

**B.A./B.Sc. Geography(Hons.)Part-III**

**Paper-V- Geographical Thought**

**Topic- Dichotomy between Determinism and  
Possibilism**

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## Dichotomy between Determinism and Possibilism

### Determinism:

In the history of geographical concepts, there have been various approaches and school of thoughts of study man –nature interaction.

Determinism is one of the most important philosophies which persisted up to the Second World War in one shape or the other. **Determinist point of view is that the environment controls the course of human action.** In other words, the belief that variation in human behavior around the world can be explained by the differences in the natural environment. The determinists generally consider man a passive agent on which, the physical factors are constantly acting and thus determining his attitude and process of decision making. The first attempt to explain man nature relationship was attempted by Greek and Roman Scholars like the physician Hippocrates, the philosopher Aristotle, and the historians Thucydides, Xenophon, and Herodotus.

Thucydides and Xenophon saw Athens's natural conditions and geographical position as the factors underlying its greatness. Strabo referred to similar phenomena when explaining the mighty and greatness of Rome. Aristotle thought that the people inhabiting the warm climates of Asia were intelligent but lacking in spirit and therefore subjected to slavery. He argued that the cold climate of Europe produced brave but unintelligent people who were able to maintain their independence but who did not have the capacity to rule others. Aristotle believed that the middle place, combined the best of all possible worlds, was Greece and the people of Greece were endowed with the finest qualities and thus destined by nature itself to rule over all. Strabo the Roman geographer attempted to explain how slope, relief, climate and all were the works of God, and how these phenomenal governed the lifestyle of people. Montesqueu pointed out that the people in cold climates are stronger physically, more courageous, frank less suspicious and less cunning than those in the warm climates. The people of warm climate are timorous, weak in body, indolent and passive. Al-Masaudi asserted that where water is abundant, the people are gay

and humorous, while people of dry and arid lands are short and tempered. The nomads who live in the open air are marked by strength and resolution, wisdom and physical fitness.

George Tathan, Kant, Carl Ritter, Alexander von Humboldt all believed in the influence of nature on man.

### **New Determinism:**

The founder of the 'new' determinism was **Friedrich Ratzel**. He supplemented 'classic' geographical determinism with elements of 'Social Darwinism' and developed a theory of the state as an organism which owed its life to the earth and which was ever striving to seize more and more territory. In the opinion of Ratzel, 'similar locations lead to similar mode of life'. He cited the example of British Isles and Japan and asserted that both these countries have insular location, which provided natural defense against the invaders. Consequently, the people of these countries have been making rapid progress. Ratzel a follower of Darwin believed in the survival of the fittest and saw 'man' as the end product of evolution and evolution in which the mainspring was the natural selection of types according to their capacity to adjust themselves to physical environment.

### **Environmental Determinism:**

The belief that variations in human behavior around the world can be explained by difference in the natural environmental is known as environmental determinism. **Ellen Churchill Semple and Elsworth Huntington** was the greatest protagonist of environmental determinism. Environmental determinism is regarded by many people as overly simplistic because it neglects the cultural factors that affect human behavior.

According to Semple the dwellers of mountains are essentially conservative where as the people of plain are energetic, serious and thoughtful rather than emotional, and cautious rather than impulsive. The people of the Mediterranean region where the climate is temperate and mild are gay, humorous, sporting and imaginative as life is easy.

Elsworth Huntington developed the idea of climate's leading role in the advancement of civilization. His basic philosophy was that the supreme achievements of civilization in any

region were always bound up with a particular type of climate and variation in climate led to 'pulsations' in the history of culture. According to him, religion and racial character is the product of climate. Subsequently geographers like Mackinder, Chisholm, Davies, Bowman, Robert Mill, Geddes, Sauer, Herbertson, Taylor, etc., interpreted the progress of societies with a deterministic approach.

### **Possibilism:**

This philosophy which attempts to explain man and environment relationship in a different way, taking man as an active agent in environment. This is a belief which asserts that natural environment provides options, the number of which increases as the knowledge and technology of a cultural group develops. This point of view was named 'possibilism' by Fournier, who wrote: 'The truth and only geographical problem is that of utilization of possibilities.' Vidal de Lablache was one of the greatest advocates of possibilism. Others who supported the philosophy of possibilism were Jane Brunhes, Borrow, Sauer etc. According to the possibilists, nature is never more than an adviser. There are no necessities but everywhere possibilities.

The possibilistic approach was criticized by Griffith Taylor, who gave the theory of neo-determinism.