Dichotomy and Dualism in Geography(General Geography versus Regional Geography) by S. Manna, Department of Geography, Narajole Raj College

General Geography versus Regional Geography

The thinking and knowledge of human being is always dynamic which developed over a period of time under the influence of society, culture, geography, climate and peer group interaction. All these things can be best understood by analyzing concept of regional synthesis that sphere of geography is not homogenous and is guided by various sister disciplines which over period of time create dichotomy and dualism.

Dichotomy means branching of subject into 2 parts- Dualism also stands for dichotomy. Geographers right from classical period have been dividing subject into 2:- Human and physical geography. Over a period of time, several dichotomies emerged out of which some are General Vs Regional geography, Physical Vs Human geography, Historical Vs Contemporary geography, Study of formal sites Vs Study of functional sites, Deterministic Vs Spatial/Possibilistic geography.

Dualism and dichotomies in geography

1. General Geography versus Regional Geography
2. Physical Geography versus Human Geography
3. Determinism and Possibilism
4. Quantitative versus Behavioral Geography
5. Idiographic versus Nomothetic
6. Inductive Approach versus Deductive Approach
7. Modernism versus post-modernism

General Geography versus Regional Geography Bernhard Varen, aka Verenius introduced the dualism of general (Universal) geography and special (particular) geography, which led to the development of ‘systematic’ and ‘regional’ geography. Thus, Varenius was the first scholar who laid the foundation of the dichotomy of systematic vs. regional geography.

Major Difference Between General Geography Versus Regional Geography:

The dichotomy between systematic and regional geography was essentially rooted in another dualism that existed in the approaches to study geography. This dualism was between the Idiographic or Inductive Approach and the Nomothetic or Deductive Approach. The dichotomy between the two approaches may be explicated as—the idiographic or empirical approach did not seek to develop laws but mainly focused on the description of particular places in the contextbof their lands, seas or places and attempt to find its relation with other places. The nomothetic

ordeductive approach on the other hand, sought to establish laws and made general deductions based on those laws.

The issue of general geography versus regional geography was most probably raised by Bernhard Varen, known as Varenius, in the 17th century.

This period is often termed as the classical period of the modern geographical thought. Varenius recognized the two main divisions of geography—general or universal and special or particular. This branching of the subject is known as general geography versus particular (special) geography. Systematic geography deals with one or a few aspects of the human environment or the human population and study their varying performance in the world or over a predefined geographical space. General geography, as viewed by Varenius, was concerned with the formulation of general laws, principles and generic concepts. It was believed to be the noblest of ends of scientific enquiry in the initial development of geography.

Gradually, all studies of a generalistic nature acquired the status of systematic geography, while the special or particular studies were described as regional geography. Systematic geography drew inspiration from the existing systematic sciences with a search for the universal and generic concepts. Regional geography, on the other hand, has not moved out of the ambit of particular studies. Regional geography in the traditional sense seeks to bring together in an aerial setting various matters which are treated separately in topical (systematic) geography. Regional geography is the study of the geography of regions.

Regional geography is often distinguished by its interest in “a specific situation in a particular locality” and has been hailed as “the highest form of the geographer’s art” (Hart, 1982). In brief, general geography deals with the whole world as a unit. It was, however, mainly restricted to physical geography which could be understood through natural laws. On the contrary, special geography was primarily intended as a description of individual countries and world regions. It was difficult to establish laws in special geography where human beings are involved, whose behaviour is always unpredictable. Special geography, nevertheless, helped in the formulation of hypothesis and structured ideas.

Dualism in geography was formally introduced in the 17th century which is often described as the classical period of modern geography by the German geographer, Bernhard Varenius. Using the terms of Bartholomew Keckermann a German philosopher, Varenius in his ‘Geographia Generalis’ partitioned geography into-

 Special geography essentially concerned with the description of particular places on the basis of direct observations. This branch of geography was assumed to have great practical importance for governance and commerce.

 General geography based on universally applicable mathematical or astronomical laws.

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Gradually, general geography evolved into systematic geography by incorporating the methods of the systematics sciences, while special geography evolved into regional geography. In simple words, the two may be expounded as----the study of the natural vegetation of the world is a systematic approach while the study of a continent with respect to its natural vegetation, landforms, climate etc. is a regional approach.

The prominent German geographer Alexander von Humboldt followed Varenius and laid the foundation of systematic geography. In his famous book 'Cosmos' Humboldt asserted that geography was meant to understand the 'harmonious unity of the cosmos.' He distinguished between uranography as descriptive astronomy dealing with the celestial bodies and, geography as dealing with the terrestrial part with the prime objective of deciphering the unity that exists in the vast diversity of phenomena. It was not only the natural phenomena that Humboldt spoke of but, he also asserted that there existed unity of the human races as well since all the races had a common origin and therefore, no race was superior to the other. The unity of the phenomena, a viewpoint that Humboldt obtained from the German philosopher Hegel was based on the conjecture that there existed coherence as well as some sort of causality among them. The understanding of that unity was supposed to be derived from an understanding of the unity that subsisted between humans and the physical landscape. In fact, Humboldt opined that like other phenomena, humans were basically a part of the nature. Knowledge of the natural or physical phenomena was categorized by Humboldt as:

 Systematic Sciences: This included sciences like botany, zoology or geology that classified phenomena according to their form and grouped them on the basis of certain commonalities.

 Historical Sciences: This dealt with the development of phenomena over time.

 Geography or Earth Sciences: This concerned itself with the spatial distribution and spatial relationship and interdependence of phenomena. It included all earth phenomena whether organic or inorganic. Humboldt in his Cosmos stressed on his views that, for a comprehensive knowledge of the cosmos it was necessary to pursue systematic studies of particular phenomena and their interrelationship with other phenomena rather than undertaking complete studies of specific areas.

According to Carl Ritter, a contemporary of Humboldt, geography was concerned with 'lokalverhaltnisse' or local conditions which described a spatial unit on the basis of three characteristics---

 topographical, concerned with the delineation of natural divisions on the earth's surface;

 formal, which dealt with the distribution and movement of such phenomena as water, air etc. that constituted the bases of human life;

 material, which dealt with the distribution of biotic life, minerals etc. Ritter provided the above purpose of geography in his famous 'Erdkunde.' It was Ritter who introduced the inductive method in geography. He sought to develop a regional geography for which he used 'erdteile' or continents as his units of study. He was of the idea that all continents had similar physical features and thus divided each continent into a highland core drained by major rivers of the land and, a low-lying coastland at the periphery.

After Varenius, the leading German scholar—Alexander von Humboldt—spelt out the difference between systematic and regional geography. Humboldt divided the subject matter of geography into uranography and geography. Uranography, according to him, is the descriptive astronomy, while geography deals with the interrelationship of phenomena that exist together in an area. He believed in inductive method and emphasized the importance of empirical method of research. While categorically stressing the value of generalization in science, Humboldt writes:

The most important aim of all physical sciences is this, to recognize unity in diversity….to grasp nature's essence under the cover of outward appearances….the purpose of indicate the manner in which natural science can be endowed with a higher purpose through which all phenomena and energies are revealed as one entity.

This embodied the logical process of transition from the particular studies of the 'single aspect' to the general aspects underlying them and revealing the 'nature's essence'. He made comparative study of different geographical regions, steppe grasslands and the arid regions to ascertain the peculiarities of the various parts of the earth surface. Thus, Humboldt also recognized the dualism of systematic versus regional geography.

Carl Ritter—a contemporary of Humboldt—was a teleologist. He stressed the need for a study of natural phenomena 'as a whole, as in parts' in order to comprehend the 'inherent plan'. Although he was convinced that there were laws, he was in no hurry to establish them. He conceived geography as an empirical science rather than one based on deduction from rational principles or a priori theory. He emphasized the fact that there is a coherence in the special arrangement of terrestrial phenomena.

Areal phenomena are so interrelated as to give rise to the uniqueness of the areas as individual units. In brief, according to Ritter, geography was concerned with objects on the earth as they exist together in an area. He studied areas synthetically, i.e., in their totality. He believed in the centrality of regional geography. He felt that geography must rise above a mere description of a multitude of facts about a particular phenomenon.

The goal of geography should be, according to Ritter, "…….. to get away from mere description to the law of the thing described; to reach not a mere enumeration of facts and figures,

but the connection of place with place and the laws which bind together local and general phenomena of the earth's surface".

Ritter's ideas on the 'wholeness' of things were in accordance with the writings of W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), whose attitudes amounted to an attempt to comprehend the entire universe, to know the infinite and to see all things in God. The scientific stance of Ritter was teleological (Greek teleo = purpose). In brief, he studied the workings of nature in order to understand the purpose behind its order. He did not regard the shape of continents as accidental but rather as determined by God so that their form and location enabled them to play the role designed by God in the development of man.

Ritter combined a basic teleological standpoint with a most critical scientific precision. "My system builds on facts, not on philosophical arguments", he said in a letter. The collection of facts was not an end in itself; the systematization and comparison of data, region by region, would lead to a recognition of unity apparent diversity. The plans of God, which give purpose and meaning, could only be discovered by taking into account all facts and relationships in the world as objectively as possible.

In the light of the scholarly attempts of Humboldt and Ritter, the scientific organization of knowledge completes itself in stages: first an accurate and detailed inventory of all facts about a single aspect is prepared, and secondly, these facts are integrated with a coherent and intelligible body of knowledge where facts about some particular aspects are seen not as specific facts but as parts of general interrelated system and are "subsumed under a number of laws" which express a genetic relationship. To quote Humboldt:

In proportion as laws admit of more general application as sciences mutually enrich each other, and by their extension become connected together in more numerous and more intimate relations, the development of general truths may be given with conciseness devoid of superficiality. On being first examined, all phenomena appeared to be isolated and it is only by the result of multiplicity of observations, combined with reasons, that we are able to trace the mutual relations existing between them.

The above lines from Humboldt reveal the essential character of post-renaissance view of geography. Humboldt and Ritter were inspired by an overriding concern for the universal for the then contemporary science. The contemporary science in astronomy and physical sciences was characterized by the proliferation of universally applicable laws. Geography could not remain immune to the prevailing tendencies.

Thus, Humboldt was seriously engaged in the development of systematic physical geography, while Ritter, to a considerable extent, was a regional geographer who gave weight to man as an important component of the physical surroundings.

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After Carl Ritter, Ferdinand von Richthofen defined geography. In his opinion, the purpose of geography was to focus attention on the diverse phenomena that occur in interrelationship on the surface of the earth. The methodology he suggested for the study of geography was that the elements of physical setting of a region be discussed and then the adjustment of man in that setting be examined.

For a substantial period, it remained the basic pattern of geographical studies not only in Germany but also in other parts of the world. Richthofen also emphasized the point that regional geography must be descriptive to highlight the salient features of a region. Moreover, it should try to seek regularities of occurrence and patterns of such unique features to formulate hypotheses and to explain the observed characteristics. General geography, he felt, deals with the spatial distribution of individual phenomenon in the world.

Geography after Humboldt, Ritter and Richthofen in Europe and America was dominated by Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904). Before Ratzel, the foundation of systematic geography was laid by Humboldt and that of regional geography by Ritter. Ratzel largely used the deductive method and compared the life-styles of different tribes and nations. In his anthropological studies, he liked to proceed with a priori hypothesis and laws and applied them to specific cases. He was obsessed by the concept of genesis of things rather than their interdependence. He applied Darwin's concept to human societies.

This analogy suggested that groups of human beings must struggle to survive in particular environments as much as plant and animal organisms do. This marked a departure from the integrative morphological approach of Humboldt.

After Ratzel, Alfred Hettner—a leading German scholar— claimed that geography is an idiographic (regional) rather than monothetic (general) science. In his opinion, the distinctive subject of geography was knowledge of the earth areas as these differ from each other. He considered man as an integral part of nature of an area. His approach was, however, deductive giving more importance to elements of physical environment.

The inductive method and empirical research got revived in France. Vidal de Lablache discarded the Ratzelian deductive approach and extensively employed specific studies (pays) for drawing conclusions of a general nature. In actual practice his efforts led to the development of regional geography, which made the understanding of particular and unique attributes the most cherished goal of geographical enquiry.

Vidal de Lablache, in his works, attempted a harmonious blending of physical and human features and tried synthesis of pays. He was convinced that small regions (pays) are the ideal units to study and to train geographers in geographical studies. According to Vidal, man and nature are inseparable, and it is not possible to distinguish the influence of man on nature from that of nature

on man. The two influences fuse. The area on which such an intimate relationship between man and nature has developed through the centuries constitutes a region.

The study of such regions, each one of which is unique, should be the task of a geographer. He, therefore, argued for regional geography and against systematic geography as the core of the discipline. Vidal's method, which was inductive and historical, was best suited to regions which were 'local' in the sense of being somewhat isolated from the world around them and dominated by an agricultural way of life.

These circumstances favoured development of local relations in architecture, agricultural practices and a general way of life; the communities lived in such close association with nature that they might be self-sufficient in majority of goods. Vidal advised geographers to carry out research in folk museums and collections and to investigate agricultural equipment which had been used in the past in order to study the individuality of development of a region.

Vidal's work, despite the breakdown of the self-sufficient regional economy, has been and still is a great inspiration to a vital tradition in geography, that of the regional monograph. Owing to these factors, Vidal argued for regional geography as the core of the discipline of geography. To quote Lablache:

Human societies like those of plants and animal world are composed of different elements subject to the influence of environment. No' one knows what winds brought them together, but they are living together side by side in a region which has gradually put its stamp upon them. Some societies have long been part of the environment, but others are in process of formation, continuing to recruit numbers and to be modified day by day.

As is clear from the above, Vidal advocated the principle of 'terrestrial whole'. He believed that the earth and its inhabitants stand in the closer reciprocal relations, and one cannot be truly presented in all its relationships without the other.

Another French geographer Reclus, while giving a precise picture of world societies, asserted that man is not the product of his environment but an important component of it. "Man may modify his dwelling places to suit his own purpose; he may overcome nature."

The later part of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th century have been characterized by an overwhelming development of specific knowledge with very little or no concern for 'integrative overviews' revealing the generic relationships of universal relevance. Undoubtedly, this phase enriched the subject but it also revealed the inherent weakness of the geographical methodology for the specific and the particular, and its failure to rise above mere description of the individual aspect to a level at which cognition of the general features becomes possible. Admittedly, it did not always succeed in relieving itself from the grooves of specialized knowledge in its search for laws and generic concepts.

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Richard Hartshorne stressed on a real differentiation (regional geography). In the post-Second World War period, geography was essentially ideographic (regional) and was articulated through the art of geographical description a commitment to fieldwork, and the integration of physical geography and human geography within the study of particular landscape.

The post-Second World War period is characterized by quantitative revolution in the subject. It has developed new conceptual frameworks leading to the emergence of a location theory which seeks for new order in the distribution of phenomena in space in their interlink ages.

The foregoing description gives a historical background of the dichotomies of systematic or general versus special or regional geography. The approaches adopted by the scholars of systematic and regional geography are described hereunder.

As stated at the outset, systematic geography deals with the universal laws and generic concepts. Systematic or general geography is essentially analytical and make use of generic concepts, whereas regional geography is necessarily synthetic and deals with unique situations and their peculiarities. Systematic geography, moreover, deals with the whole world as a unit.

For example, if we take the patterns of distribution of temperature, rainfall, vegetation, minerals, crops and population, and examine them at the world level or continent wise, it would be a case of systematic geography. In contrast to this, if we study landforms, climatic variables, soils, vegetation minerals, fauna and flora, and superimpose these physical factors on the cultural landscape or on any of the elements of socio-cultural aspect, this would be a case of regional or special geography.

To illustrate this point, Figure 9.1 has been plotted. In this figure, the rows show the approach of study of systematic geography, and columns show the approach of study of regional geography, i.e., if we study the types of soils in various continents, it is an example of systematic geography, while if we take a particular continent or a region of it and superimpose all the physical and socio-economic variables, it would highlight the peculiarities of that region. This synthetic picture, revealing the special features of the region, is a case of regional geography.

Further reveals various branches of the subject. As these branches of general geography are also combined into regional geography, it can be seen that these are the two main aspects of the subject. The figure clearly shows how the combinations of phenomena and parts of the earth's surface can give regional or general geography.

Contemporary Geography Special Geography

The dichotomy of systematic versus regional geography seems to be quite logical. In the opinion of some scholars, there may exist several geographies rather than one. In fact, geography has been defined by different geographers differently. These definitions range from landscapes, places,

space, location, man-nature interaction, man-earth system, human ecology and areal differentiation of interrelated phenomena on the earth surface to man.

Thus, geography is multidimensional not only in the number of topics and regions of the world which can be included in one study but also in the approach of study. Geography is multivariate not only in its combination of natural sciences, social sciences, and mathematics but also in the ways different geographers may combine these elements. Owing to this multivariate nature of the discipline, even regional geographers now recoil from describing all the phenomena at one place which they discover are interconnected. At a time when regional description is in backwater, it may be necessary to conceive general geography, compage regional geography, and full descriptive regional geography as three quite separate branches. Compage geography will not include phenomena which are simply characteristic of a place unless they show some logical arrangement in space and connections with other important phenomena.

The term compage was introduced to geography by Derwent Whittlesey (1956) in an attempt to give greater precision to several aspects of regional geography. The central idea of compage is that all the features of the physical, biotic and societal environments are functionally associated with the human occupancy of the earth. Yet, thinking of geography's wider function and obligation to educate laymen, as distinct from professional geographers, full, orderly regional description may still be required outside the profession.

More stress on regional geography is also not correct, because no two places, no two groups of people are exactly alike in any place at any point of time. In the words of Berry, "the regional and general geography are not different approaches, but are just the two extremes of a continuum", which he likens to a three dimensional matrix—the earth, social and geometrical. Geographical studies do not fall into systematic (topical) and regional groups but are distributed along a gradual continuum from topical studies of the most elementary integration at one end of regional studies of a most complete integration at the other.

All material objects and phenomena which exist in the real world and have been observed by us have two entities—individual or the particular and the general or the universal. They have particular characteristics which are peculiar to them and make them unique; they also have some general features which are common to other objects of the same type and are, therefore, universal in nature.

It is their individuality which makes them different from other objects. These individual objects also have certain recurrent features in common which link them to a group of objects with which they have general relations.

It is, therefore, important to note that the general characteristics exist in, and are seen through, the particular and the individual characteristics and are not independent of them. The fact is the two are mutually interpenetrative. The general becomes true in the particular and the particular becomes true in the general. …the interrelation between the individual, particular and universal lies in the

fact that they are connected, in the fact that the individual cannot exist without the universal and that the universal cannot exist without the individual, that the individual under certain conditions may become both particular and universal.

To quote V.A. Anuchin, the Soviet scholar:

One can trace definite cycles in the history of world science. Periods when general absorbs the particular and succeeded by those during which the particular destroys the general and a single science disintegrates into an endless number of branches. This later differentiation leads to great extensions of knowledge but results in less of integrative overviews of science which show that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Contemporary geography is a victim of such a phase of differentiation.

Alfred Hettner distinguished between systematic geography as that which was interested in formulating general laws and theories and, regional geography as concerned with the study of peculiarities in which the generalisations were tested to improvise on the existing theories. The regional tradition was again revived by the French geographer Vidal de la Blache. He introduced the concept of 'pays' or small local units as ideal units of study for the geographers which could even be used to arrive at general conclusions. He was contested however, by Reclus with his 'Le Terra' that was centered on systematic physical geography.

The dichotomy between systematic and regional geography subsequently led to the Hartshorne-Schaefer debate. While Hartshorne in his 'Nature of Geography' advocated that geography was regional in its essence and put forward his concept of areal differentiation', his views were refuted by Schaefer as 'Hartshorian Orthodoxy' who called for a systematic scientific approach for geographical studies.

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Gradually, general geography evolved into systematic geography by incorporating the methods of the systematics sciences, while special geography evolved into regional geography. In simple words, the two may be expounded as----the study of the natural vegetation of the world is a systematic approach while the study of a continent with respect to its natural vegetation, landforms, climate etc. is a regional approach.

The prominent German geographer Alexander von Humboldt followed Varenius and laid the foundation of systematic geography. In his famous book 'Cosmos' Humboldt asserted that geography was meant to understand the 'harmonious unity of the cosmos.' He distinguished between uranography as descriptive astronomy dealing with the celestial bodies and, geography as dealing with the terrestrial part with the prime objective of deciphering the unity that exists in the vast diversity of phenomena. It was not only the natural phenomena that Humboldt spoke of but, he also asserted that there existed unity of the human races as well since all the races had a common origin and therefore, no race was superior to the other. The unity of the phenomena, a viewpoint that Humboldt obtained from the German philosopher Hegel was based on the conjecture that there existed coherence as well as some sort of causality among them. The understanding of that unity was supposed to be derived from an understanding of the unity that subsisted between humans and the physical landscape. In fact, Humboldt opined that like other phenomena, humans were basically a part of the nature. Knowledge of the natural or physical phenomena was categorized by Humboldt as:

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Thereafter, in the late 19th century, geographers were highly influenced by the Darwinian doctrine and made significant contributions in furthering systematic geography. The most prominent among them were Ferdinand von Richtofen and Friedrich Ratzel.

Richtofen perceived geography in the same line as Humboldt as, the science of the earth's surface as well as the phenomena on it that were causally interrelated with it. According to him, the purpose of systematic geography was to provide an understanding of the interrelationship and causality of phenomena on the earth's surface which could be used for deducing about individual regions as well. He provided a guideline for the systematic study of the earth's surface. Richtofen also differentiated between general or systematic geography as analytic and regressive that was based on general concepts and, special or regional geography as synthetic and descriptive dealing with the unique and peculiar.

Friedrich Ratzel in his 'Anthropogeographie' set a framework for the systematic study of human geography and thus set a new trend in the subject. Prior to him, systematic geography only involved physical geography and, human geography was mainly confined within regional studies. His anthropogeographie was essentially a reflection of the Darwinian viewpoints and emphasized on the concept of natural selection that was used in the natural sciences. Ratzel was of the view that cultural differences of a land were much more prominent than the physical differences. Ratzel's concept of geography was based on two propositions—

-(i) the interrelation of environment and humans and

(ii) the interrelations of humans.

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