

## Historical Explanation in Geography

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### Component-I (B) - Description of Module

Items	Description of Module
Subject Name	Geography
Paper Name	<b>Geographical Thought</b>
Module Name/Title	Historical Explanation in Geography
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Pre-requisites	Geography, Chorological and chronological explanation, Quantitative revolution, Behavioural geography, Humanistic geography, Marxist geography
Objectives	To Know What Is Historical Geography
Keywords	Historical geography, Cultural landscape, Reconstruction of past, Quantitative revolution

## **Component II - e-Text**

# **Historical Explanation in Geography**

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## **I - Introduction**

History of geography and historical geography are not synonymous. History of geography deals with the changing nature of geography – how the focus of the subject has shifted and evaluated from time to time with the emergence of new ideas. Historical geography, on the other hand, may be defined as the geography of the past. According to A.H. Clark (1952) geography has many branches like social geography, physical geography, economic geography, political geography etc. However, any geography of the past, be it cultural or plant geography, is historical geography. In this regard historical geography is different from other branches of geography because it actually covers the whole realm of geography of past period. Therefore, controversy arises regarding the status of historical geography – whether it is a branch of geography or it is a separate field of study or it is simply history.

Eva Semotanova (2002) has regarded historical geography as an independent, interdisciplinary, broader discipline which studies man- nature relationship, correlates time with space and combines social and physical sciences. Huntington, on the other hand believed that historical geography laid more emphasis on history than geography. According to him, in historical geography, events of history were analysed in terms of geographical context. Guelke in his writings in 1982 also opined that historical geography should be considered as history. A large number of academicians do not agree with Guelke's viewpoint. As early as in the eighteenth century Immanuel Kant described that history and geography were different from other systematic sciences because unlike other sciences, they study the unique or particular. History is concerned with positioning of phenomena across time (chronological studies) and geography is concerned with the arrangement of phenomena across space (chorological studies). Following Kantian tradition, Hettner and Hartshorne emphasized that geography was chorological science and the central theme of geography was to study areal differentiation. It is the geography of the past that helps to understand the present unique geographical characteristics of an area and the geographical interpretation of phenomena of any region at a particular period of the past is regarded as historical geography. So, historical geography cannot be equated with history. Darby differentiated historical geography from history by focussing on assembling sequences of cross-sections to depict evolution of rural landscape. Hettner, Darby and others, who believe that it is a branch of

geography, argue that geography is regarded as spatial science and historical geography study the spatial relations of phenomena of the past.

## **II - Nature and Development of Historical Geography**

Examples of the study of historical events in their spatial context can be traced back as early as the writings of Herodotus (485-425 B.C.). The modern historical geography has been influenced by the writings of many historians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as Thomas Arnold whose famous *History of Rome* was published in 1838. During the the first quarter of the twentieth century some works on historical geography were done at Chicago School by a number of American geographers. R. J. Johnston (1981) has identified three main phases of conceptual development of historical geography in Anglo-American world after the First World War.

- (a) From 1930s till Quantitative Revolution: During this period historical geography and geomorphology were the most important branches of geography. We know that geomorphology is regarded as the science of landforms. Interestingly, historical geography of this period emphasized on cultural landscape. The most eminent cultural geographers of this period were Ralph H. Brown and Carl O. Sauer from North America and H.C. Darby from the Great Britain. In America, historical geography experienced a major thrust by the Berkeley School under the leadership of Carl Sauer. Sauer and his associates embraced interdisciplinary studies with historians and anthropologists and focussed on the generic study of landscapes – how cultural landscapes develop out of natural landscapes by human activities that continued for many generations. Both the works of Sauer and Brown studied the sequences of settlements in many parts of North and South America. Their studies, particularly the work of Sauer revealed that the same physical landscape might produce different cultural landscape due to cultural difference of the people of those regions. This indicates to the influence of environmental possibilism in his work. The students of Sauer, namely Parsons and Clark continued to follow the tradition of reconstruction of cultural landscapes in geographical studies.

In Britain Darby's classic work on historical geography was published in a series of writings under the heading of *Domesday Geographies of England* (1952-1977). However, Darby did not follow the cultural landscape school. His focus was on cross-sectional analyses through time to describe the evolution of the rural landscape. He used cartographic techniques to reconstruct the past using available materials.

From the above discussion it is clear that two different approaches prevailed in the study of historical geography after World War I which continued for almost four decades but both the approaches were more compelling when studied in regional context.

- (b) The phase of Quantitative Revolution in late 1960s and 1970s: In late 1940s and early 1950s some geographers expressed great dissatisfaction towards the chorological or regional paradigm of geography which was more descriptive and focussed on uniqueness of places as opposed to formulate general laws that are common in other fields of scientific enquiries. Schaefer criticised this exceptionalist view of geography and argued that geographers should adopt the methodology of positivism to study spatial arrangement of phenomena on the earth's surface and seek to formulate theories and laws explaining observed spatial distributions. To make the subject matter more precise and scientific, to formulate laws and models, geography shifted its perspective from ideographic to nomothetic and from description to analysis. Such transformation in the objectives and methodology of geography and the vigorous use of statistical and mathematical methods in this subject for testing hypotheses and building theories is known as Quantitative Revolution. The waves of quantitative revolution engulfed historical geography. The classical historical geography which was ideographic in nature lost its glory and found itself at the fringe of the subject. To regain the importance, some historical geographers started incorporating the mathematical and statistical techniques in their works and adopted interdisciplinary approach. Among them to name a few were A.R.H Baker (who used *Nearest Neighbour Analysis* to find out settlement structure in the 19<sup>th</sup> century rural France), F. W. Carter (who used *Graph Theory* in search of the dimension of *ecumene* in Serbia at medieval period) and H. Carter (who used *Central Place Theory* to explain spatial organization of urban system in North-East Wales in the 19<sup>th</sup> century).
- (c) Post Quantitative Revolution phase since 1970s: The theories and models that emerged as a result of quantitative revolution were influenced by the doctrine of positivism which only relies on objective reality rather than perceived reality. The over-emphasis on quantification and systematic analysis of geographical phenomena strongly criticized by some geographers; as a consequence behavioral and humanistic and radical approaches were being introduced in geography. The growing discontent against quantitative revolution also led to the revival of historical geography. The 'new' historical geography incorporated quantitative methods with humanistic and

environmental approach. A. R. H. Baker in 1981 stated that historical geography should follow the humanist tradition of historical materialism. Humanist tradition put emphasis human consciousness and human activities. Historical materialism is a method introduced by Marx to interpret the development of human societies over time. Baker believed that historical geography should be concerned with social and economic history of a place and period. Therefore, historical geography is nothing but historical explanation of geographical phenomena. Besides, the revival of traditional environmentalism in the post quantitative revolution period led to increasing co-operation between historical geographers and scholars of other disciplines (e.g., palaeobotanists, archaeologists etc.) for recreating cultural ecology of past landscapes.

### **III - Approaches to the Study of Historical Geography**

According to Smith (1965) the study of historical geography has embraced four distinct approaches. These are:

- (a) The operation of the geographical factor in history;
- (b) The evolution of the cultural landscape;
- (c) Reconstruction of past geographies; and
- (d) The study of geographical change through time.

However, many studies of historical geography incorporated more than one approaches.

#### The operation of the geographical factor in history

Many studies of historical geography are based on geographical elements of a particular time. Carl Sauer himself believed that the study of any region should be based on sequential arrangement of its previous geography. Reconstruction of past geographies is based on studying and classifying the geographical factors to understand the influence of physical environment on man in the past period. Human response to physical factors at different periods can even help to formulate geographical laws. However, such type of works has been labelled by many as history rather than geography.

#### The evolution of the cultural landscape

According to this particular approach historical geography deals with the changing cultural landscape of a region. The concept of cultural landscape was popularised by Carl Sauer. According to him cultural landscape is a landscape developed by the transformation of natural landscape. This transformation is done by human community having particular cultural traits and preferences. The concept of changing cultural landscape is similar to that of

sequential development of landforms. As geomorphologists study the processes that lead to the development of present landforms, similarly historical geographers study the processes that are responsible for transforming natural areas into cultural landforms. Smith has criticized this approach on the ground that it considers human beings as mere machines who only produce cultural landscape unemotionally.

#### Reconstruction of past geographies

Reconstruction of past geographies helps to understand the present geography – be it agricultural or urban or industrial geography. This approach for the study of historical geography is based on the view that geography is the study of areal differentiation. So it is essentially regional geography of the past period. To explain the present geography of a region one needs to study in detail the geography of past periods. For example, to understand the present urban scenario of Venice, one needs to know the geography of Venice in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Hartshorne, 1939). To put it in other way, the present particular characteristics of a region perhaps can be best explained by the situation of certain period of past. In contrast to the view of cultural landscape school, Whittlesey in 1929 said the historical geographers should not study the processes of development but focus on the interpretation of causal relationship of geographical phenomena of a fixed period. It is believed to be the most traditional view of historical geography. However, the study of the past picture of the present as the core of historical geography has also been criticised. According to Guelke (1982) the geographical study of the past period comes under the realm of history.

#### The study of geographical change through time

According to this approach, “Each past period had its own present geography” (Hartshorne, 1939). If historical geographers conduct comparative study of geographical phenomena through successive periods of time, then it is possible to depict the changing geography of an area. However, Mackinder argued that no distinction could be made between historical and contemporary geography because historical geography dealt with historical present and the study of present geographic features would be regarded as historical geography in future.

### **IV - Sources of historical geography**

According to Richard Hartshorne the study of historical geography needs data or materials which are mostly historical, i.e., collected from the past. Although some scholars believe that it is the work of historians, Brown has pointed out that only the trained geographers could find out and analyse historical records of geographical materials. In this context let us discuss the nature of the source materials of historical geography in India.

Reconstruction of past geographies of ancient and medieval India is a serious problem as there are paucities of materials and maps of this period. Therefore, it is a serious challenge to the geographers to find out the geographical information from the non-geographical accounts. In this regard the geographers have to depend on the following sources:

### Religious Text

Religious and semi-religious texts of India provide some useful geographical contents of the past. *Vedas* (written about 1500 B.C. – 1000 B.C.), *Upanishads* (800 B. C. – 500 B.C.) and *Puranas* (uncertain) contain much information about many regions of ancient India at different points of time. There are four *Vedas* and eighteen *Maha Puranas* that help to get some pictures of the land and people and dynasties of Puranic India. In his colossal work on the *Geography of Puranas* (1966), S.M. Ali has revealed that the geographical information of various *Puranas* represented gradual progress of the geographical knowledge about *Bharata* and the world. *Rgveda* is full of information about flora, fauna and tribal communities. A classification of natural vegetation into trees, shrubs and grass along with the characteristics of various plants are found in *Rgveda*. Important materials of Human Geography from the viewpoint of people's adjustment to environment through different form of human activities (agriculture, irrigation, transport settlement, diet and clothing) were highlighted in *Rgveda*. The description of relief features in later Vedic literature is better than in *Rgveda*. From *Vedas* and *Purnas*, Ali has demonstrated how occupational specialization and caste system led to the change in the pattern of physical and cultural landscape.

### Epics and Literary Sources

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. to 400 A.D.) are rich in geographical information which was utilized by Das (1894) and Dikshitar (1935). In *Ramayana*, important relief features of North India are described more or less accurately but the given topographic characteristics of Peninsular India are quite confusing. In the *Bhisma Parva of Mahabharata*, Sanjaya narrates the long list of countries, mountains and rivers of that period of India. The works of Kalidasa had also been used by Law (1954) and Gupta (1963) to find out geographical information.

### Travel Account

Historical geographers depend heavily on the travel accounts to reconstruct past geographies. In case of India, among various travel accounts, the most important are the narratives of four travellers – Chinese pilgrims Hiuen Tsang (7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) and Fa Hain (5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) and medieval Arab travellers Alberuni and Ibn Batute. Also important is the name of Megasthenes (who came to India at the end of the third century B.C.). Between sixteenth to

eighteenth centuries many Europeans (Terry, Hailton, Hawkins, Careri and other) travelled vast part of India. Their writings are also important source of historical geography of this period.

The description of Hiuen Tsang of the then India was annotated by Beal. Based on it Cunningham (1871) produced brilliant geographical account of Buddhist India. Similarly, the geographic content of the travel account of Ibn Batuta was discussed by Yule (1874).

#### Dynastic Archives and Chronicles

Materials for historical geographies can also be gathered from court histories, chronicles and biographies. *Rajtarangini* by Kalhana (12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) which provides the history of the Kingdom of Kashmir is regarded as the first historical chronicle of India. *Babarnama*, *Akbarnama*, *Tuzak-i-Jahangiri* – all are rich source of geographies of Mughal period. The works of Tod (1829, 1832) which provides valuable geographic information were based on genealogical rolls, poetic histories and other bardic literature.

#### Revenue Records

Agricultural statistics and other documents on revenue of late Mughal period are valuable resources for the reconstruction of agricultural geography of this period. *Ain-i-Akbari* by Abul Fazal has been extensively used by many historians such as Moreland and Irfan Habib. Materials on Mughal administration and revenue divisions were analysed by geographer M. Raza in his series of studies on historical geography.

#### Old Maps

Diagrammatic representations of Puranic knowledge did exist in India but they lack cartographic requirements so as to be called as maps. Earliest maps of India can be traced back in the works of Greek and Roman scholars like Eratosthenes, Herodotus and Ptolemy but their knowledge were not based on firsthand account. During the medieval period Arab geographers provided huge materials of geographic information but they were not good map makers. With the advent of European travellers from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, significant advance were observed in the field of map making. Notable contributions in this field were made by Jefferys (1768), Rennell (1782-93) and Thomas Call (1793). Rennell's *Atlas of Bengal and Bihar* and Kelley's *Atlas of South India (1782)* provide useful information about regional geography of India.

Other sources of historical geography in India includes military campaigns, temple records etc. On the basis of the various sources described above, many studies on historical



geography in India have been found. Most of them focussed on the geomorphic and climatic change on one hand and the reconstruction of past geographies in the field of human geography (e.g., urban geography) on the other.