

# Imagining APNA Punjab in Cyberspace<sup>1</sup>

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## DISCONTINUOUS AND CONTINUOUS SPACE

Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson have observed a motif of discontinuousness in modernist organizations of space. The modern map, which splits the world into a number of discrete, separate formations best illustrates the modernist premise of discontinuity (1997). Gupta and Ferguson discern a pattern of interconnected spaces marking the relations between groups and cultures (1997). This reconceptualization of space as interconnected has been triggered by the connectivity of the electronic media and new information and communication technologies (ICT).

The “deterritorialized space” of the electronic era decouples the naturalized link between space and territory in earlier productions of space. Places no longer remain attached to or bounded within discrete physical spaces. Nor does physical contiguity remain a key determinant in place-making as space is disengaged from place, culture and identity. The noncontiguous spaces of the digitized world enable places to be formed across geographical and national borders. As space becomes detached from materiality, places grow despatialized. With the possibilities for constructing place in hyperreality, places, cultures and identities no longer need to be fixed to real spaces.

The interconnected world created by new information and communication technologies should logically be expected to merge into a homogeneous, “undifferentiated space”. But digital networks have simultaneously led to the fragmentation of space in new ways reproducing, at times, pre-modern spatial divisions. The reterritorialization of space in the contemporary digitized world compels us to rethink the formation of community, identity, solidarity and difference. The boundary-breaking electronic spaces have paradoxically resulted in the thickening and intensification of old boundaries due to their greater connectivity. If the electronic media have enabled the formation of global communities, they have also signaled “the return of the tribes” in various corners of the globe.

## ICT, VIRTUAL SPACE AND NEW ETHNICITIES

Paul C. Adams and Rina Ghosh (2003) note a silence on the issue of ethnicity in the ICT debate in “India.com: The Construction of a Space Between”. They argue that the topic deserves attention since people use ICT to construct a sense of community and personal identity, both of which relate to ethnicity. They contend that “when ‘place-transcending’ technologies facilitate the creation of ties through space and reduce the separation between here and there, negating place, this can strengthen a sense of ethnic identity, which implies a tie between self and place” (Adams & Ghosh, 2003, p. 416). Adams and Ghosh have invented the notion of the *bridgescape* “as a collection of inter-connected virtual places that support people’s movement between two regions or countries and the sustenance of cultural ties at a distance.” They believe that internet, along with ‘a number of overlapping communicative links in different media spaces’ creates the bridgescape, *a set of connections between here and there, in both a geographical and a cultural sense*” (2003, p. 420). This article will explore the reconstruction of a North Indian ethnic group, dispersed by the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, in electronic space aided by digital and satellite networks, which interrogates the cartographic impulse in the making of the modern Indian nation that caused a rupture in the community’s collective memory. Punjabi *retribalization* in the electronic public sphere heralds the return of regional, linguistic affiliations offering alternative imaginings of community that contest the imagined community of the nation. It interrogates the naturalization of national identity in modernism that has repressed other forms of “spatial commitment and identity” (Gupta, 1997, p. 179).

## SPACE, GEOGRAPHY, NATION

Geography, a modern European method of organizing space representing itself as objective and universal, has dominated the epistemology of spatiality. Recent studies have implicated geography, the modern cartographic

Figure 1.

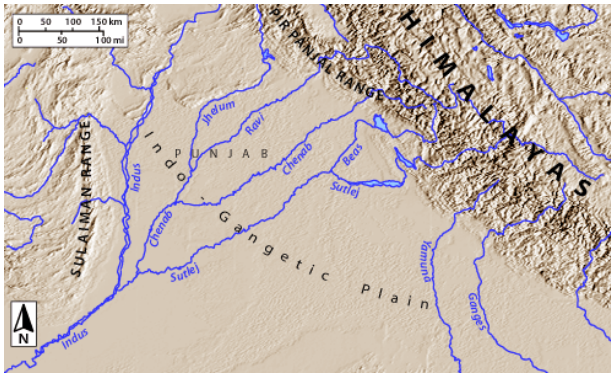


Figure 2.



Figure 3.



survey, measuring and division of space, in destroying indigenous places. Drawing on Jose Rabasa's (2001) concept of the palimpsest, Bill Ashcroft, for example, regards geography as a prime vehicle of colonial power and control through which the space of the colonized was erased and written over.

Similarly, Verba views geography and culture as playing a similar function in the production of the nation-state. He has claimed that "the creation of a national identity among the members of a nation is the cultural equivalent of the drawing the boundaries of the nation" (Pye & Verba, 1965, p. 530). Lucy Chester's (2004) description of Radcliffe's boundary as creative rather than descriptive in her analysis of the boundary dispute between India and Pakistan confirms geography's role in *inscribing* the boundaries of nations.<sup>2</sup> Chester contends that Radcliffe's hasty boundary making exercise seems to have been dictated not by factors like religious identity, the grounds for the Indian Partition, but by imperial concerns for not putting the writings of the empire in the rail, road and canal infrastructure under erasure. This confirms Carl J. Bonura Jr's contention that geography, believed to merely *describe* the boundaries of the nation-state, actually *inscribes* cultural spaces necessary for the nation-state's functioning (1998). The lines of the new nation dictated by Radcliffe's imperial ideology erases the earlier markings splitting the Punjabi, bioregional, ethno-cultural and linguistic memory.

But defining its political boundaries is more problematic given its many partitions. After the Partition of India in 1947, India received only a fraction of Punjab the major part having gone to Pakistan.

In 1966, India's portion of the Punjab was divided into three areas: Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh with only the northwest of the region comprising Punjab, the southeast becoming Haryana, and the hilly regions in the northeast Himachal Pradesh.

The present Punjab retains only 38% of the area comprising undivided Punjab.<sup>3</sup>

## INFOGRAPHY, VIRTUAL SPACE, POSTNATION

If geography was the modernist instrument of colonizing the spaces of others, infography appears to be the mode of recovery of the self in Punjabi *retribalization* through the *secondary orality* of the electronic media. From the earlier view of ICT as perpetuating old dominant structures of authority, the ICT discussion has now shifted to their appropriation by what Warf and Grimes call "counterhegemonic discourses" and their use by marginalized groups to challenge dominant structures: "Marginalized people who are unable to express their needs and identities in the so-called real world, . . . can share interests and experiences in interactive discussion forums (chat rooms), forming classic "communities without propinquities," spaces of shared interest without physical proximity" (1997, p. 263). Though nationalities might have split loyalties between the region

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