# Cartographic Domination in British India

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Although the spread of the European empires was driven by territorial acquisition, commercial interests, and global influence, they also brought with them an Enlightenment approach to better understand the worlds they were absorbing into their domain.[1] Whether it be botany, zoology, ethnography, or geography (to name a few), European specialists were side-by-side expeditionary military forces, missionaries, and prospectors. However, in bringing this positivist, enlightenment approach to their dominions, the Europeans often supplanted local knowledge and understanding of these subjects, which, in a colonial hierarchy, typically meant that colonialists world view would dominate that of the local. This epistemological domination was particularly prevalent in the practice of cartography.[2] Maps were often the only way that a territory could be visualised in its totality and consequently became the sole authority for the colonial power of what was present on the ground.[3] However, the practice of creating a map and deciding how a territory is represented is not objective, but steeped in power and assumption.[4] British cartographic practices throughout the empire were a form of epistemic domination. Although this can be seen throughout the British Empire, this paper will look specifically at cartographic efforts in British India. It will start by briefly setting out concepts of critical cartography and post-colonialism, looking at Spivak's concept of epistemic violence, before examining the case study of British India, considering how British representation of political boundaries and toponomy on official maps impacted the locals.

Due to the claimed science behind it, cartography has always been considered an objective endeavour, an accurate mimetic representation of the territory it covers, and is taken at 'face value.'[5] However, starting in the 1980s, this perceived legitimacy was challenged when academics such as J.B. Harley adopted a postmodernist approach to cartography, examining the subject through a critical lens to look at the power structures and inherent assumptions that underpin maps.[6] Since, subsequent academics have further reconceptualised maps to be understood as socially produced texts.[7] Maps, it has been suggested, provides the "basis for the mapmaker's claims and for his social and symbolic values, while cloaking them under the guise of 'scientific objectivity.'"[8] Maps are always for someone and some purpose. However, *because* maps are believed to be a faithful, objective reproduction of their subject, they are accepted at 'face value,' their assumptions unchecked and ultimately become sites for the production of knowledge, and a form of power.[9] Although the idea of knowledge production has its roots in French theorist Michel Foucault, it was Gayatri Spivak who brought it into a postcolonial setting with the introduction of the term *epistemic violence*. Spivak defines epistemic violence as the subjugation of a local emisteme, knowledge, or way of knowing the world with another, always in postcolonial setting where a pronounced power differential exists to create a hierarchy.[10] The use of the term hierarchy is of particular importance as it brings domination to the discussion, indicating that the sets of knowledge are subjugated vis-à-vis a 'pecking order.'

Thus, it is clear how cartographic activity can be used to intellectually dominate or exert epistemological violence within a colonial space. As maps are considered the authoritative representation of what is on the ground and it is the elites in a colonial hierarchy that creates those maps, what they choose to include on maps and how they represent that information becomes the 'truth' that overwrites local knowledge. This idea of epistemic violence is not exclusive to cartography. Any endeavour that seeks to scientifically catalogue a subject in a colonial setting can meet this definition. However, cartography is unique because unlike the other 'sciences' that were used to support colonialism, cartography is able to represent them on a map and therefore compound their epistemological violence through the maps. As Matthew Edney put it, "for the eighteenth-century philosophes, mapmaking was the epitome of the ordered and structured creation of a coherent archive of knowledge."[11] While all European countries mapped their colonial

territory, British colonial cartographic efforts are particularly notable for two reasons. First, the breadth of the empire in terms of landmass compared to all others makes it a compelling case study. Second, the British empire was comprised of entire, cohesive landmasses that, as will be explained shortly, were defined and bound by the power of the maps that represented them. While there are many aspects of cartography that can be used to examine the epistemological violence deployed by maps,[12] in all parts of the British empire, due to the bounds of this paper, focus will be placed on two specific topics — cartographic representation of boundaries and toponymy.[13]

**Boundaries and nationalism**

As previously mentioned, maps were an essential requirement of the British imperial effort. The British needed to create maps in order to makes sense of the territory they possessed and the people and things within it.[14] To quote Edney, "The empire exists because it can be mapped, the meaning of empire inscribed into each map."[15] In scientifically reproducing India on the map, British cartographic activity had an impact on local identity and way of life. While in one sense, as a sub-continent, India appeared a fairly self-contained mass, it was never in its history a singular entity.[16] In cataloguing the breadth of the Indian territory (as the British understood it), and drawing borders where they had previously been ill-defined or based on geographic landmarks, British cartography formed a unified Indian identity where there had been previously eclectic group of peoples.[17] As Peter Robb points out, the British application of borders and frontiers on India was drawn from their own experiences and history. Applying a governance structure that had a unitary, undivided sovereignty or jurisdiction within these boundaries created the 'native of India' or 'Indian.'[18] "The geographical unity of India is, in short, a creation of the British mapping their empire".[19] As we've come to know from thinkers such as Benedict Anderson, national identity is a socially constructed entity, plastic and subject to external structures.[20] In this sense, at least in part through its mapping efforts, the British imported a Westphalian notion of the state that created the 'Indian'. We can see this in Robb's discussions of the nomadic Naga people in 1867. The boundaries of this new entity, India, were born out of a mathematically-based efforts that were more relevant to the coloniser's map than to the local population. It was noted in 1867 by C.S. Elliot, then Chief Commissioner in India, that a commissioned map of frontiers of North Eastern area of India, Nagaland, was flawed as the line drawn to delineate a border was effectively imaginary, not being based on any tribal or physical features, and consequently meant little to the local nomadic Naga population, who continued to cross over a line that did not exist for them.[21]

While the above example shows how the local were impacted at a macro level, even at a more localised level, British cartographic efforts to delineate space and create boundaries supplanted local forms of knowledge. British cadastral surveys on the Deccan Plateau, for example, sought to rationalize and agriculturally 'improve' the land. However, in doing so, British surveyors entered into what Edney called 'logical convolutions' in order to bring Indian communal agricultural practices in line with the idea of individual ownership so essential to a liberal ideology. Looking to repeat the British experience of a liberal shift away from a feudal agriculture (namely enclosures) the British broke up the communal agriculture in order to import a liberal ideology and create a modern, profitable, and productive enterprise out of the territory.[22] However, in doing so, the British overwrote indigenous farming practices, which, while potentially less productive and more difficult to administer and tax, had been a part of local culture.

**Toponymy**

Toponymy is the study of placenames. Names are imbued with social and cultural meaning and as such, validate one's identity with territorial markers.[23] Toponymy and cartography share a unique relationship. While toponymy is a field of study in its own right, it add meaning and signifiers to a map. However, cartography equally has the ability to dictate what is and is not significant enough to be included on the map.[24] As previously mentioned, given the intractable link between imperial domination and cartography, toponymy plays a vital role in enacting the epistemic violence throughout the empire. The case of British India provides a useful example. The changes to India's place names throughout the colonial period are well known. Although the Persians, Portuguese, and French all named elements of the subcontinent according to their want, it was the British that truly codified their effort.[25] According to Anu Kapur, names were changed due to difficulties in Anglo pronunciation (e.g. Lakshadweep to the anglicised Laccadives), the inclusion of generic English words such as 'land' or 'and' (e.g. Jammu and Kashmir), qualifiers to names (e.g. East Bengal), descriptors in names (e.g. Mizo Hill district), and general standardisation of names that

were pronounced and spelled differently.[26] Although this was haphazard for part of British rule over India, in 1870 the Government of India authorized the standardisation of spelling and pronunciation of colonial place names on future maps.[27] "The idea was to produce a name representation of places that would be easy to fathom and its logic supported a homogenisation that followed British orthography."[28] Clearly this is evidence of epistemic violence through cartography. Not only did the British impose names and terms that were not of local use yet easier to pronounce and/or function in colonial administration (Bombay, for example, had no root in local nomenclature[29]), their efforts to standardize it eliminated local variation. Indeed, true to form, the British employed yet another enlightenment science, English orthography,[30] to control and rationalise local knowledge.

As the authoritative text and imbued with colonial power, maps deeply affected how Indians related to their surroundings and their history and culture. While this paper touched on just two elements of a single case study, there are many elements of cartography that can be explored to understand its power as a colonial tool.

[1] Matthey Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 7.

[2] Ibid, 17.

[3] Kalpagam, "Cartography", 89.

[4] J.B. Harley, "Maps, Knowledge, and Power," in *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design, and Use of Past Environments*, edited by Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 278.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Jeremy W. Crampton and John Krygier, "An Introduction to Critical Cartography," *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 4, no 1 (2006): 11-33; Meron Benevisiti, *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2000).

[8] Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscapes*, 13.

[9] Harley, "Maps, Knowledge, Power", 279.

[10] Kristen Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silences," *Hypatia* Vol 26, no 2 (2011): 236.

[11] Edney, *Mapping an Empire,* 18.

[12] Examples include but are not limited to political, ethnographic, geographic map.

[13] For examples, see Meron Benevisti's *Sacred Landscape* or Thomas J. Bassett, "Cartography and Empire Building in Nineteenth Century West Africa," *Geographical Review* 84, no 3 (July 1994): 316-335 for examples of critical cartography in Mandate Palestine and Colonial Africa, respectively.

[14] U. Kalpagam, "Cartography in Colonial India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no 30 (July 29, 1995): 89.

[15] Edney, *Mapping an empire*, 2.

[16] Alastair Lamb, "Studying The Frontiers of the British Indian Empire," *Journal of The Royal Central Asian Society* 53, no 3 (1966): 245.

[17] Peter Robb, “The Colonial State and the Construction of Indian Identity: An Example on the Northeast Frontier in the 1880s,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no 2 (May 1997): 248.

[18] Ibid, 249.

[19] Edney, *Mapping an empire*, 16.

[20] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016): 6-7.

[21] Robb, “Colonial State”, 257.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Maoz Azaryahu and Arnon Golan, “(Re)naming the landscape: The formation of the Hebrew map of Israel 1949-1960,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 27, no. 2 (2001): 181.

[24] Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape,* 12-13.

[25] Anu Kapur, “The Value of Place Names in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 45, no 26/27 (July 9, 2010): 413-414.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid, 415.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Vice article

[30] the conventional spelling system of a language