Mapping India

a review by Vinay Lal*

J. B. Harley and David Woodward, eds. *Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies*. Vol. 2, Book 1 of *The History of Cartography*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992. xxiv + 579 pp. Illustrated. Clothbound, [$125].It is only in the last few years that South Asian cartography, thanks largely to the invaluable work of Susan Gole, has received any scholarly attention. Despite Gole's commanding work, the results of which can be seen in five volumes published by her between 1976 and 1989, the most recent being a volume which traced Indian maps "From Earliest Times to the Advent of European Surveys", South Asian cartography for the most part remains, as it always has been, a neglected field of study. That is all the more reason why the publication of *Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies*, a portion of a massive undertaking by geographers at the University of Wisconsin entitled *The History of Cartography*, a project conceived as a 6-volume work, must be a matter of some rejoicing. The first half of this volume is devoted to Islamic cartography, a considerably well-developed field; the second half, on South Asian cartography, is entirely the work of Joseph E. Schwartzberg, who is familiar to scholars at least as the author of *A Historical Atlas of South Asia*, and it is primarily this portion which will interest South Asianists and to which I shall devote this review.

Leo Bagrow was no doubt voicing the prevailing consensus when, in his authoritative *History of Cartography* (1964), he wrote that "India had no cartography to speak of", and that "no one in India seems to have been interested in cartography" (pp. 296, 504). Having inferred that Indians were quite unaware of cartography, and similarly uninterested in rectifying that supposed deficiency, Bagrow devoted only half a page to Indian cartography in his history, and indeed most histories of cartography have been similarly predisposed. Schwartzberg agrees that India's cartographic accomplishments have been slender, and even that "the premodern cartographic achievements of South Asia pale by comparison with those of the neighboring regions of the Islamic world and East Asia", not to mention the Mediterranean world and Western Europe. This is, as Schwartzberg recognizes, "a matter for wonder, given India's major contributions to astronomy, geometry, and other branches of mathematics and the remarkably creative exuberance of its culture" (p. 295). However, he then proceeds to take issue with the conventional view, as expressed by Bagrow and by Indian social scientists themselves, that "there exists no evidence of an indigenous tradition of map making", and does so in a manner which deserves some scrutiny (p. 299).

The paucity of maps from ancient and medieval India, maintains Schwartzberg, can be accounted for as a consequence of the conjunction of certain peculiar circumstances. In India'a hot and humid climate, maps easily perished. We know that this must have been the fate of other kinds of manuscripts as well; however, as many manuscripts did survive, the earliest of these going back to the thirteenth century, we must ask why maps were so singularly susceptible to such an unkind fate. "Intentional destruction of maps", it is argued, contributed to their scarcity. Schwartzberg points a finger, howsoever tentatively, at the early Muslim conquerors, who had little use for Hindu idolatry, and also directed their destructive zeal at "innumerable temples, monasteries, and libraries", which were repositories of learning, or were otherwise lavishly painted (pp. 327-331). Whatever destruction of indigenous maps may have taken place at the hands of these conquerors, and Schwartzberg does not marshal any really tenable evidence in support of this view, the intervention of India's colonizers was to have a far more decisive impact. The British were inclined to see Indian maps as trite and fanciful products that in no way mapped 'reality'. Macaulay was of course voicing more than his own opinion when, in his notorious "Minute on Education" (1835), he ridiculed the history of the Hindus as "abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns thirty thousand years long, and geography, made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter." In their neglect and wanton destruction of indigenous maps, the British were however doing more than emulating the iconoclasm of the early Muslim conquerors, for the epistemological imperatives of the colonial state would entail, in cartography as in other areas of knowledge, the elimination of pluralistic and multiple conceptions of knowledge in favor of an allegedly scientific, rational, and objective discourse that purported to represent reality.

If such 'external' or historical reasons might not be sufficiently compelling as an explanation for the paucity of Indian maps and the meagre accomplishments of Indian cartography, Schwartzberg also furnishes what we might call 'internal' reasons, or a picture of the Hindu world-view as one that is at loggerheads with the contours, demands, and modes of expression of the material and mundane world. The Indian geographer, D. C. Sircar, noted that "there is no special word in Sanskrit for 'a map.'" He was to argue that this "raises the question whether map drawing was at all known to the Indians of old." Schwartzberg's particular inflection of this 'fact' leads him to the suggestion that the logic of Hindu culture was not conducive to cartography, at least as understood in the West, for in a predominantly religious country the map-maker was asked to draw "road maps for the soul", not representations of the "finite terrestrial earth" or some segment of it (p. 329). The journey that the soul, housed in a human body, takes on its passage through the world seemed infinitely more interesting to the Hindu than those pedestrian and terrestrial trips which maps are meant to facilitate. One would expect that maps of pilgrimage sites and routes at least would have been important to Hindus, as they have been to Jains, but apparently such

maps are of relatively recent vintage (p. 330). Schwartzberg summons the 'Brahminical conspiracy theory' to explain this gap; as he argues, it was "obviously in the economic interest of the *panditas* to have no guide to the *tirthas* [pilgrimage sites] other than themselves and the *mahatmyas*", the latter being Sanskrit texts which extolled the virtue of undertaking *yatras* to particular *tirthas*. As the business of learning was solely in the hands of the Brahmins, their authority was to remain uncontested. In Schwartzberg's words, "hence, if a map prepared by a Brahman official or savant did not square well with reality, it is questionable that others, however well informed they may have been, would have had the temerity to advance a contrary view" (p. 329). If maps were scarcely used by Hindus even when they were embarked on pilgrimages, is it at all likely that a cosmically attuned people given to ponderous thoughts and metaphysical probings, and wedded to a belief in karma, would have had any use for something as pedestrian as maps?

To scholars of South Asia, and particularly of Hindu India, religion has long been the key that unfailingly opens all doors, and Schwartzberg's recourse to this discourse is hasty and even, one might say, unfortunate. Where would Indological discourse have been without the cunning and pedantic Brahmin, the bewildering pantheon of colorful and bizarre gods and goddesses, and the effete Hindu given to superstition and barbaric practices? The attraction of religion as an organizing principle for the study of South Asian cartography is scarcely lost upon Schwartzberg; as he notes, "because culture in South Asia is to such a large extent religiously defined, it is hardly surprising that much of the cartography of the region is religiously inspired" (p. 506). This religious inspiration which guides the Hindu in the conduct of his daily life appears in many forms, among which we might number astrology, of which Schwartzberg says that its "hold . . . on the people of India and on many lands influenced by Indian culture remains exceedingly strong". Although Schwartzberg spares us a "detailed consideration of this genre of writing and illustration" (p. 316), it is meaningful that he should have drawn our attention to the purportedly mesmerizing effects of astrology upon Hindus. It is similarly significant that he merely comments on what he takes to be the lack of exchange between Hindu and Muslim cartographers, and the "seeming immunity of Hindu mapmakers, such as they were, to Islamic influences" (p. 507); in so doing, he leaves behind the two-fold impression that Hindu and Islamic cartography could only exist as separate and autonomous spheres, and that Hindus remained impervious to, and unaffected by, the superior accomplishments of Islamic cartography. When the Hindu-Muslim encounter could be quite fruitful otherwise, as we know from the history of architecture, music, and literature, it is not clear why Hindus should have remained so unyielding in the arena of cartography, unless we resurrect, once again, the idea of a bloated, sufficient, and vain Hinduism that had no use for the 'real' world.

Although Schwartzberg allows his understanding of cartography in South Asia to be guided by the Indological framework, in many other respects his work succeeds admirably in placing the study of South Asian cartography on a sounder footing, and nowhere more so than in contesting effectively the Western definition of a 'map' (p. 504). As Schwartzberg makes amply clear, there is no compelling reason why we should be bound to accept a representation as a map only if it meets certain allegedly 'scientific' standards. Not all works of visual imagination will be mistaken for maps, but neither need maps be confined to such representations as have scales, geographic grids, and so on (p. 448). If traditional South Asian maps lacked even "political boundaries" (p. 508), that suggests that the South Asian world was rather more fluid than the West, and certainly cartography would be one way to attain a comparative understanding of the political and social history of India. Schwartzberg records the interesting fact that "a substantial portion of the surviving corpus of Indian maps is of Maharashtrian provenance and that many of those maps were drawn for military purposes" (p. 324), but he does not pursue this observation. What is the relationship of militarism to cartography? Can one argue that cartography is more likely to flourish in states which are given to conquest and militant adventurism? To adopt a different line of inquiry, is it not the case that countries have lain claim to territory by means of cartographic representations? Argentina waged such a cartographic war, as even a cursory look at Argentinean postage stamps will reveal, over the Malvinas (or Falkland) Islands long before the outbreak of war with England, and likewise India and China conducted, throughout the 1950s, a relentless cartographic war over disputed border territory. Schwartzberg's volume does not take us into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but perhaps these questions will be addressed in the later volumes of the series.

The more expansive notion of a 'map' with which Schwartzberg works allows him to consider, in considerable detail and with the aid of figures, illustrations, and beautiful color plates, cosmographic maps (Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain), celestial mapping, and maps of forts, pilgrimages, and sacred places. Schwartzberg pays close attention to late premodern maps from Kashmir, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Braj, Central India, Maharashtra, North East India, and Sri Lanka, for the obvious reason that maps from these areas predominate. It is perhaps no accident that maps should have been derived largely from coastal areas, where Arab traders and European merchants would have left the marks of their influence, the traces of their modes of apprehension, or from areas constituting the borders of South Asia, where the 'anxiety of influence' may have led to rather more sharply defined cartographic demarcations of boundaries. The maps from Central India date to the Mughal period; although the pre-colonial state may not have made any provisions for cadastral mapping, the forging of empire no doubt necessitated some form of terrestrial map-making. These and numerous other questions, pertaining to Indian notions of 'place' and 'space', and to the relationship

between such constructions and cartography, are now open to further inquiry, and Schwartzberg's volume will have served its purpose admirably if it becomes the point of departure for more analytical reflections and interventions from the point of view of cultural studies. Whatever the future of cartography in South Asia, this volume leaves us with a richer understanding of the accomplishments, as much as the failings, of South Asian cartography.

Originally published in *The Book Review* (Delhi) 17, no. 9 (Sept. 1993):8-9.