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Historical Geography of India: From Indus Valley to Colonial Cartographies

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ABSTRACT

The historical geography of India reflects a long transformation in spatial understanding, territorial organisation, and cartographic practices shaped by shifts in political power, culture, economy, and knowledge systems. This study traces developments from the Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 3300–1300 BCE) to British colonial cartography (1947), using historical geography, postcolonial theory, and critical spatial analysis. The Indus Valley Civilisation exhibited advanced urban planning, with cities like Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro featuring grid layouts, water management, and trade links with distant regions. These settlements represent a proto-urban geography rooted in environmental adaptation rather than rigid territorial boundaries. In the Vedic and classical periods, spatial imagination became cosmological, with concepts like Sapta Sindhu and Bharatavarsha framing the subcontinent as sacred space. Expanding empires such as the Mauryas and Guptas institutionalised administrative networks and territorial divisions. Medieval Islamic and Mughal regimes further refined spatial governance through revenue systems like the Ain-i-Akbari, blending indigenous and Persianate traditions. Colonial rule marked a rupture with the introduction of scientific cartography, exemplified by the Great Trigonometrical Survey. Drawing on Foucault and Said, this paper critiques colonial mapping as a tool of control and epistemic dominance. It highlights continuities, such as river centrality, and shifts from sacred to scientific spatial frameworks, emphasising ongoing postcolonial efforts to reclaim indigenous geographical knowledge.

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Historical geography of India, Indus Valley Civilisation, Vedic period; Mauryan Dynasty, Mughal Empire, Colonial cartography, Spatial theory, Postcolonialism, Territorial evolution.

I. Introduction

Background and Rationale: Historical geography is an interdisciplinary field that combines history, geography, and cartography in the study of the changes in spatial patterns and mutual interactions between human societies and their environments across time (Butlin, 2009). With this kind of integration, the landscapes are not only perceived as fixed physical objects but in the form of social spaces, the meaning of which are constantly transformed by cultural, political, and economic influences. In the Indian case, historical geography provides a perspective to analyse periodical territorial changes experienced in the subcontinent, starting with the civilisations around ancient rivers, to the successive imperial empires, thus explaining how geographical knowledge was created, subverted and stolen. The geographical history of India is theoretically relevant due to its ability to break down the force of space, power, and identity. Based on the idea of cultural landscapes by Carl Sauer, who assumes that human-caused alterations leave memorable cultural imprints on natural landscapes, the historical geography of India displays the layered changes, including the agrarian

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adjustments of the Gangetic plains (Sauer, 1925). Similarly, the critique of orientalism by Edward Said reveals how the colonial representations created the Orient as an exotic and eternal space, thus justifying the imperial domination through the cartographic and discursive processes (Said, 1978). These frameworks shed some light on how geographical accounts have been used to advance hegemonic purposes, especially in South Asia, where native spatial epistemologies such as the Vedic cosmologies of the past have always struggled with external impositions.

Parallels on the world level may be made with other ancient civilisations. As an example, the urban formulation of the Indus Valley reflects on the hydrological projects in Mesopotamia, where the river systems (Tigris and Euphrates) promoted similar proto-urban settlements, which highlights the universal motifs of environmental determinism in the emergence of the states (Wright, 2010). South Asia, however, continues to dwell on the development of how the Indus and Ganges rivers created unique cultural ecologies that do not correlate with the role of the Nile in the unification of Egypt. The period of this research, i.e., between the Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 3300-1300 BCE) and the British colonial cartographies (until 1947 CE), sums up the radical changes in the perception of space. It encompasses the shift towards cosmological geographies, when space was sacralised (e.g., Bharatavarsha in the Vedic literature), to scientific representations of territory, which imposed grid-based territoriality. Those changes are also evident in the cadastral surveys in the Roman Empire of Europe, but in India, they signify a break in the indigenous comprehensive ways of looking to subtle but discontinuous colonial approaches, such as the Great Trigonometrical Survey (Edney, 1997). In turn, such a period summarises the spirit of the spatial reconfigurations inspired by the empire building, environmental transformation, and the creation of knowledge in South Asia.

Research Objectives: The purpose of the study is to theoretically examine the development of geographical ideas and spatial organisations in ancient India.

- To explore the interaction of geography, power, and empire-building in the historical epochs.
- To criticise the colonial cartographies as the tools of imperial rule and evaluate their lasting influence on the modern Indian geography.

Scope and Limitations: The conceptual and theoretical division of this work depends on a review of secondary literature, archival exegeses, and conceptualisations, avoiding the use of primary data collection. Dependence on historical documents, maps, and academic research helps to build the argument according to the qualitative approaches used in historical geography. Its geographical focus is limited to mainland India, and it focuses on macro-level trends (i.e., riverine systems and imperial provinces) without taking into consideration more specific sub-regional diversities (i.e., Dravidian south versus Indo-Gangetic north) so that no specific patterns are lost in the analysis. The post-independence developments are not marked in view of the emphasis on pre-1947 evolutions that preempt the colonial legacies without advancing to the contemporary geopolitics.

Restrictions are numerous, such as barriers to the ancient indigenous sources, which are lost frequently either through invasion, degradation of the environment, or through colonial repression. By way of example, the scarcity of deciphered Indus scripts limits the first-hand information concerning the spatial perceptions, so they have to rely on the archaeological suggestions (Schwartzberg, 1992). Similar plights plague Mesoamerican studies in the world, with colonial annihilation of codices limiting pre-Columbian knowledge of geography. Such gaps in South Asia require a wary interpretation that is aware of the biases that exist in the holes of the surviving records, which in many cases are filtered through colonialism.

Structure of the Paper: The paper is chronologically but thematically arranged. Section 2 provides the conceptual background that combines the spatial theory and the postcolonial theory. Section 3 explores ancient origins, the path through the Indus-Valley urbanism to Vedic geographies. Section 4 discusses imperial geographies in classical and medieval periods, including Mauryan networks and Mughal systems of administration. Section 5 is the critical appraisal of colonial cartographies, examining European mapp -

-ings and indigenous resistances. Section 6 brings continuities and discontinuities together, and Section 7 wraps up by reflecting on what it implies to decolonise geography.

II. Theoretical Framework

Historical geography is based on the active interaction of human societies and space throughout the course of their evolution, and it focuses on how cultural, economic, and political processes define spatial structures. Spatial diffusion, hypothesised by Torsten Hagerstrand, is one of the core theories that describes how innovations and ideas spread across geographical landscapes following hierarchical and contagious patterns (Hagerstrand, 1967). This idea is used in the Indian context as to the spread of agricultural technologies in the Indus valley civilisation, whereby the trade networks are used to spread the urban planning practices in core centres like Harappa to outlying areas, thus reflecting world analogies in Mesopotamia of spreads of river-based diffusions in supporting early state formations (Wright, 2010). But South Asia had a singular topography, in the Himalayan obstacles and the monsoon-dependent plains fed these diffusions in riverine lines, resulting in regional specialisations and not the standard diffusions along the more interwoven medieval trade routes in Europe.

The concept of landscape as text, developed by Denis Cosgrove, views the environment as symbolic, which can be deciphered using cultural ideologies and power relations (Cosgrove, 1998). The Ganges River basin is one of the landscapes in the Indian subcontinent that is defined by the Vedic myths of sanctity and economic significance, which basically makes the river an important cultural conduit that can feed agrarian communities as well as large pilgrimage corridors. Both the Ganges, in South Asia, and the Nile, in ancient Egypt, are the main arteries of divinity in their respective cosmologies, but in the former case, the Ganges supports a more diffuse hydrological history, which binds together the various ethnicities, whereas in the latter, the Nile is a more centralised, pharaonic entity. In the same way, the Indus River, which played the role of centralising ancient urbanisation, was a text of environmental harmony, disturbed by climatic changes, and thus by the way landscapes enshrine the contingencies of history.

The social construction of space is a theory by Henri Lefebvre that spaces are constructed in perceptual dimension, conceived dimension, and lived dimension to reflect power relations in society (Lefebvre, 1991). Within the territory of the historical geography of South Asia, this is translated into the manufacture of imperial spaces, including Mauryan road networks that imagine the unity of the territory but allow live experiences of connectedness. The Indus, Ganges, and others are economic lifelines socially built as trade and migration axes, much like the Rhine in the feudal integrations in Europe, but now adjusted to the Indian rhythms of the monsoon, which imposes seasonal spatial productions with no equivalent in the temperate world. All of these theories describe the historical geography of India as a strong fabric that was created with the help of diffused innovations, symbolic cultural manifestations, and spaces that were created by social forces.

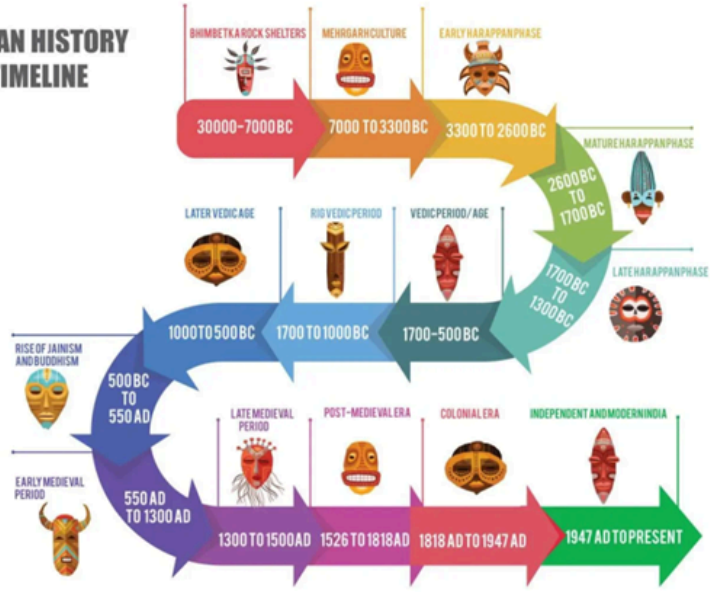
Postcolonial and Critical Geography Equatorials: The Postcolonial theory offers a critical perspective through which the colonial mappings of indigenous spaces with Eurocentric visions were imposed and erased local epistemologies. The questioning of the subaltern voices by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak raises the question of whether the marginalised groups can narrate their spatialities during the hegemonic discourses (Spivak, 1988). This is the case in colonial India, where local cartographic practices (e.g., tribal maps of forested borders) were silenced by British survey maps that depicted South Asia as an empty land to be taken advantage of. International equivalents are African cases of colonial mappings where European grids had also silenced oral spatial knowledge,s but in India, where the subaltern spatial agency survived via resistance movements, e.g, Deccan, thereby contesting the imperial impositions more explicitly than in the settler colonies of the world, like in Australia.

The ideas of hybridity and third spaces introduced by Homi K. Bhabha bring out cultural ambivalences in the colonial experiences whereby a blend of the native and imperial geographies is made to create new spatial perceptions (Bhabha, 1994). This destroys the Eurocentricity of colonial cartographies, as can be

seen in the Great Trigonometrical Survey, which refolded Mughal administrative boundaries with trigonometric accuracy, but applied a scientific rationality that marginalised Vedic cosmologies according to which the subcontinent is a mandala of sacred realms. The indigenous systems, including the Bharatavarsha, a comprehensive spatial account of the Vedic cosmology, including mountains, rivers, plains, etc., were counter-narratives, opposing the disintegrating colonialism. Equally, administrative divisions of the Mughal period described in documents like the Ain-i-Akbari were hybrid Persian-Indian spatial orders comparable to Ottoman cadastral in the Middle East but tailored to the local ethno-linguistic mosaic of South Asia. These are further criticised by critical geography, which, based on the spatial dialectics of David Harvey, was the location of capital accumulation where the colonial maps enabled the extraction of resources and were a replicated version of enclosures in Europe but intensified through caste-touched land tenures of India (Harvey, 2001). Therefore, postcolonial views expose India as a geographical arena of contention, in which the indigenous knowledges interfere with colonial legacies.

Methodological Approach: Since this is a purely theoretical study, the methodology of the research focuses on a qualitative synthesis of historical literature, maps, and scholarly literature (based on archives like the atlas of Joseph E. Schwartzberg) to recreate the spatial evolutions (Schwartzberg, 1992). This includes hermeneutic interpretation of materials, including the Vedic hymns and the colonial gazetteers, in order to reveal hidden geographical notions without actual fieldwork. Comparison of historical periods, ancient Indus, medieval Mughal, and colonial British, points to changes including the movement of cosmological to scientific mappings, with similar changes in Chinese imperial cartography between mythical and grid-based, but oriented to river-centred paradigms of South Asia.

Based on content analysis, thematic coding clusters data into spatial themes, such as sacred spaces (e.g., temple networks), and trade routes (e.g., extensions of the Silk Road into India) based on thematic coding. It is a deconstructive reading of maps as ideological artefacts because this approach was based on the critique of the imperial surveys by Matthew H. Edney (Edney, 1997). Such constraints as the use of translated texts, which may bias native voices, are also present, as are problems in the study of Mesoamerican. Nevertheless, the approach to the subject matter creates a subtle theoretical discourse, intersecting between the geographies of world history and the cathedral of the South Asian spatial heritage.



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III. Ancient Foundations: Indus Valley and Vedic Foundations

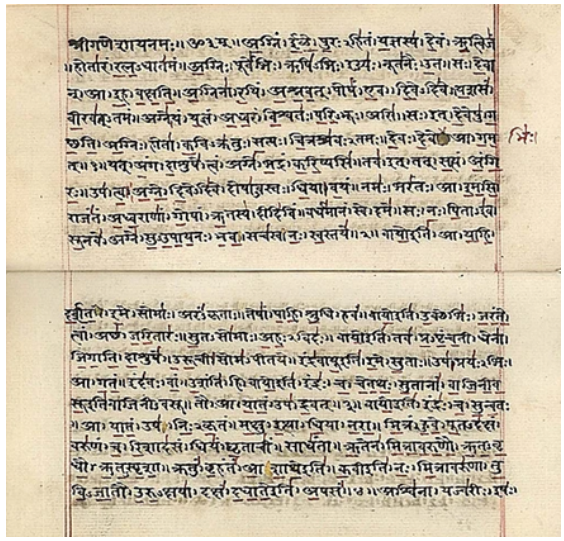
Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 3300–1300 BCE): The Indus Valley Civilisation IVC is one of the earliest urban cultures in South Asia, characterised by careful city planning and urban structure, which illustrated the evolutionary adjustments to environmental limitations. Large cities like Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were grid-patterned with standardised structures of baked bricks, with wide streets facing cardinal directions, and with extensive drainage systems, including covered sewers and public baths (Kenoyer, 1998). This plan indicates a centralised government that valued hygiene and shared order, a heterarchical type of government instead of being strictly hierarchical, and thus contrasts with the ziggurat-based cities of Mesopotamia at the time. Hydrology geography was instrumental in the patterns of settlement: the alluvial plains along the Indus River and its tributaries became productive land for agriculture, the monsoon floods creating the need for elevated platforms and water-control structures like reservoirs in Dholavira (Possehl, 2002). This ecological adjustment highlights hydrological determinism theories where the riverine process defines urban resilience, which is a dynamic whose effect is similar to the effect of the Tigris-Euphrates system on Sumerian city-states in Mesopotamia. However, it was the decentralised structure of the IVC network, with more than 1,000 locations, that focused on regional interdependence, rather than central control (Wright, 2010).

The integration of the IVC into the early globalisation is further explained through trade networks. Etched carnelian beads and steatite seals have also been found at Mesopotamian places like Ur, showing exchanges both by sea and by land through the Persian Gulf (Ratnagar, 2004). These links made the Indus a crucial point of proto-global commerce, exporting cotton cloth and importing metals, including copper. Using the implementation of the core-periphery model, developed by Immanuel Wallerstein, but applied to modern world-systems, to give an analogy, the Mesopotamian state acts as a core feeding on the Indus periphery, giving rise to unequal exchange, a stimulus to specialisation of craft activities in the IVC. South Asian experience, however, indicates a much more mutual relationship, that both IVC levels of weight and measure in turn affected Mesopotamian standards, thus suggesting the contrary (and more exploitative) coreperiphery relationships in the Nile-focused economy in ancient Egypt. It is through this theoretical lens that the spatial organisation of the IVC can be seen as both more functional and also embedded in larger economic geographies, providing the groundwork to later South Asian geographies of territories.

Vedic Period (c. 1500–500 BCE): The Vedic period is associated with urban materiality or cosmological geographies as is being described in the Rigveda, the oldest Indo-Aryan text. The Rigveda illustrates the subcontinent as a holy terrain that has a divine connotation. At the centre of such ontogenesis is the image of Sapta Sindhu (the land of seven rivers), including the Indus and its tributaries, and the symbol of fertility, purity, and world order (Witzel, 2005). The earth is depicted in the Vedic hymns as a flat disc held by mountains and rivers form lifelines as the linking points between the human and the divine world. Space in this cosmological system is theorised as a mandala in which rituals strengthen the claims of the territories. The collaboration between environmental factors (the Himalayas as boundaries and the Punjab plains as pastoral centres) into an integrated spatial narrative gives sacred over profane borders priority.

The migrations and territorial expansions of this period are theorised with the help of the Aryan migration hypothesis telling that the Indo-Aryan populations entered South Asia around 1500 BCE due to the environmental factors of aridification (Anthony, 2007). This is consistent with arguments on environmental determinism, where climatic changes such as reduced monsoon predictability inclined nomadic pastoralists to the southeast, where cultural exchanges and language dissemination occurred. Geographically, this comes in the form of a gradual movement of foci of the river northwest to the Gangetic plains, facilitating agricultural intensification and social stratification. There are similarities with Indo-European migrations in Europe, e.g., the Yamnaya culture in the Danube valley, where steppe conditions are the same drivers of the territorial conquests. In South Asia, the Vedic accent on ritual landscapes, e.g., fire altars as space markers, produced new syncretic geographies, which were a mixture of migrant and indigenous Dravidian features (Parpola, 2015). Environmental determinism has been criticised, with emphasis on agency, in that Vedic societies were adapted to fit various ecologies and were not overly mechanistic. This is why the geographies of this era depict space as being contested effectively,

creating precedence for the subsequent imperial expansions in the area.



A manuscript of the Rigveda, transcribed in the Devanagari script, dates back to the early 19th century. This text was originally passed down through oral tradition. (Staal, 1986)

The transition to Iron Age and Early State Formations: A further shift to the Iron Age (c. 1000-500 BCE) stimulated the formation of early states in South Asia, where geographical factors like fertile Gangetic plains enabled the emergence of the Mahajanapadas - sixteen territorial polities, like Magadha and Kosala. Iron technology allowed clear-cutting and plough culture to develop the alluvial Doab region, to create a demographic and economic centre, which theorists explain using the ideas of territoriality as the establishment of control over known spaces (Erdosy, 1995). Boundary-making entailed natural entities, like rivers like the Yamuna that served as barriers, and forests that served as boundaries and as such formed proto-state identities in the process of competing over resources.

When applied to the geographical theory, this spatial arrangement echoes concepts of geographical advantage suggested by Alfred Thayer Mahan, who used a naval concept of geographical advantage, modified to the context of the ground (in the case of rivers), to increase trade and military movement. This is akin to the fertile crescent in Levantine city-states but fitted to the hydrology of South Asia (monsoon) (Mahan, 1890). Environmental affordances overlap with social processes: the black earth of the Gangetic plains was conducive to surplus production, thereby creating urbanisation at places like Kausambi, and the Vindhyas connections between north and south. This reflects the development of the Greek polis system in Mediterranean basins, in which arable valleys fostered territorial conflicts, but South Asian Mahajanapadas focused on the rise of spatial hierarchies based on caste rather than on democratic gatherings (Thapar, 2002). The idea of ethnic frontiers by Barthians explains the fact that the Mahajanapades negotiated porous frontiers by the formation of alliances and warfare, unlike the Chinese Warring States, which formed hard walls. This conceptualisation of geography in South Asia views geography as a mediator of statecraft; in between ancient urbanism and classical empires, though with a synergistic emphasis on the long-term spatial survival of the subcontinent.

IV. Imperial Geographies: Classical and Medieval Times

Mauryan and Gupta Empires (c. 322 BCE-550 CE): The Mauryan Empire, which was established by Chandragupta Maurya and then perpetuated by his successors, is a turning point of the imperial geography of South Asia, in which the spatial policies united vast areas stretching from the northern boundaries to the Deccan plateau. The edicts made by Ashoka that were written on the pillars and the bedrock all over the subcontinent served as spatial markers of imperial ideology, spreading Buddhist dhamma and at the same time establishing territorial sovereignty (Thapar, 2002). These inscriptions were

carefully placed in pilgrimage places and border areas, and thus theorised space as a vehicle of moral governance which mixed religious cosmology with political control. By relying on the connectivity theory, the Mauryan road systems, including the Uttarapatha road that connected Pataliputra to Taxila north, served the purpose of trade, the movement of the military, and administrative control in a similar way that the Roman viae publicae connected the Mediterranean empire with a created connectivity (Laurence, 1999). However, these infrastructural networks in South Asia focused on the control of the different ecologies, including the dry Punjab and fertile Gangetic plains, and thus enabled faster movement of troops as well as the collection of tribute and the creation of a single imperial space according to the Lefebvre framework (Lefebvre, 1991). This interconnection was in contrast to the more decentralised Persian Royal Road, highlighting Mauryan innovation in order to adjust to monsoon areas to ensure long-term imperial unity.

Often described as the Golden Age, this legacy was carried on by the Gupta Empire, with the diffusion of culture, whereby geography encouraged new scientific and artistic developments never before witnessed. The river valleys of the Himalayan foothills to the Vindhyas, where the empire had its river valleys, especially the Ganges, were the highways along which ideas could flow just as the Silk Road did in Han China, in cultural exchanges but based on agrarian surplus in South Asia (Liu, 2010). The Gupta period also saw the spread of Sanskrit learning and mathematical innovations. Using spatial diffusion models (Hagerstrand, 1967), the Gupta period witnessed the development of astronomical mappings of the heavens by Aryabhata in the Aryabhatiya, which conceptualised the heavens using a zero and place-value system under the influence of the observational horizons of the subcontinent (Plofker, 2009). Cities like Ujjain, with an astronomical meridian, are geographically facilitated and lead to the creation of a knowledge economy that was spread throughout the trade routes to Southeast Asia. Contrary to the Roman Golden Age during the reign of Augustus, where architecture took precedence, Gupta space coordinated intellectual inquiry to the geographical permanence, and the juxtaposition between South Asian imperial space and cosmology and empiricism highlights the distinctive combination of cosmology and empiricism.

Delhi Sultanate and Medieval Islamic Invasions (c. 1206-1526 CE): With the Islamic invasions that were being orchestrated by the Medieval Islamic powers, South Asian geographies were reconfigured through the forces being directed by the northwestern passes like the Khyber and Bolan, hence allowing the Turkic and Afghan contingents access to the Indo-Gangetic plains. Muhammad of Ghur used topographical weaknesses and the idea of the Hindu Kush to the Suleiman ranges as points of strategic entry to enhance military benefits (Jackson, 1999). Environmental determinism sheds light on the role played by topography in such strategies, where dry passes were considered to be the best use of cavalry strategies rather than foot-based infantry, just like in the Mongol invasions of Central Asia, where the best use of mobility was to conquer the place (Weatherford, 2004). However, the invaders in South Asia evolved to fit the humid lowlands by setting up fortified bases, the most significant one being Delhi, which became a geopolitical centre drawing riverine trade and agrarian earnings, thus contrasting with the Ottoman use of plateaus in Anatolia as defensive bases.

The iqtata system brought about administrative geographies of the Delhi Sultanate: a feudal system of spaces, which provided military elites with land grants based on revenue collection and loyalty (Habib, 1999). This division of the sultanate into iqtas, which acted as semi-autonomous units similar to European manorial systems but combined with Islamic waqf endowments to provide spatial equity. Iqtas reorganised agrarian spaces, theorised as spaces of production (Lefebvre, 1991), so as to encourage irrigation in the Doab area and impose tribute on the peripheral areas like the deserts of Rajasthan. The parallels can be found worldwide with the Timurid assignment of the lands in Persia, but South Asian iqtas had a unique hybridisation of Persianate bureaucracy and native village systems, with the resilience in this region, in changes of dynastic reigns, between Slave and Lodi rulers. This period was therefore a period of transition out of classical unity and into fragmented feudalism, the imposition of Islamic spatial orders onto the heterogeneous landscapes in the subcontinent.

Mughal Empire (c. 1526–1857 CE): The Mughal Empire was a symbol of advanced imperial geographies, which incorporated the traditions of Central Asia with South Asian novelties during the reign of such emperors as Babur and Akbar. The mansabdari system of Akbar, where officials were ranked in terms of military service and revenue assignments, worked as pre-modern cartography, mapping orders on the territorial divisions; this was carefully recorded in the Ain-i-Akbari- a comprehensive gazetteer of administrative, economic, and cultural information (Abu'l-Fazl, 1873/2010). The text was a database of space, by surveying soils, crops, and peoples at subas (provinces) and thus resembling the imperial gazetteers of Ming China, despite focusing on fiscal accuracy using zabt measurements (Richards, 1993). The centralisation of large ecologies in South Asia, such as deltas of Bengal, ports of Gujarat, and so on, was made possible through such mappings and, thereby, overturned regional autonomies.

The assimilation of different geographies, such as the conquest of the Deccan by Aurangzeb, built up Mughal space to the south, overcoming Vindhya obstacles by the logistical system similar to the Spanish conquests in the Andes, but adapted to monsoon war (Subrahmanyam, 2005). This synthesis of space created hybrid spaces with Persianate and Indic influences. Culturally, the space in Mughal gardens and architecture was represented by the cultural landscape theory (Cosgrove, 1998), and the charbagh in the Taj Mahal represented the order of paradise in high-disorder landscapes. These landscapes marked imperial ideology onto the landscape, reflecting geometries of absolutism at Versailles in France, but adding streams of water reminiscent of Ganges sanctity into the creation of sensual experiences of power. Mughal geographies, therefore, conceptualised the empire as an aesthetic-administrative mosaic which left behind a legacy of space over the region.

Map of the Mughal Empire at its peak in the year 1700. (Joppen, 1907)

V. Colonial Cartographies: The British Imperialism and Spatial Reconfigurations

Early European Discoveries (c. 1498-1757 CE): The first European experiences with India established a revolutionary period in South Asian cartography, where maps were used as predecessors to colonial territorial assertions. The Portuguese who came through Vasco da Gama in 1498 focused on the coastal geographies and created nautical maps like the Cantino Planisphere (1502), which depicted the western coast of India in a meticulous manner that enhanced ports like Calicut to the spice trade (Sánchez, 2013). These cartographic effects theorised spaces of the coast as strategic islands, thus enabling the process of enclave colonialism via fortified factories, similar to Spanish portolan charts of the Americas that claimed littorals of the Caribbean to extract its resources. The Portuguese cartography, however, adopted local Malabar pilot knowledge in South Asia, hybridising European projections and the local monsoon navigation, and thus setting precedence to other territorial claims without penetrating the interior.

This path was further pursued by the Dutch East India Company (VOC), which created systematic atlases to dominate the eastern coasts and Bengal deltas, such as the Joan Blaeu Atlas Maior (1662) (Koeman, 1970). These were theorised as mercantile geographies, using hydrological elements like the the Hooghly River as a node to define the trade, and following their cartography of the Spice Islands of Indonesia, but adjusted to the estuarine complexities of South Asia. This strategy was first followed by the English

East India Company (EIC), which was established in 1600 and focused on the promotion of geographical regions of trade by having factories at Surat, Madras, and Bombay. The maps of the East India Company, like the one created by John Thornton in the 1680s, delimited particular geographic space which was subject to manipulation as a valuable commodity under chartered prerogative, resulting in the formation of early colonial territories. This reflected French mappings in West Africa, but in India, the EIC was more focused on textile hinterlands, which assimilated the agrarian spaces, forming the foundation of territorial expansion during the Mughal decline.

British Colonial Mapping Projects (c. 1757-1947 CE): After the Battle of Plassey (1757), the mapping of British colonies grew into a kind of imperialism, scientifically, the famous one being the Great Trigonometrical Survey (GTS) initiated by William Lambton in 1802 and developed by George Everest. The GTS has utilised triangulation to develop a geodetic grid covering the subcontinent that can be criticised as a means of epistemic domination in the view of Michel Foucault's power-knowledge nexus, whereby surveying gave birth to truths that justified control (Foucault, 1977). The maps that came as a result of this made India an object of measurement, replacing flowing native borders with fixed grids, similar to the U.S. Public Land Survey System, which imposed order on Native American lands but created a nightmare in South Asia because of grid zodolites across varied landscapes of India (Edney, 1997). This scientific front led to a blinding of imperial ambitions, to property taxes and military conciliation.

The economic geographies were further reconfigured through infrastructural developments like the railways and canals, which were theorised through dependency theory as the means of uneven development (Frank, 1966). Expanding since 1853, the railways connected raw material peripheries (e.g. Punjab wheat fields) to metropolitan ports, forming export-oriented enclaves but deindustrialising interiors, a pattern which was replicated elsewhere, for example, the Belgian rail networks in Congo, which only exploited minerals but did not industrialise the interiors. Colonial geography contributed to continuing underdevelopment, such as the Ganges Canal (1854); this irrigation system enabled cash crops to be grown in Doab areas, creating large spatial disparities. Irrigated cores thrived, and the peripheries with their salinisation effects, reminiscent of the impact of Porfirian railroads in Mexico under U.S. dominance, were increased in the South Asian context.

Resistance and Indigenous Responses: Cartographies of colonisation were agitations of indigenous struggles and were theorised by subaltern geographies challenging imperial spatial discourses. The Revolt of 1857, or First War of Independence, represented this kind of dynamic, and insurgents such as Rani Lakshmibai retook territories using guerrilla tactics in the ravines of Bundelkhand, and playing with British maps that depicted it as conquerable (Bates, 2013). Based on the subaltern theory of Gayatri Spivak, they are silenced voices through which they express a different geography, like the sacred place of Jhansi fort as an icon of sovereignty (Spivak, 1988). Colonial maps replaced the already existing histories, such as the Mughal parghanas, with a district that dismembered communal estates, and, similar to the Australian colonial surveys, but in South Asia, they sparked peasant rebellions, such as the Deccan Riots (1875).

Indigenous responses included counter-cartographies, such as the secret surveys made by Pundit Nain Singh, commissioned, on the one hand, by the British but flavoured with Tibetan spatial knowledge, fusing resistance with and against collaboration (Waller, 1990). According to the theoretical views, oral geographies of subaltern communities, including Adivasis in forested borderlands, resisted enclosure. It can be compared to the resistance enacted by Andean indigenous peoples during the Spanish colonial period. Such resistance in South Asia saved the vernacular spaces, which were a challenge to the totalising eye of colonial cartography.

Cartography of Virtue and Refusal: In post-colonial South Asia, the legacies of colonial cartographies as inherited spatial inequalities represent themselves in boundaries like the Durand Line (1893), which arbitrarily divided Pashtun lands between British India and Afghanistan, becoming thereby a source of consistently unresolved conflicts (Hopkins, 2009). Theoretised through world-systems analysis, these lines reproduce peripheral location, robbing resources and creating false ethnic separations, similar to

SykesPicot lines in the Middle East but worse still, the partition by the Radcliffe Line in South Asia (1947) that displaced millions of people. The inherited disparities comprise city-country inequalities, in which the colonial port cities, such as Mumbai, became economic centres at the expense of the hinterlands in structures of dependency (Kosambi, 1986).

Postcolonial theories, like the one of inherited spatiality, argue against the fact that these maps institutionalised uneven development in the sense that the gains of the Green Revolution were limited to the canal-irrigated areas of Punjab, which resembled the Brazilian ones in the development of favelas. This legacy is present in the current conflicts in India, like the Kashmir McMahon Line, and it emphasises the role of colonial geographies in defining the national imaginaries and the geopolitical crises.

The British Indian Empire in 1909. British India is shown in pink; the princely states in yellow. (Edinburgh Geographical Institute & J. G. Bartholomew and Sons, 1909)

VI. DISCUSSION

The current research paper condenses the development of the historical geography of India since the Indus Valley Civilisation, up to the cartographic practices of the British colonial rule, and as such, enables one to see both continuities and sharp discontinuities in the spatial organisation, perception, and management of South Asia. Across more than five thousand years, some geographical characteristics have continued to be of focus to human habitation, commerce and cultural fantasy. Riverine centrality is the most salient continuity. Since the Indus and its dependents contributed to Harappan urbanism, the Sapta Sindhu of Vedic cosmology has served to support the grounds of the Mauryan and Gupta empires, the Ganges Canal system under British dominion, and rivers have always served as economic life lines, holy axes, and ways of communication (Thapar, 2002; Schwartzberg, 1992). Trade routes, pilgrimage systems, and political jurisdiction continued to follow these hydrology systems and thus established a repetitive adaptation to monsoon-oriented sceneries, which is what defines South Asian geographies compared to the drier or colder climate regime of Mesopotamia or medieval Europe.

The amalgamation of sacred and symbolic space is also permanent. The Vedic cosmology has positioned the subcontinent as a mandala-shaped dwelling place of divinity (Bharatavarsha), and Mughal gardens and architecture continued to etch the designation of the divinity onto the physical landscape in the form of charbagh patterns and symbolism of water (Cosgrove, 1998). Even colonial infrastructures such as railways and cantonments, frequently superimposed already sacred nodes, thus demonstrating the way power always functions via the symbolism of space.

However, critical transitions are characterised by major ruptures. The most drastic change was made in

the colonial period: the change between the cosmological and administrative mapping and the scientific trigonometric cartography. Space was integrated into religious, moral, or fiscal systems in the pre-colonial systems; Vedic sacred geography, Mauryan edicts, and Mughal Ain-i-Akbari revenue surveys imprinted space onto the systems. However, the Great Trigonometrical Survey (1802-1871) impose secular and geodetic grid, which made India readable to extraction and rule, thus, instituting the power-knowledge nexus (Foucault, 1977; Edney, 1997). This discontinuity matched, but exceeded, the analogous changes in Qing China or Ottoman cadastral reforms because British mapping systematically destroyed the native epistemologies under the pretext of scientific universality.

In theory, the historical geography of India is a challenge to Eurocentric narratives of global historical geography. The criticism of Orientalism offered by Edward Said can be viewed with a certain level of relevance: colonial maps created India as a stagnant exotic realm that needed the European system to be ordered (Said, 1978). South Asia, conversely, created advanced geographical infrastructure centuries before European contact, including Harappan standardised planning, Gupta astronomical accuracy, and as such, the subcontinent makes the subcontinent a counter-example to diffusionist models which give the Mediterranean or North Atlantic a pre-eminent role in the modern geographical thought (Wallerstein, 1974). The experience of India also adds to the development of the post-colonial geography by demonstrating how subaltern spatial practices were maintained despite imperial overlay and thus a response to Spivak, who insisted that one should reclaim silenced voices (Spivak, 1988).

Global parallels reinforce these insights. Riverine centrality is also a reflection of the Nile in ancient Egypt and the Yellow River in China, but the variability of the South Asian monsoons gave rise to a more decentralised urbanism than either Mesopotamia with its centralised hydraulic state or imperial China (Wright, 2010). Colonial scientific mapping is also similar to French mapping of Algeria and British East African surveys; however, India was particularly prone to epistemic violence due to the scale and already existing cartographic traditions (Edney, 1997).

Critical analysis of sources shows major gaps. The research is based on very substantial sources of elite textual and archaeological data, which consist of Vedic Hymns, Ashokan edicts, Mughal chronicles, and British surveys, whereas the non-elite, subaltern, and indigenous points of view are underrepresented. The Indus script that has not been deciphered, the oral history of the Adivasi people and the spatial knowledge of lower-caste agriculturalists and women are mostly lost or distorted into the dominant glasses (Spivak, 1988). This is reflective of more general issues in global historical geography, in which the archives give greater weight to literate, urban, male, and imperial discourses. Further studies ought to combine digital humanities, oral histories and subaltern cartographies to solve such silences.

To sum up, the historical geography of India provides a good example of decolonising the field. As the proposed research highlights the continuities in riverine and sacred space through foregrounding and discontinuities introduced by colonial science through the lenses of rupture, the current study promotes how South Asia has contributed to and has persevered the global trends in spatial production. The theoretical synthesis provides more to a pluralistic approach to historical geography, a decentred Europe, which acknowledges the long-standing contribution of the subcontinent to the formation of human spatial imaginaries.

VII. CONCLUSION

The current research is a hypothetical analysis of the historical geography of India, between the Indus Valley Civilisation and the end of British colonial rule. It clarifies an extensive and active development of spatial conceptions, territorial organizations and cartography that extends beyond 4000 years. The continuities and transformative ruptures that have been extraordinary in shaping the geographical imagination of the subcontinent are forecasted in the analysis.

One of the most enduring continuities is the primary role of river systems as economic, cultural and symbolic life-lines. The Indus served as the bearer of some of the oldest urbanized civilizations in the

world; the Sapta Sindhu defined the Vedic sacred space; the Ganges made it possible to consolidate the empire in classical forms during the Mauryas and Guptas; and even Mughal and British systems were subsequently using the same hydrological conduits and re-engineering them (Thapar, 2002; Schwartzberg, 1992). This lasting riverine orientation is also what sets the historical geography of South Asia apart in comparison with much of the rest of the world, where rivers often serve in a secondary capacity to either coastline (Mediterranean) or steppe corridors (Central Asia). The incorporation of sacred and cosmological perspectives into spatial cognition is equally constant: since the Vedic Bharatavarsha as a ritual landscape, through the Mughal charbagh gardens as symbols of the paradise, and, even though colonial cartography could neither replace nor overlook pilgrimage networks (Cosgrove, 1998).

The greatest breakthrough was experienced during the colonial era when native forms of spatial knowledge that were based on cosmology, moral governance, and adhocracy were orderly reduced to a scientific, geodetic paradigm. The Great Trigonometrical Survey and the cadastral projects which accompanied it did not just map territory; they established a new ontology of space as an abstraction, quantifiable, and controlled space, which introduced what Foucault argued was a form of deployment of disciplinary power, through creating knowledge (Foucault, 1977; Edney, 1997). Although this epistemic shift was similar to comparable ones in French Algeria, Qing China and British East Africa, it was especially acute in South Asia since the existing traditions of space were deep and articulate, only to be superimposed.

In theory, this research will be involved in Scopus-indexed research in a number of ways. It fills in the antiquarian and colonial historiography, showing that much of the homogeneous geography of modern India, the river-centric settlements, religion-based territoriality and hereditary spatial differences, is unintelligible without going deep into history. Second, it drives postcolonial historical geography into the future by preempting South Asia as an active site of knowledge production of space instead of a passive recipient of European modernity. The analysis reclaims native epistemology of the Vedic cosmology, Mughal revenue cartography, and subaltern resistances, to critique diffusionist, Eurocentric structures that still prevail in much of world historical geography (Said, 1978; Wallerstein, 1974). By doing this, it is complying with the demands to decolonise geographical thought and to acknowledge non-Western inputs into ideas of space, territory, and mapping.

The journey of India is not isolated but connected to the larger world picture, which is evidenced by similarities across the earth. Although South Asia is similarly central to rivers as the Nile in Pharaonic Egypt or the Yellow River in imperial China, the monsoon variability peculiar to the area supported less centralised and flexible settlement patterns. The trigonometric surveying imposed by the colonialists has analogies in the Spanish grid in Latin America and the British triangulation of Ireland, although the scale, inherent complexity, and opposition in India made the epistemic struggle more noticeable and persistent (Craib, 2004). Through these comparisons, these nations place South Asia in a new perspective, not as an exception but as a critical case that adds value to comparative historical geography.

This theoretical synthesis presents several research directions that can be taken in the future. GIS-based reconstruction of past geographies and their digital mapping are viable possibilities. It would be possible to visualise the spatial continuities and disjunctures of ancient Harappan sites, Mauryan road networks, Mughal subas, and colonial districts superimposed on modern base maps, and extend the work of the Digital South Asia Library and the Historical Atlas of South Asia (Schwartzberg, 1992). These would also be able to provide a quantitative analysis of the settlement density, trade connectivity and environmental transformation over time.

The distinctiveness of the riverine-sacred-geopolitical nexus of South Asia could be further challenged by comparative studies with other long-term regions, including the Nile Valley, Mesoamerica or the Yellow River basin. Also, by incorporating subaltern and gendered histories using oral histories, folk cosmologies, and Adivasi spatial knowledge would overcome the elitism bias that prevails in a large portion of the archival record (Spivak, 1988). Lastly, the historical geography would directly be linked to the modern

policy discussions by discussing the role of colonial cartographic legacies in the ongoing geopolitical disputes (e.g., Durand Line, Radcliffe Line, McMahon Line).

In short, the history and geography of India can be viewed as a rich and disputable historical archive of human spatial imagination, one that has retained profound continuities and which has been radically reconfigured by colonialism. This study has provided a contribution to a more pluralistic, decolonised vision of the processes through which space is produced, represented and negotiated over time and space by positioning South Asia at the centre of global historical-geographical studies.

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