

# Place-Renaming as a Tool of Political Symbolism and Political Performance: Memory, Identity and Power in Contemporary Uttar Pradesh

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper analyses toponymic changes in light of the contemporary debates over memory, identity and power articulation. While drawing upon critical toponymy theory, performativity and the politics of memory, it seeks to take the idea of place-(re)naming beyond neutrality and mere administrative convenience to suggest that place-renaming involves political performance and political symbolism. By examining the recent examples of name changes, the paper argues that renaming is a power-laden concept that becomes a staged performance of ideology and legitimacy, where leaders put forth an idea of cultural revivalism, regional pride and historical correction to communicate and construct a collective history, marked by deliberate use of political symbols and communication. It begins by outlining the theoretical foundations of naming, memory and performance, thereby analysing the performative and symbolic dimension of recent ideological name-changes in Uttar Pradesh, embedding them within debates pertaining to power and identity. It further looks at the discursive role of media and society. The paper concludes by reflecting on the renaming process as a form as well as tool of symbolic governance and political communication in democratic India.*

**Keywords:** *toponyms, critical toponymy theory, legitimacy, collective memory, cultural revivalism.*

## INTRODUCTION

Naming and renaming of places has been a continuous, ever-evolving process. Streets, villages, towns, cities, districts and states are often renamed. In the modern world, where names are seen as identity markers, any place cannot remain unnamed and necessarily has to be named (Brasher &

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Alderman, 2023). What becomes important to analysis is who names and for what purpose; how is that naming or renaming carried out? Another important question of interrogation is: what explains the different reactions towards different name changes? While some remain low-key affairs, some become larger political issues or controversies. Why do some toponyms get more media attention than others? Why does renaming Allahabad to Prayagraj become an issue of national concern and coverage? What appears to be a neutral, every day, mundane exercise of theoretically changing a place-name isn't just confined to changing that name on the signboards and in the textbooks. It goes beyond it and implies changing the idea, memory and perception associated with that place in people's minds.

There has been a recent surge in name-change incidents across India. In Uttar Pradesh, it can be seen in a more profound, visible manner. A few prominent examples include renaming Allahabad as Prayagraj, Faizabad as Ayodhya, Mughal Sarai as Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Nagar. Many such demands and proposals such as renaming Muzaffarnagar to Laxmi Nagar, Aligarh as Harigarh, Ghaziabad to Gaj Prastha or Harnandipuram or Doodheshwar Nath Nagar, and Firozabad to Chandranagar, are also made. While renaming is not new to Uttar Pradesh and can be found during the entire known history, whereby places were renamed in accordance to the convenience and preferences of the political regimes, it becomes increasingly interesting to see how these recent cases of toponymic change become part of larger debates on nationalism, heritage and identity. The intensity and ideological framing in contemporary UP are distinct from that of earlier changes made in post-colonial times. Uttar Pradesh becomes an important site of examination, for it acts as a political center of India with the largest state assembly and a good share of the Lok Sabha seats, as well as for being the entry point in politics for many political leaders. Furthermore, UP projects immense cultural and religious symbolism due to the existence of many significant places such as Ayodhya, Mathura, Varanasi and Haridwar, among others. Renaming cases here reflect the intertwining of all the aspects of public life, especially religion, politics and memory.

Renaming functions as a political act, consciously staged and performed to create a public impression, often tends to exclude certain historical narratives and identities. For instance, when Allahabad was renamed as Prayagraj, the announcement was not just limited to the release of an official order. It was widely televised, popularized, ritualized and symbolically tied to a reclamation

of the Hindu Civilizational memory, marking a spectacular performative assertion of identity. While the conventional scholarship treats acts of place-name change as symbolic representation, this paper looks at such acts as political performances where ideologies and political inclinations are enacted on the political center-stage. This political performance is articulated through spaces. This perspective allows us to see place renaming as a consciously curated process involving meaning-making, legitimacy construction as well as identity articulation.

This paper seeks to answer and examine the following questions: -

1. How does place renaming operate as a tool of political symbolism and performance?
2. In what ways does the act of renaming articulate and reconfigure memory, power and identity?
3. How are these renaming efforts communicated to the people?

By using *critical toponymy theory*, i.e., treating naming as a non-neutral, political discourse; the *politics of memory* i.e., collective remembrance and forgetting; *performance theory* i.e., the politics as enactment of meaning and *critical discourse analysis*, this paper tries to analyze toponymic changes in the light of performative communication of power. It argues that renaming in contemporary Uttar Pradesh gets manifested as a deliberate tool of political symbolism which turns every day geography into an arena of memory, identity and power. This interplay between communicative (symbolic), enacted (performative) and emotional (memory) aspects gives rise to the ideological, cultural and electoral legitimacy to the government, leading to a mutual reinforcement of all these aspects. The following section highlights the interplay between toponymy, memory and performance in understanding the politics of renaming.

## CRITICAL TOPONYMY, MEMORY AND PERFORMANCE

Place-names are not neutral identifiers. While appearing to be “ostensibly visible, quintessentially mundane, and seemingly obvious” (Azaryahu, 1996, p.312), they are in fact “potent symbols and material manifestations of identity” (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007). They are politically charged, ideologically driven texts which encode relations of power, ideologies and history, simultaneously acting as texts, arenas and performances (Alderman & Dwyer, 2015). Critical Toponymy theory (Rose-Redwood & Alderman,

2011; Azaryahu, 2011; Cacciafoco & Lim, 2021; Hoelscher & Alderman, 2004; Rose-Redwood, 2011; Storey, 2011; Vuolteenaho & Berg, 2009) as a theoretical field critiques the traditional and descriptive study of place-names and situates both names and the process of (re)naming within the domain of power, politics and identity formation. Naming, therefore, becomes symbolic inscriptions used by states and regimes to project authority and commemorate a particular aspect of chosen history which, more often than not, is accompanied by erasure of some other (silenced) aspect of history. It may also include efforts to control and standardize indigenous spaces (for example, British colonial renaming reflected the colonial efforts to standardize the indigenous places) or to assert identity and pride (such as post-independence renaming from Madras to Chennai which showed Tamil linguistic pride, or Bombay to Mumbai, which showed assertion of Marathi identity), and so on. Place names, therefore, are always vulnerable to “radical political orientations of the ruling order” (Azaryahu, 1990, p.34).

Significantly, renaming is not just political in nature. It is also mnemonic. It shapes how societies remember, what they are made to remember and what they forget. It shapes how places become repositories and sites of memory (Nora, 1989), how collective memory is socially constructed and maintained through institutions and symbols (Halbwachs, 1980), and how renaming intervenes in these memory processes and erases certain pasts by simultaneously elevating the other. Therefore, memory becomes an instrument of governance wherein the selective remembering legitimizes the present political power. Uttar Pradesh’s Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath’s recurrent speeches on Prayagraj emphasize reviving ancient heritage and correcting Mughal distortions. Such speeches act as acts of mnemonic framing. Similarly, during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, space was recast through the religious memory and historical symbolism. Renaming Mughalsarai as Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Nagar, replacing a Mughal reference with a nationalist leader’s name, can also be seen within the same light. This aligns the local geography with ideological commemoration.

The performative dimension of renaming shows how politics involves actors, audiences and scripts and how the ideas of social performance, cultural pragmatics and performativity combine to put forth a strong narrative. Political acts succeed when they are dramatically and symbolically effective and when they feel authentic to the audience. Identity, therefore, is constructed through repeated acts (Butler, 1990), and political identities, in this case, are enacted

through repeated symbolic gestures. This public performance becomes complete with ceremonies, speeches, rituals and media events. This makes the process a stage where leaders perform authenticity and authority, using geography and collective memory as their script and audience, respectively. Naming and memory, connected through this performance, give rise to political legitimacy. When such a performative resolution is assigned to ideological claims, the discourse gets transformed into a visible action.

A spatial act of changing a name becomes a communicative event, and the message reaches the people in a clear manner. Political regimes, therefore, convert symbolic acts into performative spectacles to maintain effective connection with the public. For example, the renaming of Prayagraj was followed by major branding efforts. Government ads, banners, and posters with slogans show how performative renaming enters the language of governance and becomes part of everyday collective identity. Masses also communicate back with this powerful political messaging, and thereby the mutual reinforcement happens. It can be said that while *toponymy defines what is remembered, memory defines why it is remembered and performance defines how it is remembered and enacted*. Renaming efforts in Uttar Pradesh can be understood as a performative exercise of power, which transforms space into a communicative symbol through which political legitimacy, collective memory and identity undergo continuous interaction and negotiation. This continuous interaction and negotiation add immense political symbolism to the process and vice versa. In order to understand the politics of renaming, it becomes necessary to understand the political symbolism embedded in the discourse. The next section, in doing so, locates renaming within the realm of political symbolism.

## **RENAMING AS POLITICAL SYMBOLISM IN CONTEMPORARY UTTAR PRADESH**

In recent years renaming exercises in UP have moved beyond mere administrative reform and become acts of political communication and political assertion. Names of streets, stations, and cities have become mediums through which governments seek to visualize ideology and perform belongingness. In the last decade, several renaming proposals have been passed in the state. Via this political symbolism, abstract ideas such as pride, nationalism, revivalism get transformed into visible and repeatable signs. Various dimensions of symbolism are added to the narrative in order to serve

the purpose of the political class (See Table 1). Such symbolic layers, whether religious-civilizational, ideological or regional-cultural, add nuances to the process and serve different objectives while invoking various reactions and emotions amongst the masses. Every single act of renaming a place thereby symbolically redefines who belongs and whose memory counts. A map thereby becomes a symbolic battlefield of legitimation and identity. Place naming becomes a “platform for the construction of heritage and identity” (Alderman, 2008, p.196).

**Table 1: Various forms of symbolism**

Symbolic Layer	Objective	Examples
Religious-Civilizational Symbolism	To assert Hindu civilizational continuity and authenticity	Allahabad → Prayagraj, Faizabad → Ayodhya
Ideological Symbolism	To honour ideological icons and erase ‘alien’ references	Mughalsarai → Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Nagar
Regional-Cultural Symbolism	To evoke local pride and belonging	Jhansi Railway Station → Veerangana Lakshimbai Jhansi Junction.

Every renaming act, in varying degrees, performs erasure and commemoration at the same time: erasure of older names and commemoration of newer names, thereby producing a selective memory map and reinscribing ideology onto the physical space. In doing so, memorial toponyms act as “political technology” and are used to “order, govern or even resist the material and symbolic construction of places” (Rose-Redwood, 2011; Rose-Redwood, Alderman, & Azaryahu, 2008). Such symbolic projects operate through symbolic binaries between old and new, alien and authentic, forgetting and remembering and so on. Their efficacy depends upon public performance with the help of ceremonies, speeches and rituals which emotionally link the people to the act. Such governance by symbols has become an important phenomenon in the modern world.

Often such announcements and decisions are closely tied to election cycles and campaign speeches. Many announcements are made just before elections. Governments often frame them as restoration of sacred heritage and correction of historical distortion. It is amplified through media ads, TV debates and official documents which embed the new name into the bureaucratic and symbolic language. Such events are covered as public rituals. For example, the lighting of Diyas, aerial flower showers, and Ramayana

tableaux were broadcast live by national channels. Political communication and the media ecology of renaming play an important role wherein changed names are amplified and circulated through the ecosystem of advertisements, spectacle and media. Key communication modes involve official speeches and ceremonies whereby leaders publicly announce name changes and often link them to festivals or commemorations. Such temporal alignment between these acts and electoral communication makes renaming a form of symbolic governance which resonates emotionally with the electorate and often helps the government in gaining public support.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital (1989) provides another interpretive lens. Symbolic capital refers to the recognized legitimacy that accrues to those who control cultural meanings. Governments convert names into symbolic assets which yield political profit, gives them legitimacy, visibility and affective connection. Each name becomes a discursive monument after the political campaign ends and naming becomes what can be called a "potential manifestation of different socio-political dynamics – both discursive and material" (Adebanwi, 2012). Sometimes, it leads to erasing names with rival ideologies (for example, from Kanshiram Nagar to Kasganj and Ramabai Nagar to Kanpur Dehat). Through bureaucratic changes and documentation, renaming achieves permanence while entering institutional circulation such as in gazette notifications, postal codes, school textbooks, letterheads, maps, signboards, road signs, and digital maps. Media coverage by news channels, social media trends, physical symbols like government hoardings, official apps etc. create visual legitimacy and statues, memorials (Alderman & Dwyer, 2004) lead to performative reinforcement. Such materialization of symbolic power naturalizes the new name. This excessive branding visually normalizes the new toponym, which gradually gets absorbed into the everyday language. This communicative afterlife of renaming ensures that the symbolism is extended far beyond just the paperwork, and it becomes a continuous visual and discursive reminder of political authorship, while involving a well-curated process of political communication. The next section looks at renaming exercises with an analytical vantage point of political performance and political communication.

## **RENAMING AS POLITICAL PERFORMANCE AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION**

Drawing upon pragmatics (Alexander, 2006) and Goffman's dramaturgical model (Smith, 2013), toponymic changes can be interpreted

as political performance where *actors* (political leaders, bureaucrats, media, anchors, religious figures) put forth a narrative in front of the *audience* (citizens, voters, global spectators) on the *stage* (physical space that is being renamed) via the *script* (discourses of revivalism, nationalism, pride, justice) and the *props* (statues, flags, press release, ceremonies, banners, memorials). These components together transform the act of renaming to effective political theatre and power gets ritualized. For instance, Jhansi Railway Station was renamed as Veerangana Lakshmibai Railway Station to honour Rani Lakshmibai's contribution to national history. It sent out the message of feminine heroism and invoked regional pride and nationalism, alongside the production of emotional legitimacy. In another celebratory move during October 2025, Ayodhya has set a new Guinness World Record by lighting 26.17 lakh diyas during its annual Deepotsav celebrations at the Saryu River. Political messaging embedded in the visual cues like lighting diyas, slogans, drones, flags invoke a common sentiment and convert politics into the media capital. Media then amplifies renaming acts into a continuous spectacle of belonging (See Table 2). Various medium of communication such as political speeches, media coverage, formal bureaucratic orders, public rituals and digital campaigns, operate in interesting ways to create a desired impact in terms of officializing the ideology, adding legitimacy to the process as well as creating symbolic collective memory. The emotive afterlife of these acts is immensely embedded in such medium of communication and the mode of performance.

**Table 2: Medium of Political Communication and Mode of Performance**

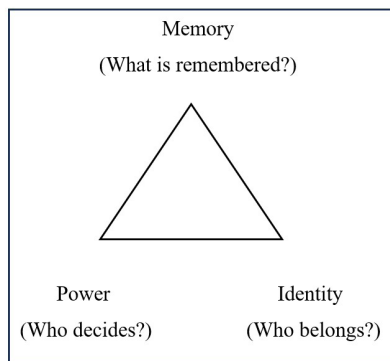
Medium of Communication	Mode of Performance	Illustrative Examples
Political Speeches	Legitimizing renaming as cultural restoration	CM speeches on Prayagraj, Harigarh proposals
Media Coverage	Amplifying symbolic narratives	TV debates, newspaper editorials framing it as 'historic correction'
Bureaucratic Orders	Transforming ideology into official	Gazette notifications framed with cultural references
Public Rituals	Legitimising through ceremony	Unveiling ceremonies of plaques/statues with party presence
Digital Campaigns	Sustaining symbolic memory	Social media hashtags and reactions

The idea of emotional governance (Richards, 2007) becomes important to this analysis, for this explains how state cultivates specific emotions, pride, nostalgia, and resentment among the people and consolidates legitimacy. People reciprocate in several ways, such as by changing or updating their social media profiles or by rebranding their shops. Absorption of state-led emotional cues leads to aestheticization of politics, marked by politics of memory and performance. Media plays a central role in the narrative building by becoming the theater where the symbolic act of renaming meets the public life. Through press releases, ministerial speeches, celebratory visuals and digital campaigns, the linguistic change is converted into a communicative performance of ideology and renaming translates into political capital having visibility, emotional resonance and a sense of participation amongst the citizens. There is a deliberate branding of space during political speeches and election-time symbolism. It can be observed in the statements of CM Yogi Adityanath and other BJP leaders, who repeatedly refer to Prayagraj and Ayodhya as symbols of awakened pride and past glory. These speeches positioned renaming as a part of a cultural reclamation project. As Nash (1993, p. 51) puts it, “The attempt to recover meaning and original form of a place name is often linked to a search for a recovery of a lost relationship to place.”

On the other hand, there are also counter-narratives and counter-performances. Many such renaming projects are criticized by the opposition parties such as Samajwadi Party, Congress and Bahujan Samaj Party, being called exclusionary. Televised debates and social media clips turned renaming into a performative contest over legitimacy wherein every side sought to claim moral ownership of memory. Many social media hashtags also trended. Such digital negotiation demonstrates that naming is co-authored in the public sphere. Meaning is not fixed merely by the State; it is rather articulated, debated and at times even resisted through participatory media cultures. Public reception is never polyphonic or unidirectional. Citizens do not merely consume the act but rather reinterpret it (Yeoh, 1996). This reinterpretation when contextualized within the spheres of memory, identity and power determines the final impact and reconfigures the spatial politics. The following section tries to understand renaming as spatial politics, with the lens of memory, identity and power.

## MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND POWER: INTERPRETING RENAMING AS SPATIAL POLITICS

Every act of naming and renaming of a place is a negotiation over space as meaning. These names transform the geography from a neutral terrain into a symbolic landscape which regulates memory and defines who belongs and who does not. To control names is to control the narrative behind them, and to control the narrative is to control belonging. Political power therefore extends to the semiotic control over the place (Foote & Azaryahu, 2009). Renaming acts as a mnemonic governance wherein the state decides which pasts are celebrated and which are silenced. Different pasts can be remembered by invoking civilizational continuity, recovering forgotten heroes or constructing a lineage between contemporary rulers and revered ancestors; forgetting can be done by effacing contested and alien histories and omitting colonial layers (Connerton, 2008; Verovšek, 2017). Such curated remembrance acts as a deliberate archival editing of the collective consciousness of that place. Similar references can be seen across the world. South Africa's post-apartheid renaming sought restorative justice through this memory inclusion (Guyot & Seethal, 2007); Eastern Europe's post-communist renaming Germany's post-Nazi renaming (Azaryahu, 1990; Post & Alderman, 2014) marked democratic transition. In India, such renaming privileges cultural and national revivalism. Identity, therefore, is materialized in toponyms. Maps become the mirrors of imagined communities (Anderson, 2006). Citizens internalize the new official language, and everyday compliance with the new names reproduces ideological normalcy. The society also reciprocates with the new names and an effective consent gets created.



*Figure 1: Triadic relation between memory, power and identity. Power shapes memory. Memory shapes identity. Identity legitimizes power*

There is a triadic relationship between memory, power and identity (See Figure 1). Power shapes memory through institutional decisions, memory shapes identity through the narrative inclusion, and identity legitimizes power through emotional consent. Renaming operates at the intersection, negotiating all three dimensions of public life. It becomes a multivalent act which is simultaneously political, cultural and pragmatic. It provides democratic visibility when local heroes, women leaders, Dalit icons are recognized. Revival of indigenous toponyms lost to colonial transliteration (like Banaras and Kanpur) leads to cultural preservation as well as administrative clarity; strategic use of historical identity for economic development also boosts tourism and heritage branding. Varanasi's ghats, streets and tourism zones have undergone micro-level renaming and beautification drives. Names like Shri Kashi-Vishwanath Corridor Project go beyond mere renaming to rebranding (Graan, 2016) the identity and reclaiming the historical heritage.

## CONCLUSION

The renaming of places in Uttar Pradesh is neither a neutral administrative act nor merely a cultural correction. It is a symbolic governance through which the state constructs legitimacy by invoking signs, symbols and memories. Changes in place names produce what Henry Lefebvre (1991) calls conceived space, i.e. a space encoded with ideological values of those who plan and govern it. Great nationalistic vocabulary is inscribed onto the everyday landscape, which then becomes spatially visible and practiced. In this sense, renaming performs the memory work by transforming the landscape into a living archive of chosen histories. Figure 2 explains the relationship between renaming acts and political legitimacy exploring how the symbolic, performative and mnemonic aspects of toponymic change invoke communicative and emotional response in the society which, in turn helps build the political legitimacy of the political class.

The study set out to explore how the act of toponymic change in contemporary Uttar Pradesh goes beyond bureaucratic adjustment and becomes a deeply performative and symbolic articulation of power. Drawing upon the frameworks of critical toponymy, political performance and the politics of memory, the paper has tried to link the political act of renaming a place with everyday lived practice and associated aspect of public life. It has studied how renaming acts as a convergence of communication, power and identity, simultaneously co-authored and negotiated at the level of society,

used as an instrument of ideological, cultural and electoral legitimacy-building in the Indian democracy.

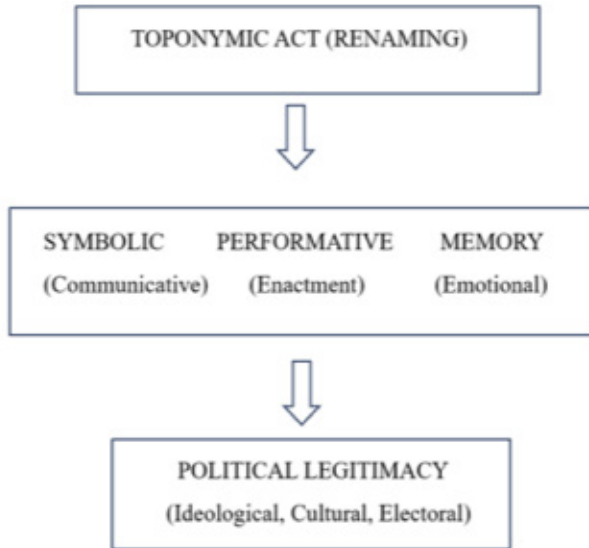


Fig. 2: Relationship between renaming acts and political legitimacy

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