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HISTORY, TRADITION AND POLITICS IN THE (RE)NAMING OF A CITY: GURGAON VERSUS GURUGRAM

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ABSTRACT

Historically, names of human settlements have often been derived from one or the other of their 'defining' characteristics. Such names can be considered 'organic' insofar as they are integral to the historical establishment and/or growth of these settlements. But there are other names that are not 'organic' but 'transplants' insofar as they are given to places that have had no linguistic, cultural or historical links with them. Instances of both kinds of names can often be seen in the cases of renaming places. Such acts of renaming are often driven by various cultural or political agendas. This essay attempts to piece together the fragmentary history of Gurgaon, a premier IT and BPO hub of the country, which was renamed Gurugram as recently as 2016. The essay argues that the long-standing name Gurgaon, though of uncertain provenance, has been 'organically' linked to the place in its somewhat short recorded history, while Gurugram draws on no such credible, 'organic' association with the place. Using the history of Gurgaon, the essay makes a larger argument that the names of places should be appropriately reflective of their cultural, linguistic or historical associations.

***Keywords**: Gurgaon, Gurugram, Mahabharata, Alexander Cunningham, Jharsa, Dronacharya, Begum Samru, Haryana, Jats*

Names have histories that are not always self-revealing. Acts of naming and renaming places, whether geographic or human-made, have been, since antiquity, driven by a variety of considerations, motives and interests that may or may not reflect themselves in the names ascribed. But never have names been purposeless. Historically speaking, names of human settlements have often been derived from one or the other of their defining characteristics. Thus, a settlement may be named after a popular deity whose shrine it houses, after a function/s that it performs (e.g., as a centre of trade, artisanal production or political authority), after a person/dynasty/group/community who actually founded it or is remembered as having founded it, or after some geographic entity (e.g., river, mine, mountain, etc.) that exists in its close proximity. Such names can be considered 'organic' in the sense that they are integral to the historical establishment and/or growth of these settlements. But there are other names that are not organic but 'transplants' in the sense that they are given to places that have had no historical links with them. Instances of both kinds of names can often be seen in the case of renaming places. The new name that replaces the older one in such a case may have links to any essential linguistic, cultural or historical associations of the place (in which case it would be organic) or may not have so (in which it would be a

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transplant). The underlying motive in such acts of renaming could be to commemorate/honor a deceased popular figure, to assert the cultural or linguistic identity of the dominant resident population group, to reverse any association/s perceived as undesirable (e.g., foreign rule), or to claim a 'respectable' antiquity through non-existing associations with historical or mythical figures or events. The last motive can be seen in the case of renaming Gurgaon, a premier IT and BPO hub of the country, as Gurugram. This essay attempts to piece together the fragmentary history of Gurgaon and argues that the long-standing name Gurgaon, though of uncertain provenance, has been 'organically' linked to the place in its somewhat short recorded history, while Gurugram draws on no such credible, organic association with the place.

Haryana state government's decision in early 2016 to rename Gurgaon, a premier IT and BPO hub of the country, as Gurugram apparently drew upon a current popular perception that the area was given to Dronacharya, the famed teacher (*guru*) of the Kuru princes in the epic *Mahabharata*, by his disciples as tuition fees (*guru dakshina*), thus making Gurgaona colloquial corruption of the Sanskrit Guru-grama (literally, the *guru*'s village or *grama*). It has been argued that the move will draw the resident population 'closer to the rich cultural heritage' of Gurgaon that has been 'forgotten about as a result of urbanisation'. Plans were conceived to change the name in all revenue and registry records, erect Dronacharya's statue at an important landmark and, perhaps, take more such 'marketing' initiatives. Some of these have been implemented, too, in the last one year, though the name Gurgaon still persists. While this decision has provoked a variety of reactions from a wide cross-section, including politicians, district officials, corporates, other public figures and long-time residents, the issue of Gurgaon's 'rich cultural heritage' represented by its 'epic antiquity' merits some serious historical scrutiny. This historical scrutiny also has bearing on a larger issue: how 'Little' oral traditions of regions, sub-regions, localities, communities, and castes are created and linked to 'Great' traditions of antiquity and 'respectability', and how micro-histories are then created by conferring on these traditions certain historical authenticity. Such histories have been and are being forged to serve a variety of political and cultural agendas. At the outset, it may be stated that this account of the origin of Gurgaon or any linkage between the area and the epic is found in no pre-colonial text or record, and the area finds mention specifically by this name only in the colonial times.

An interesting piece of archaeological evidence for early settlement in this area is recorded in a late-19th-century report by Alexander Cunningham, Director-General of Archaeological Survey of India. In his *Report of a Tour in Eastern Rajputana in 1882-83* (1885), Cunningham gives a fairly detailed account of his visit to the Gurgaon district and in particular Gurgaon village. He mentions that the village was situated along an unmetalled (*kacca*) road leading to Bahadurgarh, and on the side of this road stood a carved and inscribed stone pillar, 3 feet high, 12.5 feet wide and 5 inches thick. On the top was a flowering ornament, below which was a panel containing two figures: a king or a feudal lord seated on a *morah*, with his left leg raised, his right foot resting on the ground and his right hand holding up a flower; he was apparently addressed by an attendant standing to his left and also holding a flower in his left hand.

Below the panel was a three-line inscription in early medieval characters that read 'Samvat 729 or 928, Vaisakhbadi 4, Durgga Naga lokataribhuta'. Proposing two alternative readings of the date, Cunningham inferred that the pillar was set by one Durgaa Naga in 672 or 871 AD, though the identity of the person or the purpose for installing the pillar were not recorded. He suggests that the date was that of his death, though it is as likely to be the date of the establishment of a settlement by him. In any case, this pillar takes the history of human settlement in this area back to at least 7th or 9th century AD.

In the Mughal times, according to 16th-century chronicle *Ain-i-Akbari* by Abul-Fazl, the famous courtier of Emperor Akbar, Gurgaon was a village within Jharsa *pargana* (administrative sub-division) in the *suba* (province) of Delhi, and the zamindari of the area was held by Jats. Scarcity of water left the area agriculturally less productive though. In the disturbed political conditions of late 18th century resulting from the rapid decline of Mughal power, this *pargana* as well as others that would later constitute the British Gurgaon district came under the domination of Marathas who usually entrusted them to Scindia and French officers. Among the latter, Walter Reinhardt Sombre, a French adventurer who commanded a professionally trained mercenary army, obtained Jharsa. Upon his death, it came under the administrative jurisdiction of his widow, Begum Samru, who became the ruler of a small principality, Sardhana, near Meerut. Gurgaon village was administered by her *amil*'s office in the neighboring village of Badshahpur with the aid of a contingent posed at another village, Jharsa. However, by a treaty of 1803 the Maratha chief Daulat Rao Sindhia ceded to the British all his territories in Doab, and with this began the history of Gurgaon as a British district that comprised 11 *pargana*s, including Jharsa. While Jharsa *pargana* continued to be under the Begum's rule in early 19th century, two other neighboring villages had significant British presence: Hiyadatpur housed a cavalry station probably to keep in check the Begum's troops at Jharsa; and Bharawas (near Rewari) housed the headquarters of civil officers and a frontier cantonment. In 1836, after the Begum's death, *pargana* Jharsa lapsed, and the area passed into the hands of the British. Upon the British acquisition of Ajmer territory, the Bharawas force was transferred to Nasirabad and civil officers were shifted to a new colony established near Gurgaon. Named Jacobpura after the former Deputy Commissioner of Gurgaon, Mr Jacob, this colony housed the residential quarters and offices of these officials. In this way, Gurgaon began to emerge as an administrative centre under the British. However, during the mutiny of 1857, the local Meos attacked the British police officers and their Khanzada collaborators, killing many in the process. Thus, suppressing the rebel Meos made it politically expedient for the British to further develop Gurgaon into an administrative and military centre. Subsequently, William Ford of Bengal civil service was made the first Commissioner of Gurgaon.

For the resident population, what has been perhaps more significant than Gurgaon's politico-administrative history is its religio-cultural identity defined largely the temple of goddess Sitala that attracts an ever-increasing number of devotees from northern and eastern India every year. In the colonial times, the popularity of the temple was such that Hindu families of almost all castes visited it for the fulfillment of their desires and vows. In his *Land Revenue Settlement of the Gurgaon District* (1882), British officer F. C. Channing notes a local tradition that the image of Sitala was originally enshrined in

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Kesopur, then brought to Nathupur and finally to village Gurgaon about 400 years ago. Under Begum Samru's rule, the temple's annual income from votive offerings (*chadava*), as also the number of visiting devotees, was less; she took the temple's income only during the month of *chait/chaitra* (March-April when a fair or *mela* was held at the temple), amounting to about 6-7,000 rupees, while the income for the rest of the year was distributed among the local Jat families. But by the late 19th century, when Channing wrote his report, the number of incoming devotees had increased to 50-60,000 and the income to 20,000 rupees. The popularity of the goddess can in part be explained by demographic decline due to certain calamitous conditions. From 1855 to 1868, the population of Gurgaon rose by about 4 per cent, i.e., from 6,62,484 to 6,89,034, but from 1868 to 1881, it fell by about 7 per cent, i.e., to 6,41,848 due to incidence of crop failure and epidemic of high fever, probably small pox. The increasing number of deaths perhaps accounts for the increasing devotion to Sitala, the protectoress of people from small pox. With the growing popularity of the temple and its deity, the socio-economic character of the area changed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: many traders settled down and set up their businesses, and Gurgaon developed from a village into a bustling town (*qasba*) and then into a city.

Given this historical process of the making of Gurgaon, the question that arises is how the current popular belief in the area's association with the epic figure Dronacharya gained ground. Such perception in all probability would have been created and popularized in the early 20th century. The emergence of Gurgaon as a religio-cultural centre owing to the popularity of Sitala would have made it desirable and appropriate that the village be given a 'respectable' antiquity by linking its origin with the long-standing, well-established epic tradition. Thus, Sitala, an otherwise widely worshipped goddess of non-Brahmanical origin, was conveniently made the wife of a Brahman preceptor of epic fame. The phonetic resemblance of colloquial Gur-gaon and Sanskrit Guru-gram perhaps made the link even easier to forge. This, therefore, made Gurgaon one among the several religious sites throughout the subcontinent that have local origin myths linked to epic and Puranic heroes, deities and other characters.

Even if one were to assume the epic as historical and argue for its historic connection with Gurgaon, it would still be difficult to logically sustain the argument. The Kuru capital Hastinapur supposedly situated on the banks of Ganga would have been very far from the present location of Gurgaon, thereby making it far less likely that land would be given to Dronacharya at such a remote location; settling down in the proximity of the capital would have made the teacher's task of training the princes easier. Besides, the epic only mentions Dronacharya demanding the defeat of his arch-rival, the Panchala king Drupada, as *gurudakshina*. B. B. Lal's archaeological excavations (1973-75) of certain key sites mentioned in the epics and located in Delhi, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan traced the lowest common habitation in these sites to Painted Grey Ware (PGW) culture (1100-800 BCE), an essentially rural, pre-literate, agro-pastoral subsistence-level culture—a far cry from the grandeur of material life described in the epic. While the evidence for such early settlement by itself does not constitute conclusive evidence for the historicity of the epic, the epic itself is not a contemporary documentation of the events narrated, nor

immune to interpolations and revisions (the epic in the extant form underwent at least three stages of expansion).

While the historicity of the epic remains contentious at best, the archaeological record of Delhi-Haryana region does not hold much promise for pushing the area's antiquity too far back either. Haryana and Delhi have yielded evidence of settlements going back to 1st and 2nd millennia BCE. Indeed, the rural landscape of Haryana is dotted with mounds, some of which have been excavated and many have been found to be of proto-historic antiquity. The Purana-Qila area of Delhi, too, has produced evidence of human occupation up to 1st millennium BCE. In contrast, Gurgaon is yet to produce any archaeological evidence for such early settlements.

While it is a foregone conclusion that popular account of Gurgaon's origin is historically unsubstantiated, renaming it as Guru-gram would not yield any major political dividend for the government. Apparently, there has been no major popular movement or pressure from local religio-cultural organizations to force this policy-decision, though demands for renaming have been voiced by certain sections of people and the district administration in the last few years. It would also be wrong to argue that this decision is in tune with those of other state governments in the recent past to rename cities like Bombay, Madras, Bangalore and Calcutta. These cities had been so named in pre-independence period by the colonial authorities, and giving them indigenous names can be in some sense construed as an act of reclaiming their pre-colonial cultural identity. No such case can be made for Gurgaon. No 'alien' identity was forced upon Gurgaon; rather, the name 'Gurgaon' betrays its local cultural roots as opposed to the Sanskritized and somewhat 'alien' Guru-gram. Projecting and marketing a concocted mythical association of the area as historical obscures an otherwise rich and documented history of the area. Such symbolic and cosmetic change only serves to increase the administrative and fiscal burden of the government without yielding any tangible benefits.

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