

Nation-making through maps: analysing the lines of power in India

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Introduction

During an interview conducted with Kuldip Nayar, an Indian journalist, Cyril Radcliff, the chairman of the Boundary Commission of India 1947, revealed that he had no fixed rules to go by when he drew the India-Pakistan border. He said, "given the same amount of time, I would do the same thing again. However, if I had two or three years, I might have improved on what I did. If the aspirations of some people were not fulfilled, the fault lies in the political arrangement, with which I am not concerned" (Nayar 2006: 34). A similar concern was shared by Jawaharlal Nehru emphasising the complexities involved in defining territorial boundaries during the period. Jawaharlal Nehru in the newly created Indian Parliament in his remark about the Boundary Commission said "one side of the river is sometimes described as the other side. Maps are attached to this description but they do not tally. Sometimes a river is named and there is doubt as to which river is meant." (Nehru 1961: 49). The creation of borders, especially in a postcolonial state like India, is marked with many of such ambiguities.

This paper highlights the role of cartography as an instrument employed by state officials in tackling the ambiguity of nation state borders and describes strategies through which borders become justified. I argue that national boundaries are rather incomprehensible, insensate lines, that only "speak the language of the State, bureaucrats, politicians or the army" (Vijayan 2021), and not of the common people.

From the colonial period, maps were used by the governments to legitimise territories (Harley 1989, Wood 2010, Edney 1997). The concept of a nation frequently evokes the idea of fixed borders and definite shape and is often fed into the memory of its citizens. Establishing political borders on maps fosters civic unity by demonstrating a common territorial heritage. This unity is underpinned by the invocation of historical and geographical knowledge upon which the nation essentially relies to reinforce territoriality. In other words, geography grounds the nation in space while history roots it in time (Schulten 2012).

The "power of map" lies in its impunity. It applies specific social forces on the subjects that is the land and people mapped, to bring into being a "socialised space" (Wood 2010). The force here is that of the authority or the state. The map, therefore, functions not only as a representation of the space or as an indicator of landscape and its specialties, but as a tool that controls, manipulates and produces a social order and knowledge (Wood 2010).

This paper uses a recent example involving cartographic alteration, and discusses how national governments draw on the power of maps to formulate relations between themselves. In 2019, India published a new map (The New Indian Express 2019) comprising the territories of its two neighbouring countries, Pakistan and Nepal. A few lines in the map initiated a cartographic war, between the three nations, through which the states expressed their sovereignty and identity. Thus, we see the concerns raised by Radcliff and Nehru remain an unresolved predicament and are reflected time and again in different forms.

Two nations, two states: disparate tales of cartography

In August 2019, the Government of India abrogated Article 370, which gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir. Article 370 along with 35 (A) was nullified which gave the erstwhile state special status and mandate to define its domicile rules. Together with it, a new political map of the country produced by the Survey General of India was published with certain changes. The new map included Pakistani-controlled Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan, a disputed region between India and Pakistan, which initiated a response from Pakistan. The map also declared some areas of Nepal (Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura), as Indian territory, which the Government of Nepal refuted.

As anticipated, there were responses to the new map from several actors, especially from those directly affected by the cartographic representation - the people living at the borders. The response of the Indian state to these criticisms reflects how maps become a catalyst in the everyday affairs of the modern state and how it formulates and operates its agenda. The initial responses from both Pakistan and

Nepal were to publish their own redrawing of maps (The New Indian Express 2020, The Hindu 2020), incorporating the disputed territories, initiating a cartographic debate, which led to bilateral dialogues and territorial tensions.

In the case of Nepal, along with publishing a map with its disputed land, the Indian government also inaugurated a link road to Lipulekh, which would shorten the Kailash-Manasarovar pilgrimage, without consulting the Government of Nepal. It further flared up the border issue between Nepal and India. Nepal's parliament soon unveiled a new political map with few changes from its earlier versions and all the public and private institutions were asked to circulate the new map. Changes were made in government circulars, school textbooks and other institutionalised agencies that circulate maps. According to the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Nepal, the map increased Nepal's total area by 335 square kilometres (Bhattacharjee 2020). The areas included Gunji, Navi, and Kuti near Kalapani, which had been left out in earlier maps, were also included in the new map. India's government, however, refuted the claim and called it an "unjustified cartographic assertion" (Bhattacharjee 2020: 1). In a strongly worded statement, Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Anurag Srivastava said, "The Government of Nepal has released a revised official map of Nepal today that includes parts of Indian territory. This unilateral act is not based on historical facts and evidence" (Bhattacharjee 2020: 1). Asserting that this move was contrary to "bilateral understanding" to resolve issues through dialogue, Srivastava asserted, "such artificial enlargement of territorial claims will not be accepted by India" (Bhattacharjee 2020: 1). He noted that Nepal is well aware of India's consistent position and urged Nepal to "refrain from such unjustified cartographic assertion and respect India's sovereignty and territorial integrity" (Bhattacharjee 2020: 1).

In the context of Pakistan, with whom a historically hostile relationship exists, the release of a new map by the then Prime Minister, Imran Khan, further escalated tensions. The map was promptly passed in parliament and Khan in his speech stated that "this political map of Pakistan we are unveiling to the world firstly represents the desire of the Pakistani people, and the principle stands of the people of Kashmir. And it rejects the illegal step which India took on August 5 last year in Kashmir." (New Indian Express Report, 2020: 5). He asserted that the only solution to the Kashmir issue lies in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions, which grant Kashmiris the right to determine their political affiliation through a vote. Imran Khan's objective was to link the new map to the ongoing dispute between India and its citizens in Kashmir. By appeasing the people of Kashmir and referring to the UN

resolutions, he sought to legitimize Pakistan's territorial claim and attract international attention to the issue. India, on the other hand, dismissed the map of Pakistan as a political absurdity, contrasting it with its characterization of Nepal's map as a violation of cartographic standards. In an official statement, India's Ministry of External Affairs denounced Pakistan's assertions as legally invalid and lacking international credibility. The statement further claimed that Pakistan's actions reinforced its obsession with territorial expansion, supported by cross-border terrorism (Roche 2020).

Both countries have seemingly bolstered their military presence along their respective borders, marking yet another occasion where both nations have alluded to the possibility of war. This event serves as another example of the nation-state reminding its citizens of the importance of territorial sovereignty and highlighting the other nation's perceived lack of territorial integrity. Additionally, it underscores the commitment of each nation to safeguard its territory and, by extension, its citizens. While Nepal resorted to making the circulation of the map more stringent through its textbooks and other means and ideologically placed the map in the minds of its citizens, Pakistan engaged around the rhetoric of territorial claims. However, it is often the frontiers that witness the violent forms of discourses surrounding nationality. In the case of Kashmir, every "cartographic anxiety" (Krishna 1994: 507) of the nation, since partition, has been unleashed in this space. "Since independence (or more accurately, since partition) the anxiety (of the State) has been showcased perfectly in the space of desire called Kashmir. The 'accurate' representations of the body politic in maps and insignia are watched with an intensity that is perhaps un-equalled elsewhere" (Krishna 1994: 510).

The idea of cartography, sovereignty, territorial integrity and claims to "historical evidence" are amalgamated to legitimise the territorial dispute. The map here serves as objective, real knowledge based on pre-given, scientific/historical facts which cannot be refuted even with empirical evidence. It acquires a historical validation or a "subterfuge of antiquity" (Kaviraj 2010: 44) where in order to conceal the recent origin, the nation-state claims to have a long, deep-rooted past. The Indian State here replicates the same pattern in its response. Territorial and geographic authenticity is attained by invoking historical claims using cartography. The redrawing of maps served as an opportunity for both the state and mainland nationalists to demonstrate their loyalty to the nation's territory and its continuous borders. However, it also marked one of the most severe violations of human rights in recent history for the people of Kashmir. The government harshly suppressed the voices of its citizens by implementing

a communication blockade and employing aggressive policing methods to suppress dissent and opposition (Maheshwari 2020). Any action or attempt to alter the map was met with severe consequences, including charges of sedition and other unbailable charges. The confrontations between the state and the people along the borders reflect the contested and troubled construction of state sovereignty in a nation that was formed through territorial division.

Conclusion

Maps become the symbol or reminder of a stringent border that demarcates an inside and outside, the primary object of a nation-state. In a postcolonial or yet-to-become nation-state like India, cartography is predominantly used to transform the once fluid colonial frontier into a fixed nation. While in the colonial period mapping was a tool to enhance trade and administration, in the postcolonial period it

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became a signifier of nationalism, a tool to represent the nation-state. As Dennis Wood (2010) argues, the modern state affirms the map and vice versa through various governmental and non-governmental policies and methods.

While the state uses its mechanism and agencies to conceal its formation, cartography is used to legitimise these practices. In the post-colonial period, it palpably deals with the consequences of its ambiguous formation time and again. The discourse associated with cartography is often evoked to address the immanent questions of citizenship, belonging, territorial disputes, knowledge building etc. The incomprehensible, insensate lines continue to determine the lives of hundreds of people who struggle to belong between them

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