

Meaning of social geography

Social geography is a branch of Human Geography dealing with social structures, social groups and social activities. It is difficult to define this sub-discipline (of human geography). It is still in its formative stage and yet to assume a crystallised and final form with distinct perimeters. However, the following tentative definitions give us some idea about the meaning and scope of social geography.

It was **W. Fitzgerald (1946)**, who for the first time, looked for a definition of social geography. He almost equated it with human geography and stated that social geography studied 'spatial arrangement of social phenomena, which are of significance to man'.

T. Harrison (1946), who says that 'social geography is not a systematic treatment of society in relation with environment but a 'genetic description of social differences' as they relate to other factors and to differences in areas on the earth's surface'.

Social geography began to consolidate slowly over the nineteen-fifties and sixties. **J. Watson (1957)** defined it 'as the identification of different regions of the earth according to their association of social phenomena related to the total environment.

According to **R.E. Pahl (1965)** social geography was 'the study of the patterns and processes for understanding socially defined population groups (say, Telugu, Sindhi, Oriya, Assamese, etc.) in their spatial settings.

A. Buttimer (1968), another geographer, attempted at defining social geography and said that sub-discipline was the study of areal (spatial) patterns and functional relations of social groups in the context of their social environment'. The study, according to Buttimer further extends to consider the centres (nodes of social activity) (i.e. towns and villages) and the channels and media of social communications' (educational institutions, performing art, fairs and festivals, etc).

David Harvey defined social geography (1973) as a sub-discipline that 'addresses itself both to the spatial expression of institutions as witnessed by the incidence of inequality, poverty, racism and exploitation; and to the active role of space in influencing these social structures'.

Two British geographers, **J. Eyles (1974)** defined social geography as the analysis of social patterns and processes arising from the distribution of and access to scarce resources'. **E. Jones (1975)**, the other British pioneer in the field of social geography, defined social

geography as the understanding of the patterns which arise from the use the social groups make of space as they see it, and of the processes involved in making and changing such patterns'.

The sub-discipline grew rapidly through the nineteen-eighties and nineties. Peter Jackson was more candid when he defined social geography (1955) as study of social relations in space and spatial structures that underpin those relations'

C. Hamnett (1996) put forward a still clear definition by saying that, social geography is primarily concerned with the study of geography of social structure, social activities and social groups across a wide range of human societies.

We have come across above as many as ten definitions of social geography. Like any other definition of a discipline, none of these is comprehensive. Although social geography is a relatively new field, it has meanwhile, undergone some conceptual and contextual changes. Moreover, the term 'social' itself has many connotations and is interpreted in several ways. Lastly, the field of social geography is vast. It is because of these reasons that no unanimity has been struck so far in respect of evolving a commonly accepted definition of social geography. Without going into these polemics, we may, however, gainfully say that social geography is concerned with the patterns of the attributes of a population (like religion, social customs and traditions, literacy, age-sex structure, rural-urban composition, social organisation, etc.) and activities of people (e-g. economic, social, cultural, etc.). The dominant themes of social geography are:

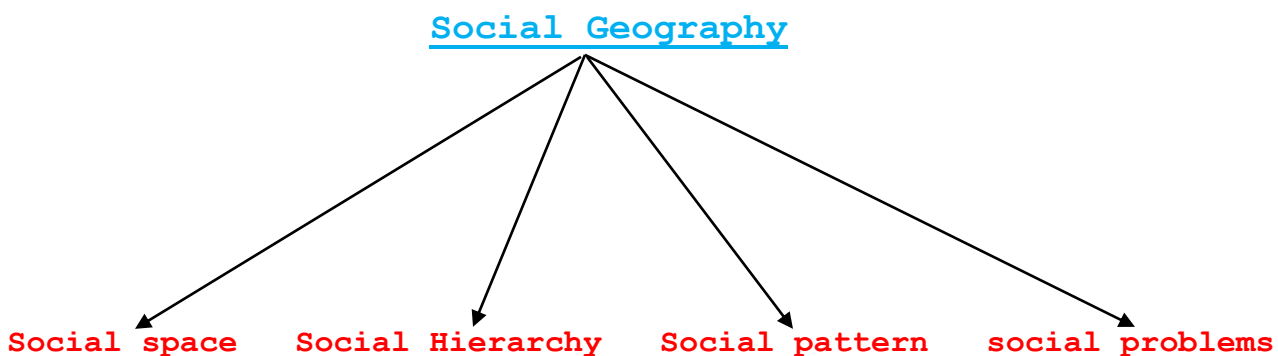


Fig: Theme of social Geography

Scope of Social Geography

Social geography is a subfield of human geography that focuses on the spatial distribution of social phenomena and the ways in which people and societies interact with their environments. The scope of social geography is broad and encompasses a wide range of topics and themes. Here are some key aspects and areas within the scope of social geography:

Cultural Geography: Cultural geography examines how culture influences and is influenced by geographic space. This includes the study of languages, religions, customs, traditions, and the spread of cultural practices.

Urban Geography: This area explores the social aspects of cities and urban environments, including issues related to urbanization, migration, housing, segregation, gentrification, and the social dynamics of urban life.

Rural Geography: Rural geography focuses on the social, economic, and cultural aspects of rural areas, including agricultural practices, rural communities, and the impact of globalization on rural landscapes.

Population Geography: Population geography studies the distribution, composition, and migration of populations. It examines factors such as population growth, demographic transitions, and the spatial patterns of human settlements.

Social Inequality: Social geography is concerned with the spatial patterns of social inequality, including disparities in income, education, healthcare, and access to resources. It explores the root causes and consequences of such inequalities.

Gender and Sexuality: Social geography also delves into the spatial dimensions of gender and sexuality, including the analysis of gender roles, identities, and LGBTQ+ geographies.

Political Geography: This subfield explores the relationships between political structures, boundaries, and social phenomena. It examines topics like geopolitics, territoriality, and the impact of political decisions on communities.

Migration and Mobility: Social geographers study patterns of human mobility, including international migration, internal migration, and refugee movements. They analyze the social and cultural aspects of migration processes.

Environmental Justice: Environmental justice is an important concern within social geography, focusing on how environmental issues and hazards disproportionately affect marginalized communities and how these communities mobilize for change.

Globalization and Transnationalism: Social geographers investigate the social and cultural dimensions of globalization, including the flow of ideas, information, people, and goods across borders.

Social Networks and Communication: It includes the study of how social networks, both online and offline, influence human interactions and the dissemination of information.

Community Studies: Social geography often involves community-level analysis, studying the dynamics of different types of communities and how they adapt and respond to social and environmental changes.

Qualitative and Quantitative Research methods: Social geographers use a variety of research methods, including surveys, interviews, GIS (Geographic Information Systems), and fieldwork, to investigate spatial patterns and social phenomena.

The scope of social geography is constantly evolving as new challenges and issues arise in our rapidly changing world. Researchers in this field work to better understand the complex relationships between society and space, and their findings can have practical applications in areas such as urban planning, public policy, and social justice advocacy.

Approaches in Social Geography

A keen observation of the works of social geography, so far done, reveals that the geographers, both in the west and the east, have studied the subject through **holistic, action oriented** and **group approaches**.

Holistic approaches: It is found that the social geographers in the past relied more on holistic deterministic and holistic possibilistic approaches. In the holistic approach the whole society of an area is taken as a unit. A common example of the holistic deterministic approach is to consider the society of a monsoon land as a society of subsistent cultivators. In the holistic possibilistic approach we refer to the actions of the society of an area and their influence on environment. The deliberations here are, especially on those actions which have contributed to creating congenial conditions for human life. Vidal de La Blache (1925), Hartshorne (1939), Gilbert and Sleet (1945), Robinson (1953), Smith (1965), Wrigley (1965), et al wrote a vast literature pertaining to social geography from these premises.

Action oriented approach: This is concerned with the action and interaction of the groups and individuals. With such an approach however, we have to be careful of psychologism. An example of psychologism is to consider that the desire to own one's own house is the product of mental insecurity. Here the truth is not ascertained but

only assumed. Thus, we must be aware of the dangers of attributing action to psychological factors. This is essentially a problem of behavioural geography. In any case, however interesting the study of small groups' or individuals' attributes and activities may be, such an approach provides us with an assemblage of huge amount of behavioural and social data which, it would be difficult to analyse and structure.

Group approach: It should be noted that social groups again vary in size. However, for the purpose of social geographical studies, a broad two-level categorisation seems appropriate. On the one level, we have the **primary group or group in-mind**, and on the other, the **secondary group or group by association**.

The **primary group** is characterised by informal, personal, face-to-face contact between members and is a vital component of a society. Thus the family is a primary group. Similarly a neighbourhood group or a clan or a tribe is also a primary group. Such primary groups make up the important social units within a large society. It should be realised that with the economic and social changes of the modern world, societal complexities have increased.

Next, coming to the **secondary group**, we find that some people group together to achieve certain ends. Such secondary groups are further divided into three sub-groups:

Firstly, some individuals, who are similarly placed on the cultural, economic or political leaders, may group to protect or advance their interests. There are many examples of this including immigrant, linguistic or religious groups in India. Such groups are called ascribed groups.

Secondly, some people group together for an intrinsic satisfaction in the group activity itself. Voluntary associations, clubs and societies fall into this group. Such a group is called expressive group.

Thirdly, there is materialist group, where individuals group together for material end. Trade unions, business associations, pressure groups, gangs, most political parties, etc. are the examples of materialist groups.

These three approaches (**holistic, action oriented and group**) are mentioned above help us to understand the content of the discipline.

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