

Changing Concept of Space in Relation to Sustainable Development



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Abstract

The concept of geographical space should be understood in a synergetic dimension; rather than as mere connotation of emptiness or in relation to individual landscape only. It is primarily due to the fact that the discipline of geography has not yet been able to define geographical or landscape space that the concept of spatial thinking tends to oscillate between absolute space and relative space. This paper has tried to present the physiographic, environmental, biological, socio-economic and human phenomena that had integrated into the geography discipline to shape the spatial concept and how it is related to environmental issue and sustainable development. For example, in forecasting climate change risks, the location of time and space is of utmost importance. However, even though space is one of the most fundamental aspects of geography, the changing concept of space is not easily comprehensible. Indeed, no vision of sustainable development that encompass plans of addressing environmental degradation and disaster problems can be complete without totally grasping the dimensions of space involved in the problems. Herein, lie the importance of this paper.

Keywords: Absolute, Relative, Space, Sustainable Development, Greed.

Introduction

The environmental scenario in the India is changing at a rapid pace, especially in the post-independence era. The two centuries of *colonial* rule had left behind an administrative system which had a depressing effect on environment. For example, the adivasis who are the indigenous people of the India and the original inhabitants of the vast forest reserves in India have been deprived off their rights as the natural stakeholders of the ample bounty hidden in the deep reserves of the Indian forests. The colonial state's resource use pattern was guided by commercialization. This trend continues in modern day India where market forces and competition influences the use of this nation's resources. The need of the hour is for the discipline of geography in India to address several national issues like climatology, soil geography, agriculture, migration, urbanization, regional development, social transformation and a host of other issues that often overlap with each other. With the advent of information technology boom in India, cyber space dimension has increased. But, guided by human greed, the political, economy and cultural space which had evolved over time in India is being increasingly influenced by commercialization, so much so that the basic tenets of sustainable development had been forgotten. In this regard, understanding the changing concept of space has become a pre-requisite to truly appreciate the importance of sustainable development in national context.

Aim of the Study

Even as the concept of space has changed over time, man's perception of the need of space has also changed. Guided by greed, mankind has strove to enjoy the bounties of earth on such a grand scale, that it is becoming increasingly unsustainable. This paper seeks to understand the changing concept of space and to put sustainable development in the correct perspective.

Research Methodology

Mostly secondary sources have been used for construction of this paper. The findings of a primary survey and a few published empirical studies have also been used. However, the limitation of a single paper is not adequate for addressing the importance of the subject.

Changing Concept of Space

In recent times, geography has evolved as a discipline that has spread its wings over different disciplines, like physiographic, environmental, biological, socio-economic and human phenomena. This integration of geography with other disciplines has occurred over space

and time. Undoubtedly, the concept of space in geography had gone through several changes. For example, during the 1950s, the author of the famous book *The Nature of Geography: A Critical Survey of Current Thought in the Light of the Past* (1939) Richard Hartshorne had participated in popular geographical debates during the 1950s over the very nature of the subject. Hartshorne (1958) had viewed the discipline of geography as a correlative discipline where there was 'functional integration of phenomena' over space.¹ Ultimately, this created the notion of geography as regional geography, or more precisely as regional science. Slowly, over time there emerged other schools of thought on the concept of space. Slowly, the concept of space changed from being an essentially Kantian absolute as propounded by Richard Hartshorne, to a relative concept as espoused by Geoffrey P. Chapman (1977).² Interestingly, Fred K. Schaefer (1953) had opined that only spatial relations matter in geography and no other because Hartshorne's Kantian absolute was viewed as orthodox.³ Both, R. G. Golledge and D. Amedeo (1968) had observed that Schaefer had changed the direction of geographical research from the consideration of the unique to the search for and development of laws concerning spatial relations.⁴ Much of that search, itself a part of formalisation of positivism in geography, took place within the existing framework of location theory and regional science. It was pointed out that geography was a spatial science working towards the discovery of general theories of spatial structure. D. Harvey (1969) went a step further and said that 'by our theories you shall know us'.⁵ W. H. Davis (1890) had described the relational view of space as opposed to the absolute view as stated earlier.⁶ His description of the study of physical space holds good for social space also. In this study of social space structure, process and stage, particularly in terms of human practice, becomes the key approach.

Jean Brunhes had perhaps given the clearest formulation of the concept of space. Brunhes (1952) had observed that 'space, which includes not only the surface that is occupied, but also that which is capable of being occupied, is a form of wealth that is undeniably the basis ofevery powerful community. Modern states fight for space.....Space, distance and difference of level become, in fact, geographical values because to satisfy his needs man enslaves and tames them'.⁷ For, 'acting contrary to physical facts is all the more cruel as man's victory over them is great and glorious' (Brunhes, 1952).⁸ With this world view, Brunhes had tried to highlight the important facts of human geography in terms of unproductive occupation of soils, conquest of vegetable and animals worlds and destructive occupation of the soil. This destructive occupation of the soil is done mainly through the destruction of plants and animals and exploitation of minerals. However, this destruction is not limited solely to the plants, animals and minerals, but also to the ecosystem and its related ecological balance. Environmental degradation and disasters are the most critical problems discussed very widely on global

stage. With a view to promoting harmonious, peaceful and better quality of life for the human being, Sommer (1969) had observed '*the long range question is not so much what sort of environment we want, but what sort of man we want*'.⁹

Sustainable Development

Sustainable Development is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".¹⁰

Sustainable development is a very misquoted and misunderstood concept. Developing countries, like India, inspite of hosting multiplexes, shopping malls and five star restaurants, are now importing manufacturing activities from the industrialized West and these increasing manufacturing activities are gradually leaving larger carbon footprints behind with the passage of time (Foster & Rosenzweig, 2003).¹¹ Economic projects are followed in developing and third world countries that are supposedly based on sustainable development, but it is mostly based on paper and not in reality. For example, in one of my earlier research that had a significant research value, it was found from a study conducted among the forest-dwellers of Rasik Bill Forest Village in Cooch Behar in West Bengal where a grandiose eco-tourism project was started from the beginning of this century, showed the negative aspects of unsustainable economic development which resulted in creating a negative mindset of the forest-dwellers of the region because they did not benefit from the ecotourism activities.¹² Infact, the model of ecotourism being promoted in North Bengal, for example at Lataguri, is gradually wiping away the flora and transforming the forest lands into concrete jungles (Karmakar, 2011).¹³ Heavy use of open space adversely affects the biomass (Singh, 1989). In another empirical study it has been found out that use of edosulfan insecticide to spray insects in tea industry has resulted in ingestion of contaminated tea and gradual erosion of fertility (Nishad, 2006).¹⁴ These are but to name a few such instances where the development path followed by India, inspite of increasing Gross Domestic Product figures and foreign exchange earnings have resulted in unsustainable and untenable growth. The dimensions of space have increased, but so has the unproductive use, exploitation and destruction of environmental resources. In general, it can be said that in trying to imitate the developed countries, the developing countries have compounded their problems by adding non-existent components to their already existing ones. This has led to an increase in the impact of such problems. A serious endeavour is required to organise and operationalise sustainable, more in human sense than in economic sense, keeping in view the fundamental fact that '*if in all the universe nothing is so frail as man, nothing likewise is so divine as he*'.¹⁵

Conclusions

'Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need but not for everyman's greed... So long as we cooperate with the cycle of life, the soil renews its fertility indefinitely and provides health, recreation,

*sustenance and peace to those who depend on it. But when the 'predatory' attitude prevails, nature's balance is upset and there is an all-round biological deterioration.'*¹⁶

Way back in pre-Independence India, the Father of the Nation's ecologically alert response to an orthodox precept among Western economists (Say's Law) and which he imbibed from Ruskin's *Unto This Last* is still very much relevant today. The concept of space in geography has undergone change, but so has the nature of man's greed. Blinded by selfish greed, man grabs and consumes more than his requirements in defiance of Nature's ecological, balanced and harmonious principle in defiance of the elementary and immutable moralities of non-stealing and non-possession of other's property, and thus brings down no end of misery upon himself and his fellow-creatures. Mankind has misinterpreted his greed with his actual needs and is selfishly trying to consume more and more of the bounties of Mother Nature, which is leading to large scale environmental degradation and disasters, like global warming, melting of glaciers, rising of sea-levels, extinction of some species and even man-made disasters like the worst nuclear disaster at Chernobyl on April, 1986 or our very own Bhopal Gas Tragedy of December, 1984. Mankind is constantly bickering and fighting for space, be it in any geographical values and trying to consume it, which has led to cold wars and tensions among countries in the world. But, most of natural resources are non-renewable and if this continues, nature and environment will be depleted forever. Mankind needs to remove their greed and harness the scientific benefits of their toil and labour, like clean technology and transfer them to developing countries, like India at minimal cost so that sustainable development takes place and the bounties of natural resources are preserved for future generations. Ample space should be left aside for future generation and only a portion of space should be used by mankind for exploitation, consumption and creation of wealth.

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