**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 crystalized and final form with distinct perimeters. However, the following tentative definitions give us some idea about the meaning and scope of social geography.

**Definition**

It was W. Fitzerald (1946), who for the first time, looked for a definition of social geography (as the sub-discipline was conceived immediately after World War II). He almost equated it with human geography and stated that social geography studied ‘spatial arrangement of social phenomena, which are of significance to man’.

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 phenomenon related to the total environment’.

R. E. Pahl gave a clearer definition of the sub-discipline in 1965. According to him, 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’.

In the nineteen-sixties, A. Buttimer (1968), another geographer, attempted at defining social geography and said that sub-discipline was ‘the study of areal (spatial) patterns and functional relation of social group 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, who is renowned for his radical bent of mind, 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 (though by no mean determinant) role of space in influencing these social structures’.

Two British geographers, J. Eyles and E. Jones contributed substantially towards consolidating social geography. J. Eyles (1974) defined social geography as ‘the analysis of social patterns and processes arising from the distribution of and access to, scarce resources’. It may, however, be noted that Eyles changed his definition subsequently and said that social geography was the analysis of social phenomenon in space (1981). 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 of the social groups make of space as they see it, and of the processes involved in making and changing such patterns’.

C. Hamnett put forward (1966) 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 several 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 organization, etc.)

Social geography differs from human geography in that the former attempts to study the social aspects of people in so far as such aspects give character to space, but human geography is all pervasive and includes all the dependent variables associated with the activities of human being that are spatially discernible. Sociology is a science of society with scant spatial interpretation. It however must be clear to us that social geography draws a lot from sociological concepts and theories, and thus there is a relationship between the two. Almost allied to social geography, there is a sister subdiscipline called cultural geography. It is difficult to differentiate between the two. However, we can say that while cultural geography deals with the variables related to both material and non-material culture that give character to an area, social geography is concerned more with social structures and social processes and the resultant social phenomenon being manifested on space.

**Nature of Social Geography**

The term social geography carries with it an inherent confusion. In the popular perception the distinction between social and cultural geography is not very clear. The idea which has gained popularity with the geographers is that social geography is an analysis of social phenomena as expressed in space. However, the term ‘social phenomena’ is in itself nebulous and might be interpreted in a variety of ways keeping in view the specific context of the societies at different stages of social evolution in the occidental and oriental culture. The term ‘social phenomena’ encompasses the whole framework of human interaction with environment, leading to the articulation of social space by diverse human groups in different ways. The end-product of human activity may be perceived in the spatial patterns manifesting the personality of regions; each pattern acquiring its form under the under the overarching influence of social structure.

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| *In the*[*social sciences*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_science)*,****social structure****is the patterned social arrangements in*[*society*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Society)*that are both*[*emergent*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergence)*from and determinant of the*[*actions of the individuals*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structure_and_agency)*. On the*[*macro*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macrosociology)*scale, social structure is the system of socioeconomic*[*stratification*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_stratification)*(most notably the class structure),*[*social institutions*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_institutions)*, or, other patterned relations between large social groups. On the meso scale, it is the structure of*[*social network*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_network)*ties between individuals or organizations. On the micro scale, it can be the way*[*norms*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norm_%28sociology%29)*shape the behavior of individuals within the*[*social system*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_system)*.* |

As compared to the other branches of geography social geography has a certain amount of recency. Eyles saw the antecedents of contemporary social geography in the development of the philosophy of possibilism in the late nineteenth century. The view of social phenomena is all-embracing and holistic, based on the totality of human interaction with environment.

Upto 1945, social geography was mainly concerned with the identification of different regions, themselves reflecting geographic patterns of association of social phenomena. In fact, during the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century, social geography started its agenda of research with the study of population as organized in settlements, particularly urban settlements. This was understandable as population in the Anglo-Saxon and American world was overwhelmingly concentrated in the urban areas. The process of urbanization had thrown up issues of social concern such as access to civic amenities and housing and the related socio-pathological issues, such as incidence of crime, juvenile delinquency and other expressions of mental ill-health. Socio-geographical studies of population distribution and ethnic composition in urban areas emerged as a major trend during this phase. The underlying ideas was to examine the social content of the urban space which resulted from coming together of diverse ethnic groups within a city. Social geographers differentiated between regions on the basis of the dominant patterns as social phenomena, mostly based on the population characteristics.

Later, under the influence of the rising tide of quantification, social geographers started employing area-specific data in order to discover spatial patterns. During this phase of development, the major focus of research remained on the analysis of the social data for the cities. Social area analysis emerged as the main tool of analysis.

It is noteworthy fact that the western social science was alive to the real issues in society. Social geography could not remain aloof unaffected by these trends. Thus, social geography in the western world developed much in response to political happenings of contemporary social relevance. The American society, for example was overwhelmingly influenced by the war in Vietnam. A common concern was expressed on issues such as poverty and social inequality within the United States. The social relevance movement in the contemporary social sciences also affected geography and issues such as race, crime, health and poverty received an increasingly large attention.

The progress of social geography in the decades since 1960 has taken three main path, each cluster of research acquiring the status of a school of thought in its own way.

1. A welfare or humanistic school mainly concerned with the state of social well-being as expressed by territorial indicators of housing, health and social pathology largely within the theoretical framework of welfare economics.
2. A radical school which employed Marxian theory to explain the basic causes of poverty and social inequality. This school of thought related the contemporary social problems to the development of capitalism particularly the internal contradictions of capitalism. For example, cities and communities within the city were perceived as organized spatially in response to the class relations and the Marxian interpretation was that a welfare approach might not be helpful.
3. A phenomenological school which laid an extraordinary emphasis on lived experience and on the perception of space by social categories based on ethnicity, race or religion.

It is thus obvious that contemporary social geography is in line with the theoretical development in human geography as a whole. This does not mean that the welfare or humanistic concerns or the quest for the causes of social inequality and class-based exploitation or phenomenological perceptions of space have replaced the tradition of areal differentiation or region formation. All these approaches have continued to co-exist.