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MUMBAI, Friday, September 02, 2005

Home
Front Page
City
Nation
World
Business
Views
Sports
Health & Fitness
Relationships
Entertainment
Chai-time

What's in a name...or two?

Where in Timbuktu is Khushbujang Laghadmand Phandhiraja Marg? It's Colaba Causeway, silly! Mirror reader Veena Patwardhan wonders what the deal is with renaming roads

The last two decades have seen politicians of all hues scrambling onto the renaming bandwagon. But guess what? When it comes to the names of localities or roads, one often finds the man-on-the-street resolutely clinging to the old ones.

Just ask a few citizens where Netaji Subhash Marg is. Chances are you'll draw a blank. But ask for Marine Drive, and bingo! Even the poor taxi drivers are in a quandary when tourists, domestic or foreign, ask for places by their new, convoluted names. Try asking a cabbie to take you to (take a long breath before this one) Khushbujang Laghadmand Phandhiraja Marg, and he'll scratch his head in bewilderment. But prod him with the old name, Colaba Causeway, and you'll hear a relieved "Pehla bolneka na!"

You still hear bus commuters asking for a ticket to VT, or Fort or Dhobi Talao (now renamed K. Vasudeo B. Phadke Chowk). Are these folks being unpatriotic? Give me a break. Mumbaikars, practical people that they are, are merely using names that are easy to recall. And easy on the tongue as well. Maybe there's a lesson here for politicians while renaming streets. Otherwise, this confusion will continue, where every second road has two names. One chosen by the politicians, which no one really uses; and the old name that the common man finds easier to use.

What's with our politicians? Why are they depriving the common man of the simplest of conveniences – short and simple street names? They're going overboard, trying to erase every trace of our colonial past, never mind if the magnificent works of some Englishmen are still the city's pride.

And it's not just English-sounding names. In Girgaum, for instance, names like Phanaswadi and Kelewadi that invoked images of the beautiful plantations that once landscaped the locality have been discarded. But here's the clincher. Renaming South Mumbai's Laburnum Road was being seriously considered till somebody pointed out that Laburnum was not the name of some Englishman, but of a tree, that too, an Indian tree!

Like my parents before me, I grew up on D'Lima Street in Mazgaon. This once-beautiful street that was, until the 1950s, swept and washed clean regularly in the pre-dawn hours, is now neglected and smelly, with overflowing drains and a bumpy surface. But yes, it has a new name – Advocate Pralhad Chendvankar Marg. Makes one wonder how the memory of this gentleman and so many other local figures can be honoured by having badly maintained roads named after them. Our politicians dream of transforming Mumbai into Shanghai. Merely replacing old names with new ones won't get us there. Building good roads will.

In a way, one can understand the need to rename major cities. It's a part of the process of reclaiming our national identity. But still, if some people refer to the city as Bombay while speaking in English, there's no need to get neurotic about it. What do you know, even veteran Shiv Sena leader Pramod Navalkar had admitted in an interview, with a chuckle and complete honesty, "Mya a time, I also say Bombay."

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