THE INFLUENCE OF EUROPEAN GEOGRAPHIC IMPORT ON INDIAN IDENTITY

Kelsey Kobik*

The making of national or regional identity is a complex process. It would be a flagrant generalization to claim that any one defining cause could play a pivotal role in its construction. Nonetheless, certain influences can of course drastically impact perceptions of personal and national identity. By investigating the history of India's colonial occupation by the English East India Company and later the British Crown, this essay highlights how the imposition of European conceptions of geography weakened the association between Indian identity and the physical environment of the subcontinent. Indeed, the new scientific notion of geography divorced myths from landscape in the Indian imagination that had been so crucial to the sense of belonging to the subcontinent in pre-colonial period.

Long before the import of the European approach to geography, Indian peoples developed distinct cultural identities associated with the land they inhabited. These identities—and undeniably they were plural—centered predominantly on religious traditions including geographic mythology and pilgrimage maps. Modern scholars of the ancient and medieval period have employed the phrase "sacred geography" in order to describe early Indian geographic and cartographic conceptualization. The ancient creation myth concerning the fabled land of Jambudvipa, and Jain maps and geographical descriptions of this place are some of the earliest surviving examples of Indian cartography (Gole, 1989). Although symbolic, and therefore not concerned with accurate topographical representation of the subcontinent, these early maps represent the deep association between the physical landscape and religious identities in early Indian cultures.

Apart from the physical conception of geography among indigenous cultures, the names peoples assigned to lands and territories are important in interpreting early geographic notions relating to identity. While labels such as Al-Hind, Hindustan, and even India were assigned to the subcontinent by travelers and conquerors from elsewhere, both ancient Indians and some modern nationalists have referred to the land

*Kelsey Kobik is a sophomore History major and South Asian Studies minor. She is thankful to Professor Basu for goading her into submitting this paper to Chronos.

as Jambudvipa or Bharatavarsha (Bose and Jalal, 1998). The latter is an example of the common practice of naming places after mythical figures, in this case the legendary Hindu king Bharata. As late as the 1850s, Indians drew upon this symbolic geographic tradition as a native reaction to the rigidly defined geopolitical maps European traders and colonizers designed once acquainted with India. Yet this could not entirely dissolve the earlier myths and legends of the Indian subcontinent. With the newly imagined physical figure of the goddess Bharat Mata (Mother India) superimposed over the shape of the European maps, the conception of the subcontinent was once again premised upon a kind of representative sacred geography (Jha, 2004).

But between the first renderings of Jambudvipa in ancient times and the circulation of the new Bharat Mata depictions in the late nineteenth century, there took place a drastic shift in the conceptualization of the geographic perception of homeland in Indian cultural identity. This shift began when the first European traders arrived with their systematic, empirical notions of cartography and culminated in the English East India Company's control of the landmass by means of western-style mapping, surveying, and geographical management of information. The first European maps of India were economically motivated endeavors. For European kingdoms and states, maps were political tools used to understand, define, and control territory. This served as the precise incentive for Europeans in India to begin mapping the area upon arrival. In order to explore India, gain a foothold within its boundaries, and ultimately control its resources, it was necessary to first formulate comprehensible charts since none yet existed by European standards (Gole, 1989). They also needed to know who controlled specific areas, or rather, with whom to negotiate trading privileges in various ports. To do this, they translated India into geographic models they could understand.

Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French merchant companies established themselves in India during the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, but after the Seven Year's War in Europe, the British East India Company achieved a stranglehold on trade within the subcontinent (Bose and Jalal, 1998). Subsequently, India was colonized not by a state or kingdom, but by a private company of merchants, whose priority was profit. From that point onward, there is no question that the reason for and nature of the mapping of India by her European occupiers was for economic control and exploitation as much as scientific curiosity. The precedence of economic motivations in the Company's geographic manipulation of India would have a substantial impact in shifting Indian identity away from an association with the legends of the land and the territory itself.

The East India Company successfully manipulated existing economies within India by monopolizing trade relations, drastically expanding and specializing ag-

ricultural communities, and completely transforming infrastructure. First the merchants forged trade agreements and treaties with local princes in order to gain access to the lucrative business already in operation (Bose and Jalal, 1998). Shortly thereafter they constructed garrison cities of their own along the coasts as their first footholds in India. These port cities, such as Bombay and Calcutta, became the hubs of commerce as the Company systematically took over external and internal trade routes. Consequently, people flocked to the now booming British trading centers and away from the older cities. Rural communities and their class relations were likewise changed considerably over the 200-year colonial period, another effect of Company management. The Company provided monetary incentives for the expansion of agricultural lands and even obliged some farming communities to convert entirely to cash crop production, including cotton, opium, and indigo (Goswami, 2004). British intrusion diminished the power the zamindars (traditional landholders) had gained during the decline of the Mughal state, installed the bania (traders) as a new administrative group, and, some would argue, intensified caste distinctions (Brown, 1985). Finally, transportation, specifically locomotive, revolutionized the territory's connectedness, surmounting the former obstacle of vast distance that had isolated most of the subcontinent. By 1920, the British Crown had constructed a network denser than any in Europe and consisting of approximately 35,640 miles of railroad connecting the most remote inland farms to port cities on the coasts (Goswami, 2004).

The Company's takeover precipitated a dramatic shift in sectors of less immediate economic influence as well. In overhauling the administrative system, they created a new need for native civil servants trained in the British style of governance. English became the official language of the Company's Indian empire in the 1830s (Brown, 1985). These changes meant a great adjustment in the existing educational system, and as Sanskrit and Arabic learning lost relevance and its scholars their government jobs, students increasingly turned to the freshly imported European erudition (Macaulay, 1735). The suddenly disenfranchised scholars of traditional Indian learning now found themselves extraneous vestiges of the old system, while those who adapted to the British system—so-called "Macaulay's children"—benefited due to their utility to the new government. Thus, the identity associated with time-honored Indian scholarship, and consequently with the ancient legends of sacred geographies, was distorted in the direction of the rising British cultural influence.

In discussing the shift in the connection of Indian identity to the Indian subcontinent, it is imperative to remember the subjective nature of employing such terms as "Indian" to refer to such a miscellaneous amalgamation of peoples and cultures as inhabit the territory. We cannot assign or discuss one monolithic identity

for all inhabitants, nor can it be concluded that *all* people experienced a dramatic change in personal or cultural identity as a result of British presence and management between 1607 and 1947. The shift this paper addresses was the alteration of the collective Indian identity.

This radical transformation in the Indian subcontinent obviously drew upon the process of mapping. Whether considering railway construction, land surveys, or establishing political boundaries, the British-made maps were central to the process. This modular notion of mapped land as a fixed and bounded territory also impacted Indian understanding of the map and their homeland. This signified a transition from disparate local cultures to a more confined bordered territory that represented a discursive break from pre-colonial culture.

Thus there was unquestionably a dramatic change in the collective Indian identity—the 'national' identity, if you will, in the centuries prior to independence, and this change was principally a result of British geo-cartographic redefinition and control. The East India Company delineated concrete political boundaries where there had been roughly envisaged religious geography, reallocated land and laborers for the greatest large-scale economic advantage where subsistence farming had prevailed for centuries, and revolutionized travel and commerce across the landscape by introducing railroads where before immense space and isolation had always severely limited communication and trade. Thus, the cause of one of the many shifts in Indian identity as various peoples came and left throughout the millennia was the import of western-style geography and cartographic application in India.

References

Bose, Sugata, and Ayesha Jalal. 1998. *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*. New York: Routledge.

Brown, Judith M. 1985. *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Gole, Susan. 1989. *Indian Maps and Plans, From Earliest Times to the Advent of European Surveys.* New Delhi: Manohar Publications.

Goswami, Manu. 2004. *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Macaulay, Thomas Babington. *Minute on Education*, 2 February 1835. Accessed through Project South Asia, 2/20/2007. http://projectsouthasia.sdstate.edu/docs/history/primarydocs/education/Macaulay001.htm.

Jha, Sadan. *The Life and Times of Bharat Mata. India Together.* Manushi, Issue 142. August 2004. Accessed 4-29-2007. http://indiatogether.org/manushi/issue142/bharat.htm.