Dichotomy and Dualism in Geography (Physical Geography vs Human Geography) by S. Manna, Department of Geography, Narajole Raj College

Physical Geography vs Human Geography

Dichotomy of physical and human geography is as old as discipline of geography itself. The Greeks were probably the first who stated and started dichotomy of physical and human geography.

Hecataeus gave more emphasis to physical geography. Similarly Eratosthenes and Ptolemy gave more importance to physical geography while Strabo and his disciples were in favour of human geography. The scholars who advocated the growth of physical geography are Hecateous, Kant, Humboldt, Darwin, Davis, penck and L.C. king, whereas human geographers such as Herodotus, Ratzel, Miss semple, Huttington, Ritter, Mackinder, Harris, Burges, carl-o-saur and stamp related to study of human geography.

Some writers have regarded it as essential for the justification of the role of geography, while others have argued for it as also for a division of the subject into physical and human geography on the ground that the respective methodologies of physical and human geography must be different.

In studies of natural phenomena, including climatology, meteorology, hydrology, oceanography, geology and landforms, it is possible to use the methods of natural sciences and to draw conclusions with a large measure of scientific precision. The methods of natural science, however, do not lend themselves very well to the study of social and cultural phenomena. Our generalization about human groups must be limited in time and space, and must relate to statements of probability rather than certainty.

Verinus whose Georgraphical Generalis published in 1650 was one of the 1st scholar to suggest that the universal and special laws can be framed in geography. The laws of physical geography can be universal, while the special laws can be framed about human society, is related a work of human geography.

Verinus was the first geographer who divided the geography into general or universal and special or particular. In the opinion of Verinus, general geography deals with the formulation of universal laws which are common for the physical geography, while the spatial/particular geography providing space for regional geography which is more related to human geography as spatial geography can formulate laws/theories only for particular region as well as for human geography.

At the beginning of the 18th century, Immanuel Kant delivered lectures on physical geography at the University of Konigsburg (Germany). He studied the deflection of wind direction resulting from earth’s rotation.

Humboldt, who is considered as the last of the great polymaths, was primarily interested in physical geography. On the other hand, Carl Ritter, the first professor of geography at the Berlin...
Dichotomy and Dualism in Geography (Physical Geography vs Human Geography) by S. Manna, Department of Geography, Narajole Raj College

University, was more inclined towards human geography. Humboldt and Ritter believed that the ultimate aim of research in physical geography was to clarify the unity of nature.

To understand the depth of dichotomy, we may go into historical development of human geography. Ritter and Ratzel were among early geographers who consider man as an important agent to change existing landscape. Vidal de Lablache opined that main objective of geography to study PAYS(region). Pays are ideal units of study and he argued that regional geography is core of discipline of geography.

Reclus laid emphasis on systematic physical geography called La Terre. After Reclus, Darwin gave importance to physical aspect of the discipline while postulating the concepts of struggle and survival. Under these circumstances, Mare Somerville published Physical Geography in 1848. In the second half of the 19th century, geographers concerned themselves more and more with physical geography. They established geomorphology, the study of landforms, which later became the most substantial element in physical geography.

The term ‘geomorphology’ was coined by Albrecht Penck—the German geographer—who was a geologist by training. After doing extensive fieldwork he formulated the principles of ‘landforms evolutions’ and showed how the systematic study of features can be approached from the chorological (regional) point of view. He stressed the importance of relief maps for a systematic study of geography. Later on, Koppen, Davis, Martonne, Mill, Jafferson and Dokuchaive put great emphasis on landforms and climate as the major concerns of geography. In all these studies, man (the most important component of ecosystem) was ignored. It was during this period that Davis put forward the idea of the normal cycle of erosion. Ratzel and Semple also gave greater importance to physical environment which determines the lifestyle of people. Semple asserted that “man is the product of earth surface”.

Huntington, while writing about the march of civilizations, has opined that the shift in their centres was due to the climate and weather conditions. Mackinder, Chisholm and Herbertson also recognized physical geography as the main field of geographers. Thomas Henery Huxley wrote Physiography in 1877. Physiography had a much wider meaning; it may be defined as a description of nature; physical geography (renamed physiography after 1877) became a very popular school subject during the last three decades of the 19th century. The Soviet scientists also conceived geography as the branch of science which deals with geomorphology, pedology, hydrology and meteorology.

This major emphasis on physical geography may be attributed to the fact that at the initial stage of development, geography it was taught by teachers who had geology background. The protagonists of physical geography declared it as the only area in which geographers should contribute.

GEOGRAPHY (U.G), SEM-V I, Paper –C13T: Dichotomy and Dualism in Geography (Physical Geography vs Human Geography)

In the opinion of Wooldridge and East:

It is futile to assert that ‘human’ or ‘social’ geography can be seen in terms of formal categories and universal principles and processes as can physical geography. This imputes to it no inferiority; it is rather to admit that it is infinitely more complex, subtler, more flexible, manifold.

Wrigley has recently commented on the methodological difficulty of “running in harness, as it were, physical geography and social geography”. By accepting the view that explanation in the physical sciences, Wrigley implies the existence of two radically different frameworks for explanatory thinking in geography. In physical geography law statements are of importance, but in human geography such statements are irrelevant. This geographical manifestation of the Weber-Winch thesis regarding laws in the social sciences need not be accepted. Rather, there are strong grounds for rejecting such a view.

It may thus be claimed that laws can be established in both human and physical geography. Some writers dissent in general from this view and claim that laws cannot be established because of multivariate nature of the subject matter, because the number of cases about which one may generalize is often small, and because the occasional exceptional circumstance may have far-reaching consequences.

The real dichotomy of physical versus human geography cannot be understood unless some light is thrown on the historical development of human geography. Ritter and Ratzel were among the first who considered man as an agent who brings change in the landscape. Febvre placed emphasis on the fact that human beings are an element of the ‘landscape’—an element whose activity is incorporated in it, a modifying agent of the environment which ‘humanizes’ it.

He also argued that the same physical factors do not always produce the same effects. In geography, according to Febvre, “we deal with man’s work, man’s calculations, man’s movement, the perpetual ebb and flow of humanity; man not the soil or the climate—is ever in the forefront”. It was Vidal de Lablache who founded the school of human geography. He gave relatively less importance to the elements of physical environment as the major determinants of cultural landscape of a region. Vidal had a clear insight into the weakness of physical geography and the deterministic argument.

He realized the futility of setting man’s natural surroundings in opposition to his social milieu and of regarding one dominating the other. According to Vidal, it is unreasonable to draw boundaries between natural and cultural phenomena; they should be regarded as united and inseparable. In an area of human settlement, nature changes significantly because of the presence of man, and these changes are the greatest where the level of material culture of a community is
Dichotomy and Dualism in Geography (Physical Geography vs Human Geography) by S. Manna, Department of Geography, Narajole Raj College

the highest. Jean Brunhes prepared himself for the conceptual framework of human geography. He developed the principles of activity and interconnection. Later, Albert Demangeon was a strong follower of Vidalian tradition.

In America, Mark Jafferson brought the idea of ‘central places’, ‘the primate city’ and ‘the civilizing rails’ in the field of human and urban geography. In the Soviet Union, D.N. Anuchin followed the principle of ‘economic determinism’.

The dichotomy of physical and human geography was sharpened in later parts of 19th century and 1st half of 20th century. It was under this influence that department of physical geography and also another department by name human geography in western world and also in Asian countries like India.

The basic philosophy of the followers of human geography was to establish a man-nature mutual relationship in which each of the two is dependent on the other. All geographical studies are aimed at developing an understanding of the earth surface and its physical and social phenomena both as spatially varying entities unique in their own way as well as components in a mutually interacting system. The methodology adopted to promote such an understanding differs from field to field and is essentially designed to suit the requirements of the content intended to be studied and the underlying objectives involved there in. The difference in methods employed in different branches of geography may be so vast as to make the very unity of field rather doubtful. For instance, “the difference in methods between studies of climate and of landforms is in many respects greater than the difference between the study of natural vegetation and of cultivation of crops.”

It is evident from the above discussion that the dichotomy of physical geography versus human geography is artificial and illogical. This dualism is the result of historical development of the discipline. In brief, geography does not fall into two groups, i.e., physical and human; these two are just the two extremes of a continuum. Hartshorne argues that if we divide geography into physical and human phenomena, we make the rest of the work illogical.

Thus, we study the effect of physical factors on man and man’s activities on land and not the physiological factor. Therefore, the division into physical and human is the cause of geography being only a partial study. In fact, all geographers realize that we could not possibly explain human choices and actions solely in terms of relationship with the natural environment. For geography, to have any value, the rift between physical and human phenomena must disappear.