Power Games of Place Names

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At the September Group of 20 Summit in New Delhi, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi ignited a political row by referring to the country as Bharat in various official communiqué. Amidst speculation that a formal name change of the country was imminent, Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar made a striking declaration, "India, under Modi, is proud to be Bharat." The contrived dichotomy between the hitherto synonyms of Bharat and India weaves biopolitical contestations of indigeneity versus alterity into the national imaginary. Presented as toponymic decolonization, the effort to erase the name "India" entails a power play by Hindu nationalists to re-territorialize the national space seventy-six years after the country gained independence from British colonial rule. Will this project of self-conscious nation rebuilding establish a new Hindu post-liberal order? Or will it devolve into illiberalism and seal India's geopolitical fate as a powder keg of Asia?

At the September Group of 20 Summit in New Delhi, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi ignited a political row by referring to the country as *Bharat* in various official communiqué. Amidst speculation that a formal name change of the country was imminent, Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar made a striking declaration, "India, under Modi, is proud to be *Bharat*."[1] The contrived dichotomy between the hitherto synonyms of *Bharat* and India weaves biopolitical contestations of indigeneity versus alterity into the national imaginary. And, it does so under the guise of reclaiming civilizational confidence.

The Constitution of India (written in both the official languages of English and Hindi) states under Article 1, "India, that is Bharat, shall be a union of states." The Hindi version begins with the phrase, "*Bhārata, arthāt India*" [transliterated form], which means "*Bharat,* that is India." The Constituent Assembly adopted[2] this language in 1949 after rejecting a proposed amendment to call the country *Bharat* and "India in the English language." Both names are thus rendered as coequal signifiers of the nation-state and endonyms.

Politics of Toponymy

The process of naming transforms a physical location (space) into a place with a singular identity. From restoring past names to re-storying the past, the politics of toponymy instantiates the broader processes of self-conscious nation (re)building at play. The aim of changing place names in post-Independence India progressed from establishing uniform Romanized spellings[3] (e.g. Caunpour/Cawnpour/Cawnpore to Kanpur) to correcting colonial linguistic corruptions (Bombay to Mumbai, Trivandrum to Thiruvananthapuram) and then effacing the legacy of medieval-early modern Muslim rule by Persianized Turkic invaders (e.g. Allahabad to Prayagraj).

The *Bharatiya Janata Party* (Indian People's Party) or BJP – that won a landslide victory in 2014 and has held power, under Modi, since then – contends[4] that India is a colonial invention. BJP fellow traveler and spiritual influencer Jagdish "Sadhguru" Vasudev characterizes[5] the name as culturally bankrupt, meaningless, and an imposition by the British using language as a "technology of dominance." As a political expedient, equating the erasure of India to toponymic decolonization is likely

to go down well in Western liberal democracies where left-wing elites have not only internalized shame and self-hatred but also revel in it. This purported exercise in self-actualization, however, does not stand up to scrutiny.

India is not an Exonym

The name India can be traced to the language of the Indo-European-speaking tribes who migrated from Central Asia to Punjab (present-day eastern Pakistan and northwestern India) in the Late Bronze Age. These Indo-Aryans established a civilization around a large river that they called *Sindhu*, meaning "body of water" in Sanskrit. When the Achaemenid Persians conquered the *Sindhu* river valley around 500 BCE, they called[6] the river *Hindu* and the region *Hindush* as their language (Old Persian) had undergone a sound change of /s/ to /h/. In Asia Minor, at the other end of the Achaemenid Empire, the Greeks pronounced *Hindu/Hindush* as *Indo*s because their Ionic dialect had uniquely lost[7] the aspirated /h/ sound during the fifth century BCE. The land beyond the Indus was called *Indikê,* and its Latin transliteration *India* entered various European languages.

The different iterations of *Sindhu – Hind*, *Hindustan*, and India – share the same ancient Sanskrit etymology and refer to the same people and their homeland. Finnish linguist Jarno Raukko (2017) explains that, as a rule of thumb in socio-onomastics, if a name is "adapted and familiarized" according to the form of the name in the target language, then it is a "sign that the name refers to something of cultural importance to the target culture, either historically or at present." The Persians, Greeks, and Arabs in the sixth century BCE identified India as a unique civilization beyond the geographic and ethnolinguistic boundary of the Indus River.

The appellations *Hind* and *Hindustan* gained popularity under the Delhi Sultanate dynasties and Mughals who monopolized political power on the subcontinent from the thirteenth century till the advent of colonialism. When Europeans began exploring the world in the fifteenth century, the search for a land called India led them to new places and peoples that are still called Indies/Indonesia and Indians today. The East India Company and then the British Crown merely used the region's well-established name.

India is not a British Invention

When BJP members attribute the creation of India to the British, they rehearse the perfidious claim that English civil servant John Strachey succinctly articulated[8] in 1880, "The first and most essential thing to learn about India is that there is not, and there never was, an India." The colonial enterprise insisted that it had forged an artificial political-administrative-territorial entity called India with the help of common law, English-language schools and universities, railways, and the printing press. The white man's burden in fact entailed, as historian Manu Goswami (1998)[9] shows, a comprehensive and accelerated scheme of impoverishing the Indian economy to serve the needs and whims of the metropole. It suited the imperialists to deny the existence of India because they saw it as nothing more than a material commodity to exploit.

In her book, *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* (2004), Romila Thapar (an eminent scholar of ancient India) writes that Buddhist texts in the sixth century BCE suggest an emerging affinity between the sixteen great kingdoms or *Mahājanapadas* across the subcontinent. The Maurya Empire (322-185 BCE), which extended from present-day Afghanistan to Bangladesh and covered the length of peninsular India except the southernmost region, consolidated the Indic peoples as a civilization unto itself. The Rock Edicts[10] of Mauryan emperor Ashoka the Great (268-232 BCE), comprising proclamations and narrative histories in Greek and Aramaic, refer to this premodern nation as *Jambudvipa* ("Berry Island"). That *Jambudvipa* has never been in the running to replace the name India should prove that etymological indigeneity is not of paramount importance.

It is worth noting that Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the intellectual father of Hindu nationalism, argued for the autochthony of the name *Sindhu* and its phonological variants. In his influential text, *Essentials of Hindutva* (1923), he envisioned the river and its tributaries as a network of threads that wove a new indigenous identity for the Indo-Aryans that had settled on its banks. Having indigenized these tribes to the subcontinent, the *Sindhu/*Indus serves as a "vital spinal cord" that connects their civilization's "remotest past to [its] remotest future." But Savarkar could not sway his

audience away from their preference for *Bharat*, which had acquired metaphysical and political valence as the original and uncorrupted homeland.

Bharat as a Hindu National Space

The name *Bharat* appears in the cosmography of the *Puranas,* which comprise a vast corpus of Sanskrit literature written between 250-1500 CE. Here, *Bharat* or *Bharatvarsha* ("Land of King Bharat or the Bharata tribe") forms the southern part of *Jambudvipa* that lies at the center of the universe. Another Puranic schema posits that *Jambudvipa* is one of the four *Mahadvipas* ("Great Islands") of the world. Goswami (2004) observes that these myths formed an "unquestioned frame of reference" in vernacular geohistorical writings about India during the early-nineteenth century. Rather than coordinate cartography, the spatiotemporal terrain of *Bharat* was drawn according to religious and ethno-social lines.

This Puranic-inflected historiography casts *Bharat* as a transhistorical entity, anchored by the elaborate and impermeable social hierarchy of *varnas* (castes) with the Brahmin priesthood occupying the highest echelon. It elevated the culture of north India because the region contains cities and geographical features that are considered sacred in Hinduism (e.g. the Himalayas, the Ganges river, and the cities of Ayodhya and Varanasi). At the turn of the twentieth century, the Hindu nationalist movement (*Hindutva*) adopted the notion of *Bharat* as a pure and resilient national space in which Hinduism had survived despite centuries of Muslim and colonial rule.

Bharat stood apart from India, which had fallen into the hands of Westernized elites who were eager to please the British and appease Muslims. Though the two inhabited the same territorial body, they possessed divergent souls. Anthropologist Thomas Blom Hansen (1996) notes that this division reflected the vernacular intelligentsia's "long standing sense of alienation" from the levers of influence in Indian society, and yearning to be acknowledged as the true representatives of the people. The BJP's parent organization was founded in this milieu.

Hindu nationalists scorn Jawaharlal Nehru (Mohandas K. Gandhi's protégé and the first Prime Minister of independent India) as the preeminent deracinated Anglophile

who used secularism as a cudgel to paralyze Hindu tradition. Under Nehru (and his political dynasty), the Indian National Congress Party dominated national politics from 1947 to 1991. The BJP maintains[11] that this hegemonic control over the state apparatus enabled Nehru's credo of Marxist secularism to reorder the system of signs, symbols, and stories that creates meaning and identity in the sociocultural sphere. In Nehruvian India, the demands of extremist Muslim factions and social minorities (i.e. lower castes and tribal groups) were always prioritized to the detriment of the majority Hindu population and its religious heritage. The enduring promise of *Bharat* is that it will remedy this wrong by establishing Hinduism as *primus inter pares* or the first among equals.

The BJP's antagonism is indeed directed at the Oxbridge-educated liberals to whom the British Raj passed the baton. The toponymic conflict between India and *Bharat* represents a power play to re-territorialize the national space seventy-six years after achieving independence. Does the rise of *Hindutva* represent a rejection of liberal universalism by the Hindu-majority provincial and vernacular masses? Or is it an iconoclastic, puritanical movement bent on erasing non-Hindu legacies of the past and voices of the present? Whether the governance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the *Bharatiya Janata Party* evolves into a new Hindu post-liberal order or devolves into illiberalism will determine the geopolitical fate of India – as a gentle giant or a powder keg of Asia.

About the Author

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Endnotes

[1] "Interview with India's Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar" by *India Today* on September 11, 2023: www.youtu.be/v-On6LKTQbU?t=274.

[2] "Constituent Assembly Debates – Volume 9, September 18, 1949," Constitution of India archives published by the Centre for Law and Policy Research (Bangalore, India): www.constitutionofindia.net/debates/18-sep-1949/.

[3] "From Kanhiyapur to Kanpur in 210 years," *Times of India* (March 2013): www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kanpur/from-kanhiyapur-to-kanpur-in-210-years/articleshow/19166755.cms.

[4] "PM Modi Talks of 'Negative Alliances,' Contrasts India with Bharat," *NDTV* (July 2023): www.ndtv.com/india-news/alliances-based-on-negativity-have-never-won-pm-attacks-opposition-4219636.

[5] In a 2018 lecture titled, "Why We Should Say Bharat, Not India," Sadhguru discusses British colonialism and its politics of toponymy: www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTCMRRotCA4&t=97s.

[6] See Parpola (2015), especially Part II – "The Indus Civilization."

[7] See the article, "Ionic Dialect," in the online *Encylcopaedia of the Hellenic World, Asia Minor*: www.asiaminor.ehw.gr/Forms/fLemmaBody.aspx?lemmaid=9337.

[8] John Strachey quoted in Yadav 2013:

> "The first and the most essential thing to learn about India is that "there is not, and never was an India, or even any country of India, possessing, according to European ideas, any sort of unity, physical, political, social or religious [...] That men of the Punjab, Bengal, the North Western Provinces, and Madras, should ever feel they belong to one great nation is impossible."

[9] For a detailed study, see Goswami (1998).

[10] See Hultzsch (1925), pages 174-5.

[11] Thomas Blom Hansen (1996) provides an insightful analysis.

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