

What's in a name? A lot, it seems, in politics



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Waiting Game

On May 26, the third anniversary of his government's inauguration, Prime Minister Narendra Modi opened the Dhola-Sadiya bridge in eastern Assam. Spanning the Lohit, one of the tributaries of the majestic Brahmaputra, the bridge is India's longest, traversing 9.2 km. As a marvel of connectivity located near the Arunachal Pradesh border with China, it has economic and strategic implications.

Sadiya town, where the bridge ends — or begins, depending on how you see it — is the birthplace of the late Bhupen Hazarika. Balladeer, musician, poet, filmmaker, intellectual, Hazarika was and remains one of Assam's greatest and most loved children. In a state that has frequently been marked by linguistic, religious and ethnic differences, Bhupen Hazarika is a remarkable unifying factor. He was the lyrical biographer of the Brahmaputra and it was appropriate that Mr Modi named the bridge after him.

Congress politicians and partisans responded to the inauguration of the bridge with a peculiar protest. The bridge, they said, had nothing to do with Mr Modi and his government. Construction had begun in 2011, under the UPA government, and plans for the bridge had been finalised in 2009-10. It was all the doing of the Congress and the Manmohan Singh government, so why was Mr Modi claiming credit?

This would seem a little strange as big infrastructure projects and policy moves are often started by one government but reach fruition under a successor. The UPA government of 2004-09 benefited greatly from the groundwork

laid by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government of 1999-2004. In fact, the boom in India's economy in the first term of the UPA had much to do with fiscal rectitude and infrastructure spending in Vajpayee's years. As a veteran administrator had remarked wryly at that stage, "In economics, as in agriculture, it is not important who sows. It is important who reaps."

Yet, that is another story. The real cause of the Congress' tetchiness is that in naming the river bridge after a local icon, rather than a faraway politician from another state, Mr Modi exposed the Congress' hollow commitment to Assam — and to India's pluralism, regional diversities and multiple identities. In picking the name of Bhupen Hazarika — who stood for election on a BJP ticket in 2004 but was hardly a BJP person and largely independent of all political affiliations — Mr Modi hit the local Congress where it hurts.

Assam voted for the Congress in three successive Assembly elections (2001, 2006 and 2011). It sent a Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, to the Rajya Sabha more than once. In return, as a parting gift in the early summer of 2014, the Congress gave Assam Sanjay Singh, erstwhile princeling of Amethi, as a Rajya Sabha representative. He had to be accommodated to guarantee support for Rahul Gandhi's campaign to defend his (Rahul's) Lok Sabha seat — so the Congress decided to dump him on Assam.

At least Manmohan Singh was a scholar and administrator of experience whom broad Assamese society respected — even if, like many others elsewhere in the country, it ended up being disappointed

with him. Mr Singh was another matter. Assam deserved better than being offered as a bribe for Rahul Gandhi's re-election attempt in Amethi.

The naming of a bridge after Bhupen Hazarika and the nomination of Mr Singh as a Rajya Sabha member from Assam just weeks before the 2014 general election are two very different and entirely unrelated events. Even so, there is a connection in the willingness of Mr Modi and the BJP to embrace popular and local urges and sentiments, and of the Congress leadership's flagrant neglect of these. This comparison should be an eye-opener for why the Congress is being written off India's electoral map, state after state.

Not only is the Congress' argument that "Our government did the work, Modi just cut the ribbon and gave the name" flawed, it can be countered by examples from the UPA era itself. In 1998, the location of the new airport in Hyderabad was finalised. In the following years, legal and contracting work was undertaken, after a bidding process the concessionaire was identified, and various documents were signed. By the time the Vajpayee government demitted office in May 2004, the bulk of the preparation was done and only the final agreement with the Union government was formally signed in late 2004.

The foundation stone of the airport was laid by Sonia Gandhi, the Congress president, in March 2005. Before she arrived it was decided that the airport would be named after Rajiv Gandhi because he had

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"trained as a pilot in Hyderabad". Obviously, as per the Hyderabad precedent, names given when foundation stones are laid are sacrosanct.

In 1999, the foundation stone of the Bandra-Kurla Sea Link in Mumbai was laid by Bal Thackeray, then the Shiv Sena chief. At the event, he said the sea link should be named after Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a popular literary and revolutionary figure in Maharashtra.

What happened next? The Shiv Sena-BJP government lost power in Maharashtra a few months after Thackeray laid the foundation stone. In 2009, the sea link was finally inaugurated by — who else? — Sonia Gandhi. The Congress was in power, nationally and in the state. There was no mention of Savarkar. It was announced that the sea link would be named after Rajiv Gandhi because he had been "born in Mumbai" and was a "son of the soil".

It is not for nothing that the joke doing the rounds on May 26 was that if the Congress had still been in office, the new bridge over the Brahmaputra would almost certainly have been inaugurated by Sonia Gandhi and almost certainly have been named after Rajiv Gandhi.

Postscript: In October 2017, India will be hosting football's Under-17 World Cup. This is the first FIFA tournament to come to India. After rigorous inspection, six stadiums in six cities were adjudged as meeting FIFA benchmarks and allotted matches for the Under-17 World Cup. They are being suitably upgraded. Three of the six stadiums — in Goa, Kochi and Delhi — are named after Jawaharlal Nehru. A fourth, in Guwahati, is named after Indira Gandhi. Not one is named after a footballer or a sportsperson. Chew on that.

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