Regional Planning in India

Now or Never?

A T A Learmonth

The evening out of regional disparities in development within the Indian Union was one of the main socio-economic objectives in the Second Five Year Plan. In practice, however, the trend has perhaps been for the developed areas to become more developed and for the backward areas to fall farther behind. This trend would probably have been similar or stronger under a free enterprise economy.

There is a strong case for developing each differing region within the country to the maximum extent permitted by its resources; for comprehensive improvements in the use of land of all types; for the development of the country-side and the towns, large and small; for decentralising production; and preventing migration to towns and cities which are already overcrowded.

This particular aim of the Second Plan has proved so far little more than a pious hope, with no effective machinery to carry it out. Nevertheless, the pressing necessity for regional development and the work already done on the problem by various agencies justify its being carried forward and brought nearer to reality during the Third and successive Plan periods.

The National Sample Survey which offers a most stimulating opportunity of keeping a finger on the pulse of the country's progress, round by round, may help regional mapping on a more intimate scale by adding on key items such as consumer expenditure, income from manufacturing and handicraft industry and so on.

Or at marginal cost, it may be possible even to use a modified sample design, round by round, which can be used for broad regional mapping from which regional consciousness may be capitalised in a constructive way.

(The writer was in India from 1956 to 1958, on loan under the Colombo Plan from the University of Liverpool to the Indian Statistical Institute.)

AN exploration was made, on the initiative of Professor P C Mahalanobis. F R S, of possible applications of geographical techniques to problems of national planning; in India. In particular a pilot project in regional survey for planning, purposes was carried out in Mysore State, with the collaboration of Indian geographers, statisticians, and economists as well as the help of many officials and others. The main results of this survey are now in the press at the Institute; some general comment, however, was offered by the writer and his wife in "The Regional Concept and National Development" in the Economic Weekly Annual for January 1958, while the prose but not the visual material of a lecture given by the author in various cities in India just before leaving for U K was published in the Bombay Geographical Magazine Vol VI-VII, No 1 for September 1959.

Concurrently studies on South India as a whole have been begun; first results show clearly how valuable such broad studies can be in putting into perspective the findings about a single State. Research and Training School has been entrusted to Dr V L S Prakasa Rao, and considerable advances in certain problems have been made since the writer left India.

Other projects and institutions have convergent interests — the work of the Damodar Valley Authority as a whole and the research work in particular by a group of workers from the Universities and the Institute of Technology at Kharagpur; the Dandakaranya project; State surveys with collaboration from Universities, as in Uttar Pradesh; the fine work of the National Atlas Organisation in its own field (see review by the writer in Economic Weekly Special Number, July 1958); and not least the technoeconomic surveys in several States by the National Council of Applied Economic Research of New Delhi, whose teams use a particularly interesting combination of academic and technical personnel and produce reports very useful and quantitative especially in the short-term context which is perhaps of particular appeal politically, although perhaps a little weak in terms of comprehensive and perspective survey.

The present article is simply the reflections of one foreign professional geographer, a year after completing a period of intensive effort in this held in India.

In retrospect, a perspective view may well gain something from distance, but in looking to future prospects there is of course a disadvantage in that one loses contact with current developments, even with the best will in the world. For instance, will the Chinese activities on the northern frontier of India result in lop-sided development programmes or will they increase the impetus towards all-round development all over India? The latter may well be the more effective protection to India's security ultimately, but very difficult to carry out especially over the next few years.

One of the four main socio-economic objectives in the Second Five Year Plan is — to paraphrase — the evening out of regional disparities in development within the Indian Union. It is of course clear that this must always be in relation to resources. The general trend in the world is for rich countries to grow richer and for almost all poor countries to grow poorer. Within India, under the Second Plan, the trend in practice has perhaps been for the developed areas to become more developed and for the backward areas to fall farther behind.
at least in relative terms. (This trend would probably have been similar or even stronger under a free-enterprise economy.) This is a not unnatural concomitant of the emphasis placed on physical planning in the sense of giving priority to basic industries from which other industries will be born or benefited in the next phases of development.

But there are strong reasons for returning to the theme of developing each differing region within the country to the maximum extent permitted by its resources. The food situation certainly justifies serious attention to increasing productivity from the land, indeed in its absence the development programme as a whole may be torpedoed by inflation; looking ahead to a period of population increase in which it is desired to improve standards of material living, comprehensive improvements in the use of land of all types seems to be needed. The need for experiment has been urged in the publications already referred to, so that this work can proceed on the basis of ascertained fact, and perhaps also spread at the grass roots instead of being imposed from above — always a difficult procedure in a peasant country.

To KEEP PEOPLE HAPPILY ANCHORED

Moreover there are strong reasons for urging all-round development spread over the countryside and the towns, large and small; it has already been demonstrated that the improvement of handicraft industries or the diffusion of small-scale industry is an extraordinary difficult process. But it may well be essential, at least for a decade or two, in order to keep people relatively anchored — and happily so — and thus to prevent further crowding into poor accommodation or even no accommodation — in cities, in far greater numbers than can be properly coped with by most municipal authorities at their present stage of development.

This particular aim of the Second Plan may have proved so far little more than a pious hope, with no effective machinery to carry it out except possibly the political pressure group in Delhi or at the State capital. Nevertheless the necessities just discussed, and the work done on the problem by various agencies, may justify its being carried forward, and brought nearer to reality, during the Third and successive plan periods.

How much might be reasonably be attempted, having regard to costs and man-power, by the beginning of the Third Plan period? Little time remains, and the writer is very conscious of the difficulty in finding able and experienced men, with a real interest in practical application of their field of knowledge. Even after the men are found, it may be difficult to get them released because of pressure of teaching or administrative duties. A somewhat greater sense of national emergency is perhaps needed in India. Authority for the writer's release for duty in India under the Colombo Plan in 1956 was given within a few hours, whereas it took months to negotiate the release of his Indian "counter-part" and successor.

REGIONAL MAPPING AT MARGINAL COST

Even granting that trained geographers are in ample supply in U K, and scarce in India, greater flexibility in procedure is surely needed in this and similar cases? Well-designed work in applied science can sometimes produce a kind of fresh wind blowing through the rarified air of the academic side of a discipline, and it may well be that the answer to this dilemma may lie in the acceptance of participation by students in surveys of national importance as part of their training. This has been done in at least one field without lowering of academic standards, and possibly to their benefit. Be that as it may, even the existing man-power situation would permit of some work being taken in hand which would assist in problems of regional allocation as between or within States.

The National Sample Survey offers a most stimulating opportunity of keeping a finger on the pulse of the country's progress, round by round. At present, estimates are published for the whole country and for the six large regions used in the 1951 Census. Regional mapping on a more intimate scale might well be justified for key items such as consumer expenditure, income from manufacturing industry and from handicraft industry and so on. This may well be possible by slumping estimates, say by Districts, for several consecutive rounds of the survey, with appropriate adjustment of items affected by changes in the cost of living. Or, at marginal cost, it may be possible even to use a modified sample design, round by round, which can be used for broad regional mapping. Indeed thinking along these lines has been in progress for quite some time.

At the technical level, this simple technique might well settle arguments for which no objective measurements are at present available. At least as important, perhaps, is the possibility that prompt processing of data in this way might enable the newspaper-reading public to keep in touch with regional progress in economic development, rather as he is able to do in comparing this year's monsoon with last or with the average. And beyond the honest but simple mapping may prove a very potent means of mass communication, from which regional consciousness may be capitalised in a constructive way.

DATA FOR REGIONAL ALLOCATIONS

The writer's main effort, in the pilot project of 1956-58, was at the State level. Writing in August-September 1958, after visiting most State Secretariats and many Universities, I was reasonably confident that it would be possible to complete first surveys of every State in time to be useful for the Third Plan, if able workers were made available and the training of others begun immediately. This assumed, of course, the selection of techniques and topics proved valuable in the Mysore project or appropriate to the needs and the man-power position in a particular State. Writing in January 1960 it is realistic only to hope that several States may undertake regional surveys and do some comprehensive regional as against departmental thinking in the preparations for the Third Plan. A future survey team should be made of course profit from the lessons to be learned from the Mysore project. The team should be broader, including technical men such as agriculturists and engineers so that estimates may be more quantitative in terms of yields and costs — in this respect being a sort of amalgum of the techniques used in Mysore and in say the Techno-economic survey of Bihar by the National Council of Applied Economic Research. Before regional planning involving the interaction of large-scale development with community development can become a reality, the patterns of communication of many kinds will have to be
studied much more, and as Evelyn Wood has often urged, controlled communications will have to be established in order that progress can continuously be phased according to known reactions up to date among the people of the region.

A great many items in such a programme for which data and trained men are available can be processed in time to be used in regional allocations for the Third Plan; these may be studied from existing material already referred to, published or in the press. Other items can only be the subject of experiment before the Third Plan; for instance selected community development Mocks in differing regions might be the subject of experiment in the estimate of population capacity assuming a desirable level of consumer expenditure (Economic Weekly Annual Number January 1958 p 156); in the planning together of town and country, of agriculture and industry (Bombay Geographical Magazine, VI-VII/1, p 95-7); in controlled communications during the phase of implementation; and in regional econometrics in which selected indexes are used for forecasting progress and subsequently tested by comparison with actual events. (Ibid., P 97)

If possible some cooperative or collective villages should certainly be included. A neotechnic and highly productive agriculture in India on capitalist lines seems unthinkible for several generations at least, and would involve a much more rapid industrialisation and UP banisation, so that some form of involvement of every family in constructive work or at least the feeling of constructive work seems essential in order to overcome the apathy which undoubtedly exists—widely regional variations—among the landless or the very poor holder of an inadequate patch of land. Patient experiment followed by rapid expansion based on demonstration may be the only way of making sufficiently rapid progress to give improved standards to an increasing population. The right kind of programming may well give a basis for a reconciliation of the kind of resurgent rural India envisaged by Vinoba Bhave and Jaiprakash Narayan with the kind of support and strength available from an industrial country.

PERSPECTIVE PLANNING OF REGIONS

Experimental projects naturally imply longer-term possibilities. Many of these are implicit in what has already been suggested. Regional planning at the Centre might consist of a regional study cell perhaps within the perspective planning group. A particular interest might be the rate of industrialisation and the rate and standards of urbanisation, considered in relation to regional patterns of prosperity and services throughout the country.

Migration and especially ways of controlling the Ho towards the towns compatible with a free society might be a main research objective, as yet I think little studied. A broad team would be envisaged in every State, and within five years it should certainly be possible to produce effective regional development plans proper, in which the interaction of the demand created by a new or expanded industrial town—and of the services and amenities it provides—on the surrounding country-side can be forecast. Controlled communications and flexibility of plan should avoid frictions and inefficiencies.

It should be possible to reach many decisions with the aid of quantitative findings—in fact operational research techniques may be applied to regional planning, at first on particular problems such as transport bottlenecks, and then gradually on more complex problems. Inter-State projects will include river basin projects like the existing Damodar Valley scheme, and also possibly large canal irrigation tracts crossing State boundaries, such as the Tungabhadra project, in which agricultural land-use, industrial expansion and urban services and amenities ought perhaps to be considered as a whole. Inter-State collaboration may be required for certain macro-regional problems, probably on an ad hoc basis—e.g. food surpluses and deficits, technical education and certain problems in power distribution.

AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY AND RESOURCES SURVEY

A particular long-term item, already available in some areas, should be expanded and rationalised as quickly as possible: in the writer's opinion India's resources in aerial photography should be expanded so that the whole country can be covered within a few years, and also they should be much more multi-purpose in use. Work in Ceylon and in Pakistan has shown the possibilities of complete air cover followed by resources survey wedding interpretation of air photographs to varying amounts of ground survey by a mixed team of geographers, penologists, geologists, foresters, agriculturists, hydrologists and the like. Foreign workers and machines have been used but in Ceylon there was provision for the training of Ceylonese counterparts in each branch of the work.

There is little doubt that once the heavy cost of air survey is faced, a great many subsequent operations are made much quicker, easier, cheaper and more efficient and quantitative. In Ceylon the technique has proved equally useful in developed and under-developed parts of the country: for instance in quick and economical development of tropical hardwoods from virgin forests; in estimation of yields of coir for an improved coir-weaving industry in developed country—for this purpose the coconut trees were actually counted from the photographs; and once the photographs were available for innumerable purposes which could not have been predicted, such as routing a pipe-line, and finding, a solution to a problem involving the flooding of salt-pans by fresh-water streams in spate. One of the greatest economies in practise is to use a spectroscope of the country proposed for irrigation in certain gorges, say, may show within a few hours that this project will not prove useful and can be abandoned; whereas otherwise many weeks of arduous and expensive work might have been involved.

WIDER AIR COVER NECESSARY

In India air photographs are of course used for many purposes, including the siting of dams, and I believe that they may be in use for general resource survey in the Dandakaranya project. The present plea is for wider aerial cover and for a much wider range of uses accompanied by liberalisation of access to the photographs. Libraries of all the photographs for the country should be maintained in Delhi, and for the State in each State capital, and possibly also special libraries for forestry, soil and soil conservation studies. Photographs involving small areas of real strategic importance of course will have to be subject to close security regulations but the great majority of the photographs ought to be
available to every bona fide scholar who can produce satisfactory introductions or other evidence of his good intentions.

At the All-India level the photographs would be useful probably mainly for investigations involving only one or two factors at a time. At the State level it should be possible within five years to train enough mixed teams in resources survey based on air photographs to allow the regional surveys of every State to be immeasurably speeded and strengthened by this modern tool. Once the heavy initial expense is faced, the answers to many problems at present answered at great labour will be available more quickly, while others almost, equally important which at present have to remain unanswered will be dealt with answered within a few days, or at the very least it can be ascertained whether a more detailed investigation is justified or not. Not every problem is covered—crop-yields, for instance, are notoriously an intractable problem in the interpretation of air photographs. Often ground work is involved — there is after all no magic about the technique! — but greatly speeded up. And if this technique can be made available widely in India it should be possible to deal with many problems by wedding aerial survey, in which she has perhaps lagged behind in proportion to her size, to sample survey, in which she has led the world.

African Governments Must Be Entrepreneurs

GOVERNMENTS in Africa must play a highly significant role in transforming the traditional economy into a modern economy, according to a new United Nations report. Conditions for economic growth based on private initiative are not very favourable and, if faster progress is to be achieved, many African governments have no choice but to perform the functions of an entrepreneur in diverting domestic savings into productive investment and even in assuming responsibilities of management. In such circumstances, measures to increase the supply of suitably trained administrators "assume an urgency which can scarcely be overemphasized."

These are some of the conclusions drawn from the Economic Survey of Africa since 1950, which was released on January 19. The report was prepared by the U N Department of Economic and Social Affairs, at the request of the new U N Economic Commission for Africa for the Commission's second session, which opened on 26 January in Tangier, Morocco.

The Survey highlights the following points, among others,

Progress of the mainly subsistence economy towards a modern economy constitutes a basic characteristic of economic development in most of Africa.

In most African countries, the past 10 years have been marked by more or less sustained increases in real national incomes in both total and per capita terms.