

## GEOGRAPHY, ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL CONCERN

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**ABSTRACT** : It is a pity that geographical sciences which swear by a commitment to an understanding of the human-environment synthesis in the ever varying qualities of space continue to reproduce deterministic or possibilistic ideas despite their known limitations. The worst casualty of this tradition has been, as a result, the geographers' commitment and concern to the society and above all geography's popular base. Such a failure may partly be attributed to the lack of an alternative ideological foundation after discarding possibilism and determinism. It is suggested that the marxist perspectives on human-environment relationship may serve as a possible corrective as well as provide the much needed fillip to the void created.

The problems of environmental degradation and ecological disturbances in India are assuming a scale unprecedented in the recent history. Despite its claim to the contrary, the state itself has been the single major factor in adversely altering the ecological harmony by way of constructing mega projects with scant regard to the sufferings of millions of people uprooted from such sites. The loss to the environment and people is being rationalised in terms of growth, development and security of the nation. This unhappy situation has forced people from nearly all walks of life to agitate to keep the environment safe from the inhuman plunder to spread consumerism helping the big business interests. Geographers traditionally concerned with the understanding of "social man in the natural space" have an exceedingly important role in exposing the danger the humanity faces at the present juncture.

Geographers are often confronted with the most embarrassing problem of defining their own discipline. What exactly makes their subject worth studying? How is Geography contributing to the domain of knowledge as a distinct discipline on the background of an ever-expanding academic division of labour? Is it a unique method of enquiry (i.e. synthesis) that distinguishes, or is it its distinct object of study which is unique?

The object of the paper, undoubtedly, is not to develop a critique of the definition of geography, nor does it aim providing an alternative to the existing

ones. But, it is difficult at the same time not to feel awkward when one finds that neither the method of enquiry nor the object of study is specific to geography or exclusively its prerogative. This fuzzy situation is particularly more apparent when the geographers start asking questions about broad issues such as environment and eco-systems and numerous attributes of it. While attempting a review of the human-environment relationship in geography, the author is only too aware of this bizarre experience. However, the prime concern of this paper is to identify the specific role of geography in understanding the ecological issues in a per-

spective that would make its presence relevant and committed. This inevitably leads to a closer scrutiny of the issue of human-environment syndrome as the fundamental problematic in geography which provides the basis to understand ecological issues in a wide perspective.

The paper begins with the understanding that the received theories of human-environment relationship are thoroughly incapable of providing any meaningful basis for analysing or explaining problems arising out of it. It would seek to achieve not only a new perspective towards the existing conflict between humanity and nature, but also the conflict within the humanity itself.

Without going into the exigencies of a debate as to the nature and definition of geography, it may be safe to accept that most geographers have included in it the 'man' and 'environment.' Traditionally, geographers have had a deep curiosity and concern for the face of the earth and the way it provides in a larger sense, a home for humankind. Much of what we see upon the surface of the earth is the work of humankind and is a result of a variety of decisions that the humanity has made as individuals or groups.

### **Ideological Background:**

These simplistic generalizations, however, cannot do enough justice to the fierce debate and contradictions that characterise the concept of 'man-environment' or 'man-nature' interactions of several ideological formulations. The two most important ideological foundations with which geographers viewed the relationship between 'man' and 'environment' refer to the determinist and possibilist schools of thought dating back to the 19th century. The debate between these schools of thought was necessarily a false

one. "It was essentially a debate between a strict environmental determinism and an idealism with a strong dose of materialism, an idealism partially conscious of its own limitation."<sup>1</sup> Although there are few takers of environmental determinism to-day, it is naive to suggest that it is a dead horse and there is no need to flog it any more. Ian Burton<sup>2</sup> remarked that:

"the quantitative revolution is taking us back much closer to environmental determinism. It is surely not coincidental that the quantitative revolution is contemporaneous with the appearance of neo-determinism in geography."

Even today, there are sufficient reasons to believe that there are strong objective conditions within the society at present that would encourage the articulation of deterministic thinking. More of this later.

Determinism gained significant popularity in the second half of the nineteenth century through a combination of desire to extend the findings of Darwin to the human sciences. It is understood that the brutality of *laissez-faire* capitalist competition evidently required some pseudo-scientific apologia for its posture as man's most rational condition. Any significant change, both spatially and historically, therefore, had to be matched in nature. When, however, it was difficult to prove and explain the direct effects of nature on people, it reverted to an argument in favour of the effect of nature in human beings (such as instincts, race and human nature). The determinist outlook, developed only to the level of simplistic ideology, and thus could not provide a sound theoretical frame of human-environment relationship. The ideological content of environmental determinism could be easily exposed when the internal inconsistency of its logic was attacked. If

human nature is unchanging then it cannot explain history which is a succession of changes and if human nature is itself alterable, it cannot be determinate.<sup>3</sup> The determinists, therefore, did not go beyond tautological circularities.

The possibilist alternative took an extremely opposite view, according to which environment offers human beings choice of possibilities of which they may or may not take advantage. Fevre, an outstanding name in this tradition, observed that, there are nowhere necessities, but everywhere possibilities and 'man' as the master of the possibilities is judge of their use. It is obvious, according to this outlook that, humanity asserts its position only at the expense of nature; that the reconciliation of human/nature dichotomy does not take place and that nature, if not direct predicate of consciousness, is ultimately so. Moreover, possibilism has nothing to offer by way of "the social and historical creation of possibilities that judge their or the dialectical nature of man's relationship with the environment."<sup>4</sup> The utility of possibilism was twofold — but contradictory in nature. First, it demolished the theoretical sanctification of reaction, and second, the inner inconsistencies forced it progressively into the area of eclecticism which led it into the acceptance of the immediate as real and a subjective ossification narrowly based on the individual. Logical positivism, phenomenology, existentialism and behavioralism were obvious outcomes. At the ideological front, moreover, it has come to serve the bourgeois initiations of free enterprise projected into the realm of human-environment relation, in order to exploit nature 'unhindered, unlimited and as he wished'.<sup>5</sup>

The inherent problem in both determinism and possibilism has been their

approach itself which is a historical. Secondly, both ignore the class-nature of this relationship. What is conveniently forgotten is the role played by the social structure as it has evolved over time and with mediation through nature, in shaping the environment which simultaneously shapes it. Therefore, 'man' and 'nature' are seen independent of each other in a game of who dominates whom. Moreover, as a logical outcome of such a position, the connotation of the term 'man' remains camouflaged. 'Man' is universalized and the relationship that exists between men and men, between one social class and the other (which affects the appropriation of environment) is trivialized. It is no wonder, therefore, that deterministic concepts appear and reappear in geography in different shades to serve the needs of the dominant class which controls the means of production (The nature and environment forming part of it) and is interested in concealing its own predatory motives by universalizing the human factor. Thus, 'human nature' and the power of 'animal instincts in man' are all revived so that the crisis of man's relationship to nature in the present epoch can be invested with a universal significance that is ultimately determined; and so that the specific historical and class nature of the crisis can be conveniently glossed over:

"Thus even an organ as respectable as Sunday times can claim in an editorial, that perhaps the inability to produce enough food to feed the world's population may be due to an impending ice age and on the level of popular culture, the 'natural' basis of the crisis is easily generalized in terms of a set of events where all are involved and nobody is to blame and in which the only

salvation is for everybody to pull their weight, e.g., earthquake, the Poseidian Adventure, Airport '75, Towering Inferno and so on. This, of course, is the real ideological quality of determinism."<sup>6</sup>

### Marxist Critique

The Marxists point out the fact that geography has had a "continuing tendency to underemphasise or misunderstand the society that intercedes between nature and human."<sup>7</sup> The conception of the human-nature relation in Marxian framework is complex. At one level "the human being is seen as a part of nature — an ensemble of metabolic relations involving constant sensuous interation with a physical environment. At another level, human beings are seen social — each as an ensemble of social relations, and capable of creating forms of social organization which can become self regulating and self transforming."<sup>8</sup> Society thereby creates its own history by transforming itself, but in the process, the relationship with nature is transformed. Thus in Marx, one finds the concept of man-nature interactions rooted in history which may be viewed as the constant struggle of humankind to emancipate itself from the clutches of nature — a movement which has been aptly described as that 'from the realm of blind necessity to the realm of freedom'. In the course of this movement, Nature is gradually humanized while humanity is increasingly naturalized. Since, humanization of Nature and naturalization of man proceed simultaneously through man's interaction with Nature, "human history may be viewed as a continuation of and a qualitatively new stage in natural history — the two constituting a differentiated unity."<sup>9</sup>

The effect of nature on humans according to this perspective is invariably medi-

ated through society. In other words natural effects would vary depending on the level and form of social organization. Secondly; "The natural context is shaped by social activity: The humans are increasingly conditioned by what they collectively and historically have made of nature — i.e. by a social nature."<sup>10</sup>

Central to Marxian understanding is the concept of labour and the concept of mode of production. It is through labour that human beings enter into a direct relationship with nature. In order to be able to interact effectively with nature through the use of instruments of labour, humans have to come to terms with other humans and as a consequence, have to build a system of institutions — economic, social and political. "The latter constitutes facets of a complex but integrated system which makes social life possible and the processes of humanizing labour to proceed in desired directions."<sup>11</sup> The desired direction however is determined as society reorganizes itself into various modes of productions or as the relation between one social class and the other changes. Thus, changes in the way in which human beings interact with nature (i.e. the changes in the modes of production) are rationalized and expressed as the changes in the concept of nature. Man's concepts of nature must then be situated within the structure that a particular society has given to itself. Under capitalism for example:

"Nature becomes for the first time simply as an object for mankind, purely a matter of utility; it ceases to be a power in its own rights; and the theoretical knowledge of its independent laws appear only as a strategem designed to subdue it to human requirements whether as object of consumption or as the means of production."<sup>12</sup>

Marx also argued that capitalism has successfully brought society to the point where humankind could be free of nature in certain important material aspects. Human beings are now in a position to create nature rather than mindlessly alter it. Through the creation of nature — a creation that has to proceed through a knowledge and understanding of nature's own laws — human beings could be freed to discover their own essentially human nature. There is an enormous difference between this unalienated creation of nature and its mindless exploitation.

Mankind organizes itself from the palaeolithic stage of complete unity of all that exists and a transcendence of the duality between the biota and the abiota, between human and nature, to the present day capitalism with the acute contradiction between human and environment. Thus, human environment relationship is moulded in all stages of human society characterized by a specific mode of production in which human beings enter into one class over the other.

This brings us to understand the specific nature of social structure and the consequent spatial structures each interacting with the other dialectically. The essentially social nature of human — environment relationships remains largely undeveloped in geographical sciences which in recent years has been leaning heavily on deterministic thinkings of one shade or the other, or lends itself to an eclecticism peculiar to a possibilistic tradition. Failure to comprehend the inherent social nature of relationship has resulted in geographer's efforts to examine the attributes of nature per se in all its facets ranging from solar radiation, erosional surfaces and the contours to racial distribution of people. 'Man' is at least a

social and the social structures are seen external to nature. In short, the dialectical nature of relationship between society and environment is concealed in a mechanistic materialism supported by sophisticated computers or by a recourse to subjective phenomenology. Burgess aptly remarked:

“... Geographical Theory, at the heart of which must stand a concept of nature, oscillates between a generality that would appal even a diplomat and an eclecticism that would frighten a scientologist. Geography continues to encompass both idealism and mechanistic materialism, though the inadequacies of both these are now concealed behind a scientific camouflage or are paraded about as blatant subjectivity.”<sup>14</sup>

If the human — environment relationship is seen as the product of changing relations of production dictated by a given mode of production, according to which the society organizes itself, then, geography, wherein the distinction lies in the “understanding of the ‘social man’ in the ‘natural space’”,<sup>15</sup> may be equipped with a methodology directly reflecting the uniqueness of human-environment relationship. Thus, it will be clear that:

“The natural factors contributed to the differentiation in the attributes of space and caused the first order of social differentiation within the human society. With man's evolving understanding of the laws of nature ... and his discovery of technological innovations the grip of natural constraints gradually loosened while the grip of social constraints hardened. The human affairs as in all stages of human history since the neolithic revolution are more and more determined by social factors.”<sup>16</sup>

The human-environment relationship therefore, should be seen as a product of the evolution of human society with its inevitable structures and laws continuously modifying the space and environment. The care of all geographic research therefore is clearly a socio-spatial dialectic<sup>17</sup> — not the primordial space, minus the human beings. Space (or environment) may be primordially given, but its organization, use and meaning is a product of social translation, transformation and experience.<sup>18</sup> It is this transformed and socially concretized environment that constitutes the geographers' concern. Basically the human-environment relationship must be seen as a social product created and structured like other social forms, out of the fundamental relations of production. Every mode of production produces its own environment which becomes particularized and concrete within a given social formation.<sup>19</sup> Environment, therefore, cannot be conceived independent of social processes which produce them. The spatial structures are not independent structures that differentiate human response, on the contrary, it is increasingly a product of the social relations.

### **GEOGRAPHY, ECOLOGY AND SOCIAL CONCERN**

If the Marxist perspective can be accepted as an alternative to the existing theories on human-environment relationship, geographers will have to discard their supposed neutrality while analysing the ecological problem and problems of environmental degradation. The neutrality is essentially an outcome of the geographers' refusal to accept the social relations of production interposing between nature and human society. Behind this posited neutrality of nature with respect to society is a clear technocratic agenda that seeks

to control natural hazards by extending the human domination of a supposedly external nature.

It is this kind of an approach which seeks not only to exploit nature but also to do so by exploiting a vast segment of the people. No appeal for environmental protection can bear any measure of success without considering the social order that perpetuates exploitation of people. In capitalism, for example nature and environment are no more perceived as life sustainers, but are mere raw materials for spreading consumerism. The rivers and the lakes are not perceived as reserves of water that can provide drinking water to millions who are thirsty; on the contrary it is seen as powerful reserves of energy that can be harnessed to run big industries to produce soaps and televisions. Forests are no more seen as reserves for food, fuel and fodder, but massive source of raw materials to be used for papers and to decorate the drawing rooms of the affluent.

The worst manifestation of this contradiction between the social classes and the consequent domination of nature is reflected in an ideology which smacks of neo-determinism. The predatory motive of the dominant class is being successfully concealed under forceful arguments to justify spatial manifestations of the worst effects of the plunder of environment as natural. Slums in the city are considered inevitable, even (Sic!) necessary, pollutions to be profitable, floods and famines as the wrath of nature. But why after all spatial pattern of famines changed fundamentally with the rise of capitalism striking the under — developed world most severely? Why did thousands of people die and continue to die in Bhopal?

Another more serious manifestation of neo-deterministic thinking in the Indian context has been invoking of such catch words as 'development' and 'national security.' By an appeal to these ill defined and elusive concepts, the state itself has been the largest force in destroying the ecological balance in several key areas imposing big projects on masses of poor and illiterate people. The ambitious Narmada valley project including the mega projects such as the Sardar Sarovar and Narmada dams, the Tehri dam in the U.P. Himalayas, the silent valley Project in Kerala (now abandoned) the Kaiga Project in Karnataka, the Narora nuclear plant in the upper Ganga valley, Baliapal test range in Orissa and many more — the list is endless — are only a few examples of the massive onslaught on the environment and people, threatening the very basis of survival of many communities. The face of the earth is being transformed. But for whose benefits? Development for whom? Are these benefits so pervasive and economically viable that the ecology and the culture of the people in synthesis with it need to be sacrificed?

The more disquieting feature of all these efforts is its attempt to conceal the real motive of the plunder of the nature for the benefit of a small minority of people by posing it as beneficial to all. Studies<sup>20</sup> have revealed that the big multi-purpose dams which were constructed in the past with the avowed aim of controlling the menace of flood hazards have actually increased its incidence. Study of the controversial Narmada river project reveals that most of the beneficiaries are the dominant classes of Gujarat, which has major industrial areas and is centre for important cash crops like groundnut, cotton and tobacco. And this is being constructed by evacuating over

200,000 (1981 census) people including a very high proportion of tribal population (50 per cent in case of Sardar Sarovar Project and 22 per cent in Narmada dam area) mostly belonging to Madhya Pradesh. The project is intended to submerge 350,000 hectares of forest land and 200,000 hectares of cultivated land. All the promised compensation for evacuees look hollow as similar projects in the past are yet to provide adequate compensations to the affected people as in Bhakra-Nangal or Hirakund dam sites. Moreover, no amount of compensation can ever be sufficient to account for the loss to the environment and disturbing the equation of the people evacuated from the eco-system they were living in prior to their uprooting. In a stratified society like ours, the poor and the disorganized are always left to fend for themselves. The evacuees are generally transferred either to barren lands or infertile wastelands. Confronted with alien socio-cultural milieu these people frequently fall victim to the worst form of exploitation in the unprotected helpless environment. The extent of socio-economic disparities gets further sharpened and accentuated.

The so-called development is thus achieved by increased disparities in the society, by making the country indebted to foreign aid for years to come and by mindless destruction of the natural resources, particularly the ecology of the riverine system depriving thousands of small farmers and fishermen in the downstream areas. Water logging and excessive salination turns millions of hectares infertile besides forming major sources of seismic activity. In fact, Tehri dam, and Narora nuclear plant are all located in the areas most sensitive from the point of view of earthquakes — a factor which cannot be dismissed easily. All these evidences

prove that overtly or covertly, the government is in favour of the big business interests which gets reflected in its approach towards the environment while talking incessantly about conservation. The need for developing is acute, but the concern should equally be for its direction. The moot question is that whether we need to develop with nature as a part of it or destroy it for the development of a few in the short run, destroying the very essence of existence in the long run. The need of the hour is, therefore, to question the very purpose of the existing direction of development. This eventually makes one acutely aware of the source and basis of development — The nature and the environment.

Geographers, traditionally have had a deep curiosity and concern with the ever-varying qualities of the earth's surface

and with the origins of human behaviour. It is a pity that this concern in the last few decades has been largely replaced by a shift towards understanding spatial relations decorated with geometrical cobwebs manufactured in the sophisticated computers. It may be intellectually satisfying, but does not serve geographers' concern for the "social man in the natural space." This perhaps explains the embarrassed silence of the community in a period which is witnessing large-scale social protests against destruction of natural environment in the garb of growth, progress, development and national security. Never before the country faced such a grave threat to its environment. Never before geographers have had an opportunity to indentify with the people who cry for the protection of their eco-system and environment.

#### NOTE

This is a revised version of the paper entitled "Human Environment Relationship — A Review" presented at the U. G. C. Seminar on "Environment and Eco-system" held at Utkal University, Feb. 1987.

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