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From Madras to Chennai: The Politics and Practice of Renaming a City

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Introduction

In 1996, a policy decision in Tamil Nadu rechristened the state's capital from Madras to Chennai. To some, the act appeared merely administrative: a new name on signboards, seals, and stationery. To others, it signaled a decisive shift in how the city understood itself and wished to be understood—by residents, by the nation, and by the world. This book takes the renaming as both event and lens, analyzing how place-naming concentrates arguments about identity, memory, and belonging, and how a single word can reorganize public narratives as well as the textures of daily life.

Renaming a city is never only about history; it is also about futures being claimed and foreclosed. The move from “Madras” to “Chennai” mobilized competing stories—about colonial pasts and postcolonial pride, about linguistic dignity and cosmopolitan aspiration, about neighborhoods and the nation. These stories were told in cabinet rooms and courtrooms, but also in tea stalls, bus depots, temple courtyards, cinema halls, and newspaper letters pages. The chapters that follow show how political actors, heritage advocates, marketeers, and ordinary residents each translated the change into their own registers of meaning and practice.

Methodologically, the book combines political analysis with ethnography. It draws on government archives, municipal records, gazette notifications, and court petitions; it also relies on interviews with civil servants, activists, journalists, signboard painters, app developers, shopkeepers, fisherfolk, commuters, and families who have called the city by both names. Participant observation in ward offices, registration counters, festival routes, and media newsrooms reveals the often-hidden labor by which names are standardized, circulated, resisted, or repurposed. This mixed approach allows us to link high politics to street-level implementation and to track how official decisions reverberate through everyday infrastructures.

The core argument is that renaming is a political technology: it reconfigures authority across state, market, and civil society while redrawing the contours of urban citizenship. Changing a toponym reorganizes the symbolic economy—logos, brands, and maps—as well as the material city—bus destinations, address proofs, and wayfinding systems. In the process, it produces new inclusions and exclusions, enabling some claims to space and obscuring others. The chapters examine how these shifts unfolded unevenly across class, caste, gender, language, religion, and region, attending to both intended consequences and unanticipated afterlives.

At the same time, the book treats memory not as a passive storehouse but as an active politics. “Madras” continues to survive in festivals, institutions, and everyday speech, sometimes as nostalgia, sometimes as critique, often as convivial shorthand.

“Chennai,” for its part, has become a platform for heritage-making and global branding alike—from music and cinema cultures to IT corridors and infrastructure megaprojects. Rather than posing them as simple opposites, I trace how the two names coexist, compete, and collaborate in shaping the city’s public imagination.

The analysis extends beyond a single metropolis. By situating Chennai alongside other Indian renamings—Mumbai, Kolkata, and Bengaluru among them—the book offers a comparative perspective on how language politics, regional histories, and national projects interact. These comparisons illuminate why certain debates, such as heritage preservation or script policy, recur across cities, and why others take distinctly local forms. They also show how global media and digital platforms now mediate the circulation and stabilization of place-names in unprecedented ways.

Finally, this is a study of practice. It follows the mundane and the monumental: the procurement file for a new highway sign, the courtroom exchange over a petition, the cricket commentary negotiating old and new toponyms, the ride-hailing app that autocorrects a neighborhood’s spelling, the festival procession whose route crosses boundaries named differently by different communities. Through these vignettes, the book argues that renaming reshapes not only how the city is represented but also how it is inhabited—how people remember, move, trade, worship, celebrate, and protest.

By placing identity, memory, and contested geography at the center of inquiry, *From Madras to Chennai* invites readers to see the politics of naming as a window into broader transformations of Indian democracy and urban life. The chapters that follow map this terrain from cabinet to street corner, from archive to algorithm, and from the sea’s edge to the city’s expanding peripheries, asking what it means—practically and politically—when a city changes its name and its citizens change the ways they live with it.

CHAPTER ONE: What's in a Name? Toponymy and Power

The very ground we stand on, the streets we traverse, and the buildings that shelter us are not merely physical entities; they are named. These names, or toponyms, are far more than simple labels. They are repositories of history, battlegrounds of ideology, and markers of identity. From the grandest monuments to the most obscure alleyways, every place name carries a story, a resonance that shapes how we perceive and interact with our surroundings. The question "What's in a name?" then, is not rhetorical, but an inquiry into the very fabric of social and political life.

In the context of a city, toponyms become particularly potent. A city's name is its primary identifier, its calling card to the world, and a crucial element of its residents' self-conception. It is emblazoned on maps, spoken in countless conversations, sung in anthems, and printed on official documents. When a city's name changes, as Madras did to Chennai, it triggers a cascade of effects, both symbolic and practical, that ripple through the collective consciousness and daily routines of its inhabitants. It forces a reconsideration of what the city represents, who it belongs to, and what stories are deemed worthy of perpetuation.

Toponymy, the academic study of place names, provides a framework for understanding these complex dynamics. It delves into the origins and meanings of names, their linguistic evolution, and their geographical distribution. But beyond the philological aspects, toponymy also examines the power embedded within naming practices. Who has the authority to name a place? Whose histories are foregrounded, and whose are effaced, in the process of assigning a name? These are not trivial questions, for the act of naming is often an act of claiming, a declaration of ownership or a projection of a particular worldview onto the landscape.

Consider the colonial era, for instance, when European powers systematically renamed indigenous places across the globe. These renamings were not simply acts of cartographic convenience; they were integral to the colonial project, asserting dominance, erasing pre-existing identities, and imposing a new order. Native names, often steeped in centuries of local knowledge and cultural significance, were replaced with names that glorified colonial figures, European cities, or imperial ambitions. This practice effectively wrote colonial narratives onto the land, transforming conquered territories into extensions of the colonizer's world.

Even after decolonization, the legacy of colonial toponymy often persists, posing a challenge to newly independent nations seeking to assert their own distinct identities.

The impulse to reclaim indigenous names or to introduce new names that reflect national aspirations becomes a powerful expression of sovereignty and a rejection of the colonial past. This is not always a straightforward process, however. Generations may have grown accustomed to the colonial names, and their complete eradication can sometimes feel like a disavowal of a shared, albeit complicated, history. The tension between historical continuity and the desire for a fresh start often defines such renaming initiatives.

The politics of toponymy extends beyond the colonial-postcolonial binary. Within nations, the naming of places can become entangled with regional identities, linguistic pride, and even caste or religious affiliations. In diverse societies, different communities may have their own historical names for the same place, each carrying specific cultural connotations. When one name is officially sanctioned over others, it can lead to feelings of marginalization or disenfranchisement among those whose preferred name is not adopted. The seemingly innocuous act of naming, therefore, can become a flashpoint for deeper societal divisions and power struggles.

The power of a name lies not only in its official designation but also in its everyday usage. Even when an official name changes, older names can persist in popular parlance, in colloquialisms, and in the collective memory of a community. These "ghost names" often reflect a resistance to official dictates, a stubborn adherence to tradition, or simply the force of habit. They can also serve as a subtle form of cultural preservation, a way of keeping alive a connection to a past that might otherwise be forgotten. The interplay between official nomenclature and informal usage offers a fascinating glimpse into the dynamic relationship between state authority and lived experience.

Moreover, the process of renaming is rarely a monolithic, top-down imposition. While state actors certainly play a pivotal role, various other stakeholders—from academics and activists to business leaders and ordinary citizens—can engage in debates, advocate for particular names, and influence public opinion. The media, in particular, often acts as a significant arena for these discussions, amplifying different perspectives and shaping the narrative around a proposed name change. Newspapers, television, and, increasingly, digital platforms become crucial sites where the "meaning" of a name is contested and negotiated.

Beyond the purely political or historical dimensions, there are also significant practical implications to renaming a city. Imagine the sheer logistical challenge of updating every official document, every map, every signpost, and every address in a bustling metropolis. The bureaucracy involved is immense, requiring coordination across multiple government departments and significant financial investment. For businesses, a name change can necessitate rebranding efforts, impacting everything from letterheads to website domains. For ordinary citizens, it means updating identification documents, redirecting mail, and perhaps even altering their ingrained

mental maps of their own city.

The economic ramifications of renaming are also noteworthy. A city's name can become a brand, associated with certain industries, cultural attributes, or tourism appeals. A name change, therefore, can be viewed as an attempt to rebrand a city, to signal a new identity to investors, tourists, and potential residents. This can involve strategic marketing campaigns and efforts to cultivate a new image that aligns with the chosen name. Conversely, there can be anxieties about losing the brand recognition associated with an older, more established name, especially if that name has historical cachet or global recognition.

In a rapidly globalizing world, the digital realm adds another layer of complexity to toponymy. How do search engines, mapping applications, and social media platforms adapt to a city's name change? The algorithms that underpin our digital navigation of the world must be updated, and the digital footprint of a city's identity must be meticulously managed. The persistence of old names in online databases or the confusion caused by inconsistent naming across different digital platforms can create real-world inconveniences and even economic disadvantages. The digital life of a name, therefore, becomes as crucial as its physical manifestation.

Ultimately, the act of renaming a city is a powerful testament to the idea that names are never neutral. They are laden with meaning, imbued with memory, and shaped by power. The transition from Madras to Chennai offers a rich case study for exploring these multifaceted dimensions of toponymy. It provides an opportunity to delve into the historical currents, political maneuverings, and everyday experiences that coalesce around the seemingly simple act of changing a place's name, revealing the profound ways in which such a change can reshape a city's identity and its inhabitants' relationship to their urban home.

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