

# *Geographical Basis for Ceylon's National Planning*<sup>1</sup>

## The Needs for Learning

**M**ANY aspects of geographic thought are certainly as old as primitive man, yet the development of geography into a practical and utilitarian discipline is very new to the world. It is the present century that has witnessed the establishment of the great many University Chairs of Geography in various parts of the world, in direct response to the growing needs of modern man for a greater knowledge of his physical and human surroundings—in a world of increasing international complexities.

The ever increasing interdependence of peoples and nations throughout the world today, makes an understanding and appreciation of the causes of such interdependence an inescapable obligation of every thinking person, whatever be his national faith or place of residence. In the past, as well as the present, much of man's recurring troubles, and even his major wars, have stemmed from his many ignorances of the fundamental geographic facts of the world in which he lives. And these have all too often been relatively simple geographic ignorances—ignorances of other peoples 'ways of life' and modes of livelihood, ignorances of the problems imposed upon a segment of humanity by a capricious nature in the form of unfriendly terrain or climate, ignorances of the multiple problems imposed by disease, or even ignorances of the handicaps which man has brought upon his own unsuspecting head by bringing too many people into a region of too little natural resources. But the 'great geographic ignorance' of all time concerns the most fundamental of all facts relating to man himself—that is the ignorance of 'who is hungry in the world' and 'how might such suffering be alleviated'. In the past, little has been known of such conditions beyond the narrow horizons of the hunger regions themselves, and consequently, there has been equally little concern in the world. But today, the people of the world are awakening to the urgent need to know and learn—to know and understand the basic facts of Earth and Man.

In direct response to this universal awakening, Modern Geography is rapidly developing and adapting itself to this pressing need of modern man, in his quest of a fuller knowledge of the complex nature of the physical world in which he lives, and certainly a fuller and more intimate knowledge of the various peoples who are his modern world neighbours.

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1. This article was prepared as an inaugural address at the University of Ceylon, but circumstances in 1950-51 prevented its presentation as such.

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### The Work of Geography

It is through Modern Geography that man synthesizes the many separate components of the intricately composed physical and cultural landscape of the world—in order to study them as a composite whole, not as separate and independently compartmented subjects. Geography recognizes the sum total of 'nature and man' and can discern therefrom the grosser maladjustments which mankind has blunderingly produced between his own works and the underlying realities of nature; and Geography attempts to devise solutions for at least the partial alleviation of such maladjustments. The geographer approaches the study of socio-economic life from the angle of the underlying physical realities: such as place, location, land, climate, soils, and minerals; from these foundations the study pushes upwards toward the cultural superstructure which is composed of man and his maze of confusing accomplishments.

The major contribution, then, of geography to society, is to bring together for composite consideration the seemingly compartmented yet closely related bodies of fact partly incorporated within many other disciplines: history, economics, sociology, agriculture, political science, geology, geomorphology, meteorology, oceanography, chemistry, physics, and even others. Modern Geography is thought of by many within the profession as a 'point of view' rather than as a 'subject' in the ordinary sense of the term.

It may be said that geographic study is concerned with where and how man lives: with the physical stage upon which he lives, with his material needs and wants, and how he contrives to satisfy his needs and desires through various productions, processings, manufactures, and exchanges. It is a study of the world's landforms and soils, of climatic conditions and vegetation; it is a study of the influences of this physical environment on man's cultural and economic endeavours; and it is a study of the abilities of man to harness and control the physical elements for his own needs.

Modern Geography is, in a sense, the study and understanding of the Earth and Man—a study of how we, and billions of others who have lived before us through the ages, have lived and utilized our earthly heritages, and a study of how we may improve our future lives through a wiser utilization of those earthly heritages. It is the study of you and me, and two billion other bits of humanity, and the bewildering stage upon which we live, and work, and die.

But one must beware of thinking that Geography encompasses a study and knowledge of *everything* about the earth or about man. It may be true that practically every fact in the known world has something directly or remotely to do with Geography, but by no means is every fact and phenomena in the world of real geographical importance—the importance of facts

varies greatly in both time and space. - At any given time or place those facts are of most importance which affect man, either directly or indirectly, to the greatest degree. Also, the relative 'scale' of a geographic study determines partly what should and will be considered geographic facts. That which is relevant to the geographic study of a small island like Ceylon might be of very little consequence in a world-wide study—the detail pertinent in a Ceylon study might be likened to a portrait painting, while that in a world-wide study to a landscape sketch.

### **Developments in Nineteenth Century Geography**

The romantically descriptive travel-book treatment of early geographic writings was displaced only during the last century, by a systematic classification and organization of the facts of nature and man. This systematic approach led to many lengthy tomes being produced in the nineteenth century, which attempted completely to catalogue and synthesize all the known facts of both the physical and the cultural world. Out of this first systematic approach developed two broad and distinct sub-divisions within geography: (1) a study and classification of the natural features of the earth, which became known as 'physical geography', and (2) a study and classification of the cultural features, including man and his works, which became known as 'human geography'.

These two sub-divisions of the subject became progressively more specialized within themselves, and unfortunately diverged from each other more and more—and as time went on they both diverged farther and farther from the pre-nineteenth century concept that geography concerned itself in some way with 'area and distribution'. In practice, physical geography became increasingly a study of the physical landscape with special emphasis on the natural forces at work in producing such features as the land forms, without much regard to man or his activities. Under somewhat the same influences human geography became primarily a search for 'relationships' between the physical and cultural factors, with an attempt to establish conclusive proof of environmental control over man's activities.

### **Twentieth Century Regional Geography**

Somewhat after the turn of the present century, 'geographic environmentalism' began to wane in popularity—and in recent decades Modern Geography has concerned itself once again with the practical objective of giving 'identity and realism to areas', no two areas in the world being identical. This has been a logical and progressive development. Geographic inquiry is fundamentally concerned with all or some portion of the earth's areal expanse, now recognized as 'geographical regions', within which man and his changing activities have equal importance with, and are inseparable from,

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the more static physical features. Regionalism has, since the turn of the century, developed into the principal technique of geographical analysis throughout the world, it is a fortunate development which has made the practical and utilitarian Modern Geography of today possible.

However, it should be emphasised that Modern Geography is not a study of *all* factors which exhibit an areal expression, i.e., phenomena which have a distributional pattern either within the world or within a geographic region, but only of those which are observable materially and either limit man and his activities or result from man's impress on the area. As an example, the study of food production distribution in South and South-East Asia comes well within the field of geographical research; but a study of international trade agreements, *per se*, between Ceylon and Burma would not be involving real geographic factors. However, international trade agreements might well be studied as non-geographic factors, in order to determine and measure their effects on the food production of various countries of South and South-East Asia.

We find then that Modern Geography is organized around the study of geographical regions, within each of which a unified study of all the geographic aspects may be encompassed, *or*, consideration may be arbitrarily limited to certain selected geographic aspects only, within special recognized regional limits. In this capacity geography serves to bring all peoples of the world into closer acquaintenship, to destroy archaic ideas of racial superiorities, and to dispel national prejudices and suspicions—and this largely through acquainting mankind with the world as it is beyond his own narrow horizons. Geographical study helps to build mutual appreciation and respect for other peoples' 'way of life', for the accomplishments and also the problems of other men and other nations. Through a greater knowledge of other peoples, mistrusted 'foreigners' become more nearly respected 'neighbours', and supposed ignorant 'natives' are found to be cultured 'gentlefolk'. Dissemination of knowledge about the world itself and the world's peoples, of those peoples' universal struggle for existence, of the world-wide sameness of their hopes and needs and problems, all foster a better international understanding—and understanding fosters tolerance and co-operation, qualities which the world today can well afford to cultivate.

### Subject Specialization

Studies of any nature or scope, which lend themselves to sub-division, give rise to speciality fields within—and geography is no exception. Within the past generation new speciality branches have been born within the broad field of geographic thought. If the speciality emphasises raw material production and manufacturing, then it is economic geography; if international relations and politics, then political geography; if of climate and weather,

then climatology; or if of maps and charts, then cartography. And there are numerous other speciality branches. However, if a study encompasses all of the observable geographic facts within a limited natural and cultural landscape, in all their interlocking relationships, that is regional geography. In the final analysis, therefore, the field of geographic study encompasses the face of the earth and the people thereon, with special reference to regional differentiations.

### **The Scope of Geographic Research**

Within any new field of learning such as Modern Geography, research plays a very important role. The whole world lies within the geographic realm, and so there is much to be done—with so very little, relatively speaking, having been accomplished to the present time. As is true in some other branches of investigation, the geographer must carry out the great bulk of his inventory and research in the 'field', across the length and breadth of the great continents, and in every far off corner and island of the world. No area where man lives, and few which he does not occupy, is too remote or too unsavoury physically to be passed over or ignored. The geographic investigator cannot bring the physical and cultural world into a laboratory—he must go out to it. Consequently, the factors of time, great distances, largeness of area, adversity of climate, and difficulty of accessibility all contrive to thwart the geographic researcher in his work. Costs in money and human effort run high and often prove prohibitive to research, with resulting excessive 'spottiness' of pattern and 'inconsistency' of the quality of the geographic knowledge of the world.

The story of the difficulties in geographic field research is not necessarily unique in the broad world of research, it simply repeats the difficulties of many other disciplines—resulting in 'too little and too late' research. As a consequence of this serious handicap the development of new research tools and techniques is very important, research techniques which may extend the scope and speed up the processes of the all important 'real' research.

In response to this serious need for new field research tools and techniques in geography, the writer has experimented over the past half dozen years with the small light airplane for low-altitude geographic field-observation work. And somewhat more recently the ordinary 35 mm. camera has been added as a second field tool for low-altitude personalized aerial photography. Both of these tools are extremely versatile. Neither of the two tools is exactly new to the general field of research, but, the adaptation of the light airplane for observation and the use of the 35 mm. camera for practical aerial photography in geographic investigations and research is new.

On the basis of extensive experiments and full-scale completed 'regional studies', conducted both in mid-latitude areas and later in tropical Ceylon,

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it is well proven that the usual regional geographic field inventory-survey can best employ a complementary use of aerial-observation-sketching-photography with some preliminary ground-level control observation. Neither technique is fully complete without the other—aerial work and ground work in geographic field research are definitely complementary, and by no means can one supplant the other.

### **Ceylon's Opportunities in Geographic Research**

Ceylon is a very active participant today in this new twentieth century international development of geographical study. Throughout the Island's secondary school system the fundamental principles of Modern World Geography are being taught, while the more advanced and specialized concepts of Geography are finding their rightful places within the new Geography Department of the University of Ceylon.

Ceylon's close physical proximity to the great Asiatic continent offers Ceylon's geography students an excellent opportunity to study those world important areas of South and South-East Asia objectively and completely. Ceylon's insular position gives sufficient separation from the vast mainland to allow a detached and objective view of both Asia's lands and peoples and the geographical problems which result. Ceylon is, on the other hand, in sufficient proximity to those densely populated South and South-East Asiatic lands to give it a thorough understanding through cultural sameness; and close enough to readily enable extensive research to be conducted into all the physical, human, and economic phases of continental life. With these special physical advantages, together with the high level enthusiasm for international co-operation exhibited throughout both the University and Governmental circles in Ceylon, there is good reason to believe that the University of Ceylon will produce in short time a department of 'geographic thought' of true international scope and significance.

Most importantly, the geographic knowledge gained through these endeavours will help to fulfill greater opportunities for the people of Ceylon and her neighbours—and to help in at least some small way to alleviate the poverty and sufferings within the region, and to bring an added richness into the lives of all mankind in this great sector of the eastern world.

It is heartening to realize that many leading men and women here and abroad are fired with the high ideal of understanding and helpfulness, they are leaders who give freely of their efforts and material goods in the hope of benefit to the less fortunate. And it is further heartening to realize that many Governments among the free countries of the world are equally as zealous toward the same end. If the simple 'will' to banish misunderstanding, poverty and hunger were sufficient, then these miseries would have long since vanished from the world, but far more than the simple 'will' is needed.

## UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

### **Ceylon's Own Needs in Geographic Research**

The tropics present a real challenge to the research geographer. Roads are generally few, broad unbridged rivers as well as broad swamps hinder movement, and broad tropical forests both hinder movement and cut surface visibility to a minimum. The tropical field research man is practically 'lost' on the ground, at least he works against great odds—odds so great that few men have ventured out at all, and even fewer have accomplished much.

Geographically the Tropics are little known today—even surprisingly large parts of Ceylon are geographic 'unknowns'. Why is there no Land Use Map of Ceylon, why no Vegetation Map, why no Soils Map, why no Crop Potential Map, and moreover, why not even a Population Distribution Map of Ceylon? The simple answer to these 'whys' is, a combination of lack of time, lack of finances, and lack of trained geographers—but probably most importantly it is the physical 'difficulty of accomplishment' of the field survey work entailed. Land Use, Soils, etc. are all 'unknown' geographic factors in Ceylon, especially concerning the 'Dry Areas' of the island—and these are all basic fundamental factors which a nation such as Ceylon *must* know before large scale land reclamation and national social planning can be achieved. To plan on any scale, and especially on a national scale, without this basic geographic information is not only administratively clumsy, but actually economically dangerous for the Nation and its People.

The amount of work and expense involved in a 'ground-survey' of Ceylon's Land Use alone would be considerable—so great in fact that even Government has not been able to undertake and underwrite it. But, this all important job can be done with relative speed and economy, expedited through the use of new geographic field techniques discussed above. In fact, this important survey project of Ceylon's Land Use is getting under way this year, through the sponsorship of the University of Ceylon, and under the direction of one of the permanent staff of the University's Geography Department. When completed, within the coming two years, this survey will be of inestimable value to the Government of Ceylon in the formulating of its National Planning policies.

### **National and International Aspects**

The International Geographical Congress has selected Ceylon (an island in Asia) and Bolivia (an interior country in South America) as 'pilot' survey areas in a projected world-wide Land Use Survey scheme, under consideration for several years, and now getting under way. This international project is to be carried out on a uniform classification basis determined through international agreement, by local geographers in each small geographic region or political unit working under conditions fully familiar to them, as in Ceylon

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where the work will be completely done by Ceylonese. Other similar world surveys (soils, land forms, population distribution, etc.) will be inaugurated from year to year, to run concurrently with the Land Use Survey—all under the co-ordinating direction of the International Geographical Congress. And it is sincerely hoped that Ceylon will continue in the same progressive way that she is undertaking the first brave step on the Land Use Survey. Because, in Ceylon's own national interest these basic surveys are absolute necessities, and in Ceylon's international interest they are of tremendous value in 'selling' Ceylon to the world. The better a nation knows itself—the better it can sell itself.

Ceylon is fortunate in having been selected as a 'pilot' region for the first of these world-wide surveys. Ceylon is also fortunate in possessing at this opportune moment the 'know how' of geographic field survey techniques, as well as competent local geographers, so the job can be undertaken with full confidence and assurance of completion. But even further than this Ceylon is extremely fortunate in having a world recognized University which is fully alive to both its local and international responsibilities, and which has demonstrated here as frequently before its keenness in giving moral and financial support to worthwhile research in all fields of learning.

Ceylon should be proud of its fine University and the monumental work it is doing in many fields of human knowledge, and it is sincerely hoped that the new Geography Department will continue to take a leading part in making the University of Ceylon a progressive and respected center of learning and research, which the nation and its people so rightfully deserve.

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