



# Names As Identity: Bharat And India In The Indian Historical Imagination

**Usha Kumari Shah**

Assistant Professor of English

Government Model College, Borkhola, Po: Jarailtola, Cachar, Assam-788127

Ph D Research Scholar

Department of English

Assam University, Diphu Campus

&

**Professor Anup Kumar Dey**

Department of English

Assam University, Silchar

Cachar, Assam - 788011

## Abstract

The article “Naming a Nation: The Historical Significance of ‘Bharat’ and ‘India’ examines the development, significance, and cultural ramifications of the two names used to refer to the same country. ‘India’ has its origins in colonial and foreign interpretations of the country, whereas ‘Bharat’ has its roots in ancient Indic sources and has civilizational, cultural, and spiritual significance. Using passages from the *Rigveda*, *Mahabharata*, *Puranas*, Jain, and Buddhist writings, the article shows how ‘Bharat’ represents both indigenous identity and historical continuity. The word ‘India’, which was popularized during British colonial authority and is derived from the Indus River, is contrasted with this in the paper as an external view of the area. The issue goes all the way to the Constituent Assembly discussions that resulted in the constitutional phrase ‘India, that is Bharat’, which highlights both continuity and dualism in national identity. The article makes the case that ‘India’ represents a contemporary, colonial legacy, whereas ‘Bharat’ represents the essence of an old civilization through an examination of historical documents, constitutional rhetoric, and decolonial ideology. In order to promote cultural revival and epistemic decolonization, the writers support recovering the term ‘Bharat’.

**Keywords:** Bharat, India, Constituent Assembly, Decolonial Identity, Civilizational Continuity

Two names, ‘Bharat’ and ‘India’, are used to refer to the same country but convey contrasting connotations and different historical and cultural significance. Both the terms can be traced back through the centuries of history, while ‘Bharat’ has strong roots and is reflected through its reference in various ancient scriptures and texts, ‘India’ can be traced back since the colonial period. These two terms present binary oppositions in terms of their conceptualization among the common masses, which makes it paramount to understand the dual nature of these terms. Since the nation’s identity, its culture, and its social and political dynamics are greatly influenced by how the country is perceived, it becomes even more crucial to dissect both the terms and the messages that the terms carry and convey.

The nation was known by the name ‘Bharatvarsha’ since ancient times, after the great king Bharata. Just like Rome was known after its king Romulus, Bharat was known by the name of its king Bharata. Vedic scriptures and texts describe the rule of Bharata and his kingdom, which was extended far and wide

across the Indian Subcontinent. Bharat came to represent the entire region, and in this way, King Bharata's name became synonymous with the land he ruled. With the passage of time, the term 'Bharatvarsha' was shortened, and the synonym 'Bharat' was also used alongside 'Bharatvarsha'. Both 'Bharat' and 'Bharatvarsha' signify the cultural continuity. Radha Kumud Mookerji remarks while talking about the significance of this ancient name: "The name Bharatvarsha is thus not a mere geographical expression like the term India, having only a physical reference, but it has a deep historical significance." (Mookerji 68)

The name 'Bharat' can be traced back to the Vedas, and it is considered its earliest reference. The Rigveda hymn mentions 'Bharat' (*Rigveda* 3.53.12): "अश्विना यातं सुहवा युवाना युज्यं हिन्वतमुपप्रयन्ता । भरतमिन्द्रः प्रथमं जनेन नि पर्षदत्र तवसः सखायः ॥" (O Ashvins, come hither, graciously invoked, ever-youthful; harness and drive your chariot here. May Indra, together with his mighty allies, protect here the Bhārata people, the foremost among men) In the *Mahabharata* (Sabhā Parva, Book 2, Chapter 13, Verse 13) the land is praised as Bhārata-varṣa: "एतदन्तरा हि लोके भारतं नाम विश्रुतम् । जनस्थानं महत्पुण्यं देवैरपि सुदुर्लभम् ॥" (Among all lands in the world, this region is renowned as Bhārata; a great and holy place of men, difficult even for the gods to obtain). Again in Bhīṣma Parva (6.10.1): "जम्बूद्वीपे महायोगिन्सप्तकुल्याः प्रसिद्धाः । भारतं चैव वर्षं तु तत्रैव पुरुषर्षभ ॥" (In Jambūdvīpa, O great sage, are seven famous divisions; among them is Bhārata-varṣa, O best of men).

The Puranas also mention 'Bharat' and *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* particularly provides a detailed description of Bharat's geography, culture, and history (2.3.1): "उत्तरं यत् समुद्रस्य हिमाद्रेश्चैव दक्षिणम् । वर्षं तद् भारतं नाम भारती यत्र सन्ततिः ॥" (That country which lies north of the ocean and south of the Himalayas is known by the name Bhārata; there dwell the descendants of Bharata). *Markandeya Purāṇa* (Chapter 54, Verse 7) mentions: "हिमाद्रेर्यावत् पृष्ठं समुद्रस्य च दक्षिणम् । तावद्भारतमाख्यं स्यात् क्षेत्रं तद्ब्रह्मणः प्रियम् ॥" (As far as the slopes of the Himalayas and as far as the Southern Ocean, that region is called Bhārata — the land dear to Brahṁā).

Various other ancient texts also contribute to the understanding of Bharat. In several Allahabad pillar inscriptions of Samudragupta (4th century CE), the word Bhārata is mentioned. Jain and Buddhist texts also mention Bharat. *Ādi Purāṇa* (Jaina Purāṇa) mentions: "जम्बूद्वीपे भरतक्षेत्रं पुण्यपापफलप्रदम् । त्रिषष्टिशतोद्भूतानां तीर्थकराणां जन्मभूमिः ॥" (In Jambūdvīpa, the land called Bharata-kṣetra gives the fruits of both merit and sin; it is the birthplace of the sixty-three illustrious beings (the Tīrthaṅkaras, Cakravartins, and others). *Tiloya-panṇatti* (Jain cosmological text, Prakrit, 3rd c. CE) refers: "जम्बूद्वीपो णवखण्डो भरखण्डं तहेव च ।" (Jambūdvīpa is divided into nine regions, and among them is the Bharata region). *Mahāvastu* (Buddhist Sanskrit text, c. 2nd BCE – 4th CE) mentions: "जम्बूद्वीपे भारतवर्षे मनुष्याणां सत्त्वानां बुद्धोत्पादः सम्भवति ।" (In Jambūdvīpa, in Bhārata-varṣa, the arising of Buddhas among human beings takes place). Again, in *Abhidharmakośa Kośa*, written by Vasubandhu in the 4th century CE, there is another reference: "जम्बूद्वीपे भारतवर्षे बुद्धोत्पादः सम्भवति, अन्येषां द्वीपानां ना" (Only in Jambūdvīpa, in Bhārata-varṣa, can a Buddha arise — not in the other continents).

**Comparative References to Bhārata:**

| Tradition                | Text & Citation                                     | Sanskrit/Pāli/Prakrit Verse   | English Translation  |
|--------------------------|---|---|--|
| Hindu (Purāṇic)          | <i>Viṣṇu Purāṇa</i> 2.3.1                           | उत्तरं यत् समुद्रस्य<br>हिमाद्रेश्चैव दक्षिणम् । वर्षं<br>तद् भारतं नाम भारती यत्र<br>सन्ततिः ॥   | That land which lies north of the ocean and south of the Himalayas is known as Bhārata; there dwell the descendants of Bharata.                                  |
| Hindu                    | <i>Mahābhārata</i> ,<br>Śānti Parva 207.64          | उत्तरं यत् समुद्रस्य<br>हिमाद्रेश्चैव दक्षिणम् । वर्षं<br>तद् भारतं नाम भारतं यत्र<br>सन्ततिः ॥   | (Same wording as Viṣṇu Purāṇa) – Bhārata is the sacred land between the Himalayas and the ocean.   |
| Jain                     | <i>Ādi Purāṇa</i> (9th c.,<br>Jinasena)             | जम्बूद्वीपे भरतक्षेत्रं<br>पुण्यपापफलप्रदम् ।<br>त्रिषष्टिशतोद्भूतानां<br>तीर्थकराणां जन्मभूमिः ॥ | In Jambūdvīpa, the Bharata region yields fruits of merit and sin; it is the birthplace of the sixty-three illustrious beings (Tīrthaṅkaras, Cakravartins, etc.). |
| Jain                     | <i>Tiloya-panṇatti</i><br>(Prakrit, 3rd c. CE)      | जम्बूद्वीपो णवखण्डो भरहखण्डं<br>तहेव च ।  | Jambūdvīpa is divided into nine regions, and among them is the Bharata region.   |
| Buddhist (Pāli Canon)    | <i>Dīgha Nikāya</i> 14<br>(Mahāpadāna Sutta)        | जम्बुद्वीपे मनुस्सानं एतद्<br>अनुप्पवत्तति, एत्थ<br>तथागतो उप्पज्जति।                             | In Jambudīpa among human beings this occurs: here indeed a Tathāgata (Buddha) is born.   |
| Buddhist (Sanskrit)      | <i>Mahāvastu</i> (2nd<br>BCE – 4th CE)              | जम्बूद्वीपे भारतवर्षे मनुष्याणां सत्त्वानां<br>बुद्धोत्पादः सम्भवति ।                             | In Jambūdvīpa, in Bhārata-varṣa, the arising of Buddhas among human beings takes place.  |
| Buddhist (Philosophical) | <i>Abhidharmakośa</i><br>(Vasubandhu, 4th<br>c. CE) | जम्बूद्वीपे भारतवर्षे बुद्धोत्पादः<br>सम्भवति, अन्येषां द्वीपानां ना                              | Only in Jambūdvīpa, in Bhārata-varṣa, can a Buddha arise — not in the other continents.  |

The detailed geographical description of Bharat is found in these ancient texts along with religious accounts. These ancient references to ‘Bharat’ show how the name is connected with the ancient heritage of the country and is a poignant aspect in the identification of the region. J. Sai Deepak, quoting Radha Kumud Mookerji in his book *India, that is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilisation, Constitution* (2021), says:

The spread of a common culture and civilization through the efforts of Emperor Bharata, from whom the name Bharat is derived, is attested to by Indic sources. ... Bharata’s civilization may be understood as a federal civilization with multiple sub-identities that are free to retain their identities



but have remained culturally and politically bound for millennia. This is evidenced by the fact that this land has a recorded history of being politically referred to as 'Bharatavarsha' or 'Bharat' without interruption, notwithstanding the Islamic invasions or European colonization. (Deepak 185)

The other name, 'India', is believed to be derived from the Indus River, which has been an important geographical marker for the identification of its people. The Persian invaders who conquered the northwestern parts of the Indian subcontinent around the 5th century BCE referred to the area around the Indus River as 'Hindustan', a term that evolved from the Sanskrit word 'Sindhu', the name of the Indus River. The Greeks, who came later, simplified this to 'Indos', leading to the term 'India' (Mookerji 32).

The term 'India' and the colonial period have often been linked, as this name was used by the British colonizers during their rule over the subcontinent. This name became synonymous with the colonial experience, as the name was first used by the British East India Company and later by the British Crown while ruling the region. Thus, the term signifies and has become synonymous with the colonial period, the struggle for independence, and ultimately led to the formation of the modern Indian state. The term 'Bharat', on the other hand, evokes a sense of cultural continuity and points towards the historical past. 'Bharat' is imbued with a sense of cultural pride and cultural heritage, highlighting civilizational continuity of the country, focusing on its contributions in the fields of philosophy, art, and science.

About the issue of the naming of the country, Article 1 of the Draft Constitution, which mentions 'India, that is Bharat', was discussed when it was presented in the Constituent Assembly. This Article was discussed and debated in the Constituent Assembly on 15 November 1948, 17 November 1948, 17 September 1949, and 18 September 1949. There were many prominent suggestions regarding the name of the new Indian Republic, and these suggestions were 'Bharat', 'Hindustan', 'Hind', 'Bharatbhumi' or 'Bharatavarsha', and names of that kind. It is also pertinent to mention here that the language of the Draft Article I that was part of the original Draft Constitution that was presented in the Constituent Assembly in November 1948, did not contain 'Bharat' in it. This original Draft version was replaced with the version that contained 'India, that is, Bharat' in the discussion of the Constituent Assembly held on 17 September 1949. The final debate on naming the country was taken up on 18 September 1949, and that was the day on which this article was finally adopted. But before reaching this final decision, all the members of the Constituent Assembly deliberated on this topic from the perspective of the country being identified with the identity associated with both 'India' and 'Bharat'. While 'Bharat' resonated with the idea of a civilizational entity, 'India' was an identifier of the equation held with the foreigners. Therefore, here it is pertinent to quote an excerpt by Kamalapati Tripathi, one of the members of the Constituent Assembly, during the debates held on naming the country:

Sir, I am enamoured of the historic name of 'Bharat'. Even the mere uttering of this word conjures before us by a stroke of magic the picture of cultured life of the centuries that have gone by. In my opinion, there is no other country in the world that has such a history, such a culture, and such a name, whose age is counted in millennia as our country has. No country in the world has been able to preserve its name and its genius even after undergoing the amount of repression, the insults, and prolonged slavery that our country had to pass through. Even after thousands of years, our country is still known as 'Bharat'. Since Vedic times, this name has been appearing in our literature. Our Purans have all through eulogized the name of Bharat. ...The moment we pronounce this name, the pictures of our ancient history, ancient glory, and our ancient culture come to our minds. We are reminded that this is the country where, in past ages, great men and great Maharishis gave birth to a great culture. That culture not only spread over all the different areas of this land, but crossing its borders, reached every corner of the Far East too. We are reminded that on the one hand, this culture reached the Mediterranean and on the other it touched the shores of the Pacific. We are reminded that thousands of years ago, the leaders and thinkers of this country moulded a great nation and extended their culture to all four corners of the world, and achieved for themselves. (Tripathi 1696-97)

Hargovind Pant, another member, argued in favour of using 'Bharatvarsha' and removing 'India' as he believed that clinging to 'India' would mean still carrying a colonized mindset. He says:

I fail to understand, in view of all this, why we are reluctant to accept, from the core of our heart, the word 'Bharat Varsha' as the name of the country. So far as the word 'India' is concerned, the members seem to have, and really I fail to understand why, some attachment for it. We must know that this name was given to our country by foreigners who, having heard of the riches of this land, were tempted towards it and had robbed us of our freedom to acquire the wealth of our country. If we, even then, cling to the word 'India', it would only show that we are not ashamed of having this insulting word, which has been imposed on us by alien rulers. Really, I do not understand why we are accepting this word. (Pant 1949)

He even registers his clear preference regarding the use of 'Bharat' and 'Bharat Varsha' instead of some other name. He too cites that this country has been identified with the names 'Bharat' and 'Bharat Varsha' for ages, and records of this have been found in ancient history and traditions. He saw no point in being hesitant in accepting the names that speak about the history of this region. After all the detailed discussions, finally, Dr. Ambedkar's amendment 'India, that is, Bharat' was adopted on 18 September 1949 in Article I. Even though the adoption of this amendment, it is adequately clear that the members of the Constituent Assembly were acutely aware of the civilizational significance of the use of the name 'Bharat'.

The amendment 'India, that is, Bharat', which contains the name 'Bharat', harkens back to a civilization identity which predates both Middle Eastern and European Colonialities. The members of the Constituent Assembly made their as well as the country's position clear regarding the awareness that "Independent Bharat is indeed the successor state to the Indic civilization." (Deepak 206) However, the use of both names signifies a dual persona where some identify more with the idea of 'India', while others with the idea that was propagated with the name 'Bharat'. In keeping with the spirit of the Decolonial theory, it has been argued that the only name that should be kept for this nation is 'Bharat', and that in order for the nation to regain its indigenous identity, the tendency to see it through the prism of India must be questioned and corrected in a number of areas, including knowledge production, history, education, etc.

The dual nomenclature has been the subject of debate and controversies because there is a considerable portion of the population that still holds the proposition that the term 'India' is a colonial imposition and signifier of colonial oppression, and advocates for the exclusive use of the term 'Bharat' to emphasize indigenous identity and cultural heritage.

## Works cited

1. Acharya, Shiva. *Nation, Nationalism and Social Structure in Ancient India*. Decent Books, 2005.
2. *Arthashastra*. Translated by R. Shamasastry, Government Press, 1915.
3. Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton University Press, 1993.
4. Constitution of India. Government of India, 1950.
5. Deepak, J. Sai. *India that is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilisation, Constitution*. Bloomsbury India, 2021.
6. Khilnani, Sunil. *The Idea of India*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.
7. Mookerji, Radha Kumud. *Nationalism in Hindu Culture*. Gyan Press Delhi, 1921.
8. Mookerji, Radha Kumud. *Ancient Indian Education: Brahmanical and Buddhist*. Motilal Banarsidass, 1989.
9. Pant, Hargovind. Speech on "Bharat Varsha" vs "India," 18 Sept. 1949. Constituent Assembly Debates, Government of India, 18 Sept. 1949, 1692.
10. *Rigveda*. Translated by Ralph T.H. Griffith, E.J. Lazarus, 1896.
11. Sharma, R. S. *India's Ancient Past*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

12. Tripathi, Kamalpathi. Speech on the naming of the country. Constituent Assembly Debates, vol. 9, Government of India, 18 Sept. 1949, pp. 1696–97.
13. *Vishnu Purana*. Translated by H.H. Wilson, Trübner & Co., 1864.

