**Social Geography: Definition & Study**

The term ‘social geography’ carries with it an inherent confusion. In the popular perception the distinction between social and cultural ge­ography is not very clear. The idea which has gained popularity with the geographers is that social geography is an analysis of social phe­nomena as expressed in space.

However, the term ‘social phenomena’ is in it nebulous and might be interpreted in a variety of ways keeping in view the specific context of the societies at different stages of social evolution in the occidental and the oriental worlds. The term ‘social phenomena’ encompasses the whole framework of human in­teraction with environment, leading to the articulation of social space by diverse human groups in different ways.

The end-product of hu­man activity may be perceived in the spatial patterns manifest in the personality of regions; each pattern acquiring its form under the over­arching influence of social structure. Besides the patterns, the way the social phenomena express themselves in space may become a cause of concern as well. This has attracted scholarly attention, particularly since 1945 when all-embracing changes in the political and economic order of the world started casting their shadows on the global society.

As compared to the other branches of geography social geography has a certain amount of recency. Eyles saw the antecedents of con­temporary social geography in the development of the philosophy of possibilism in the late nineteenth century. The view of social phenom­ena is all-embracing and holistic, based on the totality of human interaction with environment.

**Eyles also visualized social geography as a continuation of the philosophy of Vidal de la Blache and Bobek:**

“…it stressed both the humanistic nature of the geographical world… and the classificatory nature of… human geographical work…”.

Up to 1945, social geography was mainly concerned with the iden­tification of different regions, themselves reflecting geographic patterns of association of social phenomena. In fact, during the twen­ties and the thirties of the twentieth century, social geography started its agenda of research with the study of population as organized in set­tlements, particularly urban settlements.

This was understandable as population in the Anglo-Saxon and American world was overwhelm­ingly concentrated in the urban areas. The process of urbanization had thrown up issues of social concern such as access to civic amenities and housing and the related socio-pathological issues, such as incidence of crime, juvenile delinquency and other expressions of mental ill-health.

Socio-geographical studies of population distribution and ethnic com­position in urban areas emerged as a major trend during this phase. The underlying idea was to examine the social content of the urban space which resulted from coming together of diverse ethnic groups within a city.

The city with its specific functional specialization cast these social groups in its mould, resulting in the assimilation of diverse elements into a universal (Europeanized) urban ethos. However, certain ethno-cultural identities (e.g., Blacks in American cities, North- Africans in France and Asians in Britain) were so strongly defined that they continued to defy the forces of assimilation.

**Defining Social Geography:**

The taxonomy of a discipline, while arising out of its logical system, subsumes within itself the specificities of its intellectual tradition, whereby words and terms acquire specific connotations and nuances of meaning through large-scale usage and social acceptance. But this process of crystallization of the classificatory scheme is greatly distorted if the same term tends to acquire different connotations or different shades of meaning tend to be expressed through the same term.

Such is unfortunately the case with that segment of geographical studies which is termed as Human or Anthropo or Social or Cultural Geography. The term “Human Geography” has a vintage value; it emerged in an embryonic state as an element in the essential dichotomy of geography during the classical period itself and acquired more definitive connotation at the hands of the great French possibility.

The term “Anthropo-Geography”, on the other hand, arose within the rigid and inflexible conceptual framework of environmental determinism. The term “Social Geography” was perhaps introduced by Vallaux in 1908 through his Geographic Sociale: La Mer as a synonym for Human Geography and has since then remained ill-defined—its boundaries fluctuating at an alarming rate.

The term “Cultural Geography” is a gift from the new world, which, while contributing a new item in geographical glossaries, has unfortunately only added to the semantic confusion. A look at some of the standard definitions of these terms would clearly bring out the prevailing lack of clarity on these questions.

Monk house in his A Dictionary of Geography defines Human Geography as the “part of Geography dealing with man and human activities”. In the same volume, the learned scholar states later that Social Geography “is often used simply as the equivalent of Human Geography, or in the U.S.A. as ‘Cultural Geography’, but usually it implies studies of population, urban and rural settlements, and social activities as distinct from political and economic ones”.

Dudley Stamp in the Longman’s Dictionary of Geography defines Cultural Geography as “that which emphasizes human cultures and is commonly equated with human geography”.

It is quite clear that definitions like the above are of no help in demarcating the areas covered by these sub-disciplines of Geography. If there is so much of connotative similarity there is a strong case for discarding two of these terms so that geographers can at least understand each other…. Alternatively, two of these areas of academic work may be viewed as sub-sets of the third one.

—Moonis Raza, A Survey of Research in Geography 1969-72, Bombay: Allied, 1979: 63-64

Moreover, the land market in the Anglo-Saxon and American cities further marginalized these coloured people. This resulted in their spatial segregation in ghettos with all the socio-pathological implications that follow from it. Emphasis on population characteristics remained a major preoccu­pation of social geographers till the fifties of this century. During the fifties, the tradition continued with social geographers mainly preoc­cupied with population characteristics. Social geographers differentiated between regions on the basis of the dominant patterns as social phenomena, mostly based on the population characteristics. Later, under the influence of the rising tide of quantification, social ge­ographers started employing area-specific data in order to discover spatial patterns.

During this phase of development, the major focus of research remained on the analysis of the social data for the cities. So­cial area analysis emerged as the main tool of analysis. One inevitable consequence was that studies in this area, such as factorial ecology, made social geographic research dependent on the theories of human ecology.

As against this Emrys Jones’ study of Belfast gave due consid­eration to the role of values, meanings and sentiments in locational activity. It may, however, be pointed out that any study of the social phenomena within the city in the context of factor analysis helped only in the identification of patterns.

It is a noteworthy fact that the western social science was alive to the real issues in society. Social geography also could not remain unaf­fected by these trends. Thus, social geography in the western world developed much in response to political happenings of contemporary social relevance.

For example, social change in attitudes and the per­ception of prevailing reality necessitated corresponding changes in the theoretical framework adopted by social scientists. The American so­ciety, for example, was overwhelmingly influenced by the war in Vietnam.

A common concern was expressed on issues such as poverty and social inequality within the United States. The social relevance movement in the contemporary social sciences also affected geography and issues such as race, crime, health and poverty received an increas­ingly large attention.

Emrys Jones and John Eyles who described social geography as a group approach conceded that the attempts at definition represented the viewpoints of their authors to which others may not agree (Box 1.2).

**Definitions**

With due apologies to those omitted by oversight, the last twenty-five years or so have produced eight definitions of social geography, seven of which are provided by geographers working in the Anglo-American tradition.

**These are:**

The identification of different regions of the earth’s surface according to associations of social phenomena related to the total environment (Watson, 1957: 482) the study of the patterns and processes (required) in understanding socially defined populations in a spatial setting (Pahl, 1965: 81) the study of the areal (spatial) patterns and functional relations of social groups in the context of their social environment; the internal structure and external relations of the nodes of social activity, and the articulation of various channels of social communication (Buttimer, 1968: 144) the analysis of the social patterns and processes arising from the distribution of, and access to, scarce resources and… an examination of the societal causes of, and suggested solutions to, social and environmental problems (Eyles, 1974: 65) The understanding of ‘the patterns which arise from’ the use social groups make of space as they see it, and of the processes involved in making and changing such patterns (Jones, 1975: 7) (it) stressed structure relations in the analysis of social problems…

Analysis (is) based on interrelated material reality and the social contradictions this produces; which are seen as the motive force for change, and thus responsible for the development of problems like different level-of-living conditions (Asheim, 1979: 8) the study of consumption, whether by individuals or by groups (Johnston, 1981: 205) It is an interactionist perspective which aims to uncover how social structure is defined and maintained through social interaction, and which studies how social life is constituted geographically through the spatial structure of social relations (Jackson and Smith, 1984: vii)

John Eyles, Social Geography in International Perspective, London: Groom Helm, 1988; 4-5. The progress of social geography in the decades since 1960 has taken three main paths, each cluster of research acquiring the status of a school of thought in its own way.

(a) A welfare or humanistic school mainly concerned with the state of social well-being 35 expressed by territorial indicators of housing, health and social pathology largely within the theoretical framework of welfare economics.

(b) A radical school which employed Marxian theory to explain the basic causes of poverty and social inequality. This school of thought related the contemporary social problems to the development of capitalism particularly the internal contradictions of capitalism. For example, cities and the communities within the city were perceived as organized spatially in response to the class relations and the Marxian interpretation was that a welfare approach might not be helpful.

(c) A phenomenological school which laid an extraordinary emphasis on lived experience and on the perception of space by social categories based on ethnicity, race or religion. It is thus obvious that contemporary social geography is in line with the theoretical development in human geography as a whole. This does not mean that the welfare or humanistic concerns or the quest for the causes of social inequality and class-based exploitation or phenomenological perceptions of space have replaced the tradition of areal differentiation or region formation. All these approaches have continued to co-exist.

Some themes have received greater attention at certain stages in the development of Anglo-American school of geography. They may be mentioned here in brief. References have been made to social physics, implying that for the analysis of human behaviour analogies can be drawn with the physical world. Around the middle of the nineteenth century Auguste Comte adopted an approach assuming that principles of physics, or mechan­ics, may be applicable to human society as well.

The idea was revived by J.Q. Stewart in the forties of the twentieth century. In association with William Warntz the two developed the theory of social physics to create the field of ‘macro geography’. Based on these concepts a gravity model was developed in human geography which tried to ex­plain interaction between places illustrated by, for example, the movement of people and goods as products of the mass (population size etc.).

A distance factor also operated such as cost as an exponent revealing an inverse relationship. The basic idea of the gravity model also found its place in other models such as entropy maximizing model and diffusion model. Other applications are found in rank-size rule and the population potential model. These approaches were contested by many geographers who found social physics as simply mechanistic. The human society was not exactly a physical organism which could correspond to precisely defined laws.

The study of social phenomena spatially variegated as they were, led to the identification of social areas and a social area analysis fol­lowed. American sociology adopted social area analysis as a technique for relating social structure with urban patterns. In this connection reference may be made to the pioneering work of two American soci­ologists, Eshref Shevky and Wendell Bell.

The two hypothesized that within a city the range and intensity of relations depends on the social rank; that the process of urbanization leads to differentiation in the functions of the households leading to changes in the family status; and that social organization within the city leads to concentration of groups along cultural and ethnic lines. Thus, the ethnic status of an individual also plays a role in social interaction.

Geographers who adopted social area analysis as a method in their studies of urban social geography depended on statistics disaggregated for the micro units such as the census tracts within the city. Variables were chosen to rep­resent the three constructs of social rank, urbanization, and segregation in order to develop a composite index on the basis of which census tracts could be classified.

The technique was criticized for being mechanistic as there was no link between the social scaling and differentiation of population within the urban space. It was argued that the three constructs them­selves were inadequate to portray the urban social reality.

As a method social area analysis was abandoned in favour of what came to be known as factorial ecology.’ Its importance, however, lies in the fact that at a certain stage in the historical development of social geog­raphy it played a highly seminal role furnishing a basis for systematic analysis of urban social space.

Western social geography, particularly the school of thought pur­suing social welfare approach, attached the highest importance to the concept of social well-being.’ It was hypothesized that well-being characterizes a state in which the basic human needs of a given popula­tion are satisfied because the people have sufficient income for their basic needs.

However, the concept was defined within the framework of the social system of capitalism. The high income groups organized themselves in space in such a way that their basic needs were opti­mally satisfied. Income played a crucial role in creating optimal conditions for the social infrastructure, such as housing, civic ameni­ties, health, education and recreation. The underlying assumption is that the poor were not in a position to satisfy their basic needs.

The state of well-being is achieved only when the income is sufficient to fulfill the basic needs, meaning thereby that the poverty has been eradi­cated and when the services are available to all sections of the society on a sustainable basis.

It may be noted that both the western social science and social ge­ography were alive to the real issues in society and the social scientists, including geographers, responded to political happenings and the so­cial implications of these happenings attracted their attention.

While the Indian social sciences, particularly sociology, social anthropology, political science, economics, education, social linguistics and contem­porary history, have been alive to the emergent issues in the wake of political, social and economic development since independence in 1947, geographers in general and social geographers in particular have not evinced much of an interest in the contemporary issues of national interest.

The first generation of Indian geographers, viz., George Kuriyan, S.P. Chatterji, S.M. Ali, C.D. Deshpande followed by V.S. Gananathan, and V.L.S. Prakasa Rao debated extensively the issues of national reconstruction, suggesting planning strategies for the optimal development of the nation and the regions by better and more effi­cient utilization of natural resources.

However, their debates mostly remained internal to geography, although echoes were heard in the corridors of power, e.g., Planning Commission. Exceptions apart, no significant purpose was served by these debates as a meaningful dia­logue could not be conducted on a sustainable basis between geography and other social science disciplines.

This thwarted the proc­ess of cross-fertilization of ideas across the disciplines, with the result that social geographical research suffered a major setback. Geography was not only marginalized, all possibilities enabling it to make a con­tribution to the critical social theory were also denied to it. Ensonced within the confines of its own academic shell, it was virtually reduced to a social isolate.

In the seventies of the twentieth century, the Centre for the Study of Regional Development at the JNU emerged as a new nucleus of research with a vast potential for a dialogue with other so­cial sciences.

Issues such as tribal underdevelopment, agony of the masses hit by a syndrome of droughts, scarcities and famines, poverty, particularly rural poverty, social underdevelopment as expressed in il­literacy and levels of educational backwardness, destability in tribal areas in the wake of developmental projects, displacement of people by big river valley projects, disparities in levels of development in drought-prone, mountain and hill areas, etc., received increased re­search attention.

This new academic environment enriched geography’s adaptability to social science discourse. In a way the JNU experiment laid down a new agenda for social geographical research building systematically on the tradition of V.L.S. Prakasa Rao and his associates who focused their efforts on the problems of perspective planning for national and regional development. Social geography at the JNU paved the ground for more give-and-take between disciplines, enabling geography to find a place in the realm of Indian social sci­ence.