

The Regional Concept and Regional Geography

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The Regional Concept and Regional Geography

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I. Introduction

Regional Concept and Regional Geography: A Historical Perspective

The region and regional geography have been a matter of discourse for scholars since Greek period. The word "region" comes from the Latin word "regime", which means 'to manage'. The region was regarded as the appropriate areal scale to manage parts of the kingdom or empire. In a broader sense, the region was defined as a bounded area, possessing some unity or organizing structures. Such study of unified geographical phenomena in a region can be termed as regional geography. In fact, this branch of geography has been viewed as one of the oldest branches. This concept of regional geography can be traced in the works of Herodotus. In the fifth century, B.C., Herodotus described threefold divisions of his known world namely Asia, Lybia and Europe. During the Greek and the Roman period, scholars regarded regional geography as a description of the empires, routes for their armies and for searching the wealth of conquered lands. For example, Strabo laid down the foundation of regional geography through in his 17 books. He used to describe human activities in a region. Such information would have been being used by military and political rulers. In addition, the word "chorology" associated with the regional concept has also been the oldest tradition in geographical inquiry, which aims at the study of the areal differentiation of the earth's surface.

Gradually, the importance of the regional approach to geography grew during the Renaissance and the European colonial period. Various useful texts and maps describing the vegetation, the population, and the wealth of the new regions were created for European rulers. Later, during the nineteenth century, each colonial expedition was followed by writings in form of books, maps, and atlases of the travelled area. Therefore, for a century, regional geography had close relations with ruling European countries, trade companies, financing expeditions. In this background of common history between trade and geography, some of the publications like "Universal Geographies" and academic initiatives of Geographical Societies like the Royal Geographical Society laid the foundation of regional geography. In fact, due to links between geography and trade, the regional concept became as

a core theme for geography between mid of eighteen and end of the nineteenth century. Scholars like Philippe Buache (the France Geographer) brought about the concept of pure geography and demarcated region on the basis of the river basin. Later German geographer Christoph Gatterner supported the concept of river basin as a basis of identification of natural region. During this period, scholars from two main schools of geographical thought namely German and French were competing. Scholars began to redefine the regional concept from various perspectives. For example, German scholars came with the word 'Landschaft' and/or 'landschaftskunde' (landscape). Scholars give two meanings of 'Landschaft'. One meaning is areal extent with some kind of geographical uniformity and another meaning is a tentative area of the earth in people's mind. Although writing on the regional concept can be traced from pre-classical period to modern time of Ritter and Ratzel, but both meanings of Landschaft became popular only in the beginning of 19th century, especially in Germany. For example, Humboldt and Wimmer believed in the mental impression of the aesthetic character of an area, but surprisingly, Penck's concept of 'Landschaft' did not include man. He pointed out that a region or 'Landschaft' must encompass only visible geographical phenomena. Likewise, French writers used the word 'pays' in both the meanings. In fact, Landschaft is analogous to Carl Sauer's concept of cultural landscape. As per Sauer, the natural landscape is transformed into the cultural landscape through man's interaction with nature in their cultural context and lifestyles. The contemporary American and British geographers used the word landscape as synonymous to the region. However, the word 'Landschaftskunde (or landscape Science)' was referring to the study of the types of regions and their classifications on various parameters. Regions are classified on the basis of variation of geographical features (physical, socio-economic, or both). While explaining the regional variation, Hettner focussed on the pattern of geographical features resulting from mainly physical factors in regions. Schluter concentrated on the study of distinctive regional appearance resulted from the interaction between features. Schluter's concept of 'Kulturlandschaft' (cultural landscape) seems to be similar to French word 'Pays'. 'Pays' refers to a small rural well-defined area showing functional relationship between man- environment for centuries. Schluter was in favour of inclusion of man as a part of the landscape. Each region or landscape is characterized by some attributes like areal extent, location, and boundaries.

II. Attributes of Region: There are some basic attributes of a region, which are being discussed as follows:

- a) **The region has areal extent:** Each region has spatial extent with some sort of homogeneity in its physical and cultural characteristics. For example, the Thar desert and Bundelkhand region in India and the Sahara desert in Africa.
- b) **Regions have a location:** Each region is often expressed in relation with its the regional name. For example, South Asia, the South-East Asia etc.
- c) **The region has boundaries:** Each region has a boundary. This boundary could be either well-defined or transitional in nature. For example, the Himalayan region and the Telugu regions in India.
- d) **Regions may be either formal or functional:** An area is defined as a formal region if there is homogeneity in its physical or cultural features. For example, the Deccan plateau, The monsoon region. After the 1960s, geographers inclined to demarcate the Functional region. A functional region is a dynamic concept which is demarcated on the basis of functional interactions and connections. Its boundaries change over the space and time depending upon interchanges of goods and services between the core and surrounding areas. For example City region like Delhi National Capital Region (Delhi-NCR) is demarcated on basis of supply of milk, fruits, vegetables, and newspapers.
- e) **Regions are hierarchically arranged:** Regions vary in types and sizes. For example, the Indo-Gangetic plain has many regions of second order like the Upper Ganga Plain and the Lower Ganga plain. Therefore, regions are hierarchically arranged.

Besides regions are of different types.

III. Typology of Regions: The regions may be classified on various parameters. Regions may be based on physical characteristics, cultural characteristics, an amalgamation of the physical and cultural variables. As discussed previously, based on functionality, regions may be either formal or functional. Based on physical characteristics, regions are as follows:

A. Physical Regions: It is a kind of formal region based on a single characteristic. Some are main physical regions are as follows:

1. **Landform regions:** The landform regions are delineated on the basis of relief, structure, configuration, Genesis, and age. The Himalayan region and the Brahmaputra valley are a good example.

2. **Climate region:** An area with homogeneity in various combinations of climatic elements (temperature, rainfall etc.) is termed as a climatic region. For example, the Indian Monsoon region.

B. Cultural Regions: An area with homogeneity in various combinations of the culture and cultural elements is defined as cultural regions. For example, population region, linguistic region, religious region etc.

C. Political regions: In modern time, boundaries of political regions are defined after careful survey. Boundaries of the national state is a good example. Political boundaries in the national state may not be permanent, which is subjected to change as a result of internal and external pressure. The fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany is a good example.

D. Economic regions: The economic regions are defined on the basis of homogeneity in economic activities and resources over the space. The economic region has been widely used for planning and in solving the problems of poverty, hunger, underdevelopment, and malnutrition.

E. Mental regions (Mental map): People carry a mental image of a place which is termed as a mental map. The mental images may constitute some sort of political, social, cultural, and economic values. This mental image of the same place differs from person to person. For example, the mental map of tribes differs from those of the non-tribes.

F. Natural Resource Regions: Resource regions are delineated on the basis of homogeneity in nature and types of natural resources. For example natural gas regions, coal regions, and iron ore regions.

G. Urban Regions (Megalopolis): There is uniformity in urban activities like production, exchange, administration, distribution, and consumption in a region. Such region is defined as a formal. Urban regions are defined on the basis of interconnection and interaction between center and periphery. Such area is defined functional regions. For example, City region where people surrounding areas (periphery area) come to the central place for getting various services and goods. Such cities may be hierarchical structured. For example, Christaller in his Central Place Theory explains hierarchical structures of urban centers and regions. In some urban vast regions, there is continuous stretch of large and small cities. For example, in the USA, the north-eastern seaboard is the leading megalopolis region, where there is a continuous stretch of urban and suburban areas from New Hampshire to Northern Virginia, and from the Atlantic coast to the foothills of the Appalachian mountain. In reality, the majority of urban regions are functional in nature.

IV. Regionalism: A Concept

Regionalism is a sub-nationalism and political concept. It is a movement which seeks to politicize the territorial predicaments of its regions with the aim of protecting its regional interest. Generally, regionalism evolves on the basis of some social and cultural characteristics like ethnicity, caste, creed, language, color or culture. Sometimes local leaders use this concept for achieving greater autonomy and local power especially political and economic power. In fact, it is a political rhetoric and self-assertiveness based on a deep-seated mistrust of central government. Regionalism opposes pan-cultural concept. Despite globalization and modernization, regionalism is widely observed in both developed and developing countries across the world. Sometime regionalism may help in solving some socio-political and economic problems at local level, but it is one of the big obstacles in nation building process or national integration. Even in India, some emerging trends of regionalism are being observed in some states like Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Maharashtra, Punjab, Kashmir, Tamil Nadu, etc. Such kind of sub-nationalism has already posed some serious problems for India, especially in form of Punjabi-ism and Kashmiri-ism. The Assamese (Ahoms), Nagas in North-East region and Maharashtrians in Western region occasionally give a strong impression of regionalism or sub-nationalism. Regionalists may have whatever the objectives, they create serious problems for the government and governance for developmental purposes. In the world, there are so many countries, where regionalism led to national disintegration. For example, powerful Soviet Union (USSR) has been disintegrated into several independent republics. Problems of regionalism are needed to be meaningfully solved.


V. Approaches to Study of Regions

There are following approaches to study a region.

- A. **Landscape Morphology:** It refers to the study of forms and structures of visible geographical phenomena. In Landscape morphology, Schlueter emphasized on the study of distinctive regional appearance resulted from the interaction between only visible geographical features, however, Hettner focussed on the uniqueness of a region resulting from either visible or non-visible geographical features. Hettner's

approach seems to be more holistic to study all physical and socio-cultural structures in a region.

- B. **Landscape Ecology:** It is also called functional approach to study region. It studies interaction and interrelation of geographical phenomena within a region. For example, City region which is delimited by the degree of interaction of people between the city center and a periphery area.
- C. **Landscape Chronology:** It refers to the historical studies of developmental phases of a region in a sequential manner. For example, Whittlesey in 1929 discussed 'Sequent Occupance' and pointed out that each region follows sequential stages of development from an agrarian society to industrial society.
- D. **Regionalization:** The entire Earth or a country is divided into several regions depending upon homogeneity in some physical and socio-cultural features and functions. This process is called regionalization. Regionalization could be of many types like physical, economic and cultural regionalization. Therefore, this approach helps to study a region.
- E. **Landscape Classification:** Classification of Landscape is another approach to study a region. For example, the landscape is classified into two parts viz., natural and cultural landscapes. The classification itself gives lots of information on a region or a landscape.



VI. **Regional Geography:** Regional Geography evolved as a branch in many countries Germany, France and England and USA. Evolution of regional geography and contributions of some prominent geographers to this branch is being discussed as follows:

- A. **Regional Geography in Germany:** Hettner was the German geographer who pointed out that geography is chorological science of the earth aiming at the study of areas and regions. He elaborated the concept of chorology. As previously discussed, he opposed the Schluter' concept of landscape morphology. In 1906, Schluter pointed out that geography studies all forms and structures resulting from the interaction between only visible phenomena but Hettner was concerned about the only uniqueness of a region which has resulted from either by visible or non-visible phenomena. According to Hettner, the study of the uniqueness of a region is regional geography. Schluter opposed the chorological study of geography but his geography

is a distinct form of regional geography. Scholars from Germany wrote various books on region geography. Ritter's book 'Erdkunde' in 19 volumes is a good example of regional geography. This book mainly covers Africa and parts of Asia. Richthofen was the first German geographer made difference between general and regional geography. He emphasized the points of regional geography must be descriptive to highlight the salient features of the region.

B. Regional Geography in France: Regional geography was the most important branch of geography in France. Vidal de la Blache initiated regional studies through the development of a concept called 'pays' (small rural region). He opposed the concept of Reine Geography and river basin as a region. Man-environment relationship shaped small region (pays) making it unique for geographical studies. Other geographers like L. Gallois and E. De Martonne also contributed to regional geography. In addition, the trends of geological and historical studies led the growth of a concept of regional synthesis. Later this concept was accepted as an approach to do a geographical analysis of a region. During this period, the regional studies were so popular that numerous books were written and published. For example, Vidal De la Blache's 'Table De La Geographie' and 'De la France' (1903), Demangeon's 'Picardie' (1905), E. De Martonne's 'Les Alps' (1926) and 'An Essay on Middle Europe' (1930-1931), R. Blanchard's 'French Alps' were noted books which contained description of geographical features like landforms, climate, vegetation, settlement and other social-cultural structures and distinctiveness of each region and its unique man-environment relationship.

C. Regional Studies in Britain: Evolution of regional studies and trends in Britain was significantly influenced by the concept of 'Landschaft' from Germany and 'Pays' from France. For example, British scholar Patrick Geddes focussed on field studies and regional surveys for demarcating regions and regional planning. Another British geography was Andrew J. Herbertson (1865-1915) who combined Geddesian tradition of regionalization and Darwinian heritage of deterministic approach in his study of natural regions. He pointed out that natural regions in the world must be demarcated on the basis of an association of surface features, climate, and vegetation. In addition, H. Fleury offered a regional classification of the world based on problems and difficulties faced by man in achieving its basic needs on the earth surface like nutrition, reproductions, well-being.

D. Regional Geography in the USA: During early decades of the twentieth century, some American geographers were inclined to British approach to the delimitation of regions. Wesley Powell was one of the first geographers who divided the country into 16 physiographic regions but in 1914, W. L. G. Joerg used the word natural regions for dividing the regions into various small regions based on homogeneity in certain physical characteristics. Besides, N. M. Fenneman also published a study of physiographical divisions of United States in 1914. Further, C. R. Dryer came up with an approach to identify natural regions based on economic functions and natural characteristics. That is why he termed such regions as natural-economic regions. Some decades later Richard Hartshorne popularized the concept of regional paradigm in the USA. As per his view, Geography is the study of areal differentiation. Combined functions of geographical elements form a unique regional landscape. There is a difference between different regional landscapes. Such difference in regional landscapes is called areal differentiation. According to Hartshorne, geography has a unique methodology to study its region which was criticized by F. K. Schaefer. In other words, Schaefer rejected the concept of exceptionalism and pointed out Geography is a social science in which all scientific laws should apply. By the 1950s, geographers gradually disillusioned from the regional paradigm and inclined towards systematic geography.

VII. Summary and Recent trends

Between the mid of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, Regional geography like quantitative geography had been an important approach to the geographical study. This period was known as the time of regional paradigm but with the advent of quantitative revolution in the 1950s and onwards, various scholars like G. H. T. Kimble and Fred K. Schaefer criticised this paradigm because of its descriptiveness nature and lack of well-defined theories. Nevertheless, the concept of region and the regional geography paradigm influenced many branches like geomorphology, economic geography and urban geography (like city-region based on core and periphery interactions) etc. Moreover, since the 1980s, regional geography has seen observing a resurgence as a branch of geography in many universities across the world.

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