

6th Sem. Hons., CC-13
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SYSTEMATIC GEOGRAPHY VERSUS REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY :

The dichotomy between systematic and regional geography was essentially rooted in another dualism that existed in the approaches to study geography. This dualism was between the Idiographic or Inductive Approach and the Nomothetic or Deductive Approach. The dichotomy between the two approaches may be explicated as—the idiographic or empirical approach did not seek to develop laws but mainly focused on the description of particular places in the context of their lands, seas or places and attempt to find its relation with other places. The nomothetic or deductive approach on the other hand, sought to establish laws and made general deductions based on those laws. Dualism in geography was formally introduced in the 17th century which is often described as the classical period of modern geography by the German geographer, Bernhard Varenus. Using the terms of Bartholomew Keckermann a German philosopher, Varenus in his 'Geographia Generalis' partitioned geography into-

- **Special geography** essentially concerned with the description of particular places on the basis of direct observations. This branch of geography was assumed to have great practical importance for governance and commerce.
- **General geography** based on universally applicable mathematical or astronomical laws.
- Gradually, general geography evolved into systematic geography by incorporating the methods of the systematics sciences, while special geography evolved into regional geography. In simple words, the two may be expounded as---the study of the natural vegetation of the world is a systematic approach while the study of a continent with respect to its natural vegetation, landforms, climate etc. is a regional approach. The prominent German geographer Alexander von Humboldt followed Varenus and laid the foundation of systematic geography. In his famous book 'Cosmos' Humboldt asserted that geography was meant to understand the 'harmonious unity of the cosmos.' He distinguished between uranography as descriptive astronomy dealing with the celestial bodies and, geography as dealing with the terrestrial part with the prime objective of deciphering the unity that exists in the vast diversity of phenomena. It was not only the natural phenomena that Humboldt spoke of but, he also asserted that there existed unity of the human races as well since all the races had a common origin and therefore, no race was superior to the other. The unity of the phenomena, a viewpoint that Humboldt obtained from the German philosopher Hegel was based on the conjecture that there existed coherence as well as some sort of causality among them. The understanding of that unity was supposed to be derived from an understanding of the unity that subsisted between humans and the physical landscape. In fact, Humboldt opined that like other phenomena, humans were basically a part of the nature. Knowledge of the natural or physical phenomena was categorized by Humboldt as:

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- **Systematic Sciences:** This included sciences like botany, zoology or geology that classified phenomena according to their form and grouped them on the basis of certain commonalities.
- **Historical Sciences:** This dealt with the development of phenomena over time.
- **Geography or Earth Sciences:** This concerned itself with the spatial distribution and spatial relationship and interdependence of phenomena. It included all earth phenomena whether organic or inorganic.

Humboldt in his *Cosmos* stressed on his views that, for a comprehensive knowledge of the cosmos it was necessary to pursue systematic studies of particular phenomena and their interrelationship with other phenomena rather than undertaking complete studies of specific areas.

According to **Carl Ritter**, a contemporary of Humboldt, geography was concerned with 'lokalverhältnisse' or local conditions which described a spatial unit on the basis of three characteristics---

- *topographical*, concerned with the delineation of natural divisions on the earth's surface;
- *formal*, which dealt with the distribution and movement of such phenomena as water, air etc. that constituted the bases of human life;
- *material*, which dealt with the distribution of biotic life, minerals etc.

Ritter provided the above purpose of geography in his famous 'Erdkunde.' It was Ritter who introduced the inductive method in geography. He sought to develop a regional geography for which he used 'erdteile' or continents as his units of study. He was of the idea that all continents had similar physical features and thus divided each continent into a highland core drained by major rivers of the land and, a low-lying coastland at the periphery.

Thereafter, in the late 19th century, geographers were highly influenced by the Darwinian doctrine and made significant contributions in furthering systematic geography. The most prominent among them were Ferdinand von Richtofen and Friedrich Ratzel.

Richtofen perceived geography in the same line as Humboldt as, the science of the earth's surface as well as the phenomena on it that were causally interrelated with it. According to him, the purpose of systematic geography was to provide an understanding of the interrelationship and causality of phenomena on the earth's surface which could be used for deducing about individual regions as well. He provided a guideline for the systematic study of the earth's surface. Richtofen also differentiated between general or systematic geography

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as analytic and regressive that was based on general concepts and, special or regional geography as synthetic and descriptive dealing with the unique and peculiar.

Friedrich Ratzel in his 'Anthropogeographie' set a framework for the systematic study of human geography and thus set a new trend in the subject. Prior to him, systematic geography only involved physical geography and, human geography was mainly confined within regional studies. His anthropogeographie was essentially a reflection of the Darwinian viewpoints and emphasized on the concept of natural selection that was used in the natural sciences. Ratzel was of the view that cultural differences of a land were much more prominent than the physical differences. Ratzel's concept of geography was based on two propositions---(i) the interrelation of environment and humans and (ii) the interrelations of humans.

Alfred Hettner distinguished between systematic geography as that which was interested in formulating general laws and theories and, regional geography as concerned with the study of peculiarities in which the generalisations were tested to improvise on the existing theories.

The regional tradition was again revived by the French geographer Vidal de la Blache. He introduced the concept of 'pays' or small local units as ideal units of study for the geographers which could even be used to arrive at general conclusions. He was contested however, by Reclus with his 'Le Terra' that was centered on systematic physical geography.

The dichotomy between systematic and regional geography subsequently led to the Hartshorne-Schaefer debate. While Hartshorne in his 'Nature of Geography' advocated that geography was regional in its essence and put forward his concept of areal differentiation', his views were refuted by Schaefer as 'Hartshorian Orthodoxy' who called for a systematic scientific approach for geographical studies.