
Unit I

INTRODUCING HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

1

NATURE AND SCOPE OF HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

CHAPTER

We learnt earlier that Geography is 'the study of the earth as home of humans'. Its nature is interdisciplinary and integrative. Geography looks at the earth's surface from two different but interrelated perspectives, known as systematic and regional. Accordingly, it has two broad branches: systematic geography and regional geography. Human geography is a branch of systematic geography. It studies the locational and distributional aspects of cultural phenomena, resulting from ever changing human-nature interaction.

Before we know more about human geography, it would be useful to understand its nature and scope. In the following pages, we will study its emergence as a branch of geography, its scope, approaches and present status.

EMERGENCE OF HUMAN GEOGRAPHY AS A FIELD OF STUDY

Age of explorations from approximately the later half of the fifteenth century to the eighteenth century led to appreciable advances in techniques of map making and accumulation of vast information through expeditions undertaken to different parts of the world. The information on geographic facts thus collected were examined, classified and organised by the professional geographers on scientific lines. A good example of this scientific approach is the work of Bernhard Varenius. His *Geographia Generalis* divides the subject of geography into two parts: the general and the special. The former considers the earth as a whole and explains its properties, whereas the latter focuses on the constitution of

individual regions. This idea of division of geography has been in existence since the time of early Greeks. In his treatise on regional geography, Varenius outlined its contents under three sections: Celestial properties, Terrestrial properties and Human properties.

During the nineteenth century, with the rapid development of scientific methods, attempts were made to restrict the scope of geography. The major emphasis was on the study of relief features. It was, perhaps, easier to describe the relatively stable features of the earth than the more variable cultural features. Relief features were measured and tested in various ways, and through this activity a special branch of geography developed. It was originally called *physiography*, but later modified as *geomorphology*. This field of physiography/geomorphology was cultivated at the cost of other sub-fields of geography. Partly as a reaction against this school of geography, which overemphasised physical features, scholars began to examine the relationship between humans and their natural environment. Thus originated the school of human geography.

The development of human geography as a special branch of geographic study was stimulated in the later half of the nineteenth century with the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859. Buckle in *History of Civilisation of England* (1881) supported this new field by devoting a considerable portion of the book on the dependence of humans upon their environment. Friedrich Ratzel's book *Anthropogeographie* is considered a landmark in history for giving human-centric orientation

to geography. Ratzel, known as the father of modern human geography, defined it as the synthetic study of relationship between human societies and the earth's surface. Similarly, Ellen C. Semple, disciple of Ratzel, defined human geography as the study of 'the changing relationship between the unresting man and the unstable earth'. French geographer Vidal de la Blache's classic work entitled *Principles de Geographie Humaine* emphasised that human geography provides a new understanding of 'interrelationship between the earth and the man'. It synthesises the knowledge of the physical laws governing our earth and the relations between the living beings inhabiting it.

The role of humans vis-à-vis nature is both active and passive. Humans continue to act and react. The story of human progress both in space and time, is a process of humans' adaptation to their geographical milieu. E. Huntington defined human geography as the study of relation of geographic environment to human activities and qualities. Thus, human-environment relationship is dynamic rather than static. Jean Brunhes, another French geographer, paraphrased it as retrogression and progression of human phenomena, which like all terrestrial phenomena, never remains stationary. So, we must study them in evolution.

Human geography has been defined by different scholars at different times. The early scholars, such as Aristotle, Buckle, Humboldt, and Ritter focused on the influence of land upon history. Later on, in the works of Ratzel and Semple, the thrust shifted to examination of the question how physical environment influenced the human activities? Blache viewed ecological and terrestrial unity as the two principles of human geography. Huntington emphasised upon the influence of climate upon society, culture and history. It can be seen from the above discussions that in all the works the major thrust has been on the study of human society in relation to its habitat/environment.

SCOPE OR SUBJECT MATTER

Human geography is a very vast subject. It has its origin in some countries from the social

sciences, studying people in relation to space and place, and in others from physical sciences and in still others from earth sciences focusing on its links with the physical environment. The American geographers, Finch and Trewartha, divided the subject matter of human geography into two broad sections: physical or natural environment and cultural or man-made environment.

Physical or natural environment consists of the physical or natural features and phenomena such as surface configuration climate, drainage and natural resources, such as soils, minerals, water and forests. *Cultural environment* includes man-made features and phenomena on the earth such as population and human settlements as well as features associated with agriculture, manufacturing and transportation etc.

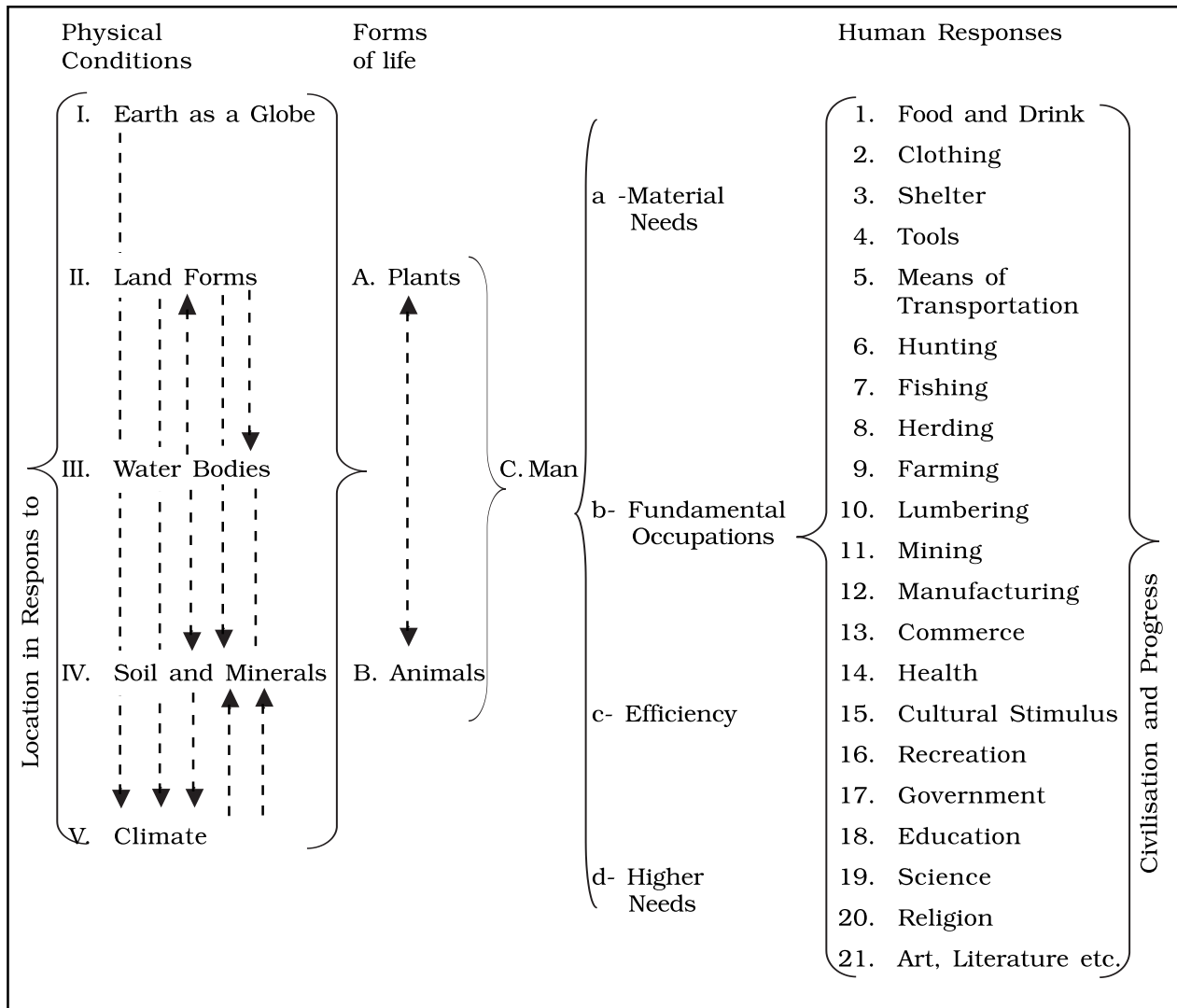
According to Ellsworth Huntington (1956), human geography is concerned with the physical conditions and the human responses to the physical environment (Table 1.1).

Vidal de la Blache's work on human geography deals with the world-wide distribution of population and settlements; types and distribution of elements of civilisation and development of various forms of transportation. All these elements profoundly modify the landscape. Jean Brunhes in his book divided human geography into a study of three groups and six types of essential facts : those connected with the unproductive occupation of the soil – (i) *houses*, and – (ii) *highways*; those connected with the conquest of the plant and animal worlds – (iii) *cultivated plants*, and – (iv) *domesticated animals*; and those pertaining to destructive occupation of the soil – (v) *destruction of plants and animals*, and – (vi) *exploitation of minerals*.

Besides, the above stated essential facts, human geography is also concerned with the study of the following aspects of human environment.

Geography of the First Vital Necessities: Fundamental physiological needs — food, shelter and clothing.

Table 1.1 : Elements of Human Geography According to Huntington



Note : The arrows and their dotted extension indicate the chief ways in which the physical conditions influence one another; climate, for example, is influenced by the earth's spherical shape, by the form of the land, and by bodies of water such as oceans. It in turn influences the form of the earth's surface, the quality of the soil, and the nature of mineral deposits. It also influences bodies of water ... but this relationship and certain others have been omitted to avoid crowding.

Geography of the Utilisation of the Earth Resources : The material things which satisfy the prime needs of human life — agricultural, pastoral and industrial activities.

Economic and Social Geography : Production, transportation and exchange of goods and services and geography of the culture.

Political Geography and Geography of History: Frontiers, territories, routes, groups of states etc.

The subject matter of human geography continues to grow and has widened considerably over the period. From an earlier thrust on cultural and economic aspects in the early twentieth century, several new branches emerged out of it to study emerging issues and problems like political dimensions, social relevance, urbanisation and urban systems, health and social well-being, gender, inequality, and public policy, to name a few.

In doing so, human geography has become not only more integrative and inter-disciplinary in nature but has also incorporated several new approaches into its fold. It gives to other social sciences the necessary spatial and systems viewpoint that they otherwise lack. At the same time, human geography draws on other social sciences in the analysis identified with its sub-fields, such as behavioural, political, economic or social geography.

Human geography, in line with geography as a whole, has three closely linked tasks to perform:

- (i) The spatial or locational analysis of man-made phenomena on the earth's surface. It refers to numbers, characteristics, activities and distributions. These aspects are effectively expressed through maps. Factors that lead to particular spatial pattern are explained. Alternative spatial patterns of greater importance and having higher equity or efficiency are proposed. The focus is on the spatial variations between areas (horizontal bonds). The relationship can be seen in two ways, that is the impact of people on regional habitat (land), as well as of land on people.
- (ii) Ecological analysis, where the focus is on studying human-environment linkages (vertical bonds) within a geographical region.
- (iii) Regional synthesis wherein the spatial and ecological approaches are fused. Regions are identified. The aim is to understand the internal morphology, ecological linkages and external relations.

This relationship is explored at different spatial scales, ranging from macro level (i.e. major world regions) through meso scale to micro level i.e. individual or groups and their immediate surroundings. Its emphasis is on people. Where are they? Why are they there? What they are like? How they interact over space? and What kind of cultural landscapes they create upon the natural landscapes they occupy? The answers to various questions are to be derived from the fundamental approach of a geographer: Who is Where, and How and Why did it get there? And, of course, we also

want to know what it means to us, to our children and to the future generations?

APPROACHES TO STUDY HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

The human-environment relationships, the main focus of human geography, has been interpreted in several ways. The post Darwinian period has witnessed several new approaches adapted to examine this relationship. Over time, approaches to study the subject matter of human geography have been changing. These changes are not exclusive to human geography but are in tune with the changes taking place within the overall domain of geography. These trends are discussed below.

Determinism refers to the point of view supporting environmental control on human action. Accordingly, history, culture, life-style and stage of development of a social group, society or nation are exclusively or largely governed by the physical factors (like, terrain, climate, fauna and flora) of the environment. The determinists generally, consider humans as passive agents, influenced by the environmental factors, which determine their attitude, decision making and life style. The first attempts to explain the physical features and the traits of various ethnic groups and their cultures with reference to the influence of natural conditions were made by the Greek and the Roman scholars including Hippocrates, Aristotle, Herodotus and Strabo.

The deterministic concept in geographic literature on human geography continued through the works of scholars, such as Al-Masudi, Al-Idrisi and Ibn-Khaldun, Kant, Humboldt, Ritter, and Ratzel well up to the early twentieth century. This concept grew widespread particularly in the United States from the writings of E.C. Semple and Ellsworth Huntington, who were considered its great exponents.

The philosophy of determinism was attacked mainly on two grounds. First, it had become clear under definite conditions and circumstances that similar physical environments do not produce the same

responses. For example, the Greek and the Roman civilisations flourished in the Mediterranean climate. But similar civilisation did not develop in similar climatic conditions in Australia, South Africa, Chile or California. Second, although environment influences humans, they also influence the environment, and the cause and effect relationship of determinism is too simple to explain this.

Consequently the idea that humans are controlled by nature was rejected and other geographers stressed the fact that humans were free to choose. When the emphasis is firmly placed on humans rather than nature, and humans are seen as an active force rather than a passive one, the approach is that of *possibilism*. Lucian Febvre, the first to use the word *possibilism*, wrote that "there is no necessities, but every where possibilities; and man as master of these possibilities is the judge of their use". Although the concept of possibilism had become quite popular after the World War I, it was Vidal de la Blache who advocated and developed systematically the school of possibilism. He opined that the life styles of people were the product and reflections of a civilisation, representing the integrated result of physical, historical and social influences governing human's relations with his habitat. He tried to explain differences between groups in identical or similar environment and pointed out that these differences were not the product of the dictates of physical environment but the outcome of other factors, such as variations in attitudes, values and habits. This concept became the basic philosophy of the school of *possibilism*. The supporters of possibilism saw in the physical environment a series of possibilities for humans to exploit it for their benefits. It was realised that the cultural context and technological advancement of humans determined how they will use the environment. The regions of extreme climate and terrain were perhaps excluded from it.

Although the nature has offered humans a lot of scope for development, it has also set the ultimate limits, crossing of which would mean a point of no return. Hence, the possibilistic

approach invited criticism from many of the contemporary thinkers. Griffith Taylor, while criticising the possibilism, put forward the concept of neo-determinism. He stressed that a geographer's role is essentially that of an advisor and not to interpret the nature's plans.

RECENT CHANGES

The post World War II period has witnessed rapid developments in all fields including the academic world. Geography, in general, and human geography, in particular, has responded by way of addressing the contemporary problems and issues concerning the human society. The conventional approaches were found to be inadequate to comprehend the new issues pertaining to human welfare, such as poverty, inequalities both social and regional, social well-being, and empowerment. As a result, the new approaches were adopted from time to time. For example, *positivism* appeared as a new approach in the mid-fifties, which laid stress on the use of quantitative techniques to induce greater objectivity in analysing the geographical pattern of various phenomena under study. Scholars such as B.J.L. Berry, David Harvey and William Bunge are among some of the proponents of this approach. This approach was later on criticised for laying excessive emphasis on so called "sterile" quantitative techniques rather than analysing such aspects of people, such as decision-making, beliefs and fears. As a reaction of positivism emerged *behavioural* approach, a concept borrowed from psychology. In this approach emphasis was placed on cognitive power of human beings.

The growing inequalities among different regions of the world and within countries along with different social groups especially under the impact of capitalism led to the emergence of *welfare* approach in human geography. Issues like poverty, regional inequalities in development, urban slums, and deprivation became the focus of geographical studies. D. M. Smith and David Harvey are some of the well known advocates of this approach. The focus of the welfare approach is on "who gets

what, where and how”? The “who” refers to the area under review, what refers to the various goods (and bads) enjoyed or endured by the population in the form of commodity, services, environmental quality and so on. The “where” reflects the fact that living standards differ according to area of residence. The “how” refers to the process whereby the observed differences arise. The welfare approach now has merged with other lines of inquiry.

Humanism is yet another approach in human geography that lays emphasis on the

central and active role of humans in terms of human awareness, human agency, human consciousness and human creativity. In other words, this approach is on the self of an human being.

The rapid emergence of new approaches in human geography in the last four decades is mainly due to a dramatic shift in human geography from description of the pattern of human phenomena to the understanding of the processes working behind these patterns. In the process human geography has become more humane.

Exercises

Review Questions

1. Answer the following questions briefly:
 - (i) Who wrote *Geographia Generalis*?
 - (ii) When did human geography emerge as a special branch of geographic study?
 - (iii) Why Friedrich Ratzel's book *Anthropogeographie* is considered a landmark?
 - (iv) Name the French geographer, who wrote *Principles de Geographie Humaine*.
 - (v) Which six types of essential facts in human geography were mentioned by Jean Brunhes?
 - (vi) What approach was followed by Lucian Febvre and Vidal de la Blache to study human geography?
2. Distinguish between:
 - (i) Determinism and Possibilism;
 - (ii) Positivism and Humanism.
3. Discuss the development of human geography ever since its appearance as a distinct field of study.
4. Explain how human geography in the early twentieth century has become more integrative and interdisciplinary?
5. “Human geography in the post World War II period has responded to the contemporary problems and issues of the human society.” Explain.