

Salient features of Possibilism in Geography

The philosophical doctrine that the physical environment provides the opportunities for a range of possible human resources and that people have considerable freedom to choose between those possibilities. According to this philosophy the natural environment present options the no. of which increases as the knowledge and technology of a cultural group develop. The emphasis was thus shifted from the natural environment to cultural as the dynamic force. Man effects the physical environment by such activities such as constructing canals in the arid lands in order to make those areas worthy of living. He also develops new ways to use the natural resource exploiting its geographical advantages.

After the World War I a sociological trend was offered by historian Lucian Febvre to explain the stage of development of different societies and their history. This approach of interpretation of history was termed as possibilism. The French historian and geographers emphasize the reign of choice open to humans in any habitat. Febvre was the first to use the word possibilism who wrote **“There are no necessities but everywhere possibilities and man as master of the possibilities is the judge of their action”**. According to the concept of possibilism the physical environment is passive and that the man is active agent to choose between the wide ranges of possibilities. The essence of the possibilist approach to the problems of relationship between man and his environment can be summarized as follows

Nature does not drive man along a particular road, but it offers a no. of opportunities from which man is free to select. For the possibilist, “The work of man on the earth and its influence are the starting point the most important is the **freedom of man to choose**.”

It was these idea that led Vidal dela Blache to develop the school of possibilism. Vidal dela Blache in his study minimized the influenced of environment on the activities of man

Lifestyle developed in different geographical environment

Central to the Vidal dela Blache works were the *lifestyle (genre de vie)* that develop in different geographical environment. In his opinion the lifestyle is the product and reflection of a civilization represented the integrated resulted of physical, historical and social influences surrounding man’s relation to *milieu* in particular place. He tried to explain the difference between groups in the same or similar environments and stressed that these differences are not due to dictates of physical environment but owing to variation in attitudes, values and habits. Variations in attitudes and habits create numerous possibilities for the human communities which became the basic philosophy of the school of possibilism. After Blache, possibilism continued to grow and spread in other parts of the world. Outside France, possibilistic ideas were accepted by a large no. of geographers and anthropologist. Barrow, the prominent ecologists gave more importance to man over environment. A more acceptable view of possibilism was presented by Sauer, a prominent American geographer. He asserted that geographer’s role is to investigate the

cultural landscape. From such an exercise, the geographers would observe major changes that have occurred in an area as a result of occupancy by human groups.

In spite of the fact that man has numerous possibilities in a given settings, he cannot go against the directions laid by the physical environment. The limits set by the nature to man's action vary from one historical period to another. In marginal environment such as hot and cold desert and at low stages of culture, man's choice may be extremely restricted. In more favorable areas of the warm and cool temperate zones where man's techniques are highly developed the possibilities are numerous. But however many skills man acquires he can never free himself from nature's control. As such possibilist approaches has been criticized by many of the contemporary thinkers. Griffith Taylor while criticizing possibilism stressed that society as a whole should make use of choices offered by the nature and geographer's duty is to interpret the programme of the nature. Taylor was largely right because the task of geography is to study the natural environment and its effect on man. Moreover possibilism doesnot encourage the study of geographical environment as it promotes natural over anthrocentrism in geography. Geographers should bear in mind that nature always set limit or boundaries within which man has to work; for his survival i.e. man has to work for his survival i.e. man has to follow the nature's programme.

Approaches or principle of possibilism in the study of Human Geography

It was emerged as a reaction to environmentalism. Possibilism is a point of view which focuses on the role of man as a geographic agent and a modifier of physical environment. Lucian Febvre used the term possibilism.

Later on the idea of possibilism was carried forward by many scholars Blache and Brunhes in France and Bowman and Carl o Sauer in USA have been staunch supporter of possibilism.

Blache-"Man is a both active and passive but he is more concerned with man as a geographic agent who modified the physical environment to suit his needs. He writes-"There is no question of geographical determinism because culture is a dominant factor in human society. Infact man views environment through the prism of culture and exercises his choice which may appear to bear no correspondence with physical environment. In California, foreg: Indian, Mexican, Spanish and Americans in sequence played their roles in the identical environment each making their choice of the way of living life from numerous possibilities that existed in terms of their culturally determined perception. He advocated the concept of *genre de vie* to further advance the cause of possibilism.

Febvre has rightly quoted that – There are no necessities but everywhere possibilities and man as a master of these possibilities is the real judge of their use.

Brunhes has alleviated humans activity to one of the powers of nature which leads to the core of possibilistic philosophy namely the contention that "Nature is not mandatory, but permissive". He

further observed the unrelenting power of natural agents which reigns(rules) in the physical world alone.

Human geography is a field of compromise in which nothing is absolute or definite for the human species on the earth except the general laws and those fundamental conditions which determine the limits beyond which all life is excluded and if man are not able to push back indefinitely all these limits in altitude, latitude, depth etc. they are at least able to force or modify few of them.

Bowman an **American geographer** lent unrelenting support to possibilism . He believed that there are no limit to human choice in the use of land. In his publication “The Pioneer Fringe” he elaborated his views –“It may be shown that there was never been a civilization that declined because that it exhausted possibilities of land”. No nation has ever fully developed its frontier. The earth has never gone back on man but man has found himself entangled in the unpredicted efforts of his own system. What really happens is that knowledge of the modern human being is not great enough to control the forces of nature.

Carl o Sauer in his concept of cultural landscape considers culture as a satisfactory explanation of human behavior. Man changes physical and biotic features of his surroundings in terms of his cultural appraisal and man transforms them into its cultural landscape.

To him, Man is the agent of change in the landscape. Accordingly physical environment should not be considered as the main source of explanation of the humanized landscape or the cultural landscape.

James and Martin have aptly remarked- Out of these study of sequence of the development of the cultural landscape vis-à-vis settlement certain principle began to emerge. One was the principle that some physical condition of the land could have different meaning for different people with different attitude towards environment different objectives in making use of it and different levels of technological skills. But the followers of possibilism recognized the limitations imposed by the physical environment. Febvre echoes the view: Man can never entirely get rid of themselves whatever they do to hold their environment has on them. In similar way Brunhes remarked that : The power and means which man has its disposal are limited and he cannot cross the boundary imposed by nature. Human activities can with certain limits vary but cannot do away with its environment it can modify it but can never suppress it and will always be conditioned by it.