

India

By Ramachandra Guha

*Chauvinism in India once ran along religious lines; today it runs equally along the lines of language, caste and region*

**S**EVERAL years ago, I wrote a piece in The Telegraph (Calcutta) on the names of city streets. I spoke of the renaming of Calcutta's Harrington Street as Ho Chi Minh Sarani, and of the dropping of caste surnames in Chennai streets.

However, my article dealt mostly with Mumbai, a city I had then recently visited. I noticed that the names of Mumbai streets were determined by a "curious mixture of chauvinism, courage, and corruption". Some street names were paid for by film-stars, while some others generously honoured the great Indians of the past. But, so far as I could tell, the vast majority of street names in Mumbai was reserved for the icons of the Marathi and Hindu chauvinists who have of late exercised much influence in that city.

I had quite forgotten about that article, until I got a mail recently reminding me of its contents. "Dear Mr Guha," the letter began: "While Googling with search phrase 'history of road names bombay' I happened to read this July 2005 piece written by you. You seem to forget that more and more Bengalis, amongst others, land in Mumbai daily, and settle here hap-

pily. Yes, there's a Shiv Sena here and a Maharashtra Navnirman Sena too. That there are no such organisations in Kolkata is also true. If, however, you are sufficiently open and candid, you will accept that this seeming tolerance of Kolkatans is false. Because, entire Kolkata is a big Bengal Vahini. Show me one prominent post in Kolkata that is filled by a non-Bengali. But then, I forget that you too must have that certain feeling that Bengalis are superior to everyone else! Another reason that there's no explicit Vahini in Kol[kata] has to do with the total lack of opportunities there. That's why all of you have to come here to Mumbai, or make frequent visits, like you seem to do."

The letter-writer then went on: "In fact, the sectarianism, chauvinism, groupism, or, would you rather that it is called 'solidarity' of Bengalis is so notorious that even you will find it difficult to refute it! In your own trade of journalism, see how one of them brings tens. Be it the Times of India, the Hindustan Times or Daily News and Analysis, you can't escape the bunch of Bengalis, always increasing in numbers. If they are weeded out, they will get in as photographers. One will bring the other. Then, there will be book reviews of the Bengalis by the Bengalis for the Bengalis. And the Bong photographer will make sure that his page-3 snaps have at least a couple of

# Chauvinism and pr

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Bongs. The Bong sub-editor will make sure that they are printed, as prominently as possible. It is an open collaborative chauvinistic game that all of you play."

Having pointed out that my chauvinism was greater than his, my correspondent continued: "I will really be honoured if you can counter what I have said. Mumbai has three prominent places named after Bengalis. Please list for me more than one in Kolkata named after Maharashtrians"

The mail ended with these words of advice: "It is very easy to be ungrateful and criticise others. Why not look into your own backyard? That will be the point where you

# prejudices in India

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might start seeing the reasons and justifications of existence of the Senas. The fact is, each of our provinces is like a country, and has full right to flaunt its language and culture. Bengal does not have a monopoly in this. And, just as even a Birla in Kol[kata] speaks Bengali, the non-Maharashtrians, including Bengali in Mumbai must speak Marathi. It is unfortunate for Maharashtrians that this is not the case, their fault being that they allowed, in fact welcomed all the Guhas, Singhs and Malhotras from outside."

The mail left me both bemused and amused. That an article written so long ago could have engendered such an emotional

response was surprising. And the charge that I was a Bengali chauvinist was funny, since I am not a Bengali in the first place. The correspondent had been misled by my surname into thinking that I was one. However, the 'Guha' in my last name is not a Bengali caste name; it refers to a character in the Ramayan. Besides, the extra 'a' in my first name indicates that my ethnic origins must lie south of the Vindhya.

The mistake was understandable. Some readers of this newspaper also make it — as when they write in angrily that I am a "self-hating Bengali", in response to a column where I might have written in less-than-adulatory terms of Sourav Ganguly or Subhas Bose or about bhadrakok culture in general.

Reflecting a little longer on the letter, I was left feeling not bemused or amused, but depressed. Why had the correspondent not engaged with the evidence of my article, but simply attributed motives? For instance, I had pointed out that the chowk outside the Prince of Wales Museum in south Mumbai was named for Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, who was, as it happens, a Bengali, yet had no obvious connection with the city.

Why wasn't it named instead, I asked, for the great ornithologist Salim Ali, who spent his life working in the museum nearby? My answer was that the Shiv Sena and the Bharatiya Janata Party would in such matters always prefer a Hindu name to a Muslim one. This line of

argument infuriated my correspondent, in whose opinion his city and region were being unfairly demeaned by a man from a rival city and region.

Eighty years ago, a notable resident of Mumbai wrote that "if a modern Diogenes were to hunt out for Indians with his lantern in these days, he would be sure to come across fervid Hindus, bigoted Muslims and fanatical souls deeply engrossed with the problem of tirelessly finding out how unjustly their own particular community was being treated, and he would have to ask in sorrow: 'Where are the Indians?'" The words are those of Syed Abdullah Brelvi, and they were published on May 20, 1926, in the newspaper he then edited, the Bombay Chronicle.

In Brelvi's day, chauvinism in India mostly ran along the lines of religion; now, it runs equally along the lines of language and caste and region. Daily life in India is marked and vitiated by these different varieties of chauvinism. Its impact is felt by the working citizen, and even by the ivory-tower intellectual.

What one writes is rarely judged by the logic of reason or fact; rather, it is subjected at once to the withering prejudices of identity. I have myself been accused by some correspondents of being a Muslim appeaser, and by others of being a Brahminical Hindu; by some of being a self-hating Bengali, and by others of being a Bengali chauvinist. COURTESY THE KHALEEJ TIMES