

## Scope and Contemporary Relevance of Human Geography

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### ABSTRACT

*Geography is the study of spatio-temporal variations over earth surface. It is to understand the earth as home of man. The scope of human geography has evolved with changes in paradigms and perspectives over the period of time. Human geographers focus on the spatial organization and processes shaping the lives and activities of people, and their interactions with places and environment. The major themes of human geography such as – location, distribution, space, place, region, movement, diffusion and man-environment interrelationships have contemporary significance. Contemporary human geography is focused on the scientific study of location of people and activities over the earth surface and the reasons for their distribution. The objectives of the present paper are – (i) to define human geography, (ii) to describe the scope of human geography and (iii) to highlight the contemporary significance of human geography.*

**Key Words:** Human, Scope, Contemporary, Spatial and Elements.

### Definition and Branches

Over the period of time the shifts in paradigms resulted into different perspectives and definitions of geography discipline. The literal meaning of geography is to describe earth, especially the character of earth surface. According to American geographer Richard Hartshorne (1959) geography is concerned to provide accurate, orderly, and rational description and interpretation of the variable character of the earth surface. Likewise Holt-Jensen (1980) defined geography as the study of variations in phenomena from place to place. Geographer Broek (1965) stated that geography is to understand the earth as the world of man. Likewise, Yi-Fu Tuan defined geography as the study of earth as home of people. Geography at macro level is divided into two major branches: physical geography and human geography. The uniting factor in this diversity of content from landforms to population, climate to settlements and biotic to economic aspects is the spatial perspective. Whether they are human geographers or physical geographers, virtually all geographers are interested in the way places and things are laid out, organized, and arranged on the surface of the Earth.

**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. Human geographers describe and explain the human patterns of social interaction, as well as spatial level interdependencies, and how they influence or affect the earth's environment. Human geography is the study of the interrelationships between people, place, 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. Some of the well known definitions of human geography are following:

“Human geography is the synthetic study of relationships between human societies and earth's surface.” - F. Ratzel (1882).

“Human geography is the study of changing relationship between the unresting man and the unstable earth.” - E.C. Semple (1911).

“Human geography offers a new conception of the inter-relationships between earth and man .... a more synthetic knowledge of physical laws governing our earth and of the relations between the living beings which inhabit it.” - Vidal de la Blache (1926).

“Human geography may be defined as the study of the nature and distribution of the relationships between geographical environment and human activities and qualities.” - Ellsworth Huntington (1959).

“Human geography is looked upon as the study of man and his work.” - Dickens, S.N. and Pitts, F.R. (1963).

“Human geography is primarily concerned with the relations between man, ways of life and the places in which they live.” - George F. Carter (1974).

“Study of how people make places, how we organize space and society, how we interact with each other in places and across space, and how we can make sense of others and ourselves in our locality, region and world.” - H. de Blij

“Human geography is the study of where and why people and human activities are located where they are.” – Rubenstein (1983)

“Human geography is concerned with the spatial differentiation and organization of human activity and with human use of the physical environment.” – Dictionary of Human Geography (Johnston, Gregory and Smith, 1994)

### Scope of Human Geography

The close relationship between man and his physical environment was recognized and emphasized in geography from the very beginning by Greek and Roman scholars such as Hecataeus, Herodotus, Aristotle, Eratosthenes and Strabo. The Arab scholars such as Al Masudi, Al Biruni, Al Idrisi and especially Ibn-a-Khaldun, also established relationships between physical environment and cultural characteristics. In the classical period of modern geography, German geographers Humboldt and Ritter focused on the relationship between social groups and their physical environment. The man-oriented perspective of Ritter was reflected in his work ‘Erdkunde’. Ritter concluded that the earth and its inhabitants stand in the closest reciprocal relation and one cannot be truly presented in all its relationships without the other.

The German Geographer Friedrich Ratzel established Human Geography as an independent discipline. His two-volume work ‘Anthropogeographie’ (1882 and 1891) presented for the first time a broad vision of man and his works and a deep systematic analysis of complex relationship of human beings with a conditioning physical environment. Ratzel demonstrated that like natural phenomena the cultural phenomena can also be systematized. Before his time human geography had largely confined itself to regional studies. Ratzel developed systematic human geography. He focused on migration (especially German and Chinese emigration) and cultural geography. In the second volume of ‘Anthropogeographie’ he attempted to discuss the concentration and distribution of population, settlement forms, migration and diffusion of cultural characteristics. Ratzel analysed phenomena in human geography giving significance to natural conditions in volume first, but stressed the significance of historical development and cultural background of population in volume second. Ratzel is also recognized as the father of modern political geography with his contributions such as the concept of ‘Lebensraum’ i.e. living space and ‘State as an Organism’ in his work ‘Politische Geographie’ (Political Geography) in 1897. Under the influence of Darwin (Origin of Species, 1859) Ratzel followed deterministic perspective of environmental control over man and his activities. Ratzel’s contribution in three volumes of History of Mankind is significant for human geographers and especially anthropologists.

The French geographer Vidal de la Blache is regarded as one of the founding fathers of modern human geography and father of ‘Possibilism’. His ‘Principles de Geographie Humaine’ which was published posthumously in 1922 (through the efforts of Emmanuel de Martonne) and translated in English in 1926 is regarded as a classic. In the introduction part he highlighted the principle of terrestrial unity, concept of milieu, the significance of environmental factors and of man’s work. The three major parts of this book included – (i) the distribution of men on the globe; (ii) the forms of civilization; and (iii) circulation. The areas of concentration and dispersion of population were described in relation to physical as well as human factors. The races and occupation modes were described in the part on forms of civilization. The unit on circulation included movement of people and things. Blache highlighted the role of railway networks in economic advancement and national unity in Europe. Blache reflected reciprocal influences between the environment and man. Martonne added and described few aspects in the work like the origin of races, diffusion of innovations and cultural regions as well as cities.

Jean Brunhes elaborated Blache’s ideas on human geography and possibilism, and diffused the Vidalian tradition to other countries through his major work titled ‘Geographie Humaine : essai de classification positive’ (1910). This work sought to give the geography of Man a clear disciplinary basis with the identification of following scope or elements of human geography.

(i) On the Basis of Evolution of Civilization:

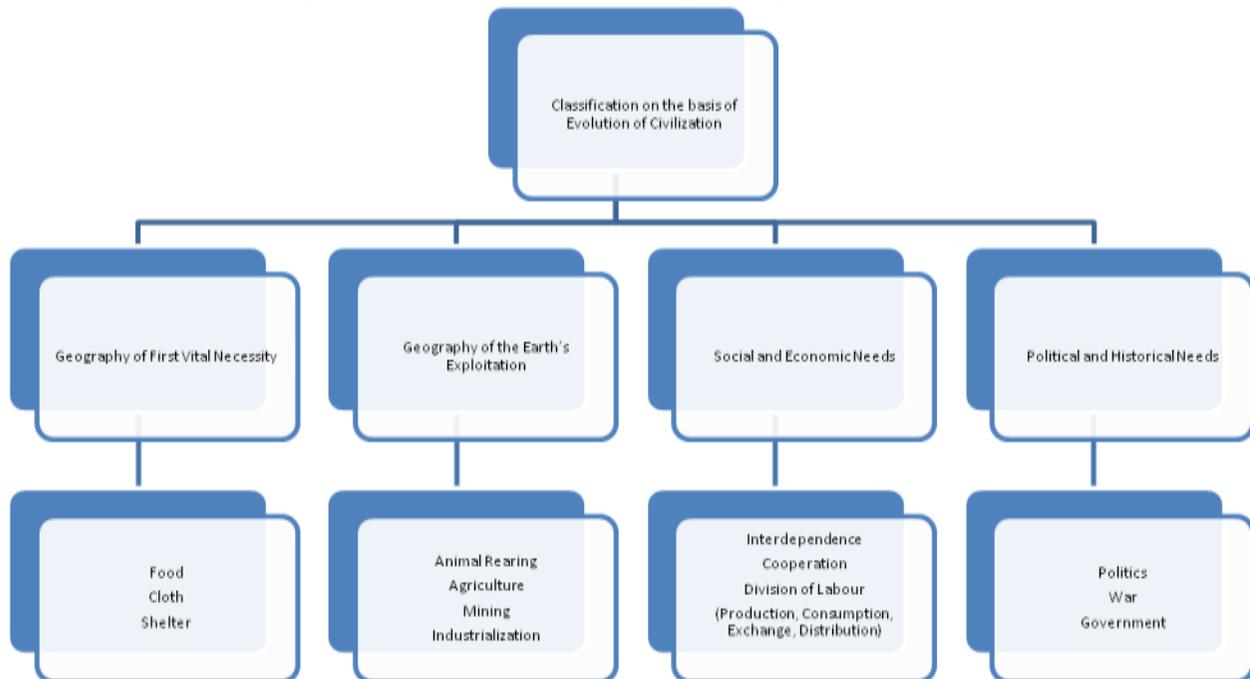
(a) Geography of the First Vital Necessity – this category included three primary needs – food, cloth and shelter which are basic needs of all persons irrespective of time and place;

(b) Geography of the Earth’s Exploitation – this category included the human activities and efforts in which human beings satisfy their needs based on exploitation of natural resources;

(c) Geography of Social and Economic Needs – in the social category Brunhes included interdependence, cooperation, division of labour and civic system and other diverse social aspects. In economic needs production, consumption, exchange and distribution were included.

(d) Political and Historical Needs – this category included description of political and historical events in relation to geographical facts (Figure 1).

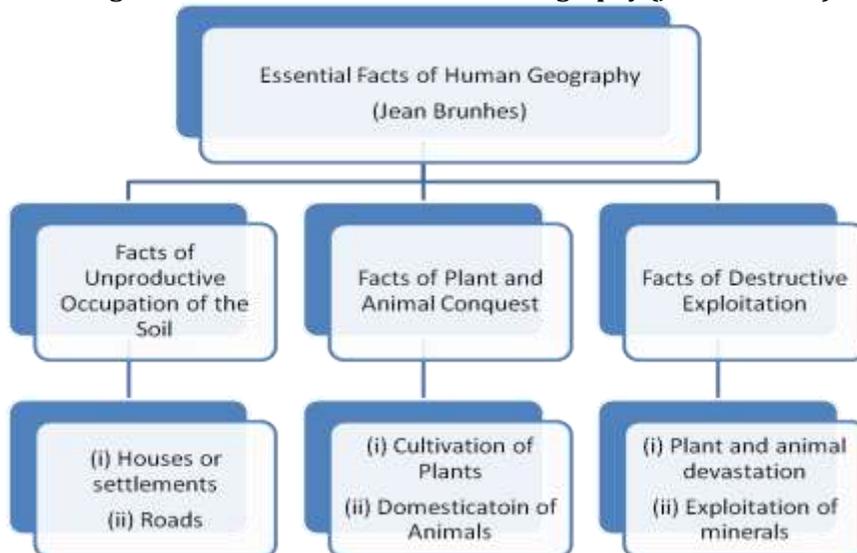
**Figure 1: Elements of Human Geography (Jean Brunhes)**



(ii) On the basis of Positive Classification or 'essential facts of geography': He grouped essential facts of human geography into three categories:

- (a) Facts of unproductive occupation of the soil – houses and roads (including rural habitations, urban agglomerations, and circulation patterns).
- (b) Facts of plant and animal conquest – the cultivation of plants and the raising of animals.
- (c) Facts of destructive exploitation – plant and animal devastation, mineral exploitation. He termed it as 'economic plunder' or 'robber economy' (Figure 2).

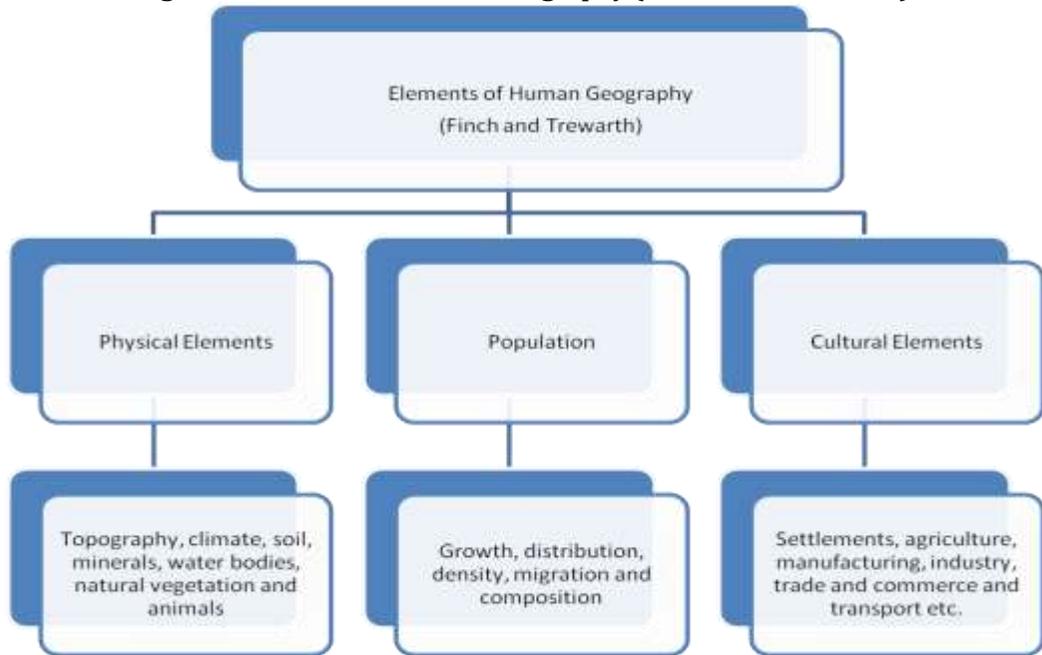
**Figure 2: Essential Facts of Human Geography (Jean Brunhes)**



Further, Brunhes himself admitted that the study of human geography is not confined to these three sets of observable phenomena but is an area of wider study which can be described as 'geography of history'. It includes following five major aspects – (i) distribution of population, (ii) economic geography, (iii) geography of political groupings, (iv) social geography and finally a synthesis of all essential facts as (v) regional geography.

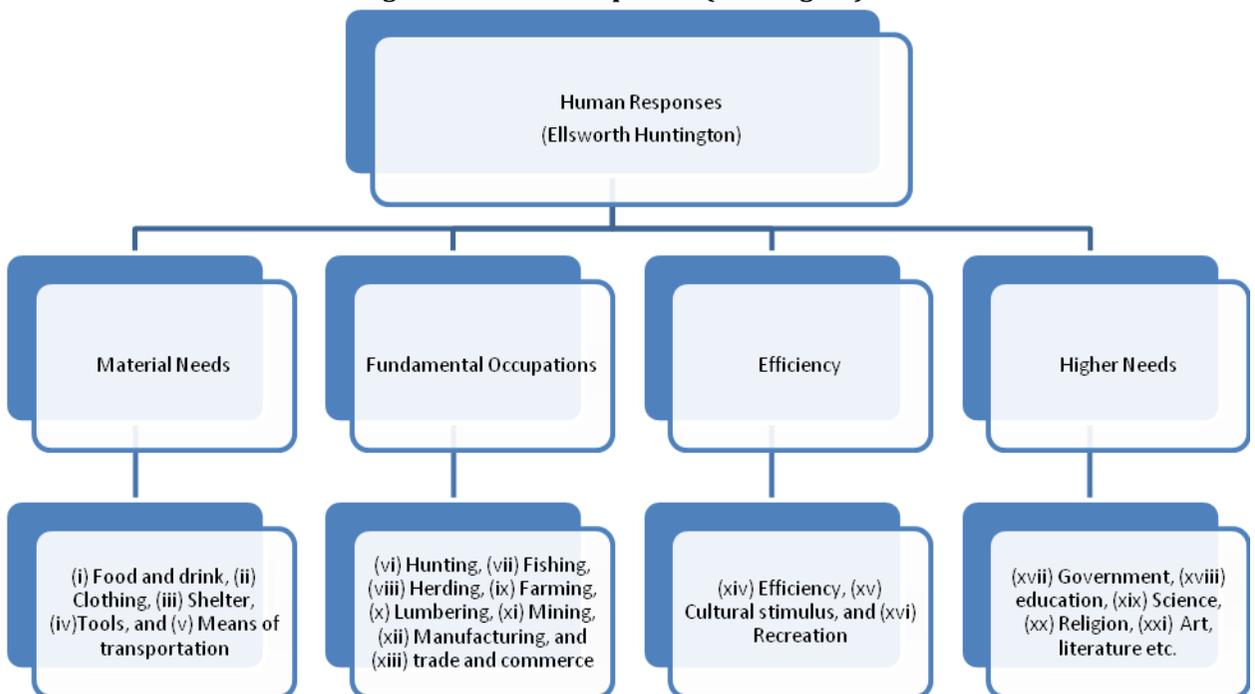
V.C.Finch and G.T.Trevarth (1957) have classified all the elements of human geography in three groups (Fig 3).

**Figure 3: Elements of Human Geography (Finch and Trewartha)**



Ellsworth Huntington, an eminent American geographer while determining the elements of human geography took a comprehensive view of physical conditions, forms of life and human responses. According to Huntington all elements of bio-physical environment are inter-related and affect each other and their combined affect is reflected in various human responses. He grouped these human responses into four categories and identified 21 human responses as scope or subject matter of human geography (Figure 4).

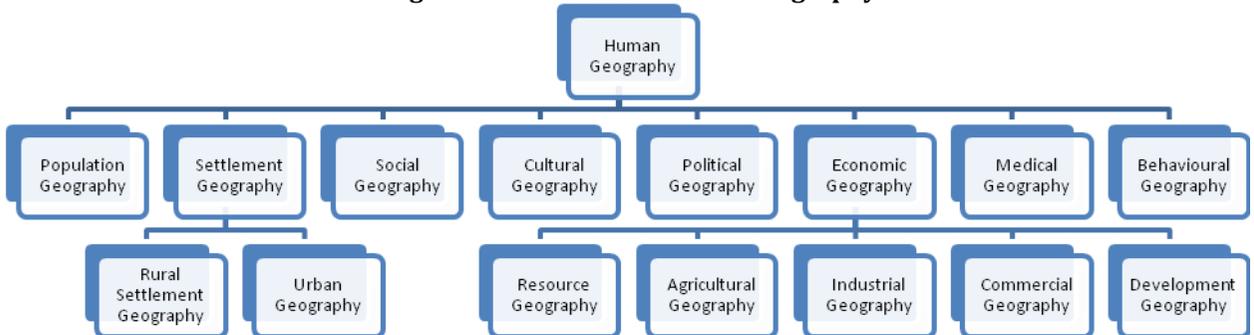
**Figure 4: Human Responses (Huntington)**



Over the period of time the human geography has widened its scope and changes in perspectives have enriched its subject matter and nature. Quantitative revolution and Behaviouralism dominated in 1950s and 1960s respectively. In 1970s diversified approaches of welfare geography, radical geography and humanism and feminism played a major role in addressing the contemporary issues. Over the period of time the sub-fields and sub-sub-fields of human geography have evolved and established themselves focusing on different elements of human activity and organization (Figure 5). What distinguishes human geography

from other related disciplines such as demography, economics, sociology, politics and psychology etc, are the application of a set of core geographical themes including location, place, man-environment interrelationship, movement and region. These themes foreground the perception that the world acts spatially and temporally, and that social relations do not operate independently of place and environment, but are comprehensively grounded in and through them.

**Figure 5: Branches of Human Geography**



### Contemporary Relevance of Human Geography

The major themes of human geography such as – location, distribution, space, place, region, movement, diffusion and man-environment interrelationships have contemporary significance. Contemporary human geography is focused on the scientific study of location of people and activities over the earth surface and the reasons for their distribution including density, concentration and pattern analysis.

In human geography population studies focus on population growth trends and patterns, density and distribution in context of physical and cultural landscape. Determinants of population dynamics – fertility, mortality and migration are key concerns. Population-resource-development relationships and population problems provide insights for population policy formulations. Therefore, the study of population is the basis for understanding a wide variety of issues in human geography. To understand the challenge of increasing food supply, reducing poverty and inequalities, encouraging economic growth with distributive justice and ecological balance and reducing pollution contemporary human geographers focus on quantitative as well as qualitative aspects. Population geographers document from where people migrate and to where they migrate and also highlight the reasons why people migrate. Economic opportunities, cultural freedom and environmental comfort are the three main objectives of migration. The insider-outsider conflicts related to migration and refugee problems have gained significance in contemporary human geography.

Human geographers try to understand and explain why differences exist and how social customs are related to cultural landscape. It helps in understanding cultural features such as languages, religions and ethnicities across earth. Human geography clarifies the contrasts in societies and cultures and in the human landscapes they have created in different parts of the world. It helps in better understanding of ‘isms’ such as racism, communalism, casteism, regionalism, naxalism, terrorism and nationalism.

In contemporary phase people are being pulled in opposite directions by two factors – globalization and local diversity. Globalization due to information technology revolution pulls people into greater cultural and economic interaction with others. At the same time people are searching for more ways to express their unique cultural traditions and economic practices. Political conflicts, economic uncertainty and pollution of environment are reflections of these two divergent forces.

Within human geography political geographers help to explain the physical and cultural elements that underlie political unrest in the world. They try to explain how people have organized earth surface into countries and different level alliances and what are reasons underlying the observed arrangements and conflicts resulting out of this geopolitics.

Human geographers are different from other social scientists because they never forget physical environment as they are trained in both social and physical-biological sciences. This is of special significance in studies related to natural disasters and their management and mitigation. This integrated approach has also special significance in achieving the goal of substation development. Human geographers address urban problems and help in process of sustainable urbanization.

The concepts, explanations, models and theories of human geography help in clear understanding to interconnections of the physical, economic, social and political systems within which we live and operate. Further the analysis of these interconnections makes us more aware about the realities and prospects of our own society in an increasingly competitive world. This way human geography helps in developing better informed citizens, more capable of understanding contemporary challenges faced by communities and countries and finally better prepared to contribute in overcoming these challenges.

**Conclusion:** 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. Human geography is the study of changing relationship between the active man and dynamic earth surface features. The major branches of human geography are population geography, settlement geography, economic geography, socio-cultural geography, political geography, medical geography, behavioural and environmental geography. Human geography helps in developing better informed citizens and better human beings, more capable of understanding contemporary challenges faced by communities and countries and finally better prepared to contribute in overcoming these challenges.

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