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REPORT FOR INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

India has a many as fifteen official languages. The national language is Hindi and English serves as a link language at present. Land surveys in India have a history of well over two centuries with the Survey of India department having its origin in the year 1767. Thus, geographical names were collected since the early days during the course of survey work. The Hunterian system of transliteration was developed in India in 1870 with a view to representing the place names more accurately as a result of the experience gathered till then and the difficulties and issues encountered. However, the Hunterian system, though still in vogue, has not achieved fully satisfactory results as will be discussed later.

ACTIVITIES

Activities involving geographical names have been progressing and enlarging in different fields. Preparation of maps, so far more or less confined to English and Hindi, are being extended into other languages. For instance, the political map of India on scale 1:4 million will shortly be printed in Kannada and Malayalam.

The work for preparation of a National Gazetteer of Geographical Names covering comprehensively all place names in the country is in hand and the preparation of lists of names on a proforma was completed by each regional Circle of the Survey of India. Work is also in progress for issuing Inventories of geographical names District-wise and State-wise. It will be significant to state that, in the lists, the names are furnished in the regional language (the source), in Hindi and in Roman, thus involving three renderings except where Hindi itself is the regional language. Amongst other details in the proforma, the feature description and the co-ordinates (correct to a decimal of a degree of arc) are also given. Computerisation of the names is also in hand. Other activities such as those pertaining to national standardization, transliteration and toponymic guidelines are covered separately below.

NATIONAL STANDARDIZATION

Laid-down procedures and rules for collection, authentication and permanent record were in existence since long and the more important names were published in the Imperial Gazetteer of India during the British regime. District Gazetteers were also prepared in those days which included several topics including culture and life-styles of the local population. National standardization was in vogue in that an Imperial Gazetteer name had to be fully adhered to in subsequent surveys, change being discouraged and permitted only through strict procedures of validation and re-authentication. These principles are still in application.

Despite the above, the results were not quite satisfactory for a number of reasons. Names often underwent distortions during the British regime with no semblance to the native form. After India gained independence in 1947, this matter has received due attention and the anglicised names have been rectified to a great extent. For instance Benares has been corrected to Varanasi and Cranganore to Kodungallur. Correction actions are continuing for some names remaining.

Some of the other aspects affecting standardization are incorrect spelling of the name due to mis-hearing, subjective interpretation from an unfamiliar language, bi-lingual areas, dual renderings by different groups of the local population, dialects and unwritten languages, tribal areas, regional variants, transliteration system deficiencies and, last but not the least, what may be called popular exonyms.

In 1953, the Government of India issued instructions regarding standardization, transliteration and procedures for change of geographical names and later on (more recently), for establishing State Names Authorities, which has since been implemented by some of the States. The State Government is the authority to decide the geographical name, for places within the State, in the regional language (if it is not Hindi) and the Surveyor-General of India is the authority for transliterating the name to Hindi and then from Hindi to Roman for uniform procedure (and not direct to Roman). Changes of names (processed for very strong reasons) are finally notified by the Surveyor-General of India by issue of formal amendments.

TRANSLITERATION

The Indian languages are basically phonetic in the alphabet and, in most cases, the system follows the pattern of the Sanskrit alphabet with extra or less phonemes or graphemes in certain cases. To the extent that these extra phonemes or graphemes of a source language are not having equivalents in the receiver language, there occurs distortion of name spelling and pronunciation vitiating also reversibility. In other words, one grapheme must have only one sound and vice-versa. The Central Hindi Directorate and the Central Institute of Indian Languages have done significant work in this regard by use of diacreties, and by rationalisation, thus augmenting inter-relations and co-ordination amongst the various languages.

The Hunterian system has, by and large, been more or less effectively serving the work of transliteration to Roman, though with gaps and deficiencies in its system. For instance, the letter d refers to two phonemes dental d and retroflex d of common occurrence in the Indian languages and with contrast and lexical differences. Similarly, the letter t refers to dental t as well as retroflex t and even to alveolar t and all the three are needed. Other graphemes like e, o, l, n and r are also concerned. This situation calls for some amendments to the Hunterian system by way of a few diacritical marks, the existing diacreties being only a macron super-script over the vowels a, i and u. Lack of proper equivalents in the Hunterian system has been one reason for gross mispronunciation of Indian place names by foreigners also. Co-relation of the Roman and other alphabets with the International Phonetic Association (IPA alphabet), even by way of a broad application, can go a long way in minimising mis-pronunciation.

There has always been the nagging question of a transliteration system without diacritical marks, which is the need of text-books and various administrative agencies. As it stands, the least we ought to do in applying a diacritical mark is to satisfy the principle that its omission does not worsen the distortion intended to be removed (e.g.: n in relation to ng and nj).

TOPONYMIC GUIDELINES

Some preliminary studies in respect of this topic have been carried out and a set of Notes on Toponymic Guidelines has been prepared which presents a general analysis. With the highly multi-lingual character encountered, the preparation of the guidelines is quite a complex matter and studies are to continue to ensure rational and lasting results. It is to be realised that toponymic guidelines are needed not only for map and other editors, but also for map readers, namely to suit those not conversant enough with the source language concerned in the map. For India, we have thus to prepare such guidelines to cover each of the languages for their unique letters, sounds or nuances as applicable. The need arises when we consider that we have to eventually prepare maps in variety in all the languages for different regions too.

The toponymic guidelines are expected to include also matters like special features of each language, aids to pronunciation, rules for interpretation in field collection, transliteration and reverse transliteration and treatment of names in areas of tribes, dialects and unwritten languages by the covering official language. Further, on the printed map, a key to pronunciation and special footnotes for certain aspects not covered by the key are also considered necessary.

EXONYMS

We are continuing our efforts for progressive reduction of exonyms. Apart from the general channel of change of such names when projected by the State Government, exonyms coming to notice during the course of topographical surveys planned from time to time in different areas are eliminated. However, it can be said that treatment of exonyms is not always a simple matter. For instance, in bi-lingual tracts, the difference in form of the name, often in the generic part or the suffix part, is inextricably tied up with the adjacent regional language. Also many exonyms are highly popular, the more so with important places of pilgrimage, tourism, commerce, etc. and the question does arise as to whether a hard and fast rule to eliminate such exonyms is possible in reality.

EDUCATION

Education in toponymy is carried out as part of the normal survey training and the need is felt for toponymy courses for which United Nations assistance is very desirable.