

# Major Themes of Human Geography

Dr. Jitender Saroha,  
Associate Professor,  
Dr.B.R.Ambedkar College,  
University of Delhi.

**Abstract:** Human geography is the study of the interrelationships between people, places, and environment, and how these vary spatially and temporally across and between locations. Human geographers focus on the spatial organization and processes shaping the lives and activities of people, and their interactions with places and environment. The National Geographic Society published a document entitled 'Maps, the Landscape and Fundamental Themes in Geography' (1986), which identified the 'five themes' of geography. These themes provide an introduction to the perspectives of human geography. These themes were outcome of the Geography Education National Implementation Project (GENIP, 1984) – an initiative of four major U.S. Geographical organizations and they provide insight into the spatial emphasis of human geographers. The objective of the present paper is to highlight the major themes of human geography.

**Key Words:** Location, Place, Region, Environment and Movement.

Human geography as second major branch of geography focuses on the study of people and their social groups, cultures, economies, and interactions with the environment by studying their relations in spatio-temporal perspective. In 1984, five themes of geography were identified by the Geography Education National Implementation Project (GENIP) as - location, place, human-environment relationship, movements and regions. In addition, distribution, space and diffusion which are closely associated with these themes have been described here with especial focus. These fundamental themes of human geography have a logical succession. They begin with *location* because geography is a spatial science and fixing of phenomena is space in terms of absolute or relative location and site and situation is primary concern. *Place* is the next logical sequence after location and it elaborates on location by describing its physical and cultural characteristics. The *human-environmental interrelationships* are obviously the next in logical sequence. These interactions set the stage for *movements* and *diffusions*. The movement and diffusion comprise of the cultural and physical relationships between and among places or are representative of spatial interactions. This succession terminates in the theme of *regions* where the spatial relationships on the basis of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity of physical or cultural or perceptual characteristics are distinguished from other regions. Regions are hierarchical in nature and can operate at any scale and are dynamic due to internal as well as external factors. A brief description of these themes is provided in the following section.

## Location

Location is to address the question - Where is it? Most geographic studies begin with the description of location which represents the particular positioning of people and things on the earth surface. Location can be of two types absolute and relative. Absolute location is defined on the basis of latitude and longitude or its exact address. For instance, the location of Indian mainland is between 8° 4' north and 37° 6' north latitudes and 68° 7' and 97° 25' east longitudes. Likewise the 28° 38' N latitude and 77° 13' E longitude determine the absolute location of New Delhi. The address, like 7 Lok Kalyan Marg (former Race Course Road), New Delhi - 110011,

represents absolute location. Relative location is the relationship of a place to other places. For instance, India is located in south Asia or south of the Himalayan Range or north of Indian Ocean. Delhi is located on the bank of the Yamuna River or in Great plains of India. The 7 Lok Kalyan Marg is near the Parliament House or near President House.

In geographical studies the location is also described on the basis of site and situation. The site is the actual location on the earth surface and it is composed of the physical characteristics of the landscape specific to the area. The site factors include – topography, climate, vegetation types, availability of water, soil quality, minerals and wildlife if any. For instance, the location of New York has locational advantage or several favourable site factors such as – natural harbor, coastal location, abundant supply of fresh water from nearby Hudson River, proximity to building raw material and presence of Appalachian and Catskill Mountains nearby to restrict inland movement. For instance the site of Sydney, in Australia, initially took advantage of the excellent natural harbour and surrounding fertile farmland. Paris was established at a point where an island allowed an easier passage across the river Seine as well as providing defense, fishing, transport, and drinking water. On the other hand, the site of Bhutan is challenging for its population due to rugged topography, harsh climate, dense vegetation and limited arable land.

Situation represents the location of a place relative to its surroundings and other places. The situation is location in relation to surrounding human and physical features. The factors included in an area's situation include the accessibility of the location, its connections with other places and raw materials. The situation of Bhutan allows it to maintain its policy of isolation and protect its traditional culture. The TISCO plant was established in Jamshedpur after analyzing the site and situational factors or locational advantages and disadvantages of many places.

As location helps to create the context within which events and processes are situated an underlying interest with location is present in almost all geographical works. Some geographers, especially in urban and economic geography, tried to present elaborate (usually quantitative) models to describe the locational properties of particular phenomena and even to predict where things are likely to take place. The Central Place Theory of Christaller is one such normative deductive model used in settlement geography. The Agriculture Location theory of Von Thunen and Industrial Location Theory of Alfred Weber are two such normative and deductive models developed in economic geography. Haggett (1965) in his work "Locational Analysis in Human Geography" highlighted the role of six geometric elements in human geography – nodes, hierarchies, surfaces, networks, movement and diffusion in formulation of models and theories and generalizations about locational order. The locational analysis has contemporary significance in determining location of various activities related to human beings such as – what should be the route of metro or express way? What would be the best location for a shopping centre or hospital or bus stand or industry or industrial suburb or satellite town etc?

## Place

The theme 'Place' answers the question - What kind of place is it? It tells about what a location is like. Place refers to the physical and human characteristics of a location. This theme of human geography is associated with the name of the place, site and situation. Every place on the earth surface is unique because of its distinct physical and human characteristics. The physical characteristics are related to topography, climate, hydrology and biogeography and human characteristics are related to the nature and size of its population, cultural and social characteristics and political systems. These characteristics represent a particular way of living called 'genre de vie' by Vidal de la Blache. The theme of place provides base to compare and contrast two places on

earth surface. For instance, it helps to distinguish Thar desert from the Ladakh. The Thar desert is a hot desert while the Ladakh is a cold one. While the Thar desert extends into Pakistan and has presence of shifting sand dunes and camels, the Ladakh is arid, bordered by China and Buddhists occupy the area with yaks. Therefore, name of the place itself creates geographic pictures.

Places are segments of the earth's surface. They are identified and given names and meaning by human beings. Places are perceived, experienced, understood and valued on the basis of their physical and cultural landscapes, with tangible as well as intangible elements. The places are of varying size from small like a dwelling to a major segment like continent or hemisphere. Places are essential not only for security, identity, sense of belongingness but also for well being and opportunities. The places in which we live are created, transformed and organized by people. The sustainability of places is threatened by natural and manmade disasters and by changes such as climate, socio-cultural, economic and technological changes, exhaustion of resources and governmental policies.

### **Distribution**

Presenting distributions on a map is a starting point for many studies in human geography. Distribution is to answer – What is where on earth surface and how is it arranged over space? Distribution is arrangement of features over space. Distribution refers to the way something is spread out or arranged over a geographic area. The concept of distribution can be applied to nearly all elements of physical and cultural landscape like distribution of landforms, climatic elements (temperature, precipitation, winds and air masses etc), animal and plant species, population, religion, language, settlements, diseases, crime, poverty, crops, industries and other economic activities. The three properties of distribution identified by geographers are density, concentration and pattern. Density represents the frequency with which something occurs in space. The features being measured include people, animals, houses, industries, or anything. For instance, the number of persons per unit area is called arithmetic density (in 2011 the population density in India was 382 persons per square km). Likewise, the number of dwelling units per unit of area will represent housing density and number of industries per unit area industrial density.

Concentration refers to the extent of a feature's spread over space. In case the objects are placed closely together it is called clustered; and in case they are placed far apart, they are called dispersed. Concentration is different from density. For example, the density of dwelling units in two localities may be same say 50 houses per km but concentrations may be different. In one locality almost all dwellings may be concentrated in a particular block out of total area and in another one may be well scattered over the total area. It represents same building density but clustered concentration in locality first and dispersed in second locality. For instance, the distribution of population in middle and lower Ganga plains is clustered but in Rajasthan and Himalayan region highly dispersed.

The third property of distribution is the pattern, which is the geometric arrangement of features over geographical area. Some features are arranged systematically and resemble with geometric shapes but others are distributed irregularly. Human geographers look for and try to explain patterns. The distribution patterns of human geography are also related to physical conditions. Spatial pattern is a perceptual structure, placement, or arrangement of objects on the earth surface. Patterns are recognized on the basis of arrangements as point, line and areal patterns and are associated with geometric shapes.

## Space

Knox and Marston (2007) described three ways of measuring space – (i) absolute space; (ii) relative space and (iii) cognitive space. Absolute space is a mathematical space which can be described on the basis of mathematical reasoning through points, lines, areas, planes and configurations. For instance, the total geographical area of India, location of sector 12 in Dwarka, agricultural field of a farmer, or national highway number say, NH-1 represent absolute space. Another mathematical space is called the topological space which is defined on the basis of connections or connectivity between points in space. A topological space is defined on the basis of a set of points along with a set of neighbourhoods for each point, satisfying a set of axioms relating points and neighbourhoods. Therefore, it allows understanding continuity, connectedness and convergence. The topological space of India will also include its connectivity with internal elements as well as external elements like Pakistan, China etc. Likewise, the connectivity of NH-1 with other transport networks and settlements and farmer's field with other fields, pathways and irrigation networks etc represent topological space. The GIS softwares for spatial analysis are based on topological space relationships.

According to Knox and Marston (2007) the relative measurements of space can take the form of socioeconomic or experiential or cultural space. The socioeconomic space includes sites, situations, routes, regions and patterns. The cultural or experiential space consists of a space where groups live and interact. The cognitive space is defined and measured in terms of values, feelings, beliefs and perceptions. Therefore it is described in terms of behavioral space, like landmarks, paths, environments. Cognitive space uses the analogy of location in two, three or higher dimensional space to describe and categorize thoughts, memories and ideas. Each individual has his/her cognitive space, resulting in a unique categorization of their ideas. The dimensions of this cognitive space depend on information, training and finally on a person's awareness. All this depends globally on the cultural setting.

## Human-Environment Relationship

In this theme the basic questions are - What is the relationship between humans and their environment? How does environment controls/influences human activity? How do different culture groups understand, use, and transform their environments? Earlier the geographers tempted to generalize about the controls of physical environment on man and his activities. This perspective of determinism prevailed from Greek and Roman times and became scientific with Darwinism. Ratzel, Semple and Huntington were the major determinists. Vidal de la Blache countered determinism and propounded its antithesis possibilism, in which man is considered as an active agent rather than passive. According to Blache 'nature is never more than an adviser' and 'nature sets limit and offers possibilities for human settlements, but the way man reacts or adjusts to these given conditions depends on his own genre de vie (way of living)'. He stated that through his occupancy and imprint on the land, Man creates distinctive countries, be they states or minor unit areas (pays). The relationship of environment and man has changed from 'control' to 'influence' to 'adjustment/adaptation/modification'.

Human-environment interaction has remained core theme of geography since time immemorial. This relationship involves three dimensions such as – dependency, adaptation and modification. For instance, the generalizations such as – 'Indian budget is a gamble on monsoon', or 'History of civilizations is the history of soils', or 'the areas with extreme climatic conditions are sparsely populated' reflect the dependency of man on physical environment. Adaptation refers to modification in ways of living keeping in view the environmental challenges for example different ways of clothing in different environmental conditions. The third dimension of the human-environment and presently the most significant one is the modification of the environment by man



for comfortable living or development or for profit maximization. Deforestation, extension of agriculture, intensive agriculture, major multipurpose river valley projects, industrialization, urbanization and transport revolution reflect transformation of physical landscape into cultural landscape. These modifications, to satisfy the needs and wants of billions of persons, have created huge problems visible from local level to global level such as pollution (water, land, soil, air and noise), ozone hole formation, deforestation, soil erosion, desertification, reduction in biodiversity and global warming and climate change. Therefore, focus is on sustainable development which is oriented towards the goal of economic growth along with social justice and ecological balance.

## **Movement**

Movement, one the major themes of human geography, focuses on the question: How and why are places connected with one another? It refers to the mobility of people, goods and ideas from one place to another and within one place. The physical movement of human beings has resulted into inhabitation of different parts of continents and islands world over and presence of man in all types of ecosystems, and also to explore great oceanic depths and upto moon in space. Migration from local to global level has remained a core issue for human geographers. Human geographers have focused on causes and consequences of migration. Many scholars have tried to frame laws of migration and formulate theories of migration mainly based on 'social physics'.

Another aspect of movement is transportation of goods, it provides base for trade and commerce. Transportation of goods from one place to another has shaped human civilizations from the very beginning. Modes of transportation have evolved and diversified over the period of time. The time and distance barriers have been reduced to a great extent. This age of globalization is based on movement. The interchanges of ideas between the nations of the world help in cultural unification and promote security, growth and prosperity of nations. Communication of ideas of liberty, fraternity, equality, democracy, human rights, humanism and concern for environment have played a significant role in the well being of human societies world over. In this age of communication revolution or information technology, with internet and mobile, information has become the key component. Therefore, the theme of movement is an integral part of studies in human geography.

## **Diffusion**

Diffusion represents the process of spread of a characteristic over space with the passage of time from one place to another. Transportation and communication networks play most significant role in diffusion. Human geographers are interested in the study of diffusion of innovation from place of origin i.e. hearth to other places. Hagerstrand developed the model of diffusion of innovation during the phase of quantitative revolution in geography. Geographers have identified two types of diffusion – relocation diffusion and expansion diffusion. The expansion diffusion is further classified into three types – hierarchical diffusion; contagious diffusion and stimulus diffusion.

Relocation diffusion is spread of an innovation (anything new) through physical movement of people from one place to another. Basically, it involves the actual movement of the original adopters from their point of origin or hearth to a new place or places. The two very simple examples of relocation diffusion are - the spread of Christianity and Buddhism in different parts of the world and diffusion of languages such as English, French, and Portuguese due to migration from Europe. The distribution of HIV/AIDS also shows relocation diffusion.

The expansion diffusion represents the spread of a characteristic or innovation from one place to another in a snowballing process. Hierarchical Diffusion – occurs when the diffusion of innovation or concept or idea takes place from a place or person of power or high susceptibility to another in a leveled pattern. For example, the spread of ideas from political leaders, socially elite persons, other important persons (like sportspersons and film stars) and other important persons (like social workers and reformists) in the community. Generally, innovations spread from metropolitan centres to cities to towns to villages in a hierarchical manner. Contagious diffusion – is the fast, widespread diffusion of a characteristic through all place or throughout the population. It is similar to spread of a contagious disease. It is like the spread of a wave among fans in a stadium irrespective of hierarchy and without permanent relocation. For instance, the diffusion of AIDS preventive methods such as antiretroviral (ARV) drugs and antiretroviral therapy (ART) in USA, Africa and India represent contagious diffusion. The ideas placed on the World Wide Web, Whatsapp, Facebook Instagram and Twitter etc spread through contagious diffusion as same material quickly and simultaneously become accessible. Stimulus diffusion – occurs when the innovative idea or characteristic diffuses from its place of origin, but gets modified by the new adopters. For instance, different menu items of Mcdonald in different parts of the world. Mcdonald's burger has diffused in India as veggie burger and not as beef burger of the hearth, which is not culturally acceptable.

### Region

The concept of region is core or central to geographical studies from the very beginning. Geography has been defined as study of regions or a chorological science or study of areal differentiations by well known geographers. Region is criteria specific area. It may be identified on the basis of physical or human or both characteristics. It can be single feature region, multiple feature region or compage. Regions can be of three types – (i) formal regions or uniform regions– its boundaries are formally defined and generally well known for example – continents, countries, states, districts, blocks and cities etc. In case of formal region the whole of the area is homogenous with regard to phenomenon or phenomena under consideration; (ii) functional regions or nodal regions – have a core or node, network and circulation. For instance, city-region – it is the region around a city which is functionally well connected with that city like Delhi Metropolitan Region. In case of functional regions the internal homogeneity is imparted by oraganisation around a common node, which may be the core area of a state or a city or town or a trade area; (iii) vernacular regions – are perceived regions with 'imaginary border' as 'mental maps', for instance, 'The Middle East'.

The study of regions helps human geographers to answer questions such as: How and why is one area similar to another? How do the areas differ? According to Richard Hartshorne geography is ' a science that interprets the realities of areal differentiation of the world as they are found not only in terms of the differences in certain things from place to place, but also in terms of the total combination of phenomena in each place, different from those at every other place'. Therefore, the principle purpose of geography is synthesis, an integration of relevant characteristics to provide a total description of a place – a region – which is identifiable by its peculiar combination of those characteristics.

**Conclusion:** All these major themes have following characteristics – (i) these themes are conceptually inclusive, which means that all geographic concepts fit into these themes; (ii) these themes are methodologically open and any type of approach can be applied e.g., regional or systematic; (iii) they are politically and philosophically neutral as they don't require a specific political inclination; (iv) these themes have applicability and teaching and learning at all cognitive levels, from lower to higher educational levels and

similarly in scale operate from local to global level. Therefore, all these themes have traditional and modern validity in human geography.

## References

1. Husain, Majid (2011) Human Geography, Rawat Publication, Jaipur.
2. Maurya, S.D. (2012) Human Geography, Prayag Pustak Bhawan, Allahabad.
3. Rubenstein, J.M. (2008) An Introduction to Human Geography: The Cultural Landscape, Pearson Prentice Hall, NJ.
4. Rubenstein, J.M. (2015) Contemporary Human Geography, Pearson Education India, New Delhi.
5. Jordan-Bychkov et al. (2006) The Human Mosaic: A Thematic Introduction to Cultural Geography. W. H. Freeman and Company, New York.
6. Knox, P.L. and Marston, S. (2007) Human Geography: Places and Regions in Global Context, Pearson Publication, New York.

