

THE SURVEY OF INDIA

A big, blue board informs us that this is a Restricted Area. The three sentries behind the sandbags, totting carbines and other assorted arms look surprisingly benign though! Somehow, the carbines, the sandbags, the innumerable Restricted Area signs do not gel with the sylvan surroundings- lush green trees, flower-laden rose bushes and a forest-like silence.

We have just stopped by the Survey of India office in Dehradun. It is a Friday afternoon and I thought it is a wonderful opportunity to stock up on maps. I have always been a great fan of the Survey of India maps- large, clear, well produced and ridiculously cheap. I have several of them with me- a big political map of India on my kitchen wall, another huge roadmap of India in my study and many just folded up, awaiting space on a wall and permission from my wife to put them up! When my son was growing up, I would frequently play this game with him of trying to identify cities on the Map of India.

Knowledge of geography is, to my mind, very essential for a well-rounded education. One frequently reads statistics about how more than 50% of the school students in the US can't even identify their own country on a map! I think, we might be doing a shade better than this, though my own impression is that the general interest in maps is waning. And this is what makes it all the more important for good, affordable maps to be easily available for everyone. But alas, the nodal agency for doing this, the Survey of India, is nowhere near being up to speed for this.

Small signposts all along the curved road leading to the main office inform us of the history of this great institution. Set up by the British in 1767, it has the distinction of being the oldest scientific department of the Government of India. The signposts also inform us of the fact that this organization is using the latest technology to carry out its operations. The charter of the Survey of India, as the website helpfully tells me, is vast- from carrying out geodetic surveys to Research & development in cartography, printing etc. Any map published in India has to be approved by the Survey of India. And of course, it produces maps of all kinds and all sizes.

I step into the "welcome" office where I have to fill in my name, address, etc. in a register. I am told by a visibly "non-welcoming" type of a person to switch off my mobile phone. And unlike a perfunctory warning, he insists that he sees me doing it! My wife and I walk along a garden path, with rose bushes on either side and quaint buildings nestled in trees which are possibly even older than this hallowed institution.

The Map Sales Office is not far. It is a small room in a building with a 10 foot verandah and has another "non-welcoming" type of a person sitting at a computer. One look at the Sales office convinces me that this is going to be a

wasted effort. The sales person is happily listening to garhwali music on his computer! On my asking for maps, I am told to go to another office from where I am guided to another dusty room where I explain the purpose of my visit to an officious looking person. He helpfully tells me to go right back to the sales office!

The sales person, having achieved his objective of convincing me that nothing in life comes easy, is now more receptive- He asks me which maps I want. I ask for a catalogue and am told that there is none. I very diffidently ask to look at the maps kept behind him so that I could choose- that I am told is obviously not permissible!

By this time, my patience has got the better of my interest in geography and I randomly chose a few maps and ask for the bill. The gentleman confidently opens up his database and starts entering the details (with a single finger!) of the maps to produce a computerized bill. He tries once and somehow manages to delete everything. Looking slightly sheepish, he tries again and this time too does the same thing! He now starts cursing someone who has used his computer some months ago and starts afresh. Amazingly, the process is repeated and the map details get lost somewhere in the innards of the cyber monster! Now it becomes a matter of honor and I at last get a computer generated bill on the fourth attempt! But clearly, our technologically challenged friend is not confident of the powers of addition of the computer. And so out comes a calculator and a manual calculation is performed to check the bill!

After several checks of the polythene bag containing the maps, I finally come out of the complex, thankful that only about an hour was wasted to get some random maps of dubious utility!

On thinking about this incident, I realized that the experience was not unique. The National Museum produces some exquisite plaster casts of figurines from the Harrapan period. Try buying one of them at the Museum store! Or the Publication Division which produces potential bestsellers like government statistics or the collected works of Mahatma Gandhi. Everywhere, one finds a total reluctance on the part of the sales staff to part with their wares. Leave alone active marketing, just the experience of buying something is nightmarish in most government organizations. If these departments work out even a minimal marketing plan, I am sure that not only will they benefit from the revenue generation, but will also fulfill a major need- whether for good maps or cheap reproductions of great Indian paintings. Instead, the idea is to deter everyone but the most determined customer! Most others like me, will just have to make do with looking at poor quality maps on the web!