

## **PROFESSOR M.M.KARUNANAYAKE: A PROFILE**

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### **1 Introduction**

Professor M.M. Karunanayake, the Chair and Senior Professor of Geography, University of Sri Jayawardenapura, retired from University service on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2005, after a long and exemplary career spanning forty-one years, of which twenty six had been as Chair of Geography. In accordance with the subsequently enacted regulations he was elevated to the position of Senior Professor on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1989.

Prof. Karunanayake joined the University of Sri Jayawardenapura (then Vidyodaya University of Ceylon) as an Assistant Lecturer on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1964 at the age of twenty three after completing the Special Degree in Geography with Honours from the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya. At Ananda College where he was a student, he showed early promise as a scholar, being the recipient of the gold medal in 1958, awarded to the best Arts student, based on the results of the University Entrance Examination. His career at the University was a journey of success (through not without the usual trials and tribulations) which saw his eventual blossoming out as one of the leading social geographers in the country with an international reputation. He obtained the Doctoral degree from the University of Liverpool which brought him in contact with one of the foremost British geographers, Professor Robert W. Steel, whom he was fortunate to have as his supervisor. Professor Karunanayake later conducted frontier level developmental research as a Visiting Fellow at the prestigious Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex (1979/80) and as a Senior Fulbright Fellow at the University of California at Berkeley (1990/91). He gained recognition both in Sri Lanka and abroad as a researcher and an academic of exceptionally high standing. He has been a teacher par excellence who produced a stream of highly motivated geographers, administrators and developmental workers to meet the needs of the country. He has been a mentor to several young academics who have managed to reach the highest point of their academic careers both locally and abroad.

The establishment of the Faculty of Graduate Studies is one of the lasting contributions that Prof. Karunanayake has made to the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. This being a novel concept there was a fair amount of resistance to the establishment of a Graduate Faculty by some sections of

the academic community. Prof. Karunanayake through discourse and dialogue was successful in dispelling their fears and managed to commence its activities with the blessings and consensus of all concerned. As the founder Dean of the Faculty he steered its affairs with a sense of vision, competence and commitment for six long years. Institutionalizing a research culture at the university was an ideal that was uppermost in his mind. Novel procedures and traditions that were set up by him in this newly established Faculty continue to give it strength and recognition.

Over the years Prof. Karunanayake has earned a well deserved reputation as an orator and has been in much demand as a keynote speaker at many academic forums. His keynote addresses without exception had been well researched and delivered with clarity and precision that won him the admiration of academic audiences.

Soon after the announcement of his retirement, the Senate of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura unanimously resolved to honour him by publishing a felicitation volume of the Vidyodaya Journal of Arts and Letters. The university also honoured him by conferring on him an Emeritus Professorship.

The article is written for the purpose of recording his scholarly achievements and contributions.

## **2. Academic Achievements**

Since the inception of his research career, Prof. Karunanayake displayed a keen interest in the field of Social Geography. His doctoral dissertation presented to the University of Liverpool titled “The Dry Zone Peasant in Transition: A Study of Agricultural Modernization in Sri Lanka” appraised the impact of agricultural modernization of peasant communities in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka from a spatial perspective. This was very much a pioneering study in the Social Geography of rural Sri Lanka.

In 1979 Prof. Karunanayake was the recipient of a Commonwealth Fellowship which enabled him to take up a Visiting Fellowship tenured at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex, UK. His research at the IDS was concerned with institutional aspects of rural development with special reference to farmer participation in irrigation water management. During the tenure of the Fellowship he gained exposure to on-going research activities and developmental thinking in vogue at the IDS-RUPAG (Rural Planning and Administration Group). The opportunity made available to him at the IDS to work with a multi-disciplinary team of specialists was particularly rewarding and left a

deep impression on his understanding of and approach to the analysis of developmental issues in Sri Lanka and the Third World.

In 1990 he won the Senior Fulbright-Hays Award to undertake research on *natural disaster preparedness in developing countries with particular reference to Sri Lanka* at the University of California at Berkeley, USA. The Senior Fellowship tenured during the academic year 1990/1991 also familiarized him with the American University System. In 1998 his proposal for a highly competitive SIDA/SAREC Research Cooperation Grant (prepared in collaboration with senior departmental colleagues) was successful and he was able to set-up a research project on Regional Development and Poverty Alleviation at the Department of Geography. This project which comprised three major components viz. research, research training for academic staff, and infrastructure development has made a significant contribution to make the Department of Geography a centre of excellence for regional development studies in Sri Lanka. The project has prompted interdisciplinary research within the University. Prof. Karunanayake as the project leader was instrumental in identifying and prioritizing research issues for investigation. Another significant aspect of the project has been the research and training links that he managed to foster with Swedish Universities such as Uppsala, Karlstad, Gothenburg and Lund. He was able to establish a split Ph.D Programme with the University of Uppsala for the benefit of younger colleagues in the Departments of Geography and Economics. This project which is due for completion in 2010 has been applauded as one of the finest examples of North/South research cooperation.

Prof. Karunanayake's early research was concerned with aspects of Rural Social Geography where he tried to see the link between society and space in the context of rural Sri Lanka. These studies were carried out as micro-level field studies primarily in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka and had anthropological flavour as well. The outcome was published in learned journals and addressed wide ranging issues relating to deprivation, food insecurity, drought adaptation, landlessness and marginalization. It is worth noting that some of the research is focused on the structural characteristics of the peasant society.

From around the 1980s Prof. Karunanayake's research took a problem and policy oriented bend. It is also evident that his research interests broadened into new areas such as institutional aspects of irrigation water management; environmental conservation and sustainable development; regional development; and poverty alleviation. These studies also resulted in several articles in peer reviewed journals, conference proceedings and valuable research reports covering a wide spectrum of topics ranging from 'farmer managed irrigation systems' to 'information technology for

regional planning in Sri Lanka'.

Prof. Karunanayake's scholarly contributions were not limited to journal articles and conference proceedings. He has also edited four books on regional development under the aegis of the SIDA/SAREC Research Cooperation Project. In chronological order they are: *People Space and Resources* (2001); *Poverty, Spatial Imbalances and Regional Planning in Sri Lanka* (2002); *Rural Urban Interface in Sri Lanka: Studies in Regional Development* (2003); and *Regional Development in Sri Lanka: Resetting the Agenda* (2005). These books contain chapters on no less than eighteen themes relating to regional development issues in Sri Lanka contributed by specialists in the field. The first three books contain erudite introductions by Prof. Karunanayake and the last a joint introduction by Professor Karunanayake and the late Prof. Anders Narman of Gothenburg University, Sweden. It may be noted that these publications have been well received by academics, planners and policy-makers concerned with regional development.

His map and text on *Major Irrigation Settlement Schemes* prepared for the *National Atlas of Sri Lanka* was incorporated as supporting material in the Land Reform Commission Report of 1989.

Prof. Karunanayake has gained academic recognition not only locally but overseas as well. He was invited to give a series of seminars on the Institutional Aspects of Irrigation Water Utilization in Sri Lanka at the University of Linköping in Sweden in 1980. The seminars have been published by the Department of Society and Environment of Linköping University as a monograph titled *Irrigation Systems in Sri Lanka: a Survey* (1980). He was also invited to be a team member of two cross-county studies undertaken by the United Nations Centre for Regional Development, Nagoya, Japan the one on *Increasing the Absorptive Capacity of the Urban Economy* (1986-1987) and the other on *Emerging Urban- Rural Linkages: Implications for Industrialization, Employment and Regional Development* (1988-1989).

He was the keynote speaker at two international conferences in 2002. The keynote address delivered at the International Conference on Public and Private Sector Partnerships: Exploring Cooperation, University of Karlstad, Sweden (May, 2002) was titled "Stability and Growth through Partnership: A South Asian Perspective". The other keynote address titled "South-South Research Partnership for Regional Development" was delivered at the South-South Research Partnership Conference held at the University of Chiang Mai, Thailand (June, 2002).

Prof. Karunanayake had the distinction of being invited abroad in 2004 to give a series of joint seminars, a clear reflection of his academic standing. The first of these was on Issues of Post-War Reconstruction in the North and East Sri Lanka given at the University of Uppsala, Sweden in May 2004. The second seminar was on *Development Issues in Sri Lanka as a Country Emerging from Conflict, and the third on Alleviating Poverty: the Sri Lankan Experience*. The last two seminars were given at the United Nations Centre for Regional Development, Nagoya, Japan in Sept-Oct 2004. More recently (in 2006) the Collegium of Development Studies at the University of Uppsala invited him to conduct a joint seminar on Post-Tsunami Reconstruction Issues in Sri Lanka.

### **3. Contribution to the Department of Geography**

It can be stated that the Department of Geography as we see it to-day is the creation of Prof. Karunanayake. A solid foundation for the growth of the Department was laid by his predecessor Prof. P.D.A. Perera. But the Department acquired its stature and character on the basis of the vision articulated by Prof. Karunanayake. In moving towards his vision of making the Department of Geography a centre of excellence in Sri Lanka for the teaching of Geography he successfully mobilized the support of all his colleagues in the Department. Although he specialized in Social Geography he truly valued Geography for its holism. He was deeply influenced by radicalism in Geography and was imbued with a concern for the social responsibility of the Geographer. These values and attitudes always emerged in his lectures, discussions and discourses.

A primary task that he took upon himself as Professor of Geography was to strengthen the academic capability of the Department. To achieve this objective he encouraged and motivated the younger colleagues to work for their higher degrees. By 2003 the Department of Geography had a complement of six PhDs, which is an achievement by any standard. Furthermore by the same year all staff members (except for a then newly recruited lecturer) had obtained their Masters degrees. He encouraged colleagues to take up opportunities outside the University on secondment when opportunities warranted. It was his firm belief such opportunities were a means of adding value to their training. He was responsible for setting up the split training arrangement with the Uppsala University for the benefit of the younger colleagues in the Department (as well as of the Department of Economics) under the aegis of the SIDA/ SAREC Research Cooperation Project. Happily this programme is now paying rich dividends in regard to higher level graduate training.

He has also made a significant contribution to curriculum development in the Department. He pioneered the introduction of Social and Rural

Geography to the University Geography Curriculum in Sri Lanka. Applied Geography was offered as a compulsory course for the Special Degree students. He emphasized the need to move away from a descriptive regional geography to a problem oriented one. He added emphasis to the field tradition established by his predecessor in the Chair. More recently, a course in Geographic Information Systems was incorporated in the curriculum and the staff duly trained. It is also important to point out that under his guidance teaching methodologies were modified and developed to include individual and group assignments, discussions and presentations as appropriate in the teaching programmes.

Until Prof. Karunanayake was appointed to the chair, postgraduate training was little developed in the Department. Since he took over the Professorship he made it his responsibility to institute Masters and Doctoral degree Programmes in the Department. He was also responsible for introducing the M.Sc Programme in Human Security, a taught programme with a research component. There is now a high demand for higher degrees offered by the Department. Several Doctoral and Masters theses have been completed under his supervision. It may be mentioned in passing that the Department of Water in Environment and Society at the University of Linkoping, Sweden as well as the Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University, Sweden sought Professor Karunanayake's services as an external advisor to guide doctoral students undertaking research on Sri Lanka.

Prof. Karunanayake inherited a Department with a fairly well developed infrastructure. It is to his credit that he had improved on existing infrastructure. His most significant contribution to the Department in terms of physical infrastructure development was the setting up of the Geographic Information Systems facility through the SIDA/SAREC Research Cooperation Project. Through the same project he also took steps to train academic staff as well as the Senior Staff Technical Officer of the Department in using GIS.

#### **4. Contribution to the University**

During his long career Prof. Karunanayake has also contributed much to the development of the University as an administrator. The role of the academic and the administrator combined easily in him. However, his most significant contribution to the development of the University has been as the Founder Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies. There is no doubt that he played a crucial role in setting-up and guiding the activities of the Faculty through its formative years. He was also Dean, Faculty of Arts from 1976 to September 1979. In addition to these he held numerous other positions in the University such as Head, Department of Geography;

Coordinator, Development Studies Program; Member of the University Council; Member, Faculty of Arts Graduate Research Advisory Committee; Member, University Research and Publications Committee; Chairman, Editorial Board of the Vidyodaya Journal of Social Sciences; Chairman, Study Leave Monitoring Committee; and Chairman, SIDA/SAREC Staff Development Awards Committee.

### **5. Contribution to the University System**

It may be noted that Prof. Karunanayake has made a significant contribution to the University system as well. He has been a resource person to the UGC, nominee to Professorial Selection Boards at the Universities of Colombo, Kelaniya, Peradeniya, Rajarata, Ruhuna and Sabaragamuwa. In addition he has also functioned as an evaluator of research publications of prospective candidates for Associate Professorship / Professorships in geography.

Several of his students hold professional and senior academic positions in Sri Lankan universities (including University of Sri Jayewardenepura) as well as in foreign universities.

During 1992-1994 he served as a member of the Board of Management of the Uva University College. He was a Member of the Standing Committee on Postgraduate Education and Research of the University Grants Commission (2000-2002). In 2001 he functioned as the Chairman of the sub-committee set-up to recommend amendments to the Faculty of Graduate Studies Ordinance. He also served as an evaluator of competitive grant proposals submitted by the Universities to the IRQUE Project in 2004. Prof. Karunanayake also has the distinction of having served as a Member of the Standing Committee on University Education of the National Education Commission.

### **6. Contribution to National Development**

As a University teacher Prof. Karunanayake has contributed to national development through his participation in activities initiated by governments, institutes and professional organizations. In this connection special reference may be made to his contribution as a member of the Editorial Board of the first edition of the National Atlas of Sri Lanka (published by the Surveyor General's Department (1985-1989) and the second edition currently in production.

Prof. Karunanayake was a member of the Project Design Team, Government of Sri Lanka/USAID/IIMI Project on shared Control of Land and Water Resources (1992). From 1993 to 1996 he was a consultant to the

Human Geography Text-Book Drafting Committee of the Educational Publication Bureau, Colombo. For many years he served as a member of the Research and Training Committee of the Hector Kobbekaduwa Agrarian Research and Training Institute.

He had served as a member of the Steering Committee of the Community Environmental Initiative Facility (CEIF) of the Environmental Action Programme I of the Ministry of Forestry and Environment Sri Lanka (2000-2002). Prof. Karunanayake had also functioned as the Chairman of the National Expert Committee on Land Degradation and Droughts set-up in the same Ministry during 2001-2002.

Furthermore, he was President, Section F (Social Sciences) of the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science (1986) and the Sri Lanka Association of Geographers (1995-1996). He is the founder President of the Sri Lanka Evaluation Association (1990-2000).

He was co-opted to serve as a member of the Committee to Review the Donor Assisted Housing Programme for the Tsunami Affected executed by the Tsunami Housing Reconstruction Unit (THRU) of the Ministry of Urban Development and Water Supply (June-August 2005). More recently, he served as Chairman of the Geography Curriculum Development Committee for the year 2007, of the Ministry of Education.

Prof. Karunanayake has also contributed in no uncertain terms to capacity building of middle level and frontline government officials to make them effective catalysts of rural regional development. In the early 1980's under the aegis of SLIDA he was involved in imparting methodological skills to middle level government officials including SLAS cadets to carry out field surveys for development related activities. In the first half of the 1990s Prof. Karunanayake functioned as consultant to the Certificate Course in Rural Development, a joint undertaking by the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and the Rural Development Research and Training Institute, Colombo, Sri Lanka. Under his guidance the course was designed to impart theoretical and practical training to frontline government officials involved in rural development. Nearly one hundred and thirty frontline officials benefited from this course. In 1997 under the aegis of the UNDP Country Programme for Poverty Alleviation he designed and implemented short-term programmes for frontline government officials in the remote divisions of the Central Province such as Kotmale, Walapane and Hanguranketa on project planning through beneficiary participation.

Prof. Karunanayake has been Team Member and Team Leader of several important *evaluation studies* carried out on development and



environmental projects implemented in Sri Lanka. These studies are basically environmental impact assessment studies for large irrigation and hydro power generation projects. In addition, he has also contributed in the capacity of Consultant, Team Member or Team Leader to several *policy oriented studies* commissioned either by government or donor agencies.

### **7. Concluding Remarks**

Prof. Karunanayake has been a scholar gentleman who devoted the better part of his life to academic pursuits. His scholarly work has been well received by the academic community here and abroad. His pioneering work on the dry zone peasant community has become a *locus classicus* in the field of social geography in Sri Lanka. Prof. Karunanayake has been a successful teacher, researcher and academic administrator. A role model to his younger colleagues he has left behind an indelible impression of commitment and dedication in the minds of his academic peers and associates. The Faculty of Graduate Studies which he pioneered, state of the art GIS facilities more recently installed at the Department of Geography, and above all the rich academic traditions that he contributed to nurture at the university are all hallmarks of his legacy to the University of Sri Jayewardenepura.

In the famous words of Newman, a University is an institution that wins the admiration of the young by its celebrity, kindles the affection of the middle aged by its beauty, and rivet the fidelity of the old by its association. The contribution made by Prof. Karunanayake in his varying capacities to steer the University of Sri Jayewardenepura in the direction of such lofty ideals is truly worthy of emulation.