A Multidimensional Approach to Human Ecology

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The book under review, *Understanding Human Ecology: Knowledge, Ethics and Politics* by Geetha Devi T V, has been adapted from the author’s doctoral research from the School of Social Sciences, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala. Her early training in botany orientates her interest in the ecology and the environment. In her own words, it is her concern with society that occasioned her shift to the social sciences, and it is in the School of Social Sciences, that she completed her MPhil and PhD studies. The science of human ecology has gained momentum over the last decade, wherein there is a deeper understanding of how anthropogenic activities create a deep impact on the environment, which is, more often than not, irreversible. Having emerged out of her doctoral dissertation, the aim of publishing this book was ostensibly to disseminate data on human–environment interactions and make it more accessible.

The book is divided into five parts, including an introduction and a conclusion. There are six chapters divided under the sections Ethics, Politics, and Knowledge. The organisation of the book is to ensure a flow and linkage between various concepts. Each section comprehensively examines the phenomenon in focus, and the author justifies her stance with literature, albeit a majority of it is drawn from the West.

**Interdisciplinary Approach**

The introduction sets the stage, acquainting the reader to the domain and the dimensions of human ecology. This section of the book delves into the issue of how anthropogenic activities are having a direct impact on the environment, often to a point of no return. While she elaborates on these concerns, she references several authors, such as Marten (2001), Bennett (1996), Dyball (2010), Moran (2010), and Rasmussen and Arler (2010), in order to lay the groundwork for her arguments. As this section introduces the book, the author’s voice is heard loud and clear, allowing the reader to understand not only her philosophical stance on human ecology, but also her justifying arguments. It shows clearly her interdisciplinary stance, which she reiterates several times in the book through her writing. It is interesting to note that most of the expert voices she uses are from the fields of environment sciences, development, and geography.

A notable omission in the interdisciplinary reading is psychology—the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994) or, more recently, Heft (2013). We would like to bring in Borden (2008: 106), where he says that

> A human ecology perspective reminds us that we really are part of a complex living world. It seeks new relations—not instead of disciplinary ones, but in addition to them. Its interdisciplinary mandate invites crossing boundaries. This requires a different kind of imagination, in pursuit of fresh combinations of ideas.

It is this fresh combination of ideas that we were looking for in the book.

Sticking to her macro-approach, the author makes reference to the politics at a governance level, and how that has an impact on the ecology. As she tries to deconstruct what human ecology is, she introduces notions of how the environment and the individual are in a symbiotic relationship, and the latter’s impact. She states that human ecology is needed to understand the role of human agency, and its subsequent role in the environment.

When the author speaks of the environmental scenario of the 20th century, she traces the development of environmentalism as a phenomenon, and how the movement transpired over centuries. This contextualises not only ecological importance, but also the role of human behaviour and initiative while interacting with their environment. In order to deepen the understanding of the human–environment relationship, she discusses deep ecology and ecofeminism as movements,
where the ethics behind an act play a significant role. When we look at feminism as a movement, we understand that it arose because of the oppression that women face in everyday life, due to power imbalances. The author draws a parallel with nature’s exploitation, by introducing ecofeminism into the purview of human ecology. What is interesting to note is how, when talking about movements, she introduces the domain of human agency and its relation to the environment.

The literature in the book suggests an eco-philosophical stance wherein the ethics of human practice need to be delved into while understanding the text. She introduces the environmentalist movement, and traces it in detail through the United States, the United Kingdom, and Africa. However, there is little mention of India’s environmental movements. The reason this is integral to understand is because it was way back in the 1700s that the Bishnoi movement had pioneered the environmental movement in India (Alam and Halder 2018). The author effectively brings to the readers an awareness of how the environmental movements in the West were for the elite, and minorities were often excluded. Bringing up environmental movements in India would serve as an effective contrast, as it was the community and their participation that saved multiple forests, thereby enriching the meaning of human ecology. The role of women in green movements in India, such as the Chipko Andolan, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and the Silent Valley Movement, can be used to vividly bring out the connections between knowledge, ethics, and politics (Agarwal 2001; Anju 2014; Devika 2009).

The author’s multidimensional approach focuses a lot on the intrinsic value and ethics behind an act. However, to question the stance of ethics, one may ask how sustainable ethics is when we are felling trees for development. The author cites several literary sources, but at times her stance on the matter is hidden. She brings together ecology and the individual closely when speaking of ethics and values. To help the readers understand this further, she mentions the need that humans have for a better standard of living; however, the morality behind our actions needs to be delved into. Here, she introduces the need for political-level reform, where policies need to be in place, lest the environment deteriorates further.

Breaking the Binary
What is interesting about the author’s writing is the manner in which she has effectively stated the multiple sides of an argument, which is a testament to her detailed knowledge on the subject. She has successfully stated and contradicted facts with the views of different scholars in the field of ecology. She brings in instances of conservation and milestones in the environmental movement such as the banning of DDT (Dichlorodiphenyl-trichloroethane) and the publication of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring (1962). These not only make the text and her arguments justified, but also easy to contextualise. However, local-level knowledge, which is integral to contested sites, is not available in the text. The cases that are documented are rendered as academic readings, which do not allow for a deeper interactionist understanding of people and the environment.

While she has already looked at ethics and human agency, she goes forth to elaborate also on the politics of activities concerning the environment. When conceptualising this, she effectively draws a parallel with development, to further reiterate her point of the degrading environment due to anthropogenic activities. During this narrative, she draws the trajectory of development and the role humans have played in it. Albeit, she again cites multiple resources here, her understanding of human ecology seems to be missing from the dialogue of the book. Halfway through the book is when she introduces Indian voices, by bringing in the Silent Valley project, and deforestation and livelihood issues in India. She introduces more voices of the East with a brief glimpse into Indonesia, which makes the text more multicultural.

With these instances, she constantly reinforces her stance of breaking the binary of development and environment and understanding it as a continuum with ethics being the common ground. The book promises much more than it delivers. The cover of the book offers multiple clues to the content of the book. It is a photograph by N A Naseer of a verdant forest, which we presume is from Kerala. The list of abbreviations in the book is very telling, indicating the science orientation of the writer. The book is an excellent textbook for students interested in environmental issues, development studies, and geography. The text is dense, and peppered with references, which will be useful for students. In order to plumb the depths of human ecology from a broader, more multidisciplinary perspective, there is room for inclusion of other social sciences, such as psychology. This is particularly important given the rise of the environmental psychology movement.

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