

Human Geography

Determinism, Possibilism, Neo-determinism

2nd and 4th sem both



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① Determinism: Determinism is one of the important philosophies which persisted upto the II world war. The main theme of deterministic school of thought is that the history, culture, living style and stage of development of a social group is largely governed by the physical factors of environment. The determinists generally consider man as a passive agent of nature.

The first attempt to explain the physical features and character of various peoples and their culture were made by Greek and Roman scholars. According to Aristotle, the inhabitants of cold countries are courageous but lacking in political organizations and capacity to rule their neighbours and also the people of Asia lack courage and so slavery is their natural state. The people of Greece on the other hand, rule over all for their finest qualities. The Greeks also correlate the easy going of Asiatic living with struggling Europeans.

Similarly, Strabo, the Roman geographer, attempted to explain how shape, relief, climate all were the works of God and how these phenomena govern the life style of people. Montesquieu pointed out that the people of cold countries (climates) are stronger physically, more courageous, frank, less suspicious and less cunning than those of the warm climates.

The geographical determinism continued to dominate the Arab geographers. Al-Battani, Al-Masudi, Ibn-Hauqal, Al-Idrisi attempts to



Correlate the environment with the human activity and their mode of life. According to them, where water is abundant, the people are gay and humorous, while the people of dry lands are short-tempered.

The founder of the 'new' determinism was Friedrich Ratzel. According to him similar locations leads to similar mode of life. He cited the examples of British Islands and Japan and asserted that both these countries have similar locations, which provide nature defence against the invaders, consequently the people of these countries are making rapid progress. As a follower of Darwin he also believed in the survival of the fittest and saw 'man' as the end product of evolution.

Miss Semple, one of the important environmentalist wrote in her book "Influence of Geographical Environment" she wrote - "Man is a product of the earth surface. This mean not merely that he is a child of the earth, dust of her dust, but the earth has mothered him, set him task, directed his thought, confronted him with difficulties, that have strengthened his body and sharpened his wits, gave him his problems of navigation or irrigation and at the same time whispered hints for their solution. She has entered into his bones and tissues, into his mind and soul. On the mountains slope; along the coast she has left these weak and flabby, arm to handle it. In the river valley she attaches him to the fertile soil...."

Miss Semple in her Book distinguishes the attitudinal characteristics of the people living in different

Physical settings and stressed that the dwellers of mountains are essentially conservative. They are also orthodox, conservative and suspicious. They are extremely sensitive in their traditions and do not like criticism. Contrary to this, the people of plains are mild, gay, imaginative and life is easy going.

Elsworth Huntington, in his book "The Principle of Human Geography" divided the world in the mild and harsh climatic zones and established that the ancient civilizations like Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Chinese, Indus were flourished in the fertile river valleys of mild climates. According to him the religion and racial characters are the products of climate. A temperature of about 20°C and variable atmosphere is the ideal condition for the high mental and physical efficiencies. The advancement of Europeans in the field of science and technology has thus been attributed to climatic conditions.

② POSSIBILISM :

After the second world war the philosophy of environmentalism was attacked. Many geographers in the USA, Britain, Canada and other countries were drawing attention of Possibilism. According to them relationship between man and his environment can be summed up as follows:

"Nature does not drive man along a particular road, but it offers a number of opportunities from which man is free to select." For the possibilists the work of man, not the earth and its influence, are the starting point, the most important is the freedom of man to choose."



P-4

This idea led Vidal-de-Lablache to develop the school of possibilism. He minimised the influence of environment on the activities of man. In his opinion, the life styles are the products, and reflections of civilization, represented the integrated results of physical, historical and social influence.

After Vidal-de-lablache, possibilism continued to grow and spread on both sides of the Atlantic. In France was a strong supporter of possibilism. Out of France, Borrow, the prominent ecologists gave more importance to man than environment. Giving example he mentioned that wheat does not have the largest yield in regions where it was first domesticated. Cultivation of rice is now done largely in USA, Canada, Australia, Pakistan and India, the places where it was diffused later.

According to Febvre man is not only a "geographic agent" but man have experienced the great changes on the surface of the earth. He was one of the forerunner of the possibilistic hypothesis. According to him "The relationship between man and nature is a reciprocal, nature modifying man and man modifying nature. As the man progressed, the mode of his livelihood changed entirely, and the scientific man of today is so (changed) prosperous in his resources that he has found out innumerable substitutes for his food, clothing and shelter.

After all, environment undoubtedly influence man, man in turn change his environment and the interaction is so intricate that it is difficult



to know when one influence ends and the other begins. Many landscapes that appear natural to us are in truth the work of man. The wheat, barley, olive, vine which dominate the mediterranean countries are entirely the product of human effort. The apple and almond orchards of Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh are the creations of men. Similarly cultivation of Basmati Rice in only 50 cm rainfall recording areas of The Punjab and Haryana are the direct and conspicuous results of human efforts. Countless such examples from the developed and developing countries can be cited. Thus man and environment are closely interdependent on each other.

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③ NEO-DETERMINISM OR STOP-AND-GO-DETERMINISM

The concept of neo-determinism was put forward by Taylor in the 1920s. He urged that the limits of agricultural settlement in Australia had been set by factors in the physical environment such as the distribution of rainfall. He believed that the best economic programme for a country to follow has in large part been determined by nature and it is geographers' duty to interpret this programme. Man is able to accelerate, slow, or stop the progress of a country's development. He is like the traffic controller in a large city, who alters the rate not the direction of progress, and perhaps the phrase stop and go determinism expresses sufficiently writer's geographical philosophy.

Man follows nature's programme only if he is wise, presuming he can act foolishly, which admits



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P-6
the possibilities provided by environment and man can choose among them. ^(Taylor) Taylor concedes him the choice between wise and foolish. But wisdom and folly are human concepts. The natural environment knows nothing of them. In nature there is only the possible and impossible. Finer categories are man made.

The possibilists admit that the opportunities offered by any environment are not all equal. Some demand little from man, others continual struggle; some yield large, other meagre returns. The ratio between effort and return can be looked upon as the price nature exacts from man for the particular choice he makes. But recognition of this inequality of opportunity gives no clue as to which nature prefers, and the wise man should take.

Once the possibility of alternative action is conceded, then it is difficult to see "Stop-and-Go-determinism" claim that man is not a free agent, that his liberty is curtailed, all agree. In no environment are the possibilities limitless and for every choice a price must be paid, proponents of possibilism admit this, but within these limits freedom to choose exists. Man makes his choice and man himself judges its relative wisdom or folly by reference to goals he himself has established. Limits of man's freedom beyond those generally recognized by possibilists. There is nothing indeed that contradicts the assertion of Febe that there are no necessities but everywhere possibilities and man as a master of these possibilities is the judge of their use. Thus man chooses but only from the range which nature presents him.