

Chapter 1 – Human Geography (Nature & Scope)

The earth comprises two major components: nature (physical environment) and life forms including human beings.

Physical geography studies physical environment and human geography studies “the relationship between the physical/natural and the human worlds, the spatial distributions of human phenomena and how they come about, the social and economic differences between different parts of the world”.

The core concern of geography as a discipline is to understand the earth as home of human beings and to study all those elements which have sustained them. Thus, emphasis is on study of nature and human beings.

We often talk of the ‘face’ of the earth, ‘eye’ of the storm, ‘mouth’ of the river, ‘snout’ (nose) of the glacier, ‘neck’ of the isthmus and ‘profile’ of the soil. Similarly, regions, villages, towns have been described as ‘organisms’. German geographers describe the ‘state/country’ as a ‘living organism’. Networks of road, railways and water ways have often been described as “arteries of circulation”.

Human Geography Defined

- “Human geography is the synthetic study of relationship between human societies and earth’s surface”.

Ratzel

Synthesis has been emphasised in the above definition.

- “Human geography is the study of “the changing relationship between the unresting man and the unstable earth.”

Ellen C. Semple

Dynamism in the relationship is the keyword in Semple’s definition.

- “Conception resulting from a more synthetic knowledge of the physical laws governing our earth and of the relations between the living beings which inhabit it”.

Paul Vidal de la Blach

Human geography offers a new conception of the interrelationships between earth and human beings.

Nature of Human Geography

Human geography studies the inter-relationship between the physical environment and socio-cultural environment created by human beings through mutual interaction with each other.

The elements of physical environments are landforms, soils, climate, water, natural vegetation and diverse flora and fauna and on the other hands the elements created by human beings are houses, villages, cities, road-rail networks, industries, farms, ports, items of our daily use and all other elements of material culture have been created by human beings using the resources provided by the physical environment.

While, the inter-relationship between them means how humans has modified the physical environment which in turn impacted human lives to a great extent.

Note: By modification we mean how humans created farms on bare lands, created rail networks despite uneven rough terrain.

Naturalisation of Humans and Humanisation of Nature

Human beings interact with their physical environment with the help of technology. Technology indicates the level of cultural development of society.

Human beings were able to develop technology after they developed better understanding of natural laws. For example, the understanding of concepts of friction and heat helped us discover fire. Similarly, understanding of the secrets of DNA and genetics enabled us to conquer many diseases. We use the laws of aerodynamics to develop faster planes.

All these are fine examples why knowledge about Nature is extremely important to develop technology and technology loosens the shackles of environment on human beings.

In the early stages of their interaction with their natural environment humans were greatly

influenced by it. They adapted to the dictates of Nature. This is so because the level of technology was very low and the stage of human social development was also primitive.

This type of interaction between primitive human society and strong forces of nature was termed as **environmental determinism**.

At that stage of very low technological development, we can imagine the presence of a naturalised human, who listened to Nature, was afraid of its fury and worshipped it.

As time went by, the people begin to understand their environment and the forces of nature in more better manner which made humans to develop better and more efficient technology. They move from a state of necessity to a state of freedom. They create possibilities with the resources obtained from the environment.

The imprints of human activities are created everywhere like health resorts on highlands, huge urban sprawls, fields, orchards and pastures in plains and rolling hills, ports on the coasts, oceanic routes on the oceanic surface and satellites in the space. These all were possible only after knowing the nature's law and then creating the necessary tools.

The earlier scholars termed this as **possibilism**. Nature provides opportunities and human beings make use of these and slowly nature gets humanised and starts bearing the imprints of human endeavour.

A geographer, Griffith Taylor introduced another concept which reflects **a middle path (Madhyam Marg)** between the two ideas of **environmental determinism and possibilism**. He termed it as **Neodeterminism or stop and go determinism**.

It means that possibilities can be created within the limits which do not damage the environment and there should be accountability. For example: if a company cuts down the trees for wood, for every tree that cuts down company must plant a tree and further there should be a check by authority on over

utilisation of resources, there should be some short of accountability for the damages that occur.

The neo-determinism conceptually attempts to bring a balance nullifying the 'either' 'or' dichotomy.

Human Geography through the Corridors of Time

The process of adaptation, adjustment with and modification of the environment started with the appearance of human beings over the surface of the earth in different ecological niches.

Thus, if we imagine the beginning of human geography with the interaction of environment and human beings, it has its roots deep in history.

Earlier there was little interaction between different societies and the knowledge about each other was limited. Travellers and explorers used to disseminate information about the areas of their visits.

Navigational skills were not developed there were no GPS or any communication line through which travellers would find information about the particular place hence they always went to places which were known to mankind and avoided unexplored regions because of danger.

The late fifteenth century witnessed attempts of explorations in Europe and slowly the myths and mysteries about countries and people started to open up. The colonial period provided impetus to further explorations in order to access the resources of the regions and to obtain inventorised information.

The intention here is not to present an in-depth historical account but to make you aware of the processes of steady development of human geography.

The summarised table will introduce you to the broad stages and the thrust of human geography as a sub-field of geography.

Table 1.1: Broad Stages and Thrust of Human Geography

Period	Approaches	Broad Features
Early Colonial period	Exploration and description	Imperial and trade interests prompted the discovery and exploration of new areas. An encyclopaedic description of the area formed an important aspect of the geographer's account.
Later Colonial period	Regional analysis	Elaborate description of all aspects of a region were undertaken. The idea was that all the regions were part of a whole, i.e. (the earth); so, understanding the parts in totality would lead to an understanding of the whole.
1930s through the inter-War period	Areal differentiation	The focus was on identifying the uniqueness of any region and understanding how and why it was different from others.
Late 1950s to the late 1960s	Spatial organisation	Marked by the use of computers and sophisticated statistical tools. Laws of physics were often applied to map and analyse human phenomena. This phase was called the quantitative revolution. The main objective was to identify mappable patterns for different human activities.
1970s	Emergence of humanistic, radical and behavioural schools	Discontentment with the quantitative revolution and its dehumanised manner of doing geography led to the emergence of three new schools of thought of human geography in the 1970s. Human geography was made more relevant to the socio-political reality by the emergence of these schools of thought. Consult the box below to know a little bit more about these schools of thought.
1990s	Post-modernism in geography	The grand generalisations and the applicability of universal theories to explain the human conditions were questioned. The importance of understanding each local context in its own right was emphasised.

Fields and Sub-fields of Human Geography

Human geography attempts to explain the relationship between all elements of human life and the space they occur over. Thus, human geography assumes a highly inter-disciplinary nature. It develops close interface with other sister disciplines in social sciences in order to understand and explain human elements on the surface of the earth.

With the expansion of knowledge, new subfields emerge and it has also happened to human geography, they are:

Table 1.2: Human Geography and Sister Disciplines of Social Sciences

Fields of Human Geography	Sub-fields	Interface with Sister Disciplines of Social Sciences
Social Geography	—	Social Sciences – Sociology
	Behavioural Geography	Psychology
	Geography of Social Well-being	Welfare Economics
	Geography of Leisure	Sociology
	Cultural Geography	Anthropology
	Gender Geography	Sociology, Anthropology, Women's Studies
	Historical Geography	History
Urban Geography	—	Epidemiology
	—	Urban Studies and Planning
Political Geography	—	Political Science
	Electoral Geography	Psephology
	Military Geography	Military Science
Population Geography	—	Demography
Settlement Geography	—	Urban/Rural Planning
	—	—
Economic Geography	—	Economics
	Geography of Resources	Resource Economics
	Geography of Agriculture	Agricultural Sciences
	Geography of Industries	Industrial Economics
	Geography of Marketing	Business Studies, Economics, Commerce
	Geography of Tourism	Tourism and Travel Management
Geography of International Trade	International Trade	

The mentioned list is large and comprehensive but It reflects the expanding realm of human geography.
