

Mapping the Past

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
 - **Chapter 1** The Spatial Turn in South Asian Studies
 - **Chapter 2** Reading Historical Maps Critically
 - **Chapter 3** Finding and Evaluating Historical Spatial Data
 - **Chapter 4** Georeferencing South Asian Maps
 - **Chapter 5** Digitizing Boundaries, Routes, and Sites
 - **Chapter 6** Building and Using Historical Gazetteers
 - **Chapter 7** Coordinate Systems, Projections, and Scale
 - **Chapter 8** Cleaning Place Names and Toponyms Across Languages
 - **Chapter 9** Modeling Time: Periodization and Change
 - **Chapter 10** From Text to Map: Extracting Spatial Information
 - **Chapter 11** Core Spatial Analyses: Buffers, Overlays, and Networks
 - **Chapter 12** Maritime Trade Routes of the Indian Ocean
 - **Chapter 13** Overland Caravans and Riverine Corridors
 - **Chapter 14** District Formation in Colonial South Asia
 - **Chapter 15** Princely States and Administrative Reorganization
 - **Chapter 16** Migration and Displacement at Partition
 - **Chapter 17** Labor, Caste, and Spatial Inequality
 - **Chapter 18** Urban Growth: Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras
 - **Chapter 19** Environment and Empire: Monsoon, Forests, Famine
 - **Chapter 20** Remote Sensing for Historical Landscapes
 - **Chapter 21** Story Maps and Narrative Cartography
 - **Chapter 22** Web Mapping and Reproducible Workflows
 - **Chapter 23** Ethics, Data Sensitivity, and Collaboration
 - **Chapter 24** Teaching and Learning with Historical GIS
 - **Chapter 25** Preserving, Citing, and Sharing Spatial Research
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Introduction

Mapping the Past is a practical guide to doing historical research with maps, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and spatial data in and about South Asia. It introduces the “spatial turn” as both a conceptual shift—asking spatial questions of familiar sources—and a methodological toolkit that lets us visualize, measure, and model historical change. Throughout, the focus remains hands-on: how to locate sources, prepare data, select appropriate methods, and communicate results

responsibly to scholarly and public audiences.

Working with South Asian materials brings distinctive challenges and opportunities. Boundaries and place names have changed repeatedly across imperial, colonial, and national periods; maps come in multiple scripts and languages; and surveying practices, projections, and scales vary widely. This book treats those complexities not as obstacles but as research prompts. Readers learn how to compare editions of maps, reconcile variant toponyms, manage uncertainty, and document decisions so that results are transparent and reproducible.

The chapters proceed from foundations to applications. Early chapters explain how to read historical maps critically, georeference them, digitize boundaries and routes, and build historical gazetteers that connect places to times, languages, and sources. Subsequent chapters introduce core spatial analyses—overlays, buffers, and networks—alongside techniques for modeling time, since historical phenomena rarely fit neatly into static polygons. The volume remains software-agnostic while offering concrete examples that can be implemented with widely accessible tools.

Three sustained case studies anchor the book. The first explores trade routes—maritime circuits across the Indian Ocean and overland and riverine corridors within the subcontinent. Readers learn how to integrate textual itineraries, port records, winds and currents, and archaeological evidence into network models and route reconstructions. Rather than claiming precise paths where sources are thin, we develop strategies to visualize plausible corridors, annotate uncertainty, and compare competing interpretations.

The second case study examines district formation under colonial rule and the administrative reorganization of princely states. Here the central problem is change in territorial units over time. We build temporally versioned boundary datasets, link them to population and revenue tables, and show how different boundary configurations can alter historical conclusions. This section introduces best practices for managing shifting geometries, from splitting and merging polygons to preserving lineage metadata that records when and why units changed.

The third case study turns to migration and displacement, with particular attention to the human costs and logistical dynamics of Partition. Because such topics involve sensitive data and living communities, we discuss ethical frameworks for collecting, anonymizing, and mapping information. Readers practice assembling evidence from oral histories, newspapers, and administrative reports; designing symbologies that avoid sensationalism; and combining density surfaces, flow maps, and qualitative narratives to convey both scale and experience.

Across all chapters, the book emphasizes reproducible workflows and durable outputs. You will learn to structure projects with clear folder hierarchies, maintain data

dictionaries and provenance notes, and publish maps through formats suited to both classrooms and public engagement—story maps, print atlases, and interactive web layers. The goal is not only to answer a research question today but also to leave a usable record that others can verify, adapt, and extend tomorrow.

Mapping the Past is written for historians, students, archivists, and digital humanists who want to move from curiosity to practice. No prior expertise in GIS is required; each method is introduced with a conceptual rationale, a worked example, and guidance on common pitfalls. By the end of the book, you will be equipped to build your own spatial datasets, pose rigorous questions of historical space, and share results that make South Asian histories newly legible—on the page, on the screen, and in the mind's eye.

CHAPTER ONE: The Spatial Turn in South Asian Studies

The way we understand and write history is constantly evolving. New theories, methods, and technologies emerge, prompting historians to revisit old questions with fresh eyes. One of the most significant shifts in recent decades across the humanities and social sciences has been the "spatial turn." This intellectual movement emphasizes the critical role of place and space in shaping human experience and historical processes. It's a recognition that history doesn't just unfold *in* space, but is also actively *shaped by* it. For South Asian studies, a field rich with diverse geographies, shifting boundaries, and complex interactions across vast landscapes, this spatial turn offers particularly fertile ground for innovative research.

Historically, academic disciplines have experienced various "turns." We've seen a quantitative turn in the 1960s, a linguistic and cultural turn in the 1980s, and even more recently, an "animal turn." Each turn signifies a moment of retrospection, a collective glance backward at established approaches and a re-evaluation of fundamental assumptions. The spatial turn, in this lineage, urges us to consider how space is not merely a passive backdrop for events, but an active participant in historical narratives. It encourages historians to think beyond purely chronological sequences and instead explore how geographical configurations, perceived landscapes, and constructed spaces have influenced societies, cultures, and politics.

For South Asianists, the implications are profound. This vast and diverse region, encompassing countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and often Afghanistan and the Maldives, presents a rich tapestry of historical geographies. From the towering Himalayas in the north to the Indian Ocean in the

south, and from the fertile Indo-Gangetic Plain to the semi-arid Deccan plateau, the physical landscape has always played a crucial role in shaping human settlement, communication, trade, and conflict. However, traditional historical narratives sometimes treated this intricate geography as a given, rather than an element worthy of deep analysis. The spatial turn seeks to rectify this by bringing geographical considerations to the forefront of historical inquiry.

The emergence of the spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences can be traced to various intellectual currents. Scholars such as Ernst Cassirer and Lewis Mumford contributed to an early understanding of community and commons in their studies, laying some groundwork. Later in the 20th century, French academic theories, particularly those of Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre, significantly propelled the movement by emphasizing the constructed nature of space and its relationship to power. These thinkers encouraged a shift from viewing space as an empty container to understanding it as a product of social interactions and a shaper of those interactions in turn.

Crucially, the spatial turn gained significant momentum with the advent and widespread adoption of Geographic Information Systems (GIS). While the concept of focusing on space had been developing theoretically, GIS provided the practical tools to analyze, visualize, and quantify spatial data in ways previously unimaginable. This technological leap allowed researchers to move beyond static paper maps and engage with dynamic, layered representations of geographic information. It transformed the ability to ask spatial questions and to see patterns that might have remained hidden in purely textual sources.

In the context of South Asian history, this means being able to move beyond simply acknowledging the existence of a mountain range or a river and instead analyze how these features influenced migration patterns, the spread of religions, the formation of states, or the movement of goods. For instance, the Indus Valley Civilization, one of the world's earliest urban cultures, flourished in the fertile river basins of what is now Pakistan and North India, with its internal communication links primarily developed along rivers and trade connections established through Arabian Sea ports. The spatial turn allows us to model these connections, explore the potential reach of this civilization, and even hypothesize about the spatial factors contributing to its decline.

Before the spatial turn, cartographic achievements in premodern South Asia, at least in terms of surviving numbers and quality compared to neighboring Islamic and East Asian regions, were often considered meager by Western scholars. While textual records suggest the production of maps for various purposes over millennia, very few ancient maps of distinctly Indian origin survive, largely due to the humid climate and possibly intentional destruction by later conquerors. The spatial turn, however, doesn't solely rely on existing historical maps; it encourages the *creation* of new spatial data from diverse historical sources. This involves extracting spatial information from texts,

archaeological records, and other historical documents to construct digital representations of past geographies.

The application of GIS to historical research, often termed Historical GIS (HGIS), truly took shape in the late 1990s. It offered historians a powerful framework to integrate diverse historical data, analyze spatial relationships, and visualize change over time. For South Asia, where historical boundaries have been fluid and administrative units constantly redefined across imperial, colonial, and national periods, HGIS is an invaluable tool for grappling with these complexities. The ability to overlay different historical administrative divisions, for example, allows for a more nuanced understanding of how territorial claims and governance evolved.

The spatial turn has spurred new sub-disciplines and research avenues. "Spatial history" has emerged as an alternative term for scholarship driven by HGIS tools and approaches. In literary studies, concepts like "literary cartography" and "spatial narratology" have gained traction, encouraging researchers to analyze the spatial dimensions of narratives and the construction of literary spaces. This shift emphasizes that space, like time, is a fundamental analytical category that enriches our understanding across various fields.

However, it's also important to note that the spatial turn is not without its nuances and ongoing debates. Some scholars caution against a "new fundamentalism" that simply inverts the traditional dominance of time over space, or a "space trap" where the metaphorical application of spatial concepts in other disciplines can be oversimplified. The goal is not to replace temporal analysis but to integrate spatial perspectives to create a more holistic understanding of the past. It's about recognizing the simultaneity of various spatial frameworks and the constructed nature of space itself.

In South Asian studies, the spatial turn has brought renewed attention to the historical geography of the region. Scholars are now more consciously observing things from spatial perspectives, leading to the discovery of previously neglected fields and new research directions. This includes examining the spatial dimensions of narratives, exploring literary geography, and delving into the historical evolution of specific places and regions. The movement has also been particularly influential in studies of migration, urbanization, and environmental change, recognizing that movements of people, ideas, and goods are inherently spatial processes.

The growing body of scholarship utilizing spatial approaches in South Asian history reflects a broader recognition that geography is not a subordinate afterthought to history. Instead, it is inextricably intertwined with social, cultural, intellectual, and personal experiences. The "insistence that no social or cultural phenomenon can be torn from its spatial context" encapsulates the core principle of this transformative intellectual movement. It compels us to ask not just *when* something happened, but *where*, and more importantly, *how* that location and its spatial characteristics

influenced the event itself. This book, *Mapping the Past*, aims to provide a practical pathway into this exciting and increasingly vital field for South Asian historians.

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