

# **Geography as Human Ecology Conceptual Background**

*Praveen Kumar*

## **Background**

Geography has always been 'vibrant science' which makes it inevitable that there would be diverging options about the nature and scope of geography. As time has passed, there are many children of geography; among them are astronomy, botany, zoology, geology, meteorology, ecology, and anthropology. In addition, geography works repeatedly with new obligations because the frontier areas. There are new centers for research, and have "added" the complexity and extent of their domain. In other words, its boundaries expanded in a few quarters, even; they contracted among others, thus in the recent past, the geographical domain has changed. In the words of Hartshorne (1939) geography seeks to acquire a complete knowledge of the areal differentiation of the world. Geography as a discipline is concerned with the ways in which men occupy the surface of the earth organize themselves spatially and utilize the world's resources in spite of being unevenly distributed (Ginsburg, 1954). This viewpoint is typically geographical in nature; if considered from the point of view of ecologists human geography emphasizes on the physical environment and man's reciprocal relationship with the environment (Theodorson, 1959). Many ecologists have elaborated the relation between geography and ecology. These two disciplines do have some common aspects but still have their differences. Geography has its main interest to study the correlation between habitat and social factors that is the so called direct relationship between man and his environment; while ecology focuses on human communities and concentrates upon man and his habitat. That means for geography place as a central concept is important but for ecology process in time holds central position. The concept of region also varies in two disciplines. For ecologist region is a unity in physical environment while for a geographer region is a product of contact and division of labor. The above discussion therefore clearly proves that human ecology is something different from human geography.

## **The Relationship between Geography with other Subjects**

The concept of geography is in the form of human ecology, which seems to help physically help in addressing the problem of the alleged overlap with some other topics. To show the interaction between humans and a particular ecosystem, geography will be able to deal with various elements of land forms, soil, climate, vegetation and similar premises through the familiar list.

However, this will not be the business of geography, which explains the origin, character and event of these environmental facilities, nor their relationship, one; another, but the responses of individuals are considered in them, individually and in combination. It has never been clear in my mind that a body of facts and principles is transferred from one science to another. In any event, geography will not be defined as human ecology; it will not be related to the origin and development of forms of land in particular or in general, but with the adjustment of man for forms in the form of elements of the natural environment. In other words, the interests of geology and geography in the forms of land will be mutually exclusive. Similarly, geography as human ecology will not be concerned with the description of the character and distribution of the various seasons of the world, but with the human relations of the climate, usually only as an element of an environment complex. Then, geography will not deal with the relations of plants and animals in their physical environment, but will affect the plants and animals as well as the elements of the natural environment that affect humans. In essence, treating geography as human ecology will not adhere to physical science, meteorology, botany, and physics, climatology, plant ecology and animal ecology but will see them as independent sciences only.

### **Human Ecology as a unique field of geography**

The modern scientific American geography that has recently emerged began with the splendid work of Davis, Gilbert, and a few others in physics or physical geography. It is a singular fact, which may be recalled in passing, that geography, though it is the mother of geology, has, in the recent period which has witnessed its revival in America, as a subject of higher study, been fostered by geology. In one university after another work in geography has been offered first in the Department of Geology. As this work increased, in some cases the official title of the department was changed to "Department-Geology and Geography". Hardly a physical geography was established, an insistent demand arose for what is called "human geography". But as already stated human geography is different from human ecology. Geography treats men and their activities in their visible aspects and so far as they may be regarded as distributed phenomena. It does not concern, except incidentally, the interrelations among men. Human ecology, which is also interested in the relations of man to his geographic environment, fastens its attention upon the human interdependences that develop in the action and reaction of a population to its habitat. In other words, while geography views the adjustment of man from the standpoint of modifications of the earth's surface, human ecology makes a detailed analysis of the process and

organization of relations involved in adjustment to environment. This brings us to a second point of distinction between the two disciplines. Geography involves a description of things as they are at a point in time; its interest is in distribution rather than development. Ecology, on the other hand, is evolutionary. It undertakes to describe the developmental process as well as the form of man's adjustment to his habitat (Hawley, 1950).

### **The Nature of Human Ecology:**

Human ecology is a relatively current development; the first use of the term in the literature was in 1921. The first book with title as ecology appeared in 1935 and interestingly was the work of a Botanist. In this brief span of time, the discipline of ecology has evolved quite rapidly. When concerned with human ecology one can relate to Mackenzie's (1931) definition which states that *Human ecology deals with the spatial aspects of the symbiotic relations of human beings and human institutions.*

Human ecology, in so far as it is concerned with a social order that is based on competition rather than consensus, is identical, in principle at least, with plant and animal ecology. Society, as ecologists have conceived it, is a population settled and limited to its habitat. The ties that unite its individual units are those of a free and natural economy, based on a natural division of labour. Such a society is territorially organized and the ties which hold it together are physical and vital rather than customary and moral, Human ecology has, however, to reckon with the fact that in human society competition is limited by custom and culture. The cultural superstructure imposes itself as an instrument of direction and control upon the biotic substructure. Reduced to its elements the human community, so conceived, may be said to consist of a population and a culture, including in the term culture (i) a body of customs and beliefs and (2) a corresponding body of artifacts and technological devices. To these three elements or factors-(i) population, (2) artifact (technological culture), (3) custom and beliefs (non-material culture) -into which the social complex resolves itself, one should, perhaps, add a fourth, namely, the natural resources of the habitat. It is the interaction of these four factors-(i) population, (2) artifacts (technological culture), (3) custom and beliefs (non-material culture), and (4) the natural resources that maintain at once the biotic balance and the social equilibrium, when and where they exist. The changes in which ecology is interested are the movements of population and of artifacts (commodities) and changes in location and occupation-any sort of change, in fact, which affects an existing division of labor or the relation of the population to the soil. Human ecology is, fundamentally, an

attempt to investigate the processes by which the biotic balance and the social equilibrium (i) are maintained once they are achieved and (2) the processes by which, when the biotic balance and the social equilibrium are disturbed, the transition is made from one relatively stable order to another. A number of human geographers accept the definition of human ecology as the study of mutual relations between men and environment, but in practice they have limited its application to a specialized field of geographic study. Some geographers—for example, Barrows, Renner, and White make human ecology synonymous with human geography. Barrows, the first geographer to publish this point of view, has written as follows: . . . *the center of gravity within the geographic field has shifted steadily from the extreme physical side toward the human side until geographers in increasing numbers define their subject as dealing solely with the mutual relations between man and his environment.* . . . White and Renner, whose volume is entitled *Geography, an Introduction to Human Ecology*, limit this field to a study of the direct relations between men or groups and their environments. This specialized field of study investigates problems of man's relation to his environment, both individually and in groups, such as (i) the effects of climate upon human health and energy; (ii) the influences of resources and topography upon human occupations, homes, institutions, and inventions; (3) influences of natural routes and barriers upon social isolation and contact; and (4) possible effects of natural surroundings upon customs, attitudes, and beliefs. Thus these human geographers, who define human ecology as a specialized field of science, obviously disagree with Bews who regards it as an inclusive synthesis. Human ecology, like other specialized sciences may be defined and delimited in terms of the basic abstractions it makes. In particular, human ecology abstracts (i) a distinctive type of ecological interaction and (ii) a distinctive aspect of community or regional structure that arises out of this interaction.