

Given a scenario where we will not have competent geospatial professionals, a vibrant geospatial industry, innovative entrepreneurs, and scientific innovations, who would provide geospatial services to accomplish the vision of Honourable Prime Minister who himself is great believer in democratization, commoditization, and socialization of geospatial information for governance, citizen empowerment and industrialization. What will happen to his vision that he shared while addressing 1600 bureaucrats in September 2015 at Vigyan Bhavan 'Let there be no Space between Space and People'?

Energy, Interlinking of Rivers, Housing and Real Estate, e-governance, Defence and internal security would require large volumes of geospatial information and services. In absence of geospatial professionals and industry, who would provide these services? Can government sector institutions with their limited geospatially trained manpower deliver these huge requirements and come up with innovative solutions in the short time given? Can National Mapping Organisations who have been deliberating on creating 10:000 scale maps, setting up NSDI and National GIS for the last 10 years or more, change overnight in terms of their capacities and speed up their processes to fulfil the urgent geospatial needs of the nation? I don't want to discount or denigrate the value of our institutional infrastructure, but at the same time it's high time that we recognize that services and solutions do not form the core of public sector DNA. Honourable Prime Minister has been travelling globally to rejuvenate belief in India and Indian mission of industrialization and commercialization. He has been working tirelessly to bring attention and attraction of IT and Engineering Giants who are today largest consumers and players of geospatial industry. Wouldn't this bill be a regressive step with its sole purpose of discouraging industrial development in the field of geospatial technologies and applications?

Disclaimer:

The views expressed here are solely those of the author in his private capacity and do not in any way represent the views of the organisations he is associated with. Social Media shares of this article by any of these organisations don't necessarily mean endorsement of the author's views unless clearly stated.

Almost every national programme of significance be it Smart Cities, Infrastructure, Digital India, Clean Ganga Mission, Clean

I must say I am very worried today as an individual, as a professional, as an entrepreneur, and above all as proud citizen of India.