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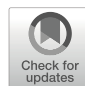

Dismantling Colonial Cartography: Indigenous Urbanism as Spatiality, India

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Abstract

Cartography in India, beginning with The Great Trigonometric Survey's civilisational project, was used by the colonial and postcolonial states to survey and earmark territories for various kinds of resources. This resource knowledge was critical in establishing colonial authority over indigenous lands. These cartographic projects became an instrument to guide the growth and expansion of roads and railways, timber felling, metallurgical industries, mines and townships. Drawing on field experiences in Jharkhand and Meghalaya, two tribal/indigenous states, the author highlights in this chapter how tribes classify the territories and lands they inhabit and how specific historic relationships are built between indigenous peoples and territories through customs, traditions, myths and values that have sustained land and resources over time. It is thereby imperative that land control be returned to the indigenous communities who have a more holistic understanding of it, rather than keeping it in the vestige of the state, for the purpose of a holistic and sustainable urban development. Through this process, indigenous communities can bring their traditional

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knowledge of distinct land ownership patterns and environmental mindfulness, guiding the process of making cities and future human settlements inclusive, resilient and sustainable.

Keywords

Cartography · Urban development · Tribes/indigenous peoples · Sustainable development · Geographical imaginations · Jharkhand and Meghalaya

Introduction

In this chapter, the author examines the politics of cartographic imaginaries as a necessarily incomplete colonial project, as the same has been carried forward by the postcolonial state in India. This has transpired in the various usages by the state including the acquisition of tribal land by the state for the purpose of extractive industries and other forms of development. Cartography in India, beginning with The Great Trigonometric Survey's civilisational project and continuing as development projects in the postcolonial situation, left more indigenous people in an alien land grid than emancipated. Xaxa (2019) and Kannabiran (2016) correctly observe that although special constitutional and legal safeguards have been provided for tribes, land acquisition and resource extraction under armed guard have aggressively continued in tribal regions. Furthermore, new juridical categories such as "encroachers" or "illegal occupants" are invented to clear the forests of tribes, despite the fact that they have been living in forests centuries before the annexation of their territory into the colonial state.

Drawing from field experiences among the Oraon and Munda tribes in Jharkhand and the Khasi tribe in Meghalaya, the author highlights in this chapter that, in inhabiting the land, there are specific relationships that are constructed between the indigenous peoples and their territory. Tribes traditionally classify lands for usages similar to the role or usage of cartography such as upland, wetlands, sand land, hill, forest, etc. In addition to it, they develop specific relationships. These have been built around customs, traditions, myths and values that have sustained land and resources over time. There is an intimate relationship between land and tribes. It is critical to keep in mind that in tribal epistemology, land and lifeworlds are the sources of collective memory and define much of the relationship that tribes have with the land. It is thereby imperative that land control be returned to the indigenous communities who have a more holistic understanding of it, rather than keeping it in the vestige of the state. This becomes even more relevant in the context of the emerging urban spaces in these regions. Indigenous communities can contribute their traditional knowledge of distinct land ownership patterns and environmental mindfulness through this process, guiding the process of making cities and future human settlements inclusive, resilient and sustainable.

Framing Cartography

The most recent altercation between the police forces of Assam and Mizoram on 26 July 2021 at the Assam-Mizoram border has only brought out one of the many such border altercations in the north-east to national attention. There is a long history of border conflict, especially with Assam and several neighbouring states such as Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram. Most of these states were tribal districts in the erstwhile Assam Province created in 1912 by the British after the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the subsequent split of the Bengal Province. The tribal districts began their autonomous movements and subsequently broke away from Assam over time. There is still a feeling of territorial loss in Assam due to which such skirmishes often take place. This can also be seen as a form of neocolonialism, which broadly has caste, linguistic and cultural contours. Theoretically, this also brings to question the notion of a "homogenous" north-east, especially when viewed from "mainland" India or for that matter the rest of the world. There can never be a unified, homogenous "north-east" within the region itself, especially with so many diverse tribal communities, each having their own distinct histories, languages, cultures, epistemologies, territorial sense and ethnic and political aspirations. It is in this context that it becomes imperative to understand the historical framing of cartography and its subsequent implications, especially in the context of indigenous peoples.

The word cartography has been taken from the Greek word "*chartēs*" which means papyrus/sheet of paper/map. The idea behind cartography is that reality (or an imagined reality) can be modelled in ways that communicate spatial information effectively. Some of the oldest maps can be traced back to Babylon, the Greeks and the Romans. In antiquity, colonialism was practised by empires such as Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, Ancient Egypt and Phoenicia (For further details see https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/colonialism). These civilisations all extended their borders into surrounding areas from about 1550 B.C. onwards. They established colonies that drew on the physical and population resources of the people they conquered in order to increase their own power (ibid). Modern colonialism began after the Renaissance, during what's also known as the Age of Discovery. Commencing in the fifteenth century, Portugal began looking for new trade routes and searching for civilisations outside of Europe. In 1415, Portuguese explorers conquered Ceuta, a coastal town in North Africa, beginning an empire that would last until 1999. In all these colonial expeditions, cartography as a colonial tool comes sharply into focus. Its use enabled the colonialists to usurp entire countries in a very organised manner.

In 1584, writer Richard Hakluyt presented Queen Elizabeth I with a programme which later came to be known as "The Principal Navigations". This plan which was derived out of a study of both Portuguese and Spanish colonial approaches set out a mode of British imperial expansion that was likely to simultaneously "satisfy all England's imported wants, at once relieving the mother country of surplus population and rendering it independent of foreign suppliers" (Zahedieh 2002). This idea permeated and propelled the whole of British expansion and colonialism. In order to

compete with other colonialists such as the French, Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch, among others, the British made an enormous investment in its coal mines which would fuel its scientific and industrial endeavours. It had the advantage of having a formidable naval fleet. With the help of the early explorers, they were able to make inroads into several countries, primarily as trading companies and then as rulers by removing the established ones. Once they were in charge of the administration of the countries, one of the first objectives was to map out the geography of the country. This was done not only to get a sense of the scope of the country but also to figure out the administrative challenges that each distinct region posed, as well as to take advantage of the resources which the region possessed. In this endeavour, cartography proved to be their biggest aid.

Framing "India" as Cartography

In the case of India, one of the earliest surveys was done in 1767 by cartographer James Rennell in Bengal. The first recorded scientific survey can be traced back to 1793 conducted by W. Mather, who was supervised by the Superintendent of Salem and Baramahal, Colonel Alexander Read (Beaglehole 1966). In fact, in a letter dated 4 October 1797, the British government appreciated the efforts of Colonel Alexander Read. However, as the British gained an increasing foothold in the subcontinent, these preliminary surveys were later dwarfed by what came to be known as The Great Trigonometric Survey (1802–1852). This project was initiated by the British infantry officer William Lambton, under the auspices of the East India Company. The Great Trigonometrical Survey of India started on 10 April 1802 with the measurement of a baseline near Madras (today's Chennai). The entire Survey was carried out separately from other surveys, such as topographical and revenue surveys. In 1875, it was decided that the Survey budget would be cut from 240,000 pounds to 200,000 pounds (Black 1891). The reason for the same has been deliberated as a cost-cutting measure on the part of the British Indian government. As a result, the Great Trigonometrical, Topographical and Revenue Surveys were merged into the Survey of India under the then surveyor general, Colonel J. T. Walker (ibid).

This project reached its zenith under his successor, George Everest. This project aimed to introduce modern scientific survey techniques, not only to create and define the spatial image of India but also "to legitimate its colonialist activities as triumphs of liberal, rational science bringing 'civilization' to an irrational land" (Edney 1997). The irrationality in the case of India is that of caste discrimination. The caste system is followed mostly by the descendants of the Aryan invaders in India and those communities who have been subsumed into it (Thapar 2003). Max Weber was the first social scientist to holistically analyse caste in India. His thesis is that Asian religious doctrines, be it Hinduism (which is built on a caste system) or Buddhism (in which there is no caste system), are so otherworldly and irrational, and when their psychological consequences are traced, as not to yield as rational, this worldly secular ethic of the kind required, in his opinion, to originate industrial capitalism (Bendix 1977). Thus modern/industrial progress is impossible in a caste society.

However, despite having a numerically dominant caste population, India also has a substantive tribal/indigenous population. Most of them became enumerated as tribes in the British censuses and as Scheduled Tribes in postcolonial India. They are communities who are seen as having a symbiotic relationship with nature (Xaxa 1998). This is where the idea of cartography as a project which frames land as a universal/capitalist entity is unsuitable in the context of indigenous peoples who have a deep, almost spiritual connection to the land. In the following two sections, the author shall dwell on the historical, precolonial land arrangements of indigenous peoples and how they were subverted with the advent of colonialism.

Situating Land in Jharkhand and Meghalaya: The Interface Between Modern/State and Traditional/Indigenous Cartography

Upon examining the precolonial history of the Chota Nagpur Platea, Roy (1915) writes, "When the Oraons settled in the Chota Nagpur Plateau, each family, appears to have selected a particular jungle area suitable for clearance and cultivation. The highest-level space by its side was selected as the site for dwelling houses. These pioneer families who cleared the jungles and brought suitable lands under the plough were called the Bhuinhars of the village, and the lands cleared by them were called Bhuinhari lands of their respective Khunts – stocks or families." Elaborating further, Tirkey (2002) writes, "the Bhuinhari land was related to Bhuinars or original settlers in a village of Chhotanagpur". Munda and Mullick (2003) writes that, "the Indigenous peoples of this vast forest land had a different sense of territoriality. For them, the land was a continuous topography where they roamed, settled and resettled. Thus, in their vocabulary, there was no such word as ***country***". It was the British East India Company that began the colonisation of Jharkhand after the receipt of the grant of Diwani (right to collect tax on the behalf of the Mughal Emperor) of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1765.

In the colonial period, except for only a few Bhuinhari lands retained by some descendants of the original settlers with legal ownership of the said lands, the rest had been illegally appropriated by the non-tribal peoples and acquired by the British. Since these people owned these lands for a long time, the existing law granted them right over these lands (Hoffmann 1937). Besides these, large-scale transfer of tribal land had taken place into the hands of the outsider absentee landlords in the entire area of Chota Nagpur through the Sale Law and Rent Act (1859). This was an act to improve the law relating to sales of land for arrears of revenue in the Lower Provinces under the Bengal Presidency (for further details, see The Bengal Land Revenue Sales Act 1859).

When the British arrived in the East Khasi Hills, where Shillong is located, there were broadly three different types of land tenure systems that have to date remained untouched. They were as follows: The land that came under the jurisdiction of the Dorbar was known as community land (*Ri-Raid*). With permission, it could be used. Individuals who did not own agricultural land could borrow it from the community for a limited time. Clan lands (*Ri-Kur*) were lands owned and controlled by various

Khasi clans, also known as ancestral land. The land was usually kept by the family's youngest daughter. The Ka Jing Seng Jing Khadduh was the clan's original residence, where religious ceremonies and social decisions were held. Private land *(Ri-Kynti)* was land acquired for personal use by a person from the community or the clan. After acquiring it, a person could distribute it to the people he/she desired. The clans and community lands were the most dominant of the three land tenure systems discussed above (Rymbai-Tokin 1975). Most of these land ownership patterns are based on traditional myths and knowledge systems of the Khasis.

The lack of a colonial cartographic exercise in the pre-empire and pre-state formation shows remarkable autonomy for the tribes of the region, who had their own indigenous cartographic arrangement of their villages. In both cases, it can be observed that the cartographic formations in the indigenous areas have an ecological classification of lands and relational aspects of the land. This method of indigenous classification of land stands in stark contrast to the modern/state-led idea of land which is meant for the purpose of commercial and industrial purposes. This classification is also far more sustainable in its design and longevity.

Post-Independence Development: The Adverse Implication of Urbanisation

At the dawn of independence, both Ranchi and Shillong townships were confined within a small territory at the time of independence. Later, large-scale expansion occurred within a defined area. In the case of Ranchi, neighbouring villages were acquired in the 1950s for the development of public sector enterprises such as the Heavy Engineering Corporation Limited (HECL), which became responsible for the area's development (Xaxa 2021a). This attracted outsiders to man the enterprise in different categories of the labour force (Vidyarthi 1968). HECL not only employed a large number of people, but it also boosted local trade and commerce. Many people from northern Bihar moved to Ranchi to take advantage of this opportunity. This resulted in the usurpation of tribal land via debt mortgage, forcible capture and other unethical means. In Shillong, however, such acquisition did not occur, and growth occurred within the confines of the leasehold land obtained during the colonial period. Villages surrounding the city were gradually transformed into suburbs, providing housing for those working in government and non-government offices. This paved the way for the growth of trade and commerce in the area, as well as the establishment of educational and health institutions. Most businesses, which were previously run by non-tribals on leased land, were gradually taken over by local Khasis. The area was managed in accordance with the rules and regulations governing village councils. Congestion occurred as the township expanded, and roads, civic amenities and housing multiplied, not only in areas under the municipality but also in areas under village councils. This eventually led to a rethinking and expansion of Shillong's urban development (ibid). In both cases, there was a shift from the traditional cartographic land holding patterns of tribes to a more neoliberal model of cartography where control of land was in the state's hands. This can also be seen as a continuation of the colonial cartographic practice of usurping traditional land to state control.

Based on the above discussions, an argument can be made that the tribes in Jharkhand and Meghalaya had a very distinct imagination of indigenous cartography through which they have had a well-organised land holding system. Much like the traditional cartographic systems of the Oraons and the Mundas, the Khasis too have a distinct pattern of traditional cartographic arrangement. This was the prevalent method of land arrangement in the precolonial era. Both land holding patterns show remarkable clarity in the way that they were organised around the different layers of the community. These cartographic arrangements also informed the social customs, practices, rituals and worldviews of the tribes. With their land holding system, the tribes were also imbued with a sense of autonomy through which they exerted self-determination in their societies, cultures, customs, traditions and worldviews. Such land arrangements also kept the community in sync with nature. However, the colonial, as well as postcolonial, development in these areas has been marked by widespread displacement, environmental destruction and resource exploitation. Such violations of both constitutional laws and traditional Indigenous laws bring into question of how sustainability can be achieved in urban development in tribal areas of India.

Sustainable Urban Spatiality in Indigenous Areas

While the 2030 Agenda, with its standalone Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on cities and communities, as well as other goals and targets relevant to the local sphere, provides unprecedented visibility to the issue of urban sustainability, the importance of cities in advancing the sustainability transformation has been recognised since the beginning of the sustainable development debate. The Brundtland Commission Report (1983) included a chapter on the urban development crisis, emphasising that “the future will be predominantly urban, and most people’s most immediate environmental concerns will be urban ones”. The Commission also emphasises that the environment is more than just physicality, extending beyond that traditional school of thought to include social and political atmospheres and circumstances. It also insists that development is about more than just how poor countries can improve their situation; it is about what the entire world, including developed countries, can do to improve their collective situation. Understanding urban development in the context of sustainability becomes critical in this context. The goal of a sustainable urban development process is to achieve the status of “sustainability” in urban communities as well as to create or strengthen the characteristics of an economic, social and environmental city. However, today’s cities face a plethora of issues such as pollution, traffic, crime, urban poverty, etc. These are not the features of sustainability because they are not keeping the dignity and minimum standard of life. The 1992 Earth Summit and the resulting Agenda 21 increased the focus on cities and prompted the development of stakeholder-inclusive local sustainability plans. As per the Sustainable Development Goals website, 156 countries have developed national urban policies. But only half are in the implementation stage. India has a national urban policy, but it has yet to tune it as per the SDG’s criteria. One of the key criteria to achieve urban sustainability is to understand the conditions in which urban transformation has taken place.

The urban development model followed in India is largely based on the dispossession of indigenous peoples' land through land acquisition, as well as the alienation of land from tribes to non-tribes. Sharan (2005) highlights "land alienation to individuals can be divided into four cross-cutting categories: namely, alienation in urban and rural areas as well as tribal to non-tribal and tribal-to-tribal alienation. In urban areas, alienation has been primarily demanded induced – for housing (by outsiders) and non-agricultural purposes. This type of alienation has continued and accelerated in the post-independence period, and has affected both tribes and non-tribes". The environment has material and spiritual significance for tribes in addition to ecological significance. Nature is woven into the fabric of tribal society. Food, houses, domestic goods, artefacts, rites, rituals, customs, festivals and so on are all manifestations of it. The indigenous communities' reliance on nature is overwhelming, but it is far from passive. Communities act on nature and transform it into forms that are useful to them while maintaining the harmony between themselves and nature. Tribes and nature have a symbiotic relationship (Xaxa 2008). In tribal societies, people recognise that nature and its resources nurture and support human life, including its growth, allowing it to reach its full potential while also harnessing nature and its resources for regeneration and growth (Ekka 2007). There is a deeper realisation that harming nature and misusing the resources would lead to resource depletion, environmental degradation, pollution, desertification, depletion of ozone layers, risking resource scarcity and climate disorders. It is for this reason that tribes look upon nature with a sense of reverence. **The tribal people's ideas about life and development are consistent with the Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainable development**. As mentioned before, the commission defines sustainable development as meeting current needs without jeopardising future generations' ability to meet their own.

Tribes in Jharkhand do raise the issues of the outsiders but unlike in Meghalaya have not pushed the agenda in an organised form of the struggle against the outsiders (Xaxa 2021b). Rather, they have articulated this issue through the assertion of their constitutional and legal rights. However, because of the presence of the powerful non-tribal outsiders, the tribals have not been able to realise their due share in terms of land, legal and constitutional rights. Non-tribals were not only economically powerful but also politically. Their agenda is diametrically opposed to the agenda of tribal people. The key agenda of the latter as noted above is the enforcement of provisions in the constitution and law. The former finds these antithetical to their development. The former considers these to be detrimental to their development. Holston (1989) argues that the framing of occupancy urbanism challenges the notion that master planning can be the sole defining reference or locus standi for locating forms of territoriality, demarcating illegal nonconforming development or conflating the city's history with "modernity". The working of land, as a deeply politicising process, embeds a wide range of diverse and often conflicting actors into urban administration, including settler groups, municipal councillors and firms but also higher levels of the state and its associated agents. Benjamin (2014) notes that occupancy urbanism challenges conventional assumptions about the politics of urban land, particularly in cities in the Global South.

What we have witnessed in the postcolonial era in India is the continuation of White colonialism through Brown colonialism. This has transpired in the form of

state acquisition of tribal land in the name of development. And most of these economic projects collapsed during the COVID-19 pandemic, exposing their hollow roots. The Great Trigonometric Survey's civilisational project left more indigenous people in an alien land grid than emancipated. The author has tried to highlight in this chapter that in inhabiting the land, there are specific relationships that are constructed between territory, identity and experience. It is important to keep in mind that in tribal epistemology, land and lifeworlds are the sources of collective memory. There is an intimate relationship between land and tribes (Xaxa 2021a). This constitutional geography is critical to the definition and identity of the tribes and is the basis for the assertion of their fundamental rights. Kannabiran (2016) correctly observes that while excessive power is vested in governors and the neoliberal state has folded government into land acquisition and resource extraction under armed guard, making the exception a permanent condition of rule in scheduled areas, and while it is also true that new juridical categories such as "encroachers" are invented to empty forests of resistance to dispossession, the constitutional geography set out in the Fifth and Sixth Suppression Acts remains.

This is more striking in the case of urban development in indigenous land. Yiftachel (2016) argues that being recognised as "indigenous" legitimises attachment to "a land and localities, and to a set of cultural, economic and political rights, of groups dispossessed and exploited for generations by states that have overtaken their lands and political power. The emphasis of most researchers who have studied indigeneity is therefore on previously autonomous cultural groups, strongly connected to their lands, which was subjugated to a modern state". One of the methodologies by how indigenous land control can be returned to the communities is by a practice which Audra Simpson describes as "ethnographic refusal" (2007). This is an academic response to the traditional and linear "asymmetrical power relations that inform the research and writing about native lives and politics and in turn refuses to write in a way that might compromise hard-won and always precarious tribal sovereignty" (Simpson 2014). In this way dispossession of land can be seen as a tool of social critique (Nichols 2020), and the subsequent responses can be seen as a reclamation of lost land (Zibechi 2012). To achieve sustainability, it is necessary to recognise that the current attitude of rational mastery over the world is misguided and that indigenous peoples provide a viable alternative in terms of rational adaptation. This is a hallmark of indigenous societies that should be incorporated into the planning process rather than replicating the current way of planning, which is primarily a top-down approach that ignores local resources, environment, ecology and people. There is a need to reimagine tribal urban development in an orthogenetic manner. Such an urban development model can usher in the era of urban sustainability.

Towards an Indigenous Urbanism

The twenty-first century is already an urban century. More than half of the world's population inhabits urban areas and is projected to grow even more this century. Cities are critical to globalisation, climate change, food security, environmental protection

and innovation. Today's urban actors, both citizens and leaders, bear a significant responsibility as trustees of the future: their current actions will shape and structure cities, allowing future generations to live healthy and sustainable lives. Cities cannot be ignored in any sustainable development strategy. They are central to our pressing issues on the political, economic, social, environmental, health and cultural fronts. Around 5 billion people are expected to live in cities by 2050. The majority of this expansion will occur in Africa, Asia and Latin America, where demographic patterns encourage more births than in European and North American cities. Although urbanisation is a phenomenon that affects all major continents, the paths it takes are heavily influenced by local cultures and socioeconomic conditions. As a result, it is even more imperative to understand the indigenous history and land holding patterns. In this regard, indigenous peoples can guide the way to achieving a sustainable urban future.

Tribes/indigenous peoples have a very different notion of land than what is propagated in the colonial times. The core of land relations which exists in indigenous communities is more from a communitarian and spiritual perspective than the stress on individual/private property. Although it is not a uniform notion of land ownership – there have been some fissures in terms of clans, gender, etc. – the broad notion remains of collective participation and ownership. This stands in stark contrast to the individual notion in the liberal/capitalist idea. If this highly organised system of land holding and land management can be brought into urban areas, it will make a significant difference to the way that cities are designed and planned. This will introduce a new way of looking at urban development which hasn't been thought of before. For a long time, urban development around the world has relied on a colonial, European model of urbanisation where authority is centralised and is part of the ruling state. Indigenous urbanisation can offer a radically different vision of urbanisation whereby land ownership remains with the community. This will not only shift the control from a central state body to the community but can also offer a sustainable vision of urban development, based on the traditional wisdom of the indigenous peoples. For tribes, the notion of development has no meaning without the inclusion of nature. This wisdom is built on the harmony of nature and culture, resulting in the formation of a social order characterised by equality in society, collectivity in the economy and accommodation in history and ethical living. This chapter aimed to critique the colonial and homogenous notion of cartography. An exterior agency cannot decide how to reframe and change the structure of the land. To have a sustainable urban future, colonial cartography must be dismantled and ownership of land returned to the tribes/indigenous peoples, where they are agents of their decisions.

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