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Sheila Embleton*

York University, Toronto, Canada

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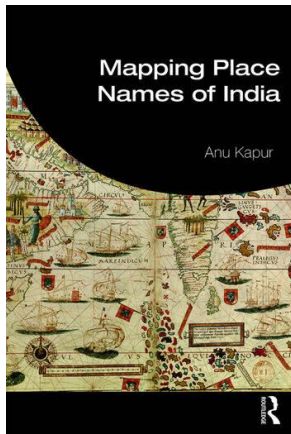
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* Contact: embleton@yorku.ca.



(<https://www.routledge.com/Mapping-Place-Names-of-India/Kapur/p/book/9780367149185>)

The study of the place names of India seldom reaches the attention of “Western” scholars¹. This was part of my motivation for choosing naming in India as the topic of my keynote at ICOS 2021, held virtually by the University of Krakow, and now published as [Embleton \(2023\)](#). What work there is is mostly produced by linguists (such as myself) or consists of articles on particular newsworthy topics in the popular press. Thus this book is a very welcome addition to the literature, especially as it is readily accessible outside of India. Its author, Anu Kapur, is a Professor of Geography at the Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, and thus she approaches the topic from a different angle from many onomasticians. The book is well written, easy to understand, and does

not require any prior knowledge of India to fully appreciate most of it. Yet, even for those who know India well, there will be much to learn.

The book consists of a foreword by Gopal Krishnan from Panjab University in Chandigarh, nine chapters, eleven figures, and 15 tables.

Krishnan’s foreword (viii–xi) situates this book relative to Kapur’s previous work on goods carrying an official “geographical indication”. He points out that in geography, “every description [...] begins with a place name”, but “a search into the origin, meaning and essence of place names is often bypassed” (ix). He foreshadows the interplay of historical, political, social, religious, ethnic, and linguistic factors in naming and renaming.

Chapter 1 (“Place Names”, 1–43) is unusually detailed and expansive for an introductory chapter with respect to the topics it covers. It begins with various definitions of the term “place name”, with more attention to geographical aspects than usual, and builds into broader topics, such as association with products, connection to hobbies and fiction-writing, how names bond people with place, how place names trace history, how multiple names for the same place can create inclusivity or tension, estimates of the number of place names in India, alternates to place names (latitude and longitude specifications, various types of code and numbers), Pāṇini’s study of place names, the importance of place names for mapmaking, and wondering why geographers in India are not more involved in place name study, a chapter-by-chapter summary of the book, and thanks and acknowledgements. It ends

¹ Perhaps this is why I have only found one review ([Basik 2020](#)) and one newspaper column ([Sharma 2020](#)).

with a state-by-state reference on research articles on place names in India from 1980–2016 (28–43), which not only shows the thoroughness of the author’s research, but will be very useful for future researchers. The number of articles for each state seems to me to be independent of either geographic or population size, or even some vague sense of “importance” on the national scene.

Chapter 2 (“Nation’s Names”, 44–50) discusses the names of the River Sindh, India, Bharat(a), Hindu, and Hindustan. There then follows a brief excursus into the continent named *Jambudvipa*, for the area extending from the Himalayas in the north to the sea in the south.

Chapter 3 (“Names of the Subnational Units”, 51–77) explores the complete set of names of the states and the union territories. Kapur has chosen to look at these as next down (after the country name) in the spatial hierarchy, clearly a geographer’s perspective, but since they obviously cover the entire country, this also immediately shows the diversity of naming across India. Any change in these names has to pass both levels of the national Parliament. Many of these names have multiple interpretations, or from the linguist’s point of view multiple possible etymologies, some most likely folk etymologies, but still relevant from the social or political point of view of how a region wishes to present itself. Kapur does not evaluate these competing etymologies, e.g., for likely validity, or for possible double or convergent etymology, but simply presents them all equally. For example, *Delhi* (61, 69) could have been a good opportunity to discuss possible double etymology. Particularly interesting are the names which (indisputably) involve two languages: *Andhra Pradesh* (Telugu + Hindi); *Arunachal Pradesh* (Sanskrit + Hindi); *Nagaland* (Sanskrit + English); and *Uttar Pradesh* (Sanskrit + Hindi). Other categories used in this discussion are nature, shape and size, geology and relief, climatic, river, flora and fauna, cultural, tribal, language and music, eponymous, and religious. Several names appear under various categories, again without evaluating validity or possible double etymology. There is then a section on epithets, e.g., *Arunachal Pradesh* as *Land of the Rising Sun*. The chapter concludes with a section on continuity and change of names, much of which is related to changing political landscapes, and mirrors typical patterns found all over the world. Much of the data sourced for this chapter comes from maps, referenced on page 77, rather than other types of text. This whole chapter is fascinating and as expected gives a brief preview of the many factors influencing names in India. Parts may be challenging to those with little or no familiarity with India, its history, or some particularities of vocabulary (e.g., that “lakh” means 100,000; that “dalit” is the lowest stratum in the caste system; later in the book (112) there is “the Bradshaw” for the railway timetable).

Chapter 4 (“Sanskritization of Place Names”, 78–87) subsumes both the language Sanskrit and the religion Hinduism, closely inter-related, in its scope. There are subsections on names of gods and goddesses, personalities from epics, donors to priests, temples, duplicating religious place names (from North

to South India, then as Sanskrit spread to Thailand and Singapore), and group names. This latter is interesting. Of the examples given, most seem not to have actual commonality within the name itself. For example, “the Sapta Puri are seven cities, pilgrimage to any one of which [...] provides liberation from rebirth [...] Mathura, Dwarka, Ayodhya, Haridwar, Kanchipuram, Ujjain and Varanasi” (82). This seems akin to something like “the Hansa League” in northern Europe, where it is a finite set of cities, but nothing shared in the names themselves. Kapur’s final example seems different, where the five place names do all share *kasi* (from Sanskrit *kashi* ‘shining’) and have a temple devoted to the god Shiva: *Varanasi* (also called *Kasi*), *Uttarakasi*, *Gupta Kasi*, *Siva Kasi*, and *Tenkasilies*. It is hard to see that these group names inspire the same feelings among the general population as do regular place names. Sanskritization is more evident in South India, where place names originally of Dravidian origin were replaced when Hinduism became the state religion. Many place names are also connected in some way to the natural or physical environment. The chapter concludes with the building and naming (after Partition and Independence in 1947) of the modern city of Chandigarh, as capital of the new Indian state of Punjab, designed by the French architect Le Corbusier. The name comes from the goddess Chandi, as evidence that “Sanskritized place names experienced a revival after the independence of India” (87).

Chapter 5 (“Persianization of Place Names”, 88–97) begins with a brief historical summary, with Arabs arriving in the 2nd CE, then a much larger wave via the Khyber Pass several centuries later, and further invasions culminating in Mughal rule from 1526 to 1857. For them, Persian (Farsi) was the court language, Islam their religion, and thus began a period of Persianization of place names. Many examples are given; many were later reversed (e.g., *Mysore* as *Nazarabad*). The names reflect persons, positions, social relationships, and almost universally they are male. Persianization extended to the associated generics as well, not just the core of the place name, so e.g., *-abad* (‘any populated place’), *-shahar* (‘town’), *-kasba* (‘market town’), *-ganj* (‘trading post’), *-kot* (‘fort’), *-bagh* (‘garden’), and *-serai/-sarai* (‘resting place’). The prefix *fateh-* (‘victory’) was sometimes added to a place name to commemorate a victory there. The name of God, *Allah*, was often used in renaming Hindu pilgrimage sites; for example, *Prayag* was changed to *Allahabad* (recently changed back to *Prayag*). Other names closely associated with Islam, such as *Islam-*, *Muhammad*, *Ibrahim*, *Rahim*, *Rasuli*, and *Abdullah* were also used; *Banaras* (currently *Varanasi*) was changed to *Muhammadabad*. “Sanskritization continued [...] for over three millennia, while [...] Persianization [...] was for less than one millennium”, but Sanskritization covered all of India, whereas Persianization was only in northern India and a few locations in the Deccan (95). As Muslim rule began to loosen for various reasons, the earlier Sanskrit-based names re-appeared, so memory had clearly been preserved over quite long time periods, or maybe in everyday usage among the illiterate majority, the old names had never disappeared,

a speculation not made by Kapur. When Persian ceased to be the court language in the early 1830s, it was replaced by English, not Sanskrit or Hindi (97).

Chapter 6 (“Englishization and Anglicization of Place Names”, 98–118) distinguishes between “Englishization”, in which “personal English names and words were introduced into the vocabulary of place names in India”, and “Anglicization”, in which “the spellings of Indian place names were changed to suit the British pronunciation” (100). Although the British were by far the most influential because of their long colonial stay encompassing most of the country, we should not forget the other colonial powers: Dutch, Danish, French, and Portuguese. The Portuguese were the first to come (with the arrival of Vasco da Gama in 1498) and the last to leave (in 1961). There is a port town, just north of the Goa airport, called *Vasco da Gama*, and place name changes in Goa are few. The Dutch were more interested in the East Indies, and despite a presence in India from 1605 to 1825, left no discernible trace on place names. The Danes, also interested in the East Indies, had a presence in Tamil Nadu (*Tranquebar*, now *Tharangambadi*, 1620–1845), in the Nicobar Islands (where two islands still have Danish names, *Teressa* and *Trinket*), and in West Bengal (*Frederiksnagore*, now *Serampore*, 1755–1845). Better known is the French presence, from 1674 off and on until 1954, in Puduccheira (Tamil for ‘new town’), later *Pondicherry*, and after 2006 *Puducherry*, as well as four other small enclaves scattered around other coastal areas. The first British trading post was at Surat in 1600 and by 1857 India was fully a British colony. Englishization was effected by using English personal names in place names (names of British officers and their wives) and by using English words in place names. Examples follow of names for hill stations, plantations, railway stations, cantonments, settlements, etc., some of which were English-only (e.g., *Port Blair*) and some mixed language (e.g., *Daltonganj*). Unusually, no names connected with British royalty and almost none connected with religion occur; the general pattern found elsewhere of using first names of women (e.g., *Ellenabad*) and last names of men prevails here as well ([Embleton 1985](#)). The British also used descriptive names (e.g., *Silent Valley*) and some mythical names (e.g., *Pygmalion*). Many of these British names were naming places hitherto unnamed. In contrast, Anglicization merely made place names easier to spell and pronounce in English (e.g., *Cawnpore* for *Kanpur*), although sometimes the changes were more far-reaching, e.g., shortening of names, or shifts of stress. There follows information about the census and mapping of India, the establishment of the postal, rail, and telegraph systems, and the obvious role of place names in those services, and consequent need for standardization of spelling.

Chapter 7 (“Nationalism and Place Names”, 119–147) begins with Partition / Independence in 1947, and the consequent desire to remove Persian and British influences. Kapur looks at various types of change of place names in districts, in many cases reversions to former names and former spellings of names, in some cases more than one change post-Independence. Descriptors such as

“frontier” were typically dropped. An emerging trend was naming after politicians, which also led to various subsequent renamings with ever-shifting politics. The next section is about names of settlements, localities, and roads, again with English and Persian names being replaced. In some cases, the change is merely a respelling (e.g., *Poona* to *Pune*). Many of the examples are well known, some less so, and political leaders are again some of those honoured, which can lead to future instability in those names. There follows a brief section on commodification of names (i.e., selling place names to companies), and then a longer and interesting section on what the policies are (and are not) for naming or renaming places in India, the role of state-level governments and problems of standardization with so many scripts. There is a section on UNGEGN (United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names), its mandate, recommendations, and directive for each country to have a names authority, which India has not yet done; the excursus (135) on uninhabited parts of the earth, undersea features and the moon could have been omitted. The chapter concludes by again referring to the lack of a state names authority and hence India’s inability to standardize its place names.

Chapter 8 (“Democratization of Place Names”, 148–187) looks at debates in the national Parliament on choices and changes of place names. This chapter is probably the least of interest to readers not familiar with the post-Partition history or politics of Independent India. The topics debated in one of the two levels of Parliament (Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha) include discontent over reorganization into states based linguistically, constitutional procedures for name changes of states, city name vs. other name for the state (e.g., *Mysore State* vs. *Karnataka*), the use of English in any names (e.g., *Nagaland* vs. *Naga Pradesh* or other alternatives), other foreign influence in names, and a few other topics. Different decisions in different venues can lead to for example Pondicherry (older form) currently being the capital of Puducherry (newer form) union territory. On one possibly humorous note, apparently the speed at which changes take place can be very lengthy (one change took 60 years to implement after the bill was passed, 156).

Chapter 9 (“Placemism and Future Place Names”, 188–208) notes that there are regular calls for additional states, based on reorganization or division of existing states. Some arguments are based on proportion of the world’s population or land area (looking at Russia, the US, and China as other large countries, but omitting Canada and Brazil, the former of which would give very divergent results compared to the averages cited). The details of the debates will again be of less interest to those not familiar with India, but statehood is assumed to convey better economic advancement, beyond the sense of cultural and ethnic cohesion. Kapur invents the term “placemism” for “when the objective factors of language and culture or economic disparity and discrimination transform and translate into a subjective consciousness of separate identity within a place [...] placemism is a consciousness, belongingness

and bonding with a place” (192). Although she refers to “topophilia”, I am not sure why that established term would not be adequate here (nor why the more pronounceable “placeism” was not chosen, if a new term was truly needed). Some examples are Gorkhaland (Darjeeling Hills in West Bengal), Bodoland (in Assam), and Mithilanchal (in Bihar); Kapur computes 41 placenism movements (195; map on 196), although I can think of at least one more, Khalistan (in Punjab) that drifts in and out of the news in Canada. Kapur states that “the issue of nation-building stands resolved today and the formation of additional and smaller states poses no threat to the national unity. This is why the additional place names associated with the creation of more states are likely to make it onto the map of India” (202). She does not speculate with a number that might become successful, but briefly recapitulates the long gestation times for some of the current states, such as the most recent, Telangana, which split from Andhra Pradesh in 2014, after 71 years of debate.

The book concludes with a “Bibliography” (209–220), including “Other web resources”, and an “Index” (221–234).

The book is well produced and laid out, and relatively free of typographical errors. A few examples will show that these do not impede comprehension: p. 10 “Before names had not been invented” should omit “not”; “many” for “mainly” (19); “linguistics” for “linguists” (19); “Thiruvananthapuram” should not have a *-j-* (19); “affected” for “effected” (156); “as far possible” for “as far as possible”, (156). One quibble I have is Kapur’s use of a term she invents, “placénism”. Despite Krishan’s attempt to justify this (x), I am not convinced of the need for this term rather than “placeism”. She also uses “toponymy” (first on page 15) rather than the more usual “toponymy” (but which is exceptionally found on page 19), without acknowledging or explaining the reason for her divergent usage. Overall, this book is excellent and a very welcome addition to the place-name literature in general and of course specifically that of India. Onomastics, as we all know, is a very interdisciplinary field, and it was particularly refreshing for me to see a familiar field (place names in India) from the point of view of a geographer, rather than from that of a linguist or historian, which is what I am used to.

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