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THIRD UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON THE  
STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Athens, Greece

17 August - 7 September 1977

Item 7 of the provisional agenda

REPORT OF THE AFRICA WEST DIVISION

The former "Africa South of the Sahara" Division was constituted into two Divisions at the fifth meeting of the Group of Experts in March 1973. The two Divisions are "Africa East" and "Africa West". The countries in the Africa West Division, which are covered by this report, are Republic of Benin, Cameroon, Central African Empire, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo and Upper Volta.

No formal meeting of the Division has so far been held but the Standardization of Geographical Names was one of the topics discussed at the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Symposium on Manpower Requirements and the Development of Cartographic Services in Africa held in Cairo from 22-26 July 1974, where it was recommended that Geographical Names Committees should be established in African countries where they do not already exist and that African regional meetings on geographical names should be organized.

A meeting of the Inter-African Committee on Surveys and Maps of the OAU is to be held to follow up the recommendation of the Symposium. Nairobi has been proposed for this meeting but there has been no reaction yet to the letter sent to Nairobi to this effect. Another letter is to be sent to Nairobi about hosting the meeting and, if there is no positive response, the possibility of holding the meeting somewhere else will be explored.

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HISTORY OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN INDIA

Paper presented by India<sup>\*/</sup>

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<sup>\*/</sup> Report prepared by Col. D.N. Sharma Atri Barmal. The views expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Government of India.

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1.1 Continuity and development of Indian civilization goes back to more than 5,000 years. North India was the home-land of Aryans who spoke Sanskrit. Numerous non-Aryan tribes lived in different parts of the country and spoke diverse dialects. During its chequered history there has been continuous intermingling of many races and their diverse cultures and languages. In ancient times Sanskrit was the language of the educated and the elite. Prakrit, Pali and Apabhraṁsh were the major languages spoken by the masses in the north of Vindhyas and Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayālam were popular in the south.

1.2 Sanskrit gave birth to most of the modern Indian languages and continues to nourish them. It has influenced all others. At one time Persian was the court language in a major part of the country. In recent times English became the official language of the government and continues to share the honour with Hindi written in Devanāgarī alphabet. The constitution of India recognises fourteen languages as official and some more are likely to be added in the future.

1.3 Needless to say that the interplay of various cultures and languages has had an unsettling effect on the geographical names. For example, 'Pātaliputra' in Sanskrit changed to 'Pātaliputta' in Pāli and is 'Patna' of today. 'Takshashīlā' became 'Takkaśīlā' in Pāli and is 'Taxila' of today. Many habitations got destroyed and their names went into oblivion; many place-names underwent changes with the change in the language of the new rulers or the people; and many place-names were changed by the rulers to commemorate their own names or dynasties. Natural calamities, such as floods, earthquakes, cyclones and epidemics and political upheavals also took their toll. Many habitations disappeared or were deserted and new ones with different or corrupt versions of their original names arose on or near their sites thereby causing confusion. There being no maps, accidental records of these events appear in literature or survives in folklore.

1.4 Moreover, as in other countries, so also in ancient India, no attempt was made at name standardization. Perhaps there was no need. Due to the difficulties of travel and communications people did not go far afield from their homes and except the places of pilgrimage, rivers and mountains and hills of religious importance and trade centres, the names of other places were not of much concern to them. Such names and the names of places not affected by foreign interference and which escaped the natural calamities have retained their pristine form even to this day.

1.5 Alphabets of Indian languages being phonetical, spelling names correctly was not much of a problem. But often the same name was given to different features in various parts of the country, thus making their identification ambiguous - a problem which the historian, the archaeologist, the geographer and others find well nigh impossible to solve. Consider the names Ganga, Sindhu, Saraswati which were given to diverse rivers all over India.

1.6 Perhaps this was inevitable. It is doubtful if name standardization can ever be possible without maps, and mapping in the modern sense, started in India with the advent of Europeans in the early part of the 18th century. As the British established and extended their rule, they carried out surveys of their new possessions to ascertain the extent of cultivated lands and the value of their revenues; for the protection of communications; and for the extension of their new found empire. Rennell was appointed Surveyor General from the beginning of 1767 and mapping of the country was taken up in earnest. First surveyors were British who were not familiar with Indian languages. Indian pronunciation of names was alien to their ears. They anglicised the names and gave many of them a mnemonic form. Thus Siraj-ud-Daulah became Sir Roger Dowler; Karachi - Crotchy; Allahabad - Isle of Bats; Lakhimpur - Lucky-poor; Mahesh-ūru - Mysore; Sundarbans - Sundry-Bunds; Hajipur - Hodge-poor and so on. The confusion became worse confounded when the same name was spelt in many ways according to the idiosyncrasies of individual surveyors. For example, Sind was spelt as Scinde, Scind, Scindh, Sindh, Sinde and Sind.

1.7 Following factors were evidently responsible for causing this confusion and anarchy in the Roman spelling of geographical names:

- (a) Mishearings and garblings of surveyors not conversant with local languages and dialects.
- (b) Lack of a uniform and standard system of transcription of Indian phonemes and transliteration of alphabets of Indian languages into Roman.
- (c) Inherent shortcomings, inconsistencies and absurdities of English orthography.

1.8 To set the matters right, the Government of India, in 1868, decided to compile provincial gazetteers throughout India and appointed Dr. W.W. Hunter to develop a uniform system of transliteration and to secure uniformity of spelling in the preparation of these gazetteers. His system of transliteration was approved by the Government in 1870 and with a few minor modifications it has been in use since then.

However, prior to the Independence of India, English alone was the official language of the Government of India and the Hunterian system served the needs of the English knowing people adequately. The question of publishing maps in Hindi and regional languages never arose. Hindi in Devanāgarī script has now taken the place of pride as the official language of the Government of India and the Constitution of India also recognizes 13 other languages as official. Some more are likely to be added in the future.

1.9 It has, therefore, become advisable to replace the Hunterian system by a more comprehensive system of transliteration which should also have the quality of reversibility. To assist in this matter, Colonel D.N. Sharma Atri Harnal, who represents Indian Division in the United Nations Group of Experts of Geographical Names, prepared tables for "TRANSLITERATION INTO ROMAN AND DEVĀNGARĪ OF THE LANGUAGES OF THE INDIAN GROUP" which were approved by the Group and adopted for use in international cartography by the Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names held in London from 10-31 May 1972 by Resolution 11. These have since been slightly revised and are under the active consideration of the Government of India. It cannot be disputed that in a multilingual country suitable transliteration tables enabling transliteration from one language to the other are the essential first step towards standardization of geographical names.

## STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN INDIA

2.1 Steps have been taken to ensure that the existing geographical names are not changed except in accordance with the rules laid down by the Government of India and that the names to the new or unnamed geographical entities are given in accordance with specified principles and rules.

2.2 However no attempt has yet been made to standardize the spelling of geographical names in the local and other official languages of India by an act of the Government. This will be possible only after the Government has adopted a standard system of transliteration into Devanāgarī and Roman of the official languages of India.

### 2.3 National authority for the standardization of geographical names

In 1953, the Government of India decided that the following principles and procedures should be adopted for determining the spelling of geographical names in India:

- "(a) Authority to determine the spelling of any name in the script used as the official language of the Centre will vest in the Central Government.
- (b) All Ministries of the Central Government and Subordinate Offices will observe the spelling approved by the Central Government.
- (c) The Survey of India will be the only authority for the transliteration of names from one script to another according to the system approved by the Central Government. In the event of disagreement between the Survey of India and a State Government, the decision of the Government of India will be final.
- (d) Where a State Government uses a script (other than the Devanāgarī script) which differs from that used by the Central Government, or where a local script of the State differs from the script used by the Central Government, the State Government will be the authority for deciding the spelling of geographical names of places or features in the State in local script. Survey of India will be responsible for transliterating these names into Devanagari or Roman script in accordance with the approved system of transliteration and in consultation, where necessary, with the State Government and other appropriate authorities".

### 2.4 Giving names to places and natural features hitherto unnamed

State Governments have full authority, where they adopt Hindi in the Devanāgarī script as the official language or even where Hindi is only a local language of the State Government, to give names to places and natural features within their areas hitherto unnamed. Such names are communicated to the Survey of India in the Devanāgarī script for transliteration to the Roman script. Should it be necessary to alter the existing spelling in Devanāgarī script of a name in use by the Survey of India, the State Government asks the Survey of India to adopt the new spelling. If the Survey of India is unable to agree, the State Government may refer the matter to the Central Government for a decision. This procedure applies also to changes in the spelling of names that appear in the Gazetteer of India.

## 2.5 Changes in spelling of existing names

In order to preserve historical continuity and avoid confusion, it has been decided not to change the existing English spelling of some internationally known places and features, e.g. Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi even though they may have slightly different local pronunciation. The Roman spelling of the geographical names appearing in the Constitution of India are to be retained unless changed by the Government of India.

As a result of historical processes, some names undergo minor changes which are noticed when these places are revisited for the purpose of revision surveys. Their spelling is corrected.

In the case of names appearing in the Imperial Gazetteer/Gazetteer of India, a minor change or inaccuracy in the spelling of a name, which comes to notice during field surveys is made in consultation with the State Government concerned. In the case of a major change the State Government is required to refer the matter to the Central Government.

In some cases, spelling of names may have to be corrected due to incorrect spelling having been initially adopted by mistake, or some place having undergone a change in the name. In such cases, the old name is inserted in brackets and is dropped only when it falls in disuse.

## 2.6 Giving a new name to a place already named

The policy of the Government is to discourage changing an accepted name which people have got used to. Names of villages etc. having a historical connexion are not allowed to be changed as far as possible. A change is not allowed to be made merely on grounds of local patriotism or for linguistic reasons, i.e., villages cannot be renamed after national leaders merely to show respect to them or for satisfying local sentiment in the matter of language, etc. Any such changes can be made only with the approval of the Central Government which generally consults the Surveyor General of India.

## 2.7 Field collection of geographical names and standardization of their spelling

The Survey of India is responsible for the collection of geographical names and rendering their spelling in Devanāgarī and Roman. While the surveyor is carrying out surveys in an area, he enters the names of places and geographical features, indicating the extent of the latter, in a register. He writes the name in any Indian language known to him, adhering faithfully to the local pronunciation, as the main aim is that the map should be able to guide the individual to the place named. No attempt is made to trace the etymology of the name or its historical origin. The spelling of the name picked up by the surveyor is finalized after consulting the local administration who maintain revenue records. The spelling, if not in Devanāgarī, is at first transcribed into it and then transliterated into Roman. In some States which have not yet adopted Hindi for official use, the names are transcribed into Roman from the regional script. A sample form on which names are collected is attached.

It will be observed that the spelling of the names of the places have not yet been standardized by the various State Governments, with the result that the surveyor writes the name as he hears it and what he writes is affected by his own predilections and linguistic deficiencies as he may not know the language of the people of the area in which he is working and he may not be able to render the sounds of an alien language in his own language.

I shall take this opportunity to pose a problem. What is standardization of a geographical name? Does standardization constitute simply collection of names, choosing one of the alternative names where more than one is current and putting them on a map or a gazetteer? In my humble view, this cannot be called standardization, though it may be a useful step towards it. Standardization, if I may say so, should mean not only giving a unique name to a geographical entity but also giving it a unique spelling in the official language or languages of the country. What I have stated is consistent with Resolution 4 (National Standardization) of the First Conference but needs to be spelt out in precise terms as it appears to me that the term "standardization of geographical names" is not well understood.

#### 2.8 Descriptive part of a name

The descriptive part of a geographical name, such as river, mountain, bay, is generally given in the same language in which the name is written.

When the descriptive part of a name is a component part of the name and the local inhabitants generally couple the descriptive part with the name, the latter includes the descriptive word.

The descriptive part is written separately when the name is applied for the natural feature to which the descriptive word applies, and combined in one word when the name applies to a village or other feature, eg. 'Malai' is the Tamil word for 'hill'.

Chenni Malai	...	name of hill
Chennimalai	...	name of village

Translations of descriptive name in a regional language are not entered in other languages when their meaning is sufficiently clear, either from the use of a symbol or by a study of the neighbouring topography, or when the descriptive regional name is well-known as, for instance, in Tibetan, such names as La, Tso, Dzong, Gomba, etc.

However, translations of the words such as river, fort, rope bridge are used.

Ganga River in Roman and " गङ्गा नदी " in Devanāgarī. When, however, the local words might not be readily understood, their meaning is given in a footnote on topographical maps.

## 2.9 Features having more than one name

When a feature, like a river or a mountain, extends over a wide distance or area, it may have a variety of local names. In such cases, the more important name is shown boldly and the local name is given in brackets alongside, in the part to which the latter pertains.

### 2.1.1 Features extending beyond the frontiers of India

Within the Indian territory, our practice is to adopt the Indian name, and beyond it, the name adopted by the country concerned. To avoid confusion and for international reference, it is very desirable that names of such features should be standardized. Although it is difficult to make the inhabitants of an area adopt a new foreign name for such a feature, the standard name could be shown alongside the local accepted name at least on all official publications.

## 3. Gazatteer of geographical names

In India, geographical names appear on Survey of India maps and in the Gazatteers of India. Although gazatteers of well-known places and features have been compiled in the past, no comprehensive gazatteer of all the known geographical names has as yet been compiled.

## 4. Glossary of geographical terms

The compilation of a glossary of internationally accepted geographical terms will be of great benefit, especially for navigational purposes and delimitation of territorial waters, etc. The Indian delegation lends full support to this project.

## 5. Foreign names

Survey of India now enters both the conventional name of a foreign country and the name which the country has adopted for itself, the latter is entered within parenthesis.

