

Geography in Practice: 'Conceptualizing Space' in Print Media in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

The objective of this paper is to explore how spaces are produced and reproduced in the print media and to understand the implications of this process. In modern society where spatial friction over information flow has all but ceased, the print media plays a key role in taking messages across the entire spectrum of society quickly and effectively. In literate and politically attuned societies like Sri Lanka, print media inspires as well as prejudices people into conceptualizing spaces in various forms and certain ways. At one level this is done intentionally for politico-ideological reasons through carefully defined and orchestrated propaganda and manipulative mechanisms and at another level it occurs inadvertently as a ceaseless of process involving repetitive use, interpretation and reification of spaces in the print media.

All spaces are socially constructed. People are phenomenologically involved in this process as their social, cultural and political life is intimately embodied in various spaces. Or in other words, people are involved in this process because spatiality is a fundamental fact of life. Although people are born into certain spaces, during the course of life, they, through the process of structuration, are constantly engaged in making and unmaking these spaces first by interpreting and reinterpreting them and second by both intentional and unintentional uses of these spaces.

Print media plays a significant role in this process of social construction of space. In day to day news coverage as well as in detailed news reports, feature articles and editorials etc., a variety of spaces are referred to; existing spaces may be reinterpreted and, most of all, new spaces may be constructed. A spatial category that is used, for example, in a political speech, may gain popularity and acceptance due to the prominence given to it in the media.

A variety of spaces are made and unmade in the print media and they can be identified in several categories such as political (e.g. state, provinces, uncleared areas), economic (e.g.,

backward regions and cities), cultural (e.g., heartlands) and social (safe havens, refugee camps) etc. These spaces once ingrained in the minds of people can get re-transmitted through the political system into the decision-making process, leading towards substantive material impacts. The differential treatment of spaces in this process can further fortify and/or tear off spatial uniqueness and inequalities.

Methodology

This research has attempted to identify various abstract spatial concepts publicized in the Sri Lankan dailies and weeklies through a content analysis. They are grouped according to their political, economic, cultural and social meanings. *Spaces* that appear to be prominent among them in the print media coverage are subjected to in-depth analysis tracing their origin and extent. This is followed by a detailed critical analysis to ascertain the ideological groundings, reflecting on the potential political implications of these concepts and how they manipulate the imagination of the people.

Discussion

What is clear from the content analysis is that newspapers are not innocently reporting events taking place in *spaces*; rather they are responsible for the making and unmaking of these spaces leading towards significant impacts. For example, "border village" as a new space which emerged with the ethno-political conflict was publicized in the print media to such an extent that people no longer question whether such a space actually exists or not. The "boundary village" is now replaced by yet another space, "threatened village" in the recent times. Spaces such as "traditional homeland", "cleared and uncleared areas", "northern-eastern region", "south", "poverty pockets" etc. are all constructed within particular political or economic contexts, and they are reproduced and added to everyday vocabulary through the print media. While these are politically constructed spaces in the context of changing political, economic and security situations, they have gained currency through print media publicity ascertaining the

fact that conceptualizing space is as much a political as a social process.

Repeated use of such spatial categories in the print media allows them to be accepted as 'normal', 'given' spatial entities. Thus, the mere fact that certain spaces are frequently used in the print media can itself be a plausible factor of their reproduction. The important point that should be highlighted here is that such frequent use can ascertain an existence that a particular space does not actually have and policy decisions can be made on that basis.

Further, it appears that not only the frequent and repeated usage, but also uncritical usage of such spaces in the print media and their unquestioned acceptance by the readership/audience can also produce similar

effects as mentioned above. In other words, certain spaces are used in the print media without any critical inquiry about the origin of such spaces or any evaluation about their potential social and political ramifications. Such uncritical endorsement of spaces fundamentally conceals the fact that these spaces are, by all means, contested spaces. The repeated and frequent use together with the uncritical usage of space within the print media thus allows them to be considered as unproblematic spatial categories. We thus conclude that making decisions based on uncritically publicized spaces and by implication disregarding their contested nature, may lead to further social and spatial consequences.