

# POSSIBILISM

## Introduction:

The relationship between man and environment has been of increasing interest to geographers throughout its history. One can say that the idea of geography as the study of man-environment relationship has a long history and has led to a long-standing debate about the position of man in relation to nature. Determinism and possibilism are the two mutually elite philosophies in geography which are centered on a man and his place in nature. Both these doctrines try to place man within the ambit of the environment and deliberate on the issue whether a man should be looked upon as a 'passive' agent or an 'active force' while interacting with the environment. In this process, he not only adapts to the environment but also brings changes within it.

The deterministic point of view states that human activities are controlled by the environment (Lewthwaite, 1966). They propose that man is just a passive force in front of nature as nature determines man's activities and in no way, man is free to control his life. Possibilism, on the other hand, argues that the relationship between man and nature is not so as human beings have the capacity to choose between a range of possible responses to physical conditions.

## The Rise of Possibilism

The doctrine of possibilism tries to explain the relationship of a human being with the environment in a different way; it puts human at a higher level and regards it as an active agent. It is a principle which claims that environment provides opportunities and man being an economic man chooses from those possibilities. Febvre (1932) in '*A Geographical Introduction to History*' stated '*there are no necessities, but everywhere possibilities; and man, as the master of these possibilities, is the judge of their use*'. The roots of possibilism can be traced back to the works of **Plato**, who is considered the master of deductive reasoning. Though his idea went into gloom for hundreds of years; the contrasting doctrine of determinism continued to grow and flourished. It got support in the writings of French scholar of the eighteenth century – **Montesquieu**, who is credited with developing a doctrine analogous to modern paradigm of possibilism. He opined that man possesses free will and has the ability to choose from a series of opportunities. Similar thoughts were also put forward by another eighteenth-century French philosopher, **Comte de Buffon**. He believed that man was ordered to conquer the earth and even transform it. Their views laid the base for *crypto-possibilistic hypothesis* (Adhikari, 2010).

In the nineteenth century, **George Perkins Marsh** and **Kirchoff** made an attempt to put forward a non-deterministic approach to human geography; they focused on the man himself. It was only in the latter half of the nineteenth century that under the leadership of **Vidal De la Blache** (1845 – 1918), a possibilistic view of man-environment developed. The focus of this philosophy was "*Nature has set boundaries and has provided possibilities for human settlement, but the way a person responds to these conditions or adjusts it depends on the traditional way of life.*" Vidal rejected the concept of material determinism and advocated favorability. He even rejected Durkheim's opinion of human geography as social morphology rather insisted that man was a partner and not a slave of the environment (Dikshit, 2009). He was critical of Darwinian-Ratzelian heritage which proposed environmental determinism and put forth the concept of possibilism. He sought a scheme for understanding the interaction of nature and culture that eschewed both environmental determinism and radical possibilism to seek answers or solution for the dichotomy between the human and the environment.

He vehemently rejected the idea that society and nature stood out as adversaries in the human-nature confrontation. For him, the man was part of nature and therefore, its most active collaborator. To resolve this dichotomy he generated the concept of '*genre de vie*'. '*Genre de vie*' (way of life) includes all activities, practices, and techniques that characterize the adaptation of a human group to the *milieu* – the natural surroundings of their habitat (Mercier, 2009). Vidal pointed out that the same *genre de vie* had different interpretations for various human groups.

Thus, his works gave a sound methodological as well as a philosophical foundation for the doctrine of possibilism. This growth somewhat weakened the hold of Darwinian Determinism within the geographical thinking. In the twentieth century, possibilism got stronghold after the publication of Blache's article in 1913 where he categorically states that geography as a discipline seeks to measure and role of man in modifying the earth surface. This was further strengthened when his book was published in 1921 (English translation in 1926), though posthumously. He observes that nature gives man materials which have their inherent needs as well as limitations thus leading them to limited uses.

Possibilism was further flourished by acclaimed historian **Lucien Febvre** (1878-1956). He puts forward - "*Whatever the men do in their own environment, they cannot completely get rid of themselves completely.*" Febvre emphasized human initiative and motivation against the environment, destroying the environmental deterministic reasoning and as part of the

environment of any group, as well as other humans, because they belong to the next group's cultural surroundings or the constraints of the environment are influenced by such thinking. He stated that in the view of possibilists, a homogeneous region does not necessarily result in a homogeneous society. This is because people residing in any area have the choice of possibilities time to time and also in the quantity they want. **Bruhnes** followed Blache's ideas and took it to next step, he not only transmitted Blache's philosophy in France but also disseminated it to different parts of the world. In 1910, his monumental work *La Geographie de L'Histoire* was published. His prime focus was on the actualities of exploitation of the earth by man commented: *"The power that is meant is limited, and it meets in it the bounds of nature that it cannot cross human activity can change within its boundaries and its environment. But it cannot be removed from its environment, it can only modify it, but it can never cross it, and it will always be conditioned by it."* He also stated that - *"Nature is not compulsory but the approval."*

Futility is also associated with the French school of geography; French geographers saw a series of possibilities for human development in the physical environment, but argued that the development in the real development was related to the culture of related people, perhaps in the field of extremes like deserts and tundra.