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## RIDE WITH THE TIDE

Fifth Column -Abhijit V. Banerjee

When it comes to naming, like the chief minister of West Bengal I too believe in consulting everyone. And, as it turned out, everyone was happy to pitch in. An old friend, a Delhi wit, and apparently a fan of the work culture of this state, wanted it to be called Rest Bengal. But, as I pointed out to him, we really don't make much progress in the list of states if we go that way. A couple suggested Bongo, after the musical instrument, on the grounds that "state ka to baaja baj gaya" (the state's music is over, meaning, for those who do not read Hindi, that things are pretty much finished for the state). I thought that was a little too negative, as was perhaps the suggestion of a local cynic who insisted on remaining anonymous: Bhongo (literally, 'breakage', to commemorate, he said, what has been done to the state over the last many years).

As is the fashion these days, I decided I will instead try to learn what I can from the global experience of renaming. The trouble is, as I discovered quickly, that most countries prefer not to be renamed, unless they are forced to do so by events (Germany got unified, while Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, not to speak of the Soviet Union, fell apart). But there are, of course, examples to the contrary. Congo became Zaire under Mobutu Sese Seko, and sank to the bottom of the list of countries, in almost every possible way. Burma became Myanmar under the military junta, and this has not stopped the country from being one of the saddest corners of Asia. And the Khmer Rouge renamed Cambodia Kampuchea before turning it into killing fields.

### Up the ladder

What about countries that went the other way, as we hope to accomplish in Bengal — up the alphabetical order rather than down? Well, Zaire is back as Congo, but things have not really improved much; Dahomey became the Republic of Benin when the country came under a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship and went into an economic tailspin, but in the last 20 years, it has been doing much better after abandoning its hardline policies and embracing democracy; and Cambodia is back, and is doing better.

Given this rather inconclusive evidence, I decided that it was important to get the right name rather than jockey for a good position on the alphabetical order. After all, we can jump past Punjab by going to Paschimbanga, but what's stopping them from revising the state's name to 'Panjab', which is what we Bengalis call it? Substance, I felt, should take precedence over mere rank-mongering. What place, I asked, would we want to be like? Which is the second fastest growing state in India in the last few years, and one where even the Bharatiya Janata Party is committed to communal harmony? Which state's chief minister was recently described by Bill Gates as having demonstrated that "the best leaders can overcome the worst circumstances"?

### Go east

My proposal is that we turn ourselves into East Bihar. It will move us way up the alphabetical order — which seems to be a priority. Like Paschimbanga, it provides some clues regarding where to look for it on the map (and it celebrates East rather than West — which seems more appropriate). And it ties us to a rising tide.

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