

'INDIA', 'BHARAT' OR 'HINDUSTAN': OLD TACTICS, BUT NEW AGENDAS OF BJP'S MAJORITARIAN POLITICS

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“India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States,” stipulates the Indian constitution depicting the arduous debates that led Parliament to adopt both names.¹ The recent political adventure of the BJP (Bhartiya Janata Party) regime to present India with the name ‘Bharat’ at G20 summit dinner invitation cards has spurred a fractious debate about whether the country is going to officially change its name to only ‘Bharat’. Analysts around the world are speculating on the possible rationale behind this semantics. Opposition parties are calling it an unnecessary ‘electoral stunt’ of the BJP. But why the BJP looks concerned about using ‘Bharat’ instead of India? What is the political wisdom behind it? Whether it is wise at all? Or is it the BJP’s only card left for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections for majoritarian politics?

The issue raised eyebrows among historians and India experts when for the dinner, the invitation cards stated it as from, ‘President of Bharat’ instead of ‘President of India’.² Shashi Tharoor, a Congress MP said, “While there is no constitutional objection to calling India “Bharat,” which is one of the country’s two official names, I hope the government will not be so foolish as to completely

1 “Article 1, Name and Territory of the Union,” Indian Constitution, [https://www.constitutionofindia.net/articles/article-1-name-and-territory-of-the-union/#:~:text=\(1\)%20India%2C%20that%20is,specified%20in%20the%20First%20Schedule.&text=\(c\)%20such%20other%20territories%20as%20may%20be%20acquired..](https://www.constitutionofindia.net/articles/article-1-name-and-territory-of-the-union/#:~:text=(1)%20India%2C%20that%20is,specified%20in%20the%20First%20Schedule.&text=(c)%20such%20other%20territories%20as%20may%20be%20acquired..)

2 “India or Bharat: What’s Behind the Dispute over the Country’s Name?” Aljazeera, September 06, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/6/india-or-bharat-whats-behind-the-dispute-over-the-countrys-name>.

dispense with "India," which has incalculable brand value built up over centuries."³ Countries are often seen changing their names like Turkey shifted to 'Turkiye'; the Czech Republic streamlined its name to Czechia; Macedonia to the Republic of North Macedonia; Ceylon to Sri Lanka; Burma to Myanmar, and their governments always have some political communication running back in their mind.

Leaders deconstruct the symbols and construct new ones for mostly political objectives that in their view suit the public sentiments. It is pertinent, therefore, to dig deeper into the factors that could have influenced the BJP to take the initiative of these names' controversy.

When the first Indian Parliament was debating on choosing the official name for the country, there were three options: 'India', 'Bharat', and 'Hindustan'. The third one appeared the least supported, while 'India' and 'Bharat' kept the debate alive. Hindu nationalist parliamentarians like Seth Govind Das, Kamalapati Tripathi, Shri Ram Sahai, Hargovind Pant, and Hari Vishnu Kamath, supported 'Bharat'; while other representatives advocated 'India' and 'Hindustan'.⁴ Ultimately, the only feasible option for Parliament was to adopt both 'India' and 'Bharat'. However, if the Constitution is translated into Hindi, 'India' everywhere is replaced by 'Bharat' and the first line is transformed as, "Bharat, that is India, shall be a Union of States."⁵

But why is this name controversy concerning? If investigated closely, it reveals the reasoning behind it. Although the country is being called by all names as 'India', 'Bharat', and 'Hindustan' depending upon the context, it is important to look into the history of all these names. The word 'Bharat' is of *Sanskrit* origin in Indian *Puranas* like *Visnupurana* and *Markandeyapurana*. It describes it as the region between the 'abode of the snow'- the Himalayas, and the Indian Ocean in the South.⁶ The region is significant for its spatial and cultural insulation. But even in these *Puranas*, the boundaries of Bharat are ill-defined. Between North and South, one can identify, but from East to West, no clear identifications one can draw. Socially, in the region, a community of shared culture resided where

3 Sheikh Saaliq, "Why India's Government Wants to Change the Country's Name to Bharat," *AP*, September 05, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/india-sanskrit-name-bharat-modi-g20-72782ba81aa67dcf7e197a98fec9b5f5>.

4 Yudhajit Shankar Das, "How India, That is Bharat' was adopted in Constitution," *India Today*, September 6, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/bharat-india-renamed-controversy-constitution-parliament-congress-2431285-2023-09-05>.

5 Krishn Kaushik, "Is India Changing its name to Bharat? G20 Invite Controversy Explained," *Reuters*, September 7, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/is-india-changing-its-name-bharat-g20-invite-controversy-explained-2023-09-06/>.

6 Horace Hayman Wilson, *The Vishnu Purana* (London: John Murray, 1840).

they had their own social principles and religious dynamics. It shows that the word 'Bharat' holds some religious sanctity in it also.⁷

The word 'Hindustan' is of Persian origin and the region beyond the *Sindhu* River was called 'Sindhustan' which in Persian was translated as 'Hindustan'. About 'India', although some analysts trace its roots to British times who defined contextualized 'India' as under a well-organized administrative and political structure with defined boundaries. However, real 'India' also takes its roots too far before colonization of the subcontinent when Greeks named the region beyond the Indus River as *Indike* and Latin as 'India'.⁸ So, the identity of the people of India has evolved from socio-spatial to political and geographical proximities. Currently, the country's name is accruing religious significance also. For example, Mohan Bhagwat, the RSS Chief in his speech said, "Bharat is a Hindu Rashtra". 'Hindu' which was a geographical term has evolved in its religious perspective. However, the BJP has its own visions and political maneuvers to perform.

Firstly, the word 'Bharat' is significant to highlight the cultural and social structure of Indian societies. According to Indian *Puranas*, the people living inside 'Bharat' are civilized and have a working nature, while the outside world is in no order.⁹ Historical analysis reveals that states often portend their values as supreme and consider it their responsibility to signify them as their internal social strength. Take the Western democracy, British colonization agendas, and China's *Tianxia*- all under Heaven, and now India wants to elevate the value that the word 'Bharat' carries.

Secondly, India is a highly polarized society where more than 3000 castes exist. Socially, these castes come under broader four divisions *Brahmin*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas*, and the *Sudras*. Historically, there had been a divide between the *Aryan* and the non-*Aryan* regions. The word 'India' refers to a politically administrative unit that has nothing to do with social coherence among these castes. The same is the case with the word 'Hindu'. Whether it be taken geographically or religiously, it doesn't prompt the unification of Aryan and non-Aryan regions- the southern belt. It is the 'Bharat' that the BJP prompts as the single binding entity that unifies all of India. Socially, religiously, ethnically, and politically divided regions can be coalesced under this 'Bharat' initiative. One must not forget that this can be a mere ideal construction to prompt multi-cultural dimensions of Indian society

⁷ Catherine Clementin-Ojha, "India, That is Bharat...": One Country, Two Names," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.3717>.

⁸ Henry Yule and Burnell Arthur Cole, *Hobson-Jobson: The Anglo-Indian Dictionary* (Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1996).

⁹ Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (New York: State University of New York press, 1988).

coalesced under one State, in front of G20 leaders.¹⁰ When it comes to taking action to eliminate these social divides, nothing may happen at all. After all, it is just a change of name, that has social significance but may not be a start followed by concrete actions by the government.

Thirdly and most importantly, as the Lok Sabha elections are upcoming in 2024, the BJP is using semantics and ratcheting up the rhetoric for electoral politics. Revocation of the special status of occupied Jammu and Kashmir was part of the BJP's Manifesto in 2019; false-flag operations against Pakistan have been used to get public support, and now the BJP is trying to prioritize indigenous culture to please the majority. The word 'Bharat' seems more local and is culturally significant for nationalist Hindus- the majority. Throughout the BJP's history, whenever Lok Sabha elections are to be held, the anti-minority agenda takes the front seat. The BJP has already changed the names of places given under Mughal rule such as Allahabad city is renamed as Prayagraj; Mughalsarai, a historic railway station is renamed as Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Junction; and the under-construction Mughal Museum is already renamed as Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. BJP has also propagated that the word 'India' is an imposition of colonizers. This otherization of Muslims and BJP's 'majoritarian inferiority complex' can be traced to the party's roots. In the 1980s, Jana Sanghis, the members of banned Jana Sangh, who later established BJP, demanded Janata Party to change the historical texts imposed by Marxist-leaning intelligentsia impressed by colonizers.¹¹ BJP-RSS nexus coalesces social and political forces in India for revisionist agendas of Hinduizing India. Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said: "This should have happened earlier. This gives great satisfaction to the mind. 'Bharat' is our introduction. We are proud of it. The President has given priority to 'Bharat'."¹²

Government actions are considered legitimate if the people consider the government rightful to take these actions. In democracies, the majority prevails, and in India which projects itself as the so-called 'largest democracy' in the world, as BJP calls it the 'mother of democracy', official actions to please the majority are deemed fair and legitimate by the regime. Apparently, the name change from 'India' to 'Bharat' does not portray a threat to anyone. But in the longer run, these tactics for majoritarian politics may strengthen the influence of the majority group that is often indulged in the

¹⁰ Rebecca Ann Hughes, "Will India be renamed Bharat? Here is why some countries change their name," *Euronews*, September 09, 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/culture/2023/09/09/will-india-be-renamed-bharat-heres-why-some-countries-change-their-name#:~:text=minister%20of%20Bharat.%E2%80%9D-,While%20India%20is%20the%20most%20commonly%20used%20name%20for%20the,from%20around%202%2C000%20years%20ago..>

¹¹ Christopher Jeffrelot, "Hindu Nationalism: A Different Idea of India," in *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and The Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

¹² S. Jaishankar on 'India-Bharat' Debate Amid Rumors of Name Change," *NDTV*, September 06, 2023, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-that-is-bharat-is-in-constitution-s-jaishankars-dig-at-opposition-4363557>.

suppression of minorities in countries like India. It was anticipated before the special session of parliament that the government may introduce legislation to officially change the name to 'Bharat' but only the Women Reservation Bill was passed on priority. However, whether it is the implementation of the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) or the 'India-Bharat' debate, any motivated action to woo the majority for the sake of more votes would make minorities, especially Muslims, further vulnerable in India.