The road from India to Bharat

Jagdish Batra   September 7, 2023

There is no gainsaying that the rumblings about the change of country's name from India to Bharat can have far-reaching ramifications. The central government under NDA or any other coalition or party is surely entitled to use either of the two names mentioned in the constitution, and the rumours about the special session having been called to effect the formal name change may not turn out to be true, but the BJP, the leading partner in the central government, may temporarily succeed in projecting itself as the true inheritor of our cultural legacy, besides throwing the opposition alliance into an identity crisis. But is that all?

The name Bharat is very old; in fact, it finds mention in the oldest cultural text Rig Veda. It also has the Mahabharata connection as it is believed that the name Bharat has its origin from Shakuntala's son Bharat. The Jain Tirthankar Rishabhdev's son too bears the same name and is often linked to the country's name. Indeed, there are other names like Aryavarta. Sindhu-desh, etc. 'Bharat' or the longer 'Bharatvarsh' has come to signify over time the entire Indian subcontinent. History forces changes and the names do evolve and change over time. So, 'Bharat' was substituted by 'India' by the travellers and invaders coming from the west. The Greeks and the Arabs had known about the land lying east of the Sindhu river, their pronunciational problem with the sound /s/ led to the word 'Sindhu' being called 'Indus' or 'Hind'. During the Mughal period, therefore, the use of the word 'Hindustan' was a natural progression. And the British rulers who came to 'Indies' of the east, gave it the name 'India'.

The names of countries and cities elsewhere in the world have got changed in contemporary times quite frequently, like Cambodia became Kampuchia, Ceylon became Sri Lanka, Burma became Myanmar, Turky became Turkiya, and so on. The names of cities have often been changed elsewhere as in India so very frequently that one need not be reminded of it here. It becomes legitimate for us in India to take pride in projecting the ancient name that is also sanctioned by our constitution. The term 'Bharat' has the sentimental appeal for us that 'India' lacks, and so we have the Indian army has the most-used battle-cry of 'Bharat Mata ki Jai'. It is also the slogan that comes as a fitting finale to any cultural event in the country.

But the problem is with our political class that views cultural or non-cultural baggage through the lens of vote-power. The name of the opposition alliance I.N.D.I.A. surely impelled or at least, hastened BJP to think in this direction even though its focus on cultural revival was always there. It would be a ridiculous situation if the opposition, as

Shashi Tharoor or Omar Abdullah have said, thinks about changing change the name of the alliance. For all you know about Indian politicians, the ping-pong game might not end there; only the ordinary voters' wits would be put to test at the polling booth!

The bigger threat, however, lies in the politicians' use of the name 'Bharat' for the nefarious purpose of capitalizing on the north-south divide. Already the first salvo has come from Tamil Nadu directed at Sanatan Dharma which forms the cultural context of the name 'Bharat'. Some others have spoken of the 'Bharat' name being only for northern part of the country forsaking the wider use of the name that has happened over ages. Such politicians suffering from myopia forget the crucial need in these times for national unity.

Indeed, if the name India is supplanted all over, it will create a lot many problems – more within the country than outside. It is far more challenging than changing the currency notes. One believes that the government has reckoned the risks involved in this exercise. It would be pragmatic to go in for the change for the purpose of official communiques and retain wherever the term 'India' or 'Indian' has been used in the names of institutions, buildings, etc.

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