

PROBLEMATIZING CARTOGRAPHIC DIVISION: A CASE OF SOUTH ASIA

Yash Sharma *

Abstract

The concept of "territorial trap" in the context of epistemic violence often perpetuates injustices in the global order, which advocates for a "state system" that divides states into cartographically divided territories. This division legitimises violence by affluent minorities within states and restricts other political units from taking substantive actions to mitigate sufferings. This paper aims to contextualise sufferings, human rights violations, and global injustice in South Asia, focusing on India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. South Asia is a complex region with at least twenty major languages spoken and has a rich history of ethnicity, language, religion, and regionalism. The emergence of territorially bifurcated nation-states in South Asia was driven by the political interests of elites and a parochial understanding of the region. The paper emphasises the need for "Substantive Global Interference" to advocate human rights and a stable environment, transcending international norms of sovereignty and non-interference.

The violence that followed the separation of Pakistan and India can be attributed to several factors, including the unplanned and unsystematic division of the territories, the irresponsible European attitude towards colonies, mass mobilisation using religious communal sentiments, and the cartographic demarcation of territories without considering ethnic, social, religious, and linguistic factors. The British played a crucial role in the territorial bloodbath, as they declared independence without executing the partition in a systematic way, leaving the territories to deal with the chaos. Internal agitation and rising demand for national liberation also played a crucial role in igniting the fire of independence, but the process was not

* Department of Political Science, University of Delhi. Sharmayash7351@gmail.com.

desired by any of the parties involved. The cartographic division of South Asia was a horrible event in the history of partitions, tearing apart families, homes, villages, and linguistic, cultural, and ethnic bonds within communities, creating new borders, and perpetuating injustice in South Asia.

Cartography, a concept that focuses on the physical and visual representation of the world, has been a slow and problematic exploration. The Western world's belief in applying scientific methods to represent complex reality has led to a flawed understanding of cartography, which excludes entities, voices, people, and cultures outside the demarcated territory. This traditional understanding of cartography often results in the separation of sufferings, culture, and problems, restraining sovereignty in the hands of a few political leaders. Cartographic division in South Asia has led to a perpetual story of suffering, with the division of the region into newly independent states causing a large population of Hindu and Muslim aliens to migrate, forced rapes, and conversions. This has resulted in the rise of authoritarian regimes, exclusion and exploitation of minorities, violence, political turmoil, human rights violations, and even civil war. The cartographic division of borders has also led to the exclusion of Hindu minorities and the repression of the Indian-Bangladesh border.

Keywords: Non-Aligned Movement, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

Introduction

“Territorial Trap” as a concept (which has been articulated by John Agnew) in the context of epistemic violence tends to parochialise our academic and political understanding of modern nation states, which can be used to articulate the injustices perpetuated by the present global order, which advocates the western notion of “state system” and represents the states as cartographically divided territorial political units measured using statistical mathematic devices that are approached with a very positivist understanding, considering states and their boundaries as “given” or natural. This constructed division of states further legitimises the monopoly and use of

violence by affluent minorities (elites) within those states, perpetuating instances of injustice and human rights violations while restricting other political units, including both states and non-state actors, from taking substantive actions to alleviate suffering. The ignorance of the global community towards the mass perpetration in domestic spheres is driven by the rationale of mutual non-interference between cartographically divided political units, which prioritises artificially constructed borders over natural human identities, cultures and emotional bonding. This paper attempts to contextualise suffering, human rights violations, and global injustice in South Asia's experiences. We cannot understand "South Asia" solely by considering the administrative apparatus. The division of South Asia by the colonial powers, roughly on the basis of religious and administrative conveniences, failed to take into consideration the ethnic, social, linguistic, and regional ties and emotions that were being shared by the people who became victims of colonial chess (which divided the region). As a region, South Asia faced unique challenges and differences compared to Western nations, which necessitated tailored solutions; however, the implementation of the Western state system, which divides regions cartographically, led to ongoing violence, displacement, mass genocides, and the marginalisation of human agency. This whole scenario required calls for "Substantive Global Interference" to advocate human rights and a stable environment by transcending the international norms of sovereignty and non-interference, which was always restricted by the Cartographic Division. Here it becomes crucial for the scholars of South Asia and Southeast Asia to problematise the cartographic division of states, which takes the fate and destiny of people with similar languages, origins, and ethnicities in juxtaposing directions. This paper, to problematise the cartographic division of South Asia, emphasises the experiences of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka with the aim of opening up ways to think beyond the restricted boundaries/borders of states and facilitating cooperation and collective decision-making to confront various social, economic and political challenges faced by Asian nations. This paper employs a literature review method and historical archives to support its arguments.

South Asia as a Region

South Asia as a region is a very complex configuration; understanding it in itself is an even more complicated task. As emphasised by Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal in "Modern South Asia," understanding and comprehending South Asia as a region entails the same scenario as the "proverbial elephant," which blind men, in a well-known story by the Muslim Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi, tried to comprehend, got confused by touching specific body parts of it, and then interpreted it accordingly (Jalal, 1998). Neither was this region fitted for the modules of nationalism advocated by the West, nor were its sociological, geopolitical and historical complexities meant to be dealt with by the imposition of the Western state system on them. It was the political interest of elites and parochial understanding of Europeans about the region which led to the emergence of territorially bifurcated nation-states in South Asia. Though they were capable of demarcating the territories by considering it the need of the hour without speculating about its consequences and exploring suitable and more appropriate alternatives, which was the result of the colonisation of their minds, they were never able to demarcate and bifurcate the ethnic, social, linguistic, religious, and emotional configurations of the region and created anxieties and a trajectory of continual injustice. There have been at least twenty major languages spoken by the people of South Asia; including the more important dialects, that number is over two hundred. Believers of every major religion of the world are found here. Crucial role of Hinduism with its ancient roots following modern transformation with multiple interpretations can be seen there, the origin of Buddhism is traced to the region, even some of Islam's political and cultural achievements took place in the subcontinent, Jain, Zoroastrian, Christian and Sikh minorities are also significantly present in South Asia with the presence of uncountable tribes, communities with their own kind of ethnicity and cultural practices and the interesting part is that there was no clear binary, compartmentalization or territorial division between these diverse communities, throughout the history they have evolved being intermingled with each other, Different religions share same language there, people sharing same religious ties are found themselves to be divided on the bases of

linguistic ties, regionality also plays crucial role in sometimes binding people of different communities, languages together and sometimes part their ways too. This nexus between ethnicity, language, religion and regionalism naturally evolved in South Asia with its own peculiarities, which cherishes the heterogeneity and has diversity in itself as a culture which can never be demarcated or confined to the fixed territorial units by human endeavours, and throughout the history whenever the attempts to accomplish it have been made, it has sent tremors to the region in the form of mass violence, displacement and never-ending migration problems, which have always perpetuated sufferings in the region. Some insights from the history of the subcontinent can help us better understand the whole dynamics.

Division of Indian Subcontinent

Histories are also written in a specific context, attempts to understand history from the Western Perspective will let us know how the partition led to creation of two modern states being Geographically divided and having solidified borders which accompanied with the establishment of new political and constitutional arrangement in India, but the accounts of victims will present an entirely different picture. Gyanendra Pandey in his "Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India" elucidated that how the ending of the colonial rule in the Sub-Continent which took place in August 1947 was accompanied with the tragedy of violence and genocides taking place among various communities, unaccountable women being raped and converted, and millions of inhabitants of land becoming illegal refugees in their own ancestral land (Pandey, 2001).

Causality of Violence

Analysing the causality of the violence which followed the separation of Pakistan and India takes us to the insights of various theories which are trying to find the cause and consequence relations of partition but as per the limitations of this paper we can have few yet very significant causes taken into consideration. Unplanned and unsystematic division of Indian and

Pakistan depicting irresponsible European attitude towards colonies, Mass mobilisation using religious communal sentiments and symbols by Elites belonging to various communities to fulfil their political interests and partition based on Cartographic demarcation of territories without taking various ethnic, social, religious, linguistic factors and sentiments into consideration played crucial role in creation of bloodshed tragedy that took place at the time of partition (Brass, 1991).

Role played by “British” in the Territorial Blood-bath

The irresponsible European attitude towards the colonies is evident in the actions of the British, who initially exploited the region's resources and human capital. When internal and external factors made controlling the colonies increasingly difficult and less significant, they hastily declared independence, failing to systematically partition the territories. This left the regions to face the chaos created by their division. Various scholars articulate various accounts of this development as elucidated by D. a Law. Though India was desired as a possession which Britain always wanted to sustain, which is in fact understood very well by its attempt to delay the transfer of power by introducing several reforms to seek legitimacy, it at the end had to leave because at that time this occupation was not serving their strategic and economic interest; that's why for them it became not worth fighting for and sustaining the control (Low, 1997). Other accounts of international theories argued that there was also external pressure on Britain to withdraw from colonies, which was created by the interplay of world war and the postwar international order of bipolarity, where Britain was too fragile to sustain its colonial possessions, and even its financial dependence on loans granted by the USA in July 1946 depicts its inability to sustain and fulfil its colonial administrative requirements (Bandyopadhyay, 2016). David George Boyce articulated that the idea of imperial possession was being increasingly criticised by the world, and the idea of an empire became even more fragile after the signing of the UN Charter (Boyce, 1999). All those internal external factors pressurized Britain to an extent that it had to take the decision in hurry without taking all the important factors into consideration before dividing the

territories even when there were voices from inside as well which were advocating the delay of partition, one such example is the asking of Hussain Suhrawardy (The Bengal Muslim League Leader) from Viceroy to postpone the decision of dividing India and Pakistan until November 1947, and the zenith of irresponsibility can be understood from the insights of Gyanendra Pandey's works which elucidate that the boundaries between two newly independent states was not even officially known until two days after they were declared independent and that much time was enough for the agitation and initiation of genocidal violence, rapes of innocent women, abduction of women and children and the aired anxieties and discontent between communities who became victims of colonial chess played by British, whose ground realities and the role played by them(colonisers) is not even acknowledged by the Global North these days.

Internal dynamics of Partition.

Internal agitation and rising demand for national liberation were also playing a crucial role in igniting the fire of Independence, but the way this whole process took place was desired by none. Even though the various sections of the subcontinent were continuously endeavouring to get independence, it was not speculated by them how it would turn out. The Congress Party, which was leading the national liberation movement, didn't even want the separation of Pakistan. Though Jinnah was representing or claiming to represent all the Muslim voices but he didn't have popular support and was not able to accommodate all the Muslim voices as Muslim in India was not a monolithic, homogeneous community, they by themselves were divided on the bases of regional and linguistic affinities as articulated by Ayesha Jalal in her "Democracy and Authoritarianism" that the aspirations of "Muslim League" to carve out a Territorially divided Muslim state from the north-west and north-east part of Sub-Continent (having Muslim Majority), which was not able to contain the regionalism of provinces where Muslims were whether in majority or minority, in fact the support which these provinces lent to Muslim League was for the hope that it will lead to negotiation of constitutional arrangements which will entail strong provinces and weak

centre (Jalal A. , 1995), as Gyanendra Pandey too penned out that nobody (from masses) in those days even thought of migration and strictly confined states within cartographically divide units which will separate the destiny and fate of people belonging to same land for ever, all they were thinking was that everything will remain same and there won't be any changes in demography , "Sindh would remain Sindh, Panjab would remain Punjab" (Pandey, 2001). But in reality it led to the creation of never-ending communal cleavage and hatred between Hindus and Muslims and various religious, ethnic and linguistic communities of South Asia; the cartographic division of South Asia will always be marked as a horrible event in the history of partitions in the world. The process, which was understood by colonisers as a mere creation of the new lines on the map, was much more complicated and devastating than it was understood; it tore families, homes, villages, and linguistic, cultural, and ethnic bonds within communities, which would now be permanently compartmentalised and create new borders. Tired dynamic event gave rise to narratives of ongoing injustice in South Asia.

Problematizing Cartographic Division

As emphasised by J.B. Harley in his "Deconstructing Map," the speed of exploring the concept of cartography remains slow. Understanding cartography using a positivist approach, which majorly focuses on prevailing scientific understanding of the world, which considers the cartographic division of the world as objective science, has been a characteristic of the global order we live in (Harley, 1992). The problem lies in our uncritical acceptance of the notion that progressive science, which entails the process of moving beyond the positivist and static understanding of cartography, has been a myth which is created by cartographic manoeuvring. Here it is becoming important for social scientists to dismantle the claim of cartographers which exhibits cartography as a pure science and erases the existence of arts and social sciences in "professional cartography". To transcend this problematic understanding of cartography, firstly we need to emphasise the basic understandings of cartography and then highlight the varied consequences which occur when we focus on specific definitions of

cartography. The use of dual definition by British cartographers highlights their conspiracy of presenting a very simplistic definition of cartography in front of masses in order to parochialise their understanding of the concept and disengage them from the critical assessment of it, and this is how the whole process of making certain knowledge universal and applicable to the whole world takes place. A better understanding of cartography can be drawn from the definition given by JB Harley, who defined it as "a body of theoretical and practical knowledge that mapmakers employ to construct maps as a distinct mode of visual representation." I believe this definition gives us a more substantive understanding of the concept, as by accommodating both the practical and theoretical aspects of knowledge, it opens up the scope to build the link between graphical representations of borders or lines on a map with its practical implementation and the consequences it creates. The belief of the Western world that the representation of the complex reality can be produced by applying the scientific methods to all the events and processes leads to the prevalence of a flawed understanding of cartography, which claims to deliver a "true, probable, progressive, or highly confirmed knowledge". This tendency of the West leads them to create the hierarchies within different cultures and regions, which further regards non-Western cultures as inferior to European maps. This whole traditional understanding of cartography speaks the language of exclusion, which excludes all the entities, voices, people, and culture outside the demarcated territory and helps a particular section, community, or elite group within the demarcated territory to establish and legitimise its authority, as the best maps are considered to be those which contain an authoritative picture of "self-evident factuality". This process leads to separation or compartmentalisation of sufferings, culture, and problems of all divided units, neglecting all the historical, social, and cultural ties they share by restraining the sovereignty in the hands of a few political leaders of cartographically divided units. More severe consequences of cartography include disguising social structures beneath instrumental and abstract space created by computer mapping, which creates a huge gap between the graphical representation and the ground realities of regions.

Cartographic Division of South Asia: A perpetual story of Sufferings

Contextualising the problematic consequences of cartographic division in South Asia can help us gain a clearer understanding of the concept. As previously mentioned, the severe consequences of partition victimised a large population in the region and initiated a narrative of perpetual injustice; therefore, I have intentionally used the term "perpetual sufferings" to indicate that this suffering has never ended and continues to this day. The cartographic division of the region into newly independent states made a huge population of Hindus and Muslims aliens in their birthplace; communal riots took extreme forms and got converted into planned genocides, forced rapes and conversions, forced migration, loss of property, violent destruction of resources and violation of human rights in the region as never done before. A comparative analysis of state formation in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka will give us a brief understanding of how the problematic features of the cartographic division of the region affected the states and created accounts of violations of normative principles of rights, justice, equality, and liberty for the people. Some common features in the distinct trajectories of state formation of these states can be emphasised here, which included the rise of authoritarian regimes within states monopolising their coercive control using the rationale of authority over demarcated territory, exclusion and exploitation of minorities, continuous instances of violence, continuous political turmoil, human rights violations and even 26 years of civil war in Sri Lanka (Imtiyaz, 2024). Pakistan because of the unplanned division of territories got scattered resources, absence of central state apparatus which led to centralization of power into the hands of Bureaucracy and Military which took violent authoritarian form, the country witnessed several military coups, militarization of state, lacuna of resources and the scenario became even worse for Eastern Pakistan whose people shared different ethnic and linguistic ties from Western Pakistan which led them to face exclusion from their rightful place of governance, imposition of alien language(Urdu) on the Bengali speaking population, and their declaration of formation of new sovereign state "Bangladesh" in 1971 led Pakistan army to launch a violent campaign against East Pakistan which left thousands dead, exodus of

millions to India, genocide of Bengali population, then this prompted Indian government to interfere in support of Bangladesh, whose cost India had to pay by fighting a war with Pakistan (Jalal A. , 1995) But the instances of violence didn't stop here, the newly independent Bangladesh again continued the legacy of the region which faced several regime changes, flawed political culture, religious violence (Riaz), and the most recent development (August 2024) where the presiding PM had to resign and oust the country because of its authoritarian measures which compelled violent upsurge of masses, the worst consequences of political turmoil are being faced by the Hindu minorities within the state who are being continuously murdered, raped by the Muslim majority, the most heart wrenching event which sent tremors to whole world came in front when at India-Bangladesh border, huge population was gathered in demand of getting entry into Indian territory, there was mass cry of people to save their life, though the soldiers at the Indian side were speaking their language, though the people on both sides of the border were sharing same ethnic, linguistic, historical ties but this was the cartographic division of borders which provided security to those residing in India and excluded those at the side of Bangladesh to get exploited, raped and murdered.

References

Bandyopadhyay, S. (2016). Decolonisation and the Politics of Transition in South Asia.

Boyce, D. G. (1999). Decolonization and State building in South Asia. Brass, P. (1991). Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison. Derrida, J. (1967). Of Grammatology.

Cambridge University Press.

Foucault, M. (2000). Power.

Frank, A. G. (1966). The Development of Underdevelopment. Harley, J. B. (1992). Deconstructing the Map.

Hegel, G. W. (1899, 1956). *The Philosophy of History*. New York. Hobson, J. M. (2004). *The Esatern Origins of Western Civilization*.

Intiyaz, A. R. (2024). *The Sinhala-Buddhicization of the State and the rise of Authoritarianism in Sri Lanka*.

Jalal, A. (1995). *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia: A Comparative and Historical Perspective*.

Jalal, S. B. (1998). *Modern South Asia*.

Low, D. A. (1997). *Britain and Indian Nationalism: The Imprint of Ambiguity*.

Pandey, G. (2001). *Remembering Partition Voilence, Nationalism and History in India*.

Power, M. (2006). *Anti-Racism, Deconstruction and ‘Overdevelopment.’”*.

Riaz, A. (n.d.). *Religion as a Tool for authoritarian legitimation : The case of Bangladesh*.