

Communications to the Editor

TO THE EDITOR:

I have now read forty-nine reviews of either the 1978 or the 1992 impression of *A Historical Atlas of South Asia*. While I would take issue with specific statements in some of those reviews, I have never, before now, felt any urge to write a rejoinder. Ludden's review (*JAS*, 55.3 [August 1996]) however, is so egregiously ill-informed and pervasively vacuous that I believe a published response is in order. Although I could easily respond to all of his criticisms, space limitations require that I confine my remarks to what I take to be his principal arguments.

While stating that he has used the *Atlas* "constantly," Ludden alleges that it has had "limited impact" and asserts that "graduate students find it virtually impossible to read cover-to-cover." What does he expect from a reference work (No. 2 in the AAS Reference Series)? I constantly refer to my *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, but never expect to read the whole of it. Can Ludden cite any other historical atlas that has had a comparable impact on the study of a major world region or even of a single country? His claim that the *Atlas* has "not even inspired critical attention" is incorrect. While I do not know which reviews of the work he has read, the lengthy initial *JAS* composite review, which he does cite, contains no small measure of useful critical attention. The criticism he deems necessary "would indicate the need to replace old-fashioned geography with something else because [sic] history cannot live without geography." The concluding clause in this statement is correct and has, in fact, guided the *Atlas* enterprise from its inception; but, taken as a whole, the sentence is a fatuous *non sequitur*. Ludden not only ignores the many innovative aspects that characterize the *Atlas*, but provides no clue as to what the "something else" might be that would replace its "old-fashioned geography."

Ludden is entitled to his condescending opinion in stating that the *Atlas* maps and text "appear venerably old-fashioned;" but it might help if he cited some examples to make his point. "Old-fashioned" for what reasons and compared to what? But does that even matter? Isn't the key question whether the work communicates useful information clearly, accurately, and, with respect to the maps, in a far more powerful and efficient way than is possible through the medium of prose?

Ludden correctly calls attention to the decline in "the geographical content in South Asian historiography." The implication, however, that the *Atlas* is somehow at fault for being behind the changing times strikes me as invalid. Rather, the disjuncture presents more of an indictment of South Asian historiography than of the *Atlas*. If contemporary antipositivist historians "in the move toward more sophisticated forms of historical knowledge" believe that "spatial specification" can be "discarded," so much the worse for them. What is fashionable and sophisticated is not necessarily what is correct. There are many paths to understanding, among which comprehension of things in their geographical context will always remain important.

Perhaps the greatest fundamental misconception in Ludden's review is that what he perceives to be the "exorbitant" cost of the *Atlas* is somehow related to the fact the plates were "drawn by hand," rather than by computer. This reveals a lack of

knowledge of the publishing industry and of production methods in historical cartography. A rule of thumb in academic publishing for books like the *Atlas* is that the retail price shall be roughly four times the manufacturing cost. The economic justification for the wide margin of difference derives mainly from the costs of marketing, warehousing, and distributing along with the imputed risk of being stuck with a work that does not sell. As Ludden could have ascertained had he carefully read the Preface to the *Atlas*, the press bore none of the developmental costs of the work, namely those for research (the largest single component) and for map compilation and drafting. The eighty-five-person-years of labor that went into the *Atlas* were paid for entirely by the many funding agencies noted in the *Atlas* acknowledgments and were borne mainly by American taxpayers. Per copy printed, that subsidy would amount to several times the retail cost of the work and represents, in effect, a substantial gift to each purchaser. Yet, Ludden, who, despite his profession, could not bring himself to purchase the original edition, fails to recognize what a bargain the *Atlas* was and remains. The proportion of the development costs attributable to drafting was but a small fraction of the total; and, even if the drafting had been completely computerized, the savings realized would not have been very great (laymen tend to have exaggerated notions of what computer graphics can accomplish). More to the point, they would have had no effect on the retail price.

Ludden, who invokes computer mapping as if it were a mantra, is correct in stating that “computerized data bases” could facilitate atlas revision, in whole or part; but here too he demonstrates ignorance of the economic parameters within which would-be producers of high-quality maps must operate, again failing to recognize that drafting costs—as opposed to those for research and compilation—will account for only a small component of the total. Given the latter reality, I foresee no surge of new mapping efforts by historians of South Asia, despite the fact that relevant data bases are already commercially available in CD-ROM format. His naive notion of making just “one base-map available” is ludicrous for a host of technical reasons.

Ludden writes of the overlapping of “two points of departure—critical thinking about historical space and computer mapping techniques.” On the former subject, why has he nothing to say about the concluding atlas essay, “A Geopolitical Synopsis: The Evolution of Regional Power Configurations in the Indian Subcontinent,” which presents a view of spatial relations in South Asian history that would have been totally impossible before the preparation of the *Atlas* and which no other atlas has yet been able to match? This query also relates to the alleged “conceptual anachronism” of the *Atlas* and the need “to improve representations of space-time in South Asian history.” Who, before the *Atlas*, has ever systematically quantified space-time? Had Ludden indicated in his review *how* to provide the improved representations he calls for and cited some exciting and powerful new computer-generated historical maps of the type he advocates, his arguments might carry weight; but all of the examples that I have so far seen are not only singularly unaesthetic, but conceptually flawed (though most lay readers will fail to perceive the reasons why). The same can be said of much of the computer-generated historical mapping (some marketed with great, but ill-deserved, ballyhoo) for other areas of the world. Simply stated, computer mapping will be good when done by good cartographers and bad in the hands of the far more numerous cohort of bad cartographers. Most maps and graphs that I have had published in recent years, including those for the 1992 impression of the *Atlas*, have, in fact, been computer-drawn; and, if I were to direct the preparation of a completely new edition, I would certainly take advantage of the available technology. But, assuming economic constraints (e.g., with respect to the use of color) similar to those faced in the past,

most of the maps therein would not look radically different from those in the existing work.

Ludden faults my centering two azimuthal maps on Delhi (both, incidentally, computer-drawn, even in the original edition). The point of those maps was to show the world centered on South Asia as a whole; but any azimuthal projection, by definition, must be centered on some point. Can Ludden suggest a point more appropriate than Delhi and provide a compelling rationale for his alternate choice?

Ludden's assertion that the *Atlas* maps "reify boundaries inside and around South Asia etched in our minds by the area studies establishment [*sic*]" could scarcely be more off the mark. He has obviously ignored the lengthy discussion in the introduction and in three relevant map plates (pp. xxxiv–xxxv), which seek to impress upon the reader the need to maintain a critical attitude in regard to boundaries. It is no accident that the *Atlas* relegates the depiction of political boundaries for all premodern periods to small-scale insets, and, even then, depicts them with numerous caveats (supplemented by those of the *Atlas* text) as to their imprecise and ephemeral nature. In a marked departure from standard practice in almost all historical atlases, the one under review emphasizes the constant flux of boundaries both in the text and by the varying widths of the hundreds of chronological bars representing the duration and changing extent of polities over the course of South Asian history. All of this Ludden seems not to have noticed.

With respect to the external boundaries of South Asia, Ludden again ignores the empirical evidence at hand. He notes approvingly, but incorrectly, that the three plates relating to the physical geography of South Asia extend well beyond the Indian subcontinent and alleges that subsequent maps fail to do so. In fact, of the three former plates, only the one on physiography extends beyond the limits of India at the height of British power, whereas no fewer than twenty-nine subsequent plates, mainly political, relate largely to areas well beyond (as well as within) the subcontinent. And how could Ludden have failed to notice the 16" x 26" spread in the inside front cover of the *Atlas* which presents an exceedingly detailed—and intentionally boundary-free—map of Asia from Arabia and Iran all the way east to the outer limits of the Malay Archipelago?

Ludden calls attention to the Indian government's disclaimer about the depiction of boundaries in the *Atlas* and adds that "Anxieties attached to maps by governments in South Asia border on obsession." Obviously, all South Asian governments are legitimately concerned about how their borders are mapped; but only India, to the best of my knowledge, has maintained a sustained obsessive policy to control what maps may be printed in, imported into, or distributed within its territory. Moreover, it repeatedly challenges non-Indian mapping agencies in regard to maps printed for non-Indian markets. Ludden's notion that the "politics of mapping" should provide "a *primary* [my emphasis] point of departure for new historical geographies" is, however, ill-advised. Although I, among others, have written on this fascinating subject, I would never dignify attempts at mind-control by making them "a primary point of departure" for anything.

Ludden's charge that "a single definition of what constitutes South Asia—forever [*sic*]—is built into the *Atlas*," is arrant nonsense. Did he not read the first paragraph of the introduction, which states what South Asia is "normally" taken to include for purposes of the present work? Also ill-advised is his politically correct inveighing against "the grossly inaccurate, anachronistic use of the term 'India'" in maps based on the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and other texts. Having map titles with the word "India," as most of the area portrayed has been known for so much of the time covered

by the *Atlas*, is no more than a convenient convention, rather than a surrender to “the power of Sanskrit scholars.” Would Ludden object to titles such as “Scandinavia at the Close of the Ice Age” or “Greece in the Age of Pericles” in other historical works? In any event, if the *Atlas* staff, which included South Asians of four religions, was in the thrall of Sanskrit scholars, how does Ludden explain our inclusion of maps of India as viewed by Chinese pilgrims, and reproductions (plate 4.3) of maps showing the views of al-Ishtakhri, al-Biruni, al-Idrisi, and other Muslim scholars concerned with al-Hind, as well as our use of so many primary sources by Muslim historians?

To state that the *Atlas* reflects “classical orientalism” is an indefensible canard. In more ways than in any comparable work, the *Atlas* attempts to portray South Asia not through any single cultural prism, but, as the previous paragraph suggests, through every lens that we could bring to bear on the region. And for Ludden to fault the *Atlas* because some Hindu chauvinists, inspired by an interpretation of Indian history/mythology derived from certain Sanskrit texts, “destroyed the Babri Masjid” is a reprehensible form of guilt by imputed association, a really “cheap shot.” To assert that the *Atlas*, originally published in 1978, is “at best, quaintly out of touch” (more condescension) because it didn’t call attention to events that took place more than a decade later; and then to suggest that the work might even be “politically partisan,” when so much pain was taken to present a catholic view of history, only compounds the felony. How could Ludden not notice our impartial mapping of communal riots, among other disturbances, in the original edition (plate 9.D.1) and our exceedingly detailed graphic updating of this plate (with Babri Masjid duly noted) in the 1992 impression (p. 277; text on pp. 276, 277–78)?

As indicated above, Ludden sees fit in his review to note the power of “the area studies establishment” and he asserts that “the *Atlas* critically implicates institutionalized area studies in the U.S.” Both references suggest the existence of some entity endowed with a degree of commonality of spirit and purpose that is greater than I believe to be the case. What Ludden constructs as an “establishment” (with whatever unwholesome connotations his usage of the term may convey) I prefer to regard as a community of scholars and administrators who, in varying ways and degrees, share an interest in an area of the world that increasingly sees itself (witness the creation of SAARC) as a meaningful region. But, to the extent that an establishment may be said to exist, we can give thanks to it not only for making the *Atlas* possible, but also for leading to the current employment of both Ludden and myself and the existence of this journal, which offers a vehicle for the expression of our divergent views.

Ludden’s statement that “new historical geographies demand collaborations that connect academic domains” is unexceptionable in the abstract; that is precisely what the original work provided. The new impression, however, makes no claim to provide a new historical geography, but simply offers, in response to strong consumer demand, a reprinting of the original work with such additions as a modest budget would allow. As stated in the new preface, to have attempted a thorough-going revision would have delayed completion of the work for many years and resulted in a volume far more costly than the one that Ludden now considers exorbitantly priced. (Incidentally, the price of the new American printing was purposely set so as to subvert sales in South Asia. Every copy sold in India to foreign scholars such as Ludden not only thwarts this purpose but denies *Atlas* authors modest royalties to which they would otherwise be entitled.)

Having failed to purchase the original edition of the *Atlas*, Ludden shamelessly admits that, “legal or not,” he has made slides of the *Atlas* for classroom use and

asserts that doing so is “the only [*sic*] way to use the *Atlas* for teaching.” Thereby he raises questions not only about his own sense of ethics (his practice *is* illegal), but also about his knowledge of pedagogy. I would not dream of projecting in a classroom slides of maps as detailed as most of those in the *Atlas*, since students would be unable to absorb their messages and take adequate notes on them in a darkened room in the limited time that the images would typically be on view. Rather, along with numerous other teachers, I place the *Atlas* on library reserve so that students can study it at leisure for as long as they need or desire.

The sentence in Ludden’s final paragraph asserting that “History has mangled . . . [the *Atlas*] interpretations and intentions beyond all recognition” is a bit of grandstanding that is not merely wrong, but offensive. Rather, it is Ludden’s shoddy historiography that projects a mangled view of a work that has no equal for South Asia or any other major world region. When a better atlas is produced according to Ludden’s seemingly high, but wholly undefined, specifications, I shall be happy to revise this judgment; but I see no such work on the horizon.

To conclude, Ludden has advanced a series of impressions that are rooted in ignorance and often contrary to the empirical content of the *Atlas* itself. His review demonstrates that he has failed to grasp the *Atlas*’ purpose and has not carefully—if at all—read several of its key portions (preface, acknowledgments, introduction, and “A Geopolitical Synopsis”) that would have steered any more thoughtful critic away from most of his erroneous judgments. His views are so thoroughly incompatible with those of dozens of other reviewers that one wonders whether he feels that he is possessed of some special insight that they (along with a former Watumull Prize Committee of the AHA and an Honors Committee of the AAG) lack. I may be wrong, but it strikes me that Ludden’s agenda is to score points with a segment of the modern “sophisticated” academic community by promulgating views that are intellectually chic irrespective of their validity.

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TO THE EDITOR

Professor Schwartzberg’s expertise and achievements are beyond question. They were not at issue in my review, which did not intend to cover the same ground as had forty-odd previous reviews of the *Historical Atlas of South Asia*. Instead, in the review, I considered the *Atlas* to be a scholarly institution within a specific academic and educational environment, in which I am not an expert atlas-maker but a scholar and teacher who is trying to improve historical understandings of space and territory. From this perspective, the *Atlas* is full of good data; it is an indispensable reference tool. It also represents a formation of knowledge that is no longer an adequate model for students or scholars, for a variety of reasons, some of which I touched upon in the small space that was allotted to me for the review. The enduring utility of the *Atlas* may be measured best in future critical readings that may generate new formulations of its data and conceptions of its lacunae. Other venues will be appropriate for these discussions, which could include many readers of *JAS*, because the same problems also attach to authoritative American formations of the historical geography of East and Southeast Asia.

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