

What's in a Name?

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'What's in a name?' asked the wise Bard in young Juliet's voice, and answered, again in Juliet's words:

*That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet*

(Romeo and Juliet, II, 2, 43-44)

True. By the same token, a sprig of asafoetida, by any other word or name, would smell as fetid. So I want to ask our name changers: Will Prayagraj be less poor, less crowded, less chaotic, less lawless in regard to traffic laws, less illiterate, more open, more salubrious than poor old Allahabad? The city has not changed for the better over the last sixty years since my parents made it their home and where I have lived permanently for the same number of years. The Allahabad that I remember from 1953 when I came here as a young man to study at the feet of the giants of English studies in those days: S. C. Deb, P. E. Dustoor, and many others, was a city of peace, and quiet, and erudition, and urbanity. It was a city of Hindi and Urdu and even English writers, Sanskrit and Arabic-Persian scholars, scientists, historians and economists, and saintly Hindus and Muslims who imprinted their name on the pages of the city's glorious history. I, like many others, have seen the beloved city of Nirala, Firaq Gorakhpuri, Mahadevi Varma, Hariprasad Chaurasia, Sukhdev Prasad Bismil Ilahabadi and scores of others slide ineluctably deeper into the slough of culturelessness, filth of urbanization and unplanned expansion. Will all this change when you remove Allahabad and install Prayagraj in its place?

So what are we trying to prove? Does name-changing also mean game-changing? Perhaps, in this case, it does. A senior leader declared that this change will erase Akbar's name from the people's memory. What will that achieve? It won't fill the people's belly, it won't find a suitable husband for the cycle rickshaw puller's daughter, it won't prevent the migrant labourer's or any other helpless man's daughter from being raped. Will there be more *Betis* saved and rescued and more *Betis* educated and given employment in Prayagraj?

What and who exactly was Akbar, I'll leave for the historians to testify. I just want to testify that Allahabad was not the name given to the city by Akbar. Akbar named it Ilahabas/Ilahabad. The holy city of Prayagraj remained where it was and still is: on and around the confluence of Triveni: Saraswati, Ganga, and Jamna (or Yamuna, if you want to be a pedant) where the annual Magh Mela was held and is still held. Prayagraj, the holy site where our three sacred rivers join. Akbar in fact elevated this part of the country. Combining, in 1580, a number of existing *subas* (provinces) including Jaunpur and the ancient Kara, he created a new suba. The headquarters of that suba was called Ilahabas/Ilahabad.

In Arabic, and so also Persian and Urdu, *Ilāh* does not mean Allah, the One and Indivisible, the Unbegotten who begot no one. *Ilāh* simply means, 'god, any god.' So when Akbar named the city *Ilāhābās* or *Ilāhābād*, he was doing honour to the people. He named the new city *The Abode of Ilāh*, that is, the Abode of Divinity. If someone wants to change the name to Prayagraj, they are disrespecting the Divinity which resides here. It's not a disrespect to Akbar or any other benighted Mughal.

Where does the modern name Allahabad come from? It is a name, rather a spelling and pronunciation, given by the British. I don't know if it was meant to spite the Hindus, or 'honour'

the Muslims, or it was just ignorance and cussedness. Most probably it was the latter. It's not unlikely that ears that could hear *Kānhapur* (Kanha's City) as Cawnpore and *Lakhna'ū* (Lakhan=Lakshman's City) as Lucknow and *Avadh* as Oude, would hear *Allāh-Ābād* instead of plain old *Ilāhābād* which didn't have the resonance of ALLAH and HIS CITY. No one who speaks any of the languages spoken here and around here, Hindi, Urdu, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Pratapgarhi, pronounces the city's name as Allahabad, or Allah-Abad (The City of Allah). This name is a purely foreign entity. Abolish it if you will. No one will be happier than I, because it jars on my Indian ears. I grew up saying and hearing 'Ilahabad' and am quite happy with it.

Those in power have full power to make new things and name them as they please. To seize an existing entity and to rename it—for whatever purpose, malice, spite, assertion of small mindedness, denial of history—is obnoxious and is not something that befits a sovereign, self-confident national government. And it is counter-productive. It may feed the malice of a few and sadden the hearts of quite a few more, but it won't add anything positive to the treasury of the nation's psyche.

Ironically, the names 'High Court of Judicature at Allahabad' and 'University of Allahabad' will remain unchanged. That is, the most significant nomenclature will not be changed, unless two separate amendments are promulgated by Parliament to the Acts of Parliament which named them so. Incidentally, I understand that the name-change will cost 4800 lakh rupees of public money. The public never voted this expenditure and I, an insignificant member of the public submit that this sum could easily sustain 480 impoverished voters of U.P. for life.

It has been said that those who object to the change from Allahabad (read Ilahabad) to Prayagraj have no knowledge of History. It has also been said the name-change will eradicate Akbar's name from Allahabad (Ilahabad)'s history. But the boot would seem to be on the other leg. The name Allahabad is a British legacy. Akbar's true legacy to this city starts with the Fort—a fort from where his beloved son Salim ruled as a rebel Sultan with a unilateral declaration of Kingship over the Mughal Empire. Salim was here as rebel king from 1599 to 1604. He struck coins in his name, had his name mentioned as Sultan and Zill-ul-Lah in formal perorations before the Friday prayers. He assembled, in fact created an Ilahabad school of Mughal painting here, had writers and calligraphers produce books of art and literature. Let the Fort be pulled down (the cost in terms of riverine traffic, environment degradation and capital investment would be astronomical) but the annals of history cannot be emptied of those five years of Salim Jahangir's rule from that Fort. Then we have the Khusrau Bagh, where is buried Jahangir's son and Akbar's favourite grandson who missed becoming the Mughal Emperor by a hair's breadth. History is not a mere word in a dictionary that can be obliterated by fiat. It is a time, a people, and a sensibility. It stays with you, however much you may deny it.

Naming is an exercise in ego-satisfaction, sometimes an exercise in expediency. Name changing is an exercise in false vanity, if not malice. 'Change the name and it's about you', as Horace said, though in another context.

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