

Name Tags For Dillivalas Sujit Saraf

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(written for Outlook magazine)

My parents once came to visit me in Delhi, and were quite intimidated by the crowds at the railway station. We took a taxi from Ajmeri Gate to Daryaganj. On Asaf Ali Road, our car had a near-collision with a tonga. Both drivers jumped out. For ten minutes, they had the most vicious altercation my parents had ever witnessed. I pulled up every window in a futile attempt to dam the flood of MCs, BCs, and expletives that can't be printed even in short-hand. That was how Delhi greeted my parents. I never called them again.

There is some truth in the belief that a city is always ruder than a town, because people lead busier and more stressful lives. Many years ago, I travelled from the quiet town of Amherst, Massachusetts – where people brake dutifully so you may cross the road - to New York City, and was nearly run over when I stepped off the curb. Even cities, however, lie in a spectrum of boorishness, and Delhi certainly occupies the violet end. On a recent trip to Mumbai, I encountered none of the Delhi arrogance when asking for directions near Kala Ghoda - it is another matter that no one had heard of Max Mueller Bhavan! Indeed, Kolkata, Bangalore or Chennai do not even come close in their disregard for common decency.

Why is Delhi foul-mouthed? When I was in school, Bengalis said it was Punjabi culture. Punjabis said it was Jat culture: everyone knew of the abusive phone calls made by Devi Lal, then Deputy PM, to *The Indian Express*. We could take the lead of our chief minister and lay it on Biharis: they tax Delhi's courtesy along with its infrastructure. Or we could follow our instinct and blame politicians: surely they have something to do with this, as they do with everything else? Finally, of course, we could summon leftist rage and demand: how dare you expect a smoke-breathing citizen to greet you in this sump of inequity?

I have often wondered what a courteous Delhi would feel like. On the television show *Seinfeld*, the mayor of New York proposes that citizens wear name tags, because "everyone would be a lot friendlier". People on the streets of Manhattan would peer at each other's tags and say, "Hello, Sam!", or "How are you doing, Joe?" Let us follow *Seinfeld* and cure the rudeness of a self-important city. Anyone found without a name tag should be sent to the trans-Yamuna area (politely, of course). We know, of course, that the best way of solving a problem is to declare it illegal - that was how we took care of

beggary, smoking in public, and the building of commercial units in residential areas. Imagine Monday morning outside AIIMS: “Good Morning, Batraji!” “Sushmaji, namaste!” “Changey ho Rajinder Singh?”

On *Seinfeld*, the man who came up with this idea got fired but, as any communist can tell you, we do not let American hegemony stand in the way of nuclear deals or name tags. The next time I approach the immigration counter at Indira Gandhi International Airport, I will wear a “Mera naam Sujit hai” sticker. Perhaps the man at the counter won’t scold me, ask if I have a girl-friend in America, or wonder if I really want my fountain-pen back.