

**Sweta**

## **RENAMING GHATS OF BANARAS: SUBALTERN NAMES AND PAROCHIAL CARTOGRAPHY**

### **Introduction**

Names play a significant role in everyday life and are layered with multiple cultural meanings. Not everything is named and things that are named have some value. The process of naming is inherent to culture. Names are important bearers of culture. The aim of the present article is to study the perspective of people on the process of renaming. It studies the ways people comprehend the renaming of the ghats. The article highlights the strategies of maintaining the subaltern names of the ghats. The article and the performing functions of names examines the process of renaming of the ghats. It explores the process of renaming which represents community mores and values. The aim of the present article is to study such kind of appropriation which compromises with the existing meaning and creates a new identity for the ghats. It looks at the renaming of the ghats as a socio-political intention to naturalize the place with a new name, wipe out the past and establish an authority over it. The article analyses struggle for renaming and sustaining subaltern names. Through this article, the researcher seeks to present the ways in which subaltern spaces are recognized. It elaborates on the conscious practices which are directed to reinforce and sustain the subaltern ghat names. The present primarily focuses on two ghats, the Nishad Raj ghat and the Galli Baba ghat. Though other ghat names have also been mentioned, but the aim is to see people's perspective on change of names. The primary focus of the article is to highlight the ways the subaltern ghat names survive among the hegemonic Brahminical and patronized places.

Toponyms might appear completely unreadable. But they are definitions of cultural landscape (Sopher 1978; Tuan 1991). The nomenclature of a place is done to allocate it a meaning, and significance. The names may signify tourist spots, sacred spaces, markets, and the like. They are bearers of identity, cultural associations, history and authority. They influence social practices and define the quality of the place. Place names or toponyms act as cultural mnemonics

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which anchor the history, memories, political struggle and practices of the place. They are a form of reference to the place. The study of toponyms has always concerned itself with ontology and taxonomy of the place. Toponyms are also the “artillery of the subaltern, a sophisticated institution to diverge and resist the established domination” (Doron 2013: 95). The idea of subalternism questions the elitism (Guha 1988). It highlights the “fundamental relationships of power, of domination and subordination” (Sarkar 1984: 273). Subaltern names depict “general attributes of subordination”; and renaming and sustaining a subaltern name is “politics of people” (Guha 1988:40). There are many subaltern names and they are in constant struggle to make their own place. These subaltern names are politically active.

In recent decades, there has been an interest in exposing the politics of place-making through the subaltern names. Subaltern names are a political act. The subaltern names are recognizing spaces of not so popular agency. As Tuan (1991:688) puts it, “naming is power- the creative power to call something into being, to render the invisible visible, to impart a certain character to things”. An array of anthropological work is available on the city of Banaras. Much has been written about the sacred complex of the city, its population, material culture, architecture, the river Ganga and the riverfront. However, little attention has been paid to the subaltern ghat-names and their complex relationship with people in everyday life. The dominant cartography of the ghats is ruled by mythologies and great traditions. The paper studies the ghat-names as referral tools through which people not only address a location, recall a history or worship the sacrality of the place but they also shape the activities of the people and give meanings to the place (Tilley 1994).

### **The city and the ghats**

Banaras is the holy city, a Hindu pilgrimage and a site of syncretism. Banaras is a known name in the pilgrimage circuits. Ganga has a unique geographical feature in Banaras. It forms a crescent-shaped half moon like structure. The river-land interface has developed into majestic amphitheater-like steps; the ghats. Banaras is often known as the city of ghats. Popularly Banaras is seen through the cartographies of the ghats. The riverfronts of Banaras are a site series of 84 ghats. They symbolize “the integration of 12 signs of the zodiac....7 sheaths of the body or seven layers of atmosphere...along these ghats exist *jal teerthas* symbolizing the integrity of time cycle ( 12 zodiacs or months) and space division ( 8 directions)....” (Singh 2013: 4). These ghats have evolved as the cultural landscape of the city. They have become a pilgrimage center of Hinduism. They are associated with tangible and intangible heritage and guard the extensive mythologies of the river and the divine nature of the city. Ghats are the place for enacting rituals associated with life and death, purity and pollution and everyday activities. The ghats are visualizations of the scared landscape of Banaras. All around the year,

there are various festivals which are celebrated on the ghats. The spectacular movement of pilgrims and tourists never ends. “The Ganga riverfront catches up the historically developed socio-religious ideals, values, place consciousness of pilgrims and their faith.....altogether helped to form a unique faithscape” (Singh 2009: 229). The ghats are the hotspots of the sensual experience of the city. They are filled with the acoustics of the bells, chants, boatmen calling and the smell of flowers, incense sticks fill the air. It is a place full of sensory experience.

### **Ghat-names and their Meanings**

Each ghat has a distinct name. Each ghat-name is associated with a specific role. It is through these ghat-names that we study the sacred geography and the symbolic value of the city. The ghat-names are like lattice structure to which the historicity and the primordial culture of Banaras are enmeshed. These names are like genetic codes which contain in themselves powerful meanings. The ghat-names are not only mnemonic devices but they also weave emotions and sentiments around themselves. They sustain and nurture the ghat space and feed the visitors with the realities of the existence of the river and the riverfront as the sacred entity. The ghat-names help people develop a kind of attitude towards it. People develop a sense of ownership and attachment to the place through names. Some ghat-names have been renamed over a span of time. Renaming is about breaking the cultural hegemonies. It is a political motive and as Bourdieu (1991:105) says “there is no social agent who does not aspire, as far his circumstances permit to have the power to name and to recreate the world through naming”. The change of name projects the legitimized hegemonic discourses over the ghats, which has a socio-political intention.

### **Renaming the Ghats**

Before 1950's *mata anandmai* ghat was known as *imaliya* ghat. Bade Pandey Ji (researcher's informant), the owner of a bookstore on Dasashwamedh ghat is a repository of knowledge about the ghats of Banaras. His father had written various books and notes on Banaras. In one of the engaging conversations, Bade Pandey Ji told the researcher about the old names of few ghats. *‘Hamare pitaji bataya karte the ki jo Assi Ghat ke pass Mata Anandmai ghat hai uska naam pehle imaliya ghat tha. Jo Panch Ganga ghat hai, wahan par Bindu Madhav Mandir tha, Auranjeb ne uss mandir ko tod diya. Pehle wo ghat Bindu Madhav Mandir k naam se prachlit tha. Hamare aankh k samne ki baat hai, yeh jo Rajendra Prasad Ghat hai pehle isko ghoda ghat bulate the. Baad mein Rajendra Babu k naam pe rakh diya gaya. Yahi sab atikraman hai hamari sanskriti par. Naam badalne se aapne uss jagah ka itihas mita diya.’* (My father used to tell me that the *Mata Anandmai* ghat near *Assi* ghat was known as *Imaliya* ghat. There was *Bindu Madhav* temple on present-day *Panch Ganga* Ghat. The temple was demolished by *Auranjeb*. Before

demolition, the ghat was known by the name of *Bindhu Madhav* temple. Rajendra Prasad ghat was initially called as Ghoda ghat. All this is a violation of our culture. By changing the name they have changed the history of the place.)

These are the excerpts from my field diary. *Bade Pandey Ji* was clear that renaming leads to the erasure of history of the place and recreating a new identity for the place. According to him renaming was an encroachment on the culture of that place stripped. In adopting the name of Ghoda Ghat as Rajendra Prasad ghat we cleave the historical connections of the place with the narratives pertaining to horses owned by rich people and the history of traditional markets. Not many are aware of the old names of the ghat. The locals of the city lament that the change of name has stripped the ghats of their originality. New names have capsized the memories of place related to old names. The process of renaming is eventful.

When the old ghat-names are replaced by new names, they also impact the perception and social practices; redefine the quality of the place. Initially, the Panch Ganga ghat was known as Bindu Madhav ghat. After the demolition of the temple, it was renamed as Panch Ganga ghat. The renaming erased a referral location to establish a new one. The researcher asked 80 of her informants where was Bindu Madhav temple and only the Pandas, boatmen and native people of the city could tell the location while the pilgrims from outside Banaras didn't know about it. The Bindu Madhav temple therefore has been reduced to a relic of past because it no more appears in the dominant places along the ghats. The names speak about some characteristic features of the ghat. They are like pointers and markers of the ghat. But as the name changes, the markers are subsumed by the new name. The new name, therefore, has the "power to wipe out the past and call forth the new" (Tuan 1991: 668).

There were many like Pandey Ji who felt there was no need to change the names of the ghat. '*Ghat Ka naam badal ke hum apne ane wali peedhi ko itihās se vanchit kar rahein hai*' (By changing the ghat-names we are depriving our coming generations of history) said Anil Swami, a Marathi temple priest. On further inquiring about the process of renaming, a tea seller on Rana Mahal ghat says, '*Rana Mahal Ghat Ko agar koi Korea ghat bata de to yahi lagega na ki badda sa mahal Korea ke raja ne banaya tha. Jab tak ki ham batlaye na. Asse to naam se pata chal jata hai thoda bahut.....*' (If someone calls Rana Mahal Ghat as Korea Ghat (named after the country Korea), it will appear as if this palace was made by the king of Korea. We get to know many things from the name). For Anil Swami, renaming is equivalent to depriving our coming generation of the history of the area. In this sense, place names bear the 'cultural baggage' (Seddon 1997:15). Thus, when we take a ghat-name, we get an idea of what it is. Renaming a ghat erases the previous information about the ghat and marks the place with a new identity. As a result many

may confuse the material culture of the ghats as a part of new identity and not the old name. This is primarily because the “symbolic imaging of the past gets enveloped with materials of present”(Rose-Redwood 2008:433). Names capture the uniqueness of the ghats and renaming subdues the identity. Most of the ghats were renamed for the following reasons.

- 1) A section of ghat was rebuilt by a patron and thus it was named after him or her. For example, a portion of Vacharraaj ghat was *kaccha*. Affluent Jain patrons rebuilt it into *pacca* ghat and since then it was called Jain ghat. Some also believe that it was the Digamber temple which led to the renaming of the ghat.
- 2) The local population led the movement to rename the ghat. Mahesh Nishad recalls that they wanted a separate ghat from Prabhu ghat. They also had their own temple on the ghat that is why a part of the Prabhu ghat was renamed as Nishad ghat.
- 3) On some occasions names are changed to commemorate someone. This type political name keeping is very evident as in the case of Ghoda-Ghat. It was the center of purchase and sale of horses in the past. Later in 1984, it was renamed after the 1<sup>st</sup> president of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad by Uttar Pradesh government.

The process of renaming is, at times, resisting the dominant ideology and establishing one’s own identity. While the site series of 84-ghats in Banaras are named after dominant groups, elites, important mythological events, popular Hindu temples there are few ghats which are named after the common people, community or caste groups. The community of Boatmen or *Nishad* “as they popularly refer themselves to, has remained marginalized and associated with occupational category of fishing and boating” (Doron 2013:42). The community has in recent past led prominent movements to promote caste consciousness and bringing the members of their community together. They believe that their marginalization is primarily because of the Brahmanical hegemony over the ghat-scapes and the government has been negligent towards their demands. One such local movement was led by *Nishads* to reclaim the area of Prabhu Ghat as Nishad Raj Ghat.

*Mahesh Ji* (boatman) states that ‘*Inn ghato Pe Hamari Jati ke log rehte Hai. Hum uss ghat Ko saaf rakhte hain, hamare bhagwan ka mandir bhi yahi hai.. To iska ghat ka naam bhi unke naam pe hona chahiye tha. Jab sheetla mandir se sheetla ghat naam pada to Nishad Raj Mandir se Nishad Ghat naam Kyu nahi pad sakta*’. (People of our caste stay on this ghat. We keep this ghat clean. Our God’s temple is also there. This ghat should also be named after the name of our God. When *Sheetla* ghat derives its name from *Sheetla* Mandir, why this ghat can’t be named Nishad Ghat after Nishad Raj temple?). Mahesh Ji and other boatmen recount, how the government has never given an ear to their problems. Patru as others call him says, ‘*Ganga-*

*Putra hai Hum Log, Kauno Dubta Hai To Pehle Hum hi Jate Hai Bachna, Yeh Jal Police Kuch Nahi Karta, Tab Bhi Hame Struggle Karna Padta Hain. Hum Log Ko To Apne Bade-Bujurg Se Sunane Mila Hai Ki iss Nishad Raj Ghat Ke nam Ke Liye Wo Log Bada Struggle Kiye. Jo Nahi Karega Wo Phir System Main Pista Jaigha. Hamari Pehchan Hai Hame Bhi Log Jante Hai. Tourist Log Ko Ghumate Time Hum Bolte Hain Ki, "This is Nirshad Raj Ghat. Temple of We Boatmen, God Is Here. Many like me stay here". (We are the son of Ganga. We are the first one to save people who drown in the river. These Jal Police don't do anything. Still, we have to struggle. Our ancestors told us that they had to struggle a lot to get the Nishad Raj Ghat name. One who doesn't struggle will succumb to the pressure of the system. We have our identity. People know us. While touring with tourists I tell them, "This is Nishad Raj Ghat. Temple of us boatmen God is here. Many of us stay here").*

Many texts cite the struggle of the boatmen community to get the portion of Prabhu Ghat that was renamed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The above verbatim indicates the communities reclaiming the mother-son connection with *Ganga* and seeking their own rights and recognition of the ghat-scapes. During the researcher's fieldwork, researcher encountered various events when Nishad community was celebrating their community festivals by performing rituals, distributing politically motivated pamphlets, calling the community to fall under one umbrella and be strong and all these events also commemorated the Nishad Raj diwas at the Nishad Raj Ghat.

Recently, boatmen have formed a strong network resisting the domination of the Brahmanical hegemony in their own way. Renaming is an intentional practice which plays a significant role in shaping the autonomy of the marginalized, emerging from their own aspirations, struggles, and resistance. Doron (2013) says the boatmen produce and reproduce the place and identity by improving their economy and changing the spatial order of recognition. Nishads in their struggle to rename the ghat have challenged the dominance of caste and asserted their own right over ghats. However, this pedagogy is also relevant in placing one self in the dominant spatial order of the Hindu Brahmanical system. Reclaiming and renaming is one way of establishing the autonomy in the competing spatial order of patrons, deities, and mythologies. Nishad Raj ghat is an appropriated landscape by marginal stakeholders. The struggle of the community to etch its name as a Ghat's name is not local. Instead, it voices out the struggle through names. The *Nishad Raj* ghat is an identifier of the community

If one compares the ghat-names and their narratives, Nishad Raj Ghat, and others fall apart from the communion. They do not fit the normative system of naming. Instead, these ghats are a reminder of consistent caste inequality and caste struggle. They appear as a result of politically motivated struggle to bring in the ghat within the ambit of the marginalized. These toponyms act as critical toponyms with the monolithic ideology of space. They have a single

motive of claiming the landscape. This claim is made through renaming the landscape and extending one's own identity to it. Just like *Nishad Raj* ghat, *Galli Baba Ghat* is also a toponymic form of resistance against the hegemonic place names. It is a competing nomenclature of the marginalized group against the authorized system of naming (Yeoh 1992). The *Galli Baba* ghat is sandwiched between *Rajendra Prasad* Ghat and *Man Singh* Ghat. The ghat steps lead to the temple of *Galli Maharaj*. *Galli Baba* was a renowned wrestler of his time. On every *nag panchamai* he would take part in wrestling competitions. He was known for his strength. *Galli Baba* is worshipped by young wrestlers. The temple has a pedestal where a local shop-keeper and an aspiring wrestler offer the prayers every day. *Galli Baba* was the only child of his parents. *Yadaviji*, a waiter by profession comes every day to *Galli Baba* temple. There are a lot of equipments for exercising. *Riyyaz* (exercise) is an important part of locals everyday life. So, *Galli Babe* temple is a place for *Riyyaz* after a bath.

The devotees of *Galli Baba* have named the tiny space as *Galli Baba* ghat. It is a referral peg for those who come to the temple and do *Riyyaz*. Just like *Nishad Raj*, *Galli Baba* belongs to a marginal sect of people who have a common intention of *Riyyaz* and gaining strength. This temple is accessible to anyone and there are no caste biases imposed on the entry into the temple. The devotees of *Galli Baba* have inscribed the ghat-scape with a subordinate history running parallel to the historic and popular presentation of the rich patrons of the ghat. Amidst, monuments and minarets, the temple, not so attractive, is adorned by those who idealize *Galli Baba* as a great wrestler and deity of strength and courage. The public impression of ghat is absent, but it is a ghat for those who are ardent followers of *Galli Baba*. The *Galli Baba* ghat is a toponym which is derived from offbeat narratives and they have an exclusive past of its own. *Galli baba* ghat is a parochial name. These toponyms search for the same attention like those of its contemporary like *R. P. ghat* or *Dashashwasmedh ghat*. But they are silenced by the domination of the prominent names. These toponyms are absent from the dominant dialogues of everyday life on the ghat, but the name can't be erased from the spatial and symbolic structures as it establishes "narratives and memories designed to naturalize links between 'people', 'culture and 'place' (Doron 2013: 95, Gupta and Ferguson 1992). The *Galli baba* ghat name finds no place on the dominant maps of the Ghat. They are silenced by the big ghat-names with majestic and universalized history.

## Conclusion

The ghat-names like *Nishad Raj* Ghat and *Galli Baba* Ghat localize the subaltern strategies, of positioning ones 'identity' on the 'physical and symbolic landscape of the ghats' (Doron 2013: 95). Such ghat-names are invisible and neglected from the hegemonic narratives of mythologies. The

ghat-names are like ‘recognizable frames’ which differentiate one ghat from the other (Nuttall and Mbembe, 2005: 193). Renaming is a process of reclaiming one’s identity and protecting it from the euphemism of grand mythological stereotypes. Subaltern names depict “general attributes of subordination”; and renaming and sustaining a subaltern name can be seen as “politics of people” (Guha 1988:4). As Guha says the Nishad Raj Ghat and Galli baba Ghat are subaltern names which represent the difference between the total against the ‘elite’ (Guha 1988: 44). These ghat-names are subaltern names as they do not belong to the sanskritised places of the ghats. These subaltern names are an agent of change. The article presents how ghat names embark a distinct political identity and also marks their own territory. These ghat-names are like a kind of ‘self-organization’ of the space (Godlewski 2010: 8-9). They are community spaces made viable through everyday activities on it. These ghat-names are “marginalized and deinstitutionalized subaltern” names crafting their own space and quietly encroaching the ordinary “(Bayat 2000:533). They are not the part of stereotypical religiosity. They label the ghats with “flexibility, pragmatism, negotiation...habitus of dispossessed” (Bayat 2007: 579). They are occupied by people of lower strata of society who possess “political consciousness that refuses” to be sanitized by the Brahmanical practices” (Benjamin 2008: 719,725). The article explores how the ghats are like micro spaces amalgamating with prominent structures of the ghats. Renaming ghats is a performative realm of political struggle. The ghat-names are cultural inventions drawn from struggles of inequality and reinstating community identity. The ghats are strategically renamed and ghat-names are performances by various subaltern voices.

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