Part One

The Philosophy of Geography
Chapter 1

Geography as a Science

Geography till the nineteenth century meant only description of all terrestrial phenomena. There was emphasis on exploration and the concomitant development of surveying and cartographic methods. The commodity exports and imports Geography of Chisholm was certainly not a science. Till 1914, which was the exploratory period of the world, geography was sterile and of a 'gazetteer type', but since that time, the conception tended to become more and more scientific. The contributions of Ratzel, Semple, La Blache, Brunhes, and Herbertson, mark the dawn of a new era which can rightly be called the 'Scientific Era' in geographical thought. In fact, no subject has been so completely revolutionised and transformed in recent years as geography. It has been brought within the scope of Sociology and so humanized. It is no longer regarded as the science of the earth, primarily associated with geology, but rather, as the science of man conceived of, in relation to space (place) having its main connections with other human sciences conceived of, in relation to time.

Geography is defined as the study of the 'inter-relations between Man and his Environment'. The Geographer studies about the Earth as 'the House of Mankind'. His task is to show the extent to which the pattern of human life is affected by environmental conditions. This concept, according to many critics is vague. Mill, in the "International Geographies" (1899) describes geography as a science which deals
with the different land forms and with their influence on the distribution of all phenomena. W.H. Davis gives us a most startling definition, when he defines geography as a "modern ecology" suggesting the term 'Climatology' for the branches which deal with the distribution of organic life in its relation with the earth (vide 'The Making of Geography' by Dickinson, page 294). According to Barrows, geography is "the science of human ecology, the aim of which is not to examine the character and occurrence of features of the environment, but to examine human responses to them", (vide, Annals of Association of American Geography, 1927, quoted by Dickinson, in 'The Making of Geography', page 211). This man is the central theme - no life, no geography. Roxby is of the opinion that geography is concerned with the influence of environment on the evolution of races.

Geographers are frequently charged that their discipline is more peripheral than central, more ambiguous than definite. This is only partly justified, and we find that in modern geography, empiricism has been replaced by rational methods of analysis and synthesis.

The beginning of the distinctively modern period of geographical science is associated with two great geographical pioneers in Humboldt and Ritter. The former, a great traveller and a man of science observed a vast number of phenomena, he co-related them and considered them in their relations to each other. The latter, a great teacher, laid stress upon the Earth as the field of man's activity. He was the prototype of those who by their personal influence and by their books have been responsible for enriching the Science of Geography within the last fifty years. But perhaps the greatest contribution to
geography considered as a reasoned and ordered science rather than a mere collection of facts is that of Charles Darwin when he published his book "The Origin of Species" in 1859. His works added a new interest to the study of inter-relations and contributed to the development of geographical science. This great scientist showed that there is a delicately adjusted balance between organisms and their surroundings taken in their widest sense. In other words, Darwin's 'Doctrine of Evolution', has added a unifying and co-ordinating principle which has not only prevented geography from being crushed by the enormous recent increase in known facts, but has also for the first time raised it to the level of a science. Modern geography concerns itself with a systematic study of 'Natural and Cultural landscapes': their description and interpretation. This gave birth to the Regional Concept. The distinctive field of geography is associated with the study of the region in all its complexes and this is the 'binding thread' of the studies of both Physical and Human geography. It is rather the selective study of the humanly significant relationships which exist between the physical and cultural patterns and which give each region its distinctive "personality".

According to Professor Linton - "Geography is concerned with the study of the earth's surface; with the recognition in any area of the elements whether of terrestrial cosmic or social origin which have conspired to give its character". It is, as the French maintain, a DESCRIPTION EXPLICATIVE DES PAYSAGES (Ref. Linton, Geog. Jour. Jan 1949).

Geography has been enriched by facts brought from the collateral sciences and its position as the mother Science has been established. As the study of geography became more and more systematic and classificatory, more and more off-shoots have grown: Geomorphology, Climatology, Pedology, Plant Geography.
Human Geography, Economic Geography, Urban Geography, Political Geography, and this has given scope to another criticism that 'geography is a bundle of specialisms'. This criticism has been repudiated unequivocally by all modern geographers: Geography is not a bundle of isolated bits, but the different branches are like the 'Salts of the same acid'. Man is the common denominator and the main concern of the geographer is the systematic study of human activities in different environments. Synthesis of the geo-economic phenomena through maps is the technique, and a major objective is the formulation of principles or laws of man-environment complex.

The geographer is concerned with man and nature. 'Activity and relationship' dominate the discipline of geography. The form taken is:

Cause → Fact → Consequence

The modern view is that the idea of growth rather than causation should be developed. Thus, 'Geography is a physical and biological study'. Or, to express it in another way, Geography is the reciprocal relationship between physical environment and life.

The term 'reciprocal' in the above definition of geography means that the Environment may affect Man or, that Man may affect the Environment. This has brought two schools of geographers. Or, in other words, there are two schools of thought about the Philosophy of Geography:

The first which is the older, is known as the school of environmentalists. They hold that differences in human ways are fundamentally due to, or are linked with differences in natural environment. This school represented by Hippocrates, Bodin, Ratzel, Semple, Griffith Taylor, and others thought...
mostly in terms of the Earth's influence on Man and laid stress on the physical elements of Landscape, in particular, climate. Fredrick Ratzel of Berlin was the first environmentalist in the anthropological field and Ellen Churchill Semple became his most distinguished pupil. Environmental domination over Man has been faithfully accepted by this school and the phrases 'Man is a product of the earth's surface' or 'the sovereign influence of environment' or 'geographical determinism' sums up the essence of its viewpoint.

The second school, which is dominating at present, holds the other side of the string. Man is the focus of the environment; he is the modifying agent, also, the creator: only certain opportunities are created by the Environment. Vidal-de-la Blache and Brunhes are leaders of this school and its philosophy goes by the name of 'Possibilism'. Huntington and Carl-O-Sauer are also advocates of this school. The expression 'cultural landscape', most current in the geographical literature of the U.S.A., indicates the ready acceptance of the truth of the second school by the American geographers. The Environmentalist theory is now considered to be crude, and it is generally agreed by the present writers that it must fail as an explanation of human differences. Non-geographic factors - economic, political, social, and technological - should also be taken into account. But even now we have writers like Griffith Taylor who would hold that the environmental factor has its due share, and in certain parts of the world, the Tundras and Deserts, for instance, the human factor mostly pales into insignificance. As rightly pointed by Griffith Taylor himself, more depends on the point of view: Education and the case in point. It is also agreed that Man is a 'geomorphological agent', he is not passive but dynamic. The same environment does not convey
the same meaning to the European cultivator, or the scientist, and the pigmy or the Dyak, but it should be remembered that human types are changing with the changing space relations and the changing demands of the inhabitants of a particular landscape. One thing appears to be definite over which there can be no difference of opinion and that is, in the evolution of landscape, the influence of environment is fundamental. But the modern rationalist does not readily embrace this thought (Environmentalism) in his philosophy.

Modern geographers talk more about cultural landscapes, land occupancy and occupational sequence. Yet certain facts cannot be denied. Crude interpretation of the Environmentalist theory may be objected but the basic influence cannot be overlooked. Glasshouses, green-houses, and vernalization may be taken as proofs of the constructive achievements of Man. To quote a textbook example - Is it possible to grow bananas in the Tundras or graze reindeer in the tropical forests? Of course, there are two aspects of any environment; the dynamic and the functional. With the local environment remaining the same, can the economic landscape in England and Japan of today be compared with that of a hundred or two hundred years back? An environmentalist can at once put the question: Is there, and can there be any civilization of the Himalayan peaks? In this way, much can be said on both sides but the following conclusions are probably inescapable:

1) The possibilities of human life are ultimately limited by the environment.

2) A material way of living is forced upon the people by their specific environmental forces.

3) "Environment leads to more subtle adaptations in cultural life".
At best it can be said between the triumph of applied science and the achievement of the most savage tribes, the difference is one of degree and not of kind.

To sum up, in modern geography one finds a change in its rationale and also in methodology. But it must be remembered that 'the subject still wears a coat far too big for it'. Geography is a living subject, full of the variety of human life. It explains ways of living in all their myriad diversity. Its function is to enable the ordinary man to understand his surroundings, whatever they may be, and so help him in that delicate but important task of adjustment which, consciously or unconsciously, is the task of every living thing. It provides an overall and balanced outlook on human life and herein lies its high utilitarian value not only to the student and the teacher but also to the citizen and the scientist, as well as to the politician and the administrator.