The recent invitation to the state banquet hosted by the President of the country for the leaders of the G20 has generated some amount of controversy. The invitation to the banquet indicated that the same was extended not by the President of India, as would normally be the case given the invitation was in English, but by the President of *Bharat*, the name for this country especially when using the Hindi language. This change of name has been read by many as indicative of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) desire to officially change the name of the country to Bharat alone.

Such a change, should it take place, would not be surprising and entirely in line with the desire manifested by the BJP to throw off what they see as vestiges of colonial rule and represent the authentic cultural core of the country, which to their minds is Sanskritic, Puranic, and Brahmanical – in other words upper caste Hindu – culture.

What was surprising about this whole episode was not the apparent desire of the BJP to change the name of the country, which is consistent with its past actions as well as its stated ideology. What was surprising was the outrage of the host of members of other electoral parties, as well as actors in the media. This outrage *now* is strange because there have been a host of changes to the names of cities in the country ostensibly to undo colonial bondage through the years, right from the time of independence. This trend seems to have picked up especially since 1995 when the city of Bombay was renamed exclusively as Mumbai, a trend that was followed in most metropolitan centres as well, with Madras renamed Chennai in 1996, Bangalore renamed Bengaluru in 2007, Calcutta renamed Kolkata in 2001. And these are examples of merely the metropolitan cities. A similar trend has been noticed for smaller cities as well, the neighbouring city of Belgaum, being respelled as Belgavi, for example. In all these cases, and in those of other cities, after some tiny opposition, the citizenry and the media had tamely fallen in line.

This timidity was a mistake then, and in fact should have been vociferously opposed at the time. What these name changes represented was the gathering of momentum of a force that now seems unstoppable. The pusillanimous citizens justified the changes of all these names, not only by the fact that there was a legislation justifying it – as if one is obliged to obey an unjust law – but especially by the silly response that colonial names will just not do in India. What the citizenry was effectively doing then, and barring a few exceptions continues to do now, is to support a logic that prohibits pluralism in the country, insisting that only one cultural vision was acceptable.

What we need to bear in mind is that this vision that found the colonial era names of cities unacceptable was, and continues to be, not just about the change of a name, but of blacklisting entire cultures associated with those names. Thus, the change of the name of the

city from Bombay to Mumbai, was also about delegitimizing the cultures that were associated with the name Bombay. The cultures of the Anglo-Indians, the multiple Christian communities, even the Parsis. The change of the name of the city of Bombay was part of an assertion of the Marathi speaking communities, over the city, to exclude all other communities; communities that had in fact been instrumental in building the city. The same holds true for all the other cities, where what was being erased with the change in names was the colonial culture of the city and the legitimacy of the native communities that embodied that culture.

Indeed, the erasure of colonial India has been an on-going project in the country and intimately tied to various strains of Indian nationalism. This project has acquired the unthinking support of vast segments of the citizenry because they have unthinkingly swallowed the nationalistic rhetoric that they learn in school, and through the media. What needs to be borne in mind, however, is that there is no India without the British Raj (and other European cultures). The India that was born via the Constitution was an India that was built primarily on a British understanding. It was British – essentially Christian – values that underwrote the entire project of Indian anti-imperial nationalism. The value of this British inflected India, which has been systematically under attack should be obvious to all who are able to see that what has replaced the colonial cultures is unable to sustain the happy cultural pluralism that we associated with India. Bear in mind, that the colonial cultures of India, or the Pax Britannica, did allow for indigenous cultures to coexist. This is simply not the case of the India that has been changing names. Indeed, it is not just cultural pluralism, but with the abandoning of the colonial, there has also been an abandoning of basic civility that was introduced into the country through colonial intervention.

The remedy to the potential change of the name of the country lies not just in protests, but in realising the politics that underlay the process of changing the names of cities began decades ago. The remedy lies in citizens actively reverting to the simultaneous use of the older names of the cities, Bombay, Bangalore, Madras, Belgaum, Poona, etc. Such a strategy would, in fact, be very much in line with our national history, where resistance to British rule involved Non-Cooperation and Boycott. What we need today is a social boycott of the logic that suggests that colonial names must go, and an embrace of these very names.

Indeed, our project must not stop with the simultaneous use of the city names of colonial vintage but must take seriously the role that language plays in sustaining the intolerance of Hindu nationalism. Take, for example, the way most Indians use the word “non-vegetarian” when referring to regular food. To use the word non-vegetarian is to assume that vegetarianism is the dietary norm of this country. And this is most certainly not true. Vast segments of this country eat meat as a norm. Thus, if we must indicate that vegetarianism is

the aberration of a few, intolerant, groups in this country, it is necessary, no critical, that we stop using the word non-veg, and refer to vegetarian food as the options to regular food. For example, whenever a helpful waiter asks me “veg, non/veg” I smile brightly and say, “I will have the meat option”. Similarly, when faced with someone using the new names for cities. I look at them blankly, until I affirm that we are speaking about Bombay, Bangalore, Calcutta. Had we not been speaking in English I don’t make a fuss about these words.

The current debates around the name of the country should make us realise that words and names are intrinsically linked to political options and to survival, and that a resistance to intolerance is in fact possible not necessarily through mass gatherings, but through small, persistent actions in our daily lives.

Language is important, the life of our Republic relies on it.

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