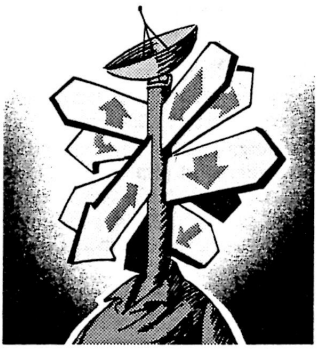
Journey without maps

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One of the major achievements of our democratic set-up is establishing the right to information. But a more basic point is: Are you getting the right information? On most occasions you are asking for information not from deeply buried government files but from accessible, everyday sources. The information you get could be incomplete or wrong.

Those who view the news on DD's Marathi channel, Sahyadri, would see the earth with a huge India projected across it, making you wonder what geography you learnt at school. According to the channel, most of our country extends well south of the equator with the southern tip at a helicopter ride from Antarctica. Why can't the correct map be drawn?



For a nation that is sensitive to how our borders are represented on maps, this comes as a surprise. India often bans maps which do not conform to its version of the reality.

But Indian city maps are full of errors. They are not accurate enough to guide a pedestrian or a motorist to his destination. I was recently looking for a road map of Maharashtra, hoping to find maps of the kind that are available in the West. I wanted to know which exit i should take on the Pune-Mumbai expressway while coming from Pune, so as to go to Panvel railway station? I went to a major book store to buy a map that would have those details. I discovered that my question was too advanced for Indian mapmakers. Even the 2006 edition of a road map failed to show the expressway, even though it has been around for five years.

We pride ourselves on being 'with it' in information technology. But information is not meant to be confined to call centres. It should be available in different contexts. In Europe or US, one can access a website that will tell me how to drive from one point to another, given the postal addresses at the two ends. The instructions will be precise to the extent of telling me where to turn after hundred metres. Can we claim to have databases with such an information system for our cities? I have yet to see one free from major errors.

The numbering of houses in supposedly modern cities like Mumbai hardly helps. They are so numbered that it would be hard to locate them. My postal address in Pune carries a survey number which is fine if you are searching for land records, but not the house.

The information system provided in a place is characteristic of the people who use it. If the people are not particular about precision and accuracy, the information system they come up with will be lax and vague. When you ask someone how to get to a particular place, you will rarely get precise information. "Go straight", you will be told, the guide's hand waving to the right. Or you will be told to look for a house that is 'diagonally opposite' the petrol station, whatever that may mean. Arches on major roads display directions to special landmarks, but these can be ineffective for any motorist unfamiliar with the area.

The armed forces are no exception. Travelling from Mumbai to Pune on the old highway, one would see a hoarding saying that the naval academy is on the road to the right. It does not say which turning to the right — the first, second or third. The academy would know that such vagueness in its field operations would not be tolerated.

Man-made satellites have given us the global positioning system. They tell us our position on the earth, e.g., latitude, longitude and height above mean sea-level. It is used in navigating cars through city traffic. The navigator tells you the best path to your destination, sometimes folding in information on traffic conditions. If you take a wrong turning, it would guide you back. But to make it work, you need to feed into the navigator's memory the precise map of the town.

The writer is an astrophysicist.