

Mapping definitely, the indefinite': the Linguistic Survey of India as an experimental atlas

Philip Jagessar (University of Nottingham, School of Geography)
philip.jagessar@nottingham.ac.uk

8 January 2021 - *Linguistic Geographies // Géographies Linguistiques Seminar*

In 1896, George Grierson – a member of the Indian Civil Service and noted philologist – commenced a monumental project to survey, classify and map the languages and dialects of India. A significant ambition of the Linguistic Survey of India (LSI) was to publish maps of the major languages and linguistic areas in India. At the start of the process Grierson had in mind which languages were to be mapped and which maps he wanted published in the LSI. Getting there meant making sense of and piecing together discrete forms of cartographic information so that the final maps were comprehensible to a broad readership composed of scholars, officials and laypersons.

Reading the final maps, on the other hand, suggests that the LSI could not settle on one way to map language. The forty-five maps which constitute a 'linguistic atlas' of India are diverse in style, size, scale and methods used. The only consistent feature of the maps is their lack of uniformity. This can partly be explained by the maps being made at different stages over two-and-a-half decades, and the changes in personnel, methods and material in that time. However, this paper argues that the maps of the LSI should be read as an experiment in which Grierson, through a network of surveyors, scholars and interactions with organisations such as the Survey of India, tries to find the most effective way to map language. Crucially, linguistic mapping is not an exact science - languages are only mapped approximately - and the variation in maps are a consequence of trying to capture India's heterogeneous linguistic geography. The LSI's maps were trying to answer questions which troubled Grierson such as how to map a language spoken over a large area or small area; how to map languages that extend beyond India; how to map an area with many different dialects; and how to map the geographical limits of a language or dialect. In other words, the LSI was an *experimental atlas* illustrating different methods and techniques to map the languages and dialects in the Indian subcontinent and beyond.

