

Indian Geographic Thought: A Critical Analysis of Traditional Knowledge System

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Abstract: This paper presents a critical analysis of traditional knowledge systems in Indian geographic thought, exploring their development, key concepts, and contributions to our understanding of the world. The chapter examines the evolution of Indian geographic thought from ancient Vedic geography to classical Indian geography, highlighting the influence of folk geography and Puranic cosmography. It delves into key concepts such as desha (region), janapada (settlement), nagara (city), and prithvi (earth), which are central to Indian geographic thought. A critical analysis of these traditional knowledge systems reveals both strengths and weaknesses, including their impact on contemporary geographic thought. The chapter also explores the influence of colonialism and modernization on Indian geographic thought, leading to a decline in traditional knowledge systems. A comparative analysis with Western geographic thought highlights similarities and differences, demonstrating the significance of Indian thought in shaping global geographic understanding. This chapter argues that Indian geographic thought offers valuable insights into traditional knowledge systems, emphasizing the importance of understanding and appreciating indigenous perspectives. It underscores the relevance of Indian geographic thought in contemporary times, particularly in the context of sustainable development, environmental conservation, and cultural heritage. By examining the rich and diverse history of Indian geographic thought, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of traditional knowledge systems and their contributions to global geographic understanding.

Keywords: Indian Geographic Thought, Traditional Knowledge Systems, Bhugol, Nagar, Janapada, Prithivi.

I. Introduction

Indian geographic thought has a rich and diverse history, spanning thousands of years and encompassing a wide range of traditional knowledge systems. From the ancient Vedic texts to the classical Indian geographers, Indian thinkers have long grappled with fundamental questions about the nature of the world, the relationship between humans and the environment, and the best ways to organize and understand spatial relationships. Despite its long history and significant contributions to global geographic understanding, Indian geographic thought remains poorly understood in the Western academy, often relegated to the margins of mainstream geographic discourse.

This paper seeks to address this lacuna by providing a critical analysis of traditional knowledge systems in Indian geographic thought. Through a detailed examination of key texts, concepts, and thinkers, this chapter will explore the development and evolution of Indian geographic thought, highlighting its unique insights and perspectives on the world. By engaging with Indian geographic thought on its own terms, rather than simply trying to fit it into Western categories or frameworks, this chapter aims to demonstrate the value and relevance of traditional knowledge systems in contemporary geographic debates.

1. Traditional Knowledge Systems in India:

India is home to a diverse array of traditional knowledge systems, each with its own unique perspectives and approaches to understanding the world. Some of the key traditional knowledge systems in India include:

Vedic Geography (1500 BCE - 500 BCE): The Vedic texts, such as the Rigveda and the Mahabharata, contain early geographic descriptions of the Indian subcontinent, including the concept of the "seven islands" (sapta-dwipa).

Puranic Cosmography (500 BCE - 500 CE): The Puranas, a collection of Hindu myths and legends, describe the universe as comprising multiple worlds and realms, including the earthly realm (Prithvi) and the heavenly realm (svarga).

Classical Indian Geography (500 BCE - 1500 CE): Indian geographers such as Varahamihira and Aryabhata made significant contributions to the field of geography, including the development of new mapping techniques and the identification of the Earth's circumference.

Folk Geography (ongoing): India's diverse folk traditions, such as the tribal cultures of the Northeast and the folk songs of rural India, contain rich geographic knowledge and spatial practices, including the use of natural features and landmarks for navigation.

These traditional knowledge systems have contributed significantly to our understanding of the world, offering unique insights into the relationships between humans, the environment, and the cosmos. Despite their importance, however, these systems have often been marginalized or ignored in favour of Western scientific approaches to geography.

2. Vedic Geography:

Vedic geography refers to the geographic descriptions and concepts found in the Vedic texts, which are among the oldest and most sacred texts of Hinduism. The Vedic period, spanning from 1500 BCE to 500 BCE, saw the development of a sophisticated geographic understanding, including:

- The concept of the "seven islands" (sapta-dwipa), which described the Indian subcontinent as comprising seven distinct regions.
- The identification of the four cardinal directions (north, south, east, and west) and the use of astronomical observations to determine direction.
- The description of the Earth as a flat disc (bhugola) surrounded by oceans and mountains.
- The concept of the "mountain of the gods" (deva-parvata), which referred to the Himalayas as a sacred and spiritually significant region.

Key Vedic texts that contain geographic descriptions include:

- The Rigveda, which contains descriptions of the seven islands and the four cardinal directions.
- The Mahabharata, which describes the geography of the Indian subcontinent and the surrounding regions.
- The Shatapatha Brahmana, which contains detailed descriptions of the Earth's dimensions and the movements of the celestial bodies.

Vedic geography reflects a deep understanding of the natural world and the spiritual significance of the landscape. While the Vedic texts do not provide a modern scientific understanding of geography, they demonstrate a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the relationships between humans, the environment, and the cosmos.

3. Puranic Cosmography:

Puranic cosmography refers to the cosmic and geographic descriptions found in the Puranas, a collection of Hindu myths and legends. The Puranas, composed between 500 BCE and 500 CE, contain elaborate descriptions of the universe, including:

- a. The concept of the "three worlds" (triloka): the earthly realm (prithvi), the heavenly realm (svarga), and the netherworld (patala).
- b. The description of the universe as comprising multiple concentric spheres, including the Earth, the Sun, the Moon, and the stars.
- c. The identification of the four oceans (samudra) surrounding the earthly realm.
- d. The concept of the "mountain of the gods" (deva-parvata), which referred to the Himalayas as a sacred and spiritually significant region.

Key Puranic texts that contain cosmographic descriptions include:

- a. The Vishnu Purana, which describes the creation of the universe and the geography of the earthly realm.
- b. The Bhagavata Purana, which contains detailed descriptions of the heavenly and netherworlds.
- c. The Matsya Purana, which describes the universe as comprising multiple concentric spheres.

Puranic cosmography reflects a complex and multifaceted understanding of the universe, blending mythological and spiritual concepts with geographic and astronomical observations. While the Puranas do not provide a modern scientific understanding of the universe, they demonstrate a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the relationships between humans, the environment, and the cosmos.

4. Classical Indian Geography:

Classical Indian geography refers to the geographic knowledge and traditions developed in ancient India, particularly during the Gupta Empire (320-550 CE). This period saw significant advances in geographic understanding, including:

- a. The development of new mapping techniques, such as the use of grids and scales.
- b. The identification of the Earth's circumference by Aryabhata (476 CE).
- c. The description of the Indian subcontinent as comprising nine regions (nava-varsha).
- d. The identification of the four major rivers (Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, and Sindh).

Key classical Indian geographers include:

- a. Aryabhata, who wrote the Aryabhatiya, a treatise on mathematics and astronomy.
- b. Varahamihira, who wrote the Pancha Siddhantika, a comprehensive work on astronomy and geography.
- c. Bhaskara, who wrote the Siddhanta Siromani, a treatise on mathematics and astronomy.

Classical Indian geography reflects a sophisticated understanding of the natural world, blending scientific observations with mythological and cultural traditions. The contributions of classical Indian geographers had a significant impact on the development of geography in India and beyond.

Some notable texts from this period include:

- Aryabhatiya (476 CE)
- Pancha Siddhantika (505 CE)
- Siddhanta Siromani (1150 CE)

These texts demonstrate the advanced geographic knowledge and traditions developed in ancient India, and highlight the significant contributions of classical Indian geographers to the field of geography.

5. Folk Geography:

Folk geography refers to the traditional geographic knowledge and practices of indigenous communities in India. This includes:

- a. Oral traditions and stories about the creation of the landscape and the location of sacred sites.
- b. Practical knowledge of the environment, including the location of water sources, fertile soil, and medicinal plants.
- c. Use of natural features and landmarks for navigation and orientation.
- d. Cultural and spiritual associations with specific landscapes and places.

Folk geography is often passed down through generations by word of mouth, and is closely tied to the cultural and spiritual practices of indigenous communities. Examples of folk geography in India include:

- a. The tribal communities of the Northeast, who have a rich tradition of storytelling and oral history related to the landscape.
- b. The folk songs of rural India, which often contain geographic references and descriptions of the natural environment.
- c. The traditional knowledge of Ayurvedic medicine, which is closely tied to the geographic location of specific plants and herbs.

Folk geography highlights the importance of local knowledge and traditional practices in understanding the natural world. It also underscores the need to recognize and respect the cultural and spiritual associations of indigenous communities with their environments.

Some notable examples of folk geography in India include:

- a. The Naga tribes of the Northeast, who have a rich tradition of storytelling and oral history related to the landscape.
- b. The Bhil communities of Western India, who have a deep understanding of the forest environment and its resources.
- c. The traditional knowledge of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which is closely tied to the unique environment and biodiversity of the region.

II. Key Concept and Ideas

Classical Indian geography and folk traditions employ a range of key concepts and ideas to understand and describe the world. These concepts, often rooted in spiritual and cultural beliefs, offer unique insights into the relationships between humans, the environment, and the cosmos. This section will explore some of the central ideas in Indian geographic thought, including the concept of desha (region), janapada (settlement), nagara (city), and Prithvi (earth). By examining these concepts, we can gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which Indian thinkers have traditionally understood and interacted with their environment.

II. Key aspects of desha include:

1. Desha (Region):

In Indian geographic thought, desha refers to a region or territory, often characterized by its unique cultural, linguistic, and environmental features. The concept of desha emphasizes the importance of place and regional identity in understanding the world.

Key aspects of desha include:

- a. Geographic boundaries: Desha is often defined by natural boundaries such as rivers, mountains, or forests.
- b. Cultural identity: Desha is closely tied to the culture, language, and traditions of its inhabitants.
- c. Environmental characteristics: Desha is often associated with specific environmental features such as climate, soil, or vegetation.

The concept of desha is significant in Indian geography because it:

- a. Recognizes regional diversity and uniqueness
- b. Emphasizes the importance of local knowledge and traditions
- c. Provides a framework for understanding the relationships between people and their environment

Examples of desha in India include:

- a. The Punjab region, known for its fertile plains and Sikh culture
- b. The Bengal region, characterized by its deltaic environment and Bengali language
- c. The Deccan region, defined by its plateau landscape and diverse cultural heritage

By understanding desha, we can gain insights into the complex relationships between culture, environment, and identity in Indian geography.

2. Janapada (Settlement):

In Indian geographic thought, janapada refers to a settlement or inhabited region, often characterized by its social, economic, and political organization. The concept of janapada emphasizes the importance of human settlement and community in understanding the world.

Key aspects of janapada include:

- a. Human settlement: Janapada is centered on the idea of human habitation and community.
- b. Social organization: Janapada is often associated with specific social structures, such as tribes, castes, or villages.
- c. Economic activities: Janapada is characterized by its economic activities, such as agriculture, trade, or craftsmanship.
- d. Political organization: Janapada may have its own political systems, such as chiefs, councils, or kingdoms.

The concept of janapada is significant in Indian geography because it:

- a. Recognizes the importance of human settlement and community
- b. Highlights the diversity of social, economic, and political organizations
- c. Provides a framework for understanding the relationships between people and their environment

Examples of janapada in India include:

- a. Tribal villages in the Northeast, organized around kinship and shared resources
- b. Ancient city-states, such as Taxila or Varanasi, with their own political and economic systems
- c. Rural villages, centred on agriculture and local traditions

By understanding janapada, we can gain insights into the complex relationships between human settlement, community, and environment in Indian geography.

3. Nagara (City):

In traditional Indian geographic thought, Nagara refers to the city or urban settlement. The concept of Nagara emphasizes the importance of urban planning, architecture, and community in creating a harmonious and sustainable environment.

The Nagara is often depicted as a sacred space, with its design and layout reflecting the cosmic order and the interconnectedness of all living beings. The city is seen as a microcosm of the universe, with its various components working together in harmony.

Key features of the Nagara include:

- a. A central axis or spine, often marked by a major temple or public building
- b. A grid-like pattern of streets and alleys, reflecting the cosmic order
- c. A mix of residential, commercial, and public spaces, promoting community and social interaction
- d. Incorporation of natural elements, such as parks, gardens, and water features

The concept of Nagara highlights the importance of urban planning and design in creating sustainable and thriving communities. By understanding the traditional Indian approach to city-building, we can gain insights into creating more livable, equitable, and environmentally conscious urban spaces.

4. Prithvi (Earth):

In Indian geographic thought, Prithvi refers to the Earth or the physical world, often personified as a goddess or mother figure. The concept of Prithvi emphasizes the importance of the natural environment and the interconnectedness of all living beings.

Key aspects of Prithvi include:

- a. The physical world: Prithvi encompasses the land, oceans, mountains, and atmosphere.
- b. Personification: Prithvi is often depicted as a goddess, emphasizing the sacred and nurturing qualities of the Earth.
- c. Interconnectedness: Prithvi highlights the relationships between humans, animals, plants, and the natural environment.
- d. Cycles of nature: Prithvi is associated with the cycles of birth, growth, decay, and renewal in the natural world.

The concept of Prithvi is significant in Indian geography because it:

- a. Recognizes the sacred and interconnected nature of the environment
- b. Emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with nature
- c. Provides a framework for understanding the relationships between humans and the natural world

Examples of Prithvi in Indian culture include:

- a. The goddess Bhudevi, often depicted as a consort of the god Vishnu
- b. The concept of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" or "the Earth is one family"
- c. The emphasis on environmental conservation and sustainability in Hindu and Buddhist traditions

By understanding Prithvi, we can gain insights into the Indian perspective on the natural world and our place within it.

III. Critical Analysis:

This section provides a critical analysis of Indian geographic thought, examining both its contributions and limitations. Despite its rich history and diverse traditions, Indian geography has often been marginalized or overlooked in favour of Western perspectives. This section will explore the ways in which Indian geographic thought challenges and complements dominant Western approaches, highlighting its unique insights into the relationships between culture, environment, and identity. By critically examining Indian geographic thought, we can gain a deeper understanding of its relevance and significance in contemporary geographic debates.

Additionally, you may want to consider adding another paragraph to outline the specific areas of critical analysis, such as:

This section will critically examine Indian geographic thought through several key lenses, including:

- a. The tension between traditional knowledge systems and modern scientific approaches
- b. The role of power and politics in shaping geographic knowledge and practices
- c. The intersection of culture, identity, and environment in Indian geographic thought
- d. The potential applications and implications of Indian geographic thought in contemporary contexts.

1. Strengths and Weaknesses of Traditional Knowledge Systems:

Strengths:

- a. ***Unique perspectives:*** Traditional knowledge systems offer distinctive insights into the relationships between culture, environment, and identity.
- b. ***Local relevance:*** Traditional knowledge is often deeply rooted in local contexts, making it highly relevant and applicable to specific regions and communities.
- c. ***Holistic understanding:*** Traditional knowledge systems frequently encompass spiritual, social, and ecological aspects, providing a comprehensive understanding of the world.
- d. ***Community-based:*** Traditional knowledge is often held and transmitted within communities, fostering social cohesion and collective identity.
- e. ***Adaptability:*** Traditional knowledge systems have adapted to changing environments and circumstances over centuries, demonstrating resilience and flexibility.

Weaknesses:

- a. ***Limited scope:*** Traditional knowledge systems may have limited geographic or thematic scope, making them less applicable to broader contexts.
- b. ***Lack of documentation:*** Much traditional knowledge remains undocumented, risking loss and erosion over time.
- c. ***Vulnerability to external influences:*** Traditional knowledge systems can be vulnerable to external influences, such as colonialism, urbanization, and globalization.
- d. ***Potential for stagnation:*** Traditional knowledge systems may become static and resistant to new ideas and innovations.
- e. ***Power dynamics:*** Traditional knowledge systems can be influenced by power dynamics within communities, leading to unequal access and representation.

By acknowledging both the strengths and weaknesses of traditional knowledge systems, we can better understand their value and potential applications in contemporary contexts, while also addressing the challenges and limitations associated with these systems.

Impact of Colonialism and Modernization" (approx. 300 words):

2. Colonialism and modernization have had a profound impact on traditional Indian geographic thought, leading to:

Loss of Traditional Knowledge

- Suppression of indigenous knowledge systems by colonial powers
- Erasure of traditional practices and beliefs
- Replacement with Western scientific approaches

Disruption of Community-Based Knowledge

- Breakdown of community structures and social cohesion
- Loss of intergenerational knowledge transmission

- Commodification of knowledge for economic gain

Imposition of Western Epistemology

- Introduction of Western scientific methods and categories
- Privileging of empirical data over traditional knowledge
- Marginalization of non-Western epistemologies

Hybridization and Adaptation

- Blending of traditional and Western knowledge systems
- Adaptation of traditional practices to modern contexts
- Emergence of new, hybrid forms of geographic thought

Resurgence and Revitalization

- Efforts to revitalize and document traditional knowledge
- Recognition of indigenous rights and self-determination
- Integration of traditional knowledge into modern geographic practice

By examining the impact of colonialism and modernization on traditional Indian geographic thought, we can better understand the complex and often fraught history of geographic knowledge production in India.

3. Relevance in Contemporary Times:

Traditional Indian geographic thought remains relevant in contemporary times, offering valuable insights and perspectives on:

Environmental Sustainability

- Holistic understanding of human-environment relationships
- Emphasis on living in harmony with nature
- Recognition of the sacred and interconnected nature of the environment

Cultural Diversity and Pluralism

- Celebration of diverse cultural practices and knowledge systems
- Recognition of the importance of local knowledge and traditions
- Promotion of cross-cultural understanding and exchange

Decolonization and Social Justice

- Challenge to dominant Western epistemologies and power structures
- Recognition of indigenous rights and self-determination
- Promotion of equitable and inclusive geographic practices

Globalization and Urbanization

- Understanding of the impact of globalization on local cultures and environments
- Recognition of the need for sustainable and equitable urban planning
- Promotion of community-based initiatives and participatory governance

Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Approaches

- Integration of traditional knowledge with modern scientific approaches
- Recognition of the value of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research

- Promotion of collaborative and inclusive research practices

By recognizing the relevance of traditional Indian geographic thought in contemporary times, we can harness its potential to address pressing global challenges and promote a more equitable, sustainable, and culturally diverse world.

IV. Comparative Analysis with Western Geographic Thought:

The study of Indian geographic thought offers a unique opportunity to engage in a comparative analysis with Western geographic thought. While Western geography has traditionally been dominated by positivist and empiricist approaches, Indian geographic thought offers a distinct perspective that emphasizes the spiritual, cultural, and social aspects of human-environment relationships. By comparing and contrasting these two traditions, we can gain a deeper understanding of the diversity of geographic thought and practice, and identify potential areas of convergence and divergence.

A comparative analysis between Indian and Western geographic thought reveals both similarities and differences. Both traditions recognize the importance of understanding the relationships between humans and their environment, but they differ significantly in their epistemological and methodological approaches. Western geography has often prioritized empirical data and scientific methods, whereas Indian geographic thought has emphasized the role of intuition, spirituality, and community-based knowledge. By examining these differences, we can challenge dominant Western perspectives and explore the potential contributions of non-Western geographic thought to contemporary debates in geography. This comparative analysis can also facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of geographic knowledge and practice.

1. Similarities and Differences:

Similarities:

- Both Indian and Western geographic thought recognize the importance of understanding human-environment relationships
- Both traditions emphasize the need for spatial analysis and mapping
- Both acknowledge the role of culture and society in shaping geographic knowledge and practice
- Both have evolved over time, incorporating new ideas and approaches

Differences:

- Epistemology:*** Western geography emphasizes empirical data and scientific methods, whereas Indian geographic thought prioritizes intuition, spirituality, and community-based knowledge
- Methodology:*** Western geography often employs quantitative and positivist approaches, whereas Indian geographic thought incorporates qualitative and interpretive methods
- Focus:*** Western geography tends to focus on physical environment and spatial patterns, whereas Indian geographic thought emphasizes the cultural, social, and spiritual aspects of place and landscape
- Scale:*** Western geography often focuses on global and regional scales, whereas Indian geographic thought prioritizes local and community-based scales
- Purpose:*** Western geography aims to understand and explain geographic phenomena, whereas Indian geographic thought seeks to understand and harmonize human-environment relationships

By examining the similarities and differences between Indian and Western geographic thought, we can gain a deeper understanding of the diversity of geographic knowledge and practice, and identify potential areas of convergence and divergence. This comparative analysis can also facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of geographic inquiry.

2. Influence of Indian Thought on Western Geography:

Indian geographic thought has had a significant influence on Western geography, particularly in the following areas:

- a. **Holistic approaches:** Indian thought has inspired Western geographers to adopt more holistic and integrated approaches, considering the interconnectedness of physical and human environments.
- b. **Cultural and spiritual perspectives:** Indian geographic thought has encouraged Western geographers to incorporate cultural and spiritual perspectives into their work, recognizing the importance of meaning and symbolism in shaping human-environment relationships.
- c. **Community-based research:** Indian thought has influenced Western geographers to engage in community-based research, prioritizing local knowledge and collaborative approaches.
- d. **Critical geography:** Indian geographic thought has contributed to the development of critical geography in the West, challenging dominant paradigms and highlighting issues of power, justice, and equity.
- e. **Postcolonial perspectives:** Indian thought has informed postcolonial perspectives in Western geography, emphasizing the need to decolonize geographic knowledge and practices.

Notable Western geographers influenced by Indian thought include:

- Carl Sauer, who incorporated cultural and historical perspectives into his work
- Yi-Fu Tuan, who explored the concept of "topophilia" (love of place)
- David Harvey, who engaged with Indian thought in his work on postcolonialism and critical geography
- Gillian Rose, who drew on Indian philosophy in her feminist and postcolonial critiques of geography

By acknowledging the influence of Indian thought on Western geography, we can recognize the value of cross-cultural exchange and the importance of diverse perspectives in shaping geographic knowledge and practice.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Indian geographic thought offers a rich and diverse tradition of understanding human-environment relationships, emphasizing the importance of culture, spirituality, and community. Through its unique concepts and approaches, such as Prithvi, Janapada, and Nagara, Indian geography provides valuable insights into the complex and multifaceted nature of geographic knowledge and practice. By engaging with Indian geographic thought, we can challenge dominant Western perspectives and foster a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of geography.

As we move forward, it is essential to recognize the significance of Indian geographic thought in shaping a more equitable and sustainable world. By embracing the diversity of geographic knowledge and practice, we can work towards a more harmonious relationship between humans and the environment. The study of Indian geographic thought is not only an academic pursuit but also a vital step towards creating a more just and sustainable future. By exploring and learning from Indian geography, we can enrich our understanding of the world and our place within it.

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