

Dnyaneshwar Kulkarni Changes His Name

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Dnyaneshwar Kulkarni had endured a wretched morning. It was the month of October; the sun came out early, hot and fierce, and Dnyaneshwar was rather frail of constitution. Five minutes at the bus stop was enough to make him feel faint. Inside the crowded bus it was, if anything, more uncomfortable. The journey from the suburbs to the city sapped his energies even before his work for the day had properly begun; by the time he got off at Girgaum he felt he was running a temperature. Then, as he was crossing the road, the strap of his sandal abruptly gave way. How strange that, when he had been wearing it for a good eight months without complaint, it should give way on just this day! Dnyaneshwar broiled in the heat for another five minutes while an indolent cobbler ran some stitches through it. Next, as he was taking the railway bridge over Charni Road to get to Marine Drive, who should appear all of a sudden but a ticket checker. Dnyaneshwar protested that he had no intention of taking a train, and that all he wanted to do was to get to the other side, but the TC said he'd heard that story a million times before, and fined him a hundred rupees for travelling without a proper ticket. Furthermore, the TC was one of those people who insists on making out a receipt for every wallet they lighten; not satisfied with plain 'D. Kulkarni', he elicited Dnyaneshwar's full name and wrote it out in bold letters—DNYANESHWAR

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KULKARNI—as Dnyaneshwar watched horrified, grasping the extent to which unseen malevolent powers surround man on all sides, subtly directing the workings of the visible world towards their own ends. By the time he entered the Directorate of Records, Dnyaneshwar’s head was throbbing like a cement mixer. Who would have thought it would be such an ordeal just to get to his destination?

He took directions from a sleepy chowkidar and, proceeding warily up a flight of stairs, found himself in a dim and musty corridor, littered with bits of paper and fouled by paan stains, at the very end of which, hung a large framed black-and-white photograph of Indira Gandhi. As Dnyaneshwar trudged down the corridor, it seemed to him that the late Prime Minister’s reproachful eyes were following him. It was a great relief to him when he found the room he wanted and, scuttling into it, put a wall between himself and her disconcerting gaze. Inside the room several people were sitting at chairs and tables, looking around here and there, and at a large table in the centre was a short line of three or four people holding the same form as the one he’d carefully filled out the day before. Dnyaneshwar joined this. He was curious to see what their names were, and what they wanted them changed to, and especially what they’d written under ‘Reason for change of name’, but they were protective of their papers and kept them folded or shielded them. His eyes turned to the official to whom they were submitting their documents. The man was strong and stocky as a bull; sitting at his desk, and resting his elbows upon the arms of his chair, he was visible only up to his waist; his legs were hidden, and his well-polished shoes peeped out from underneath his desk. The gaze that he directed at those who stepped up before him was the

very gaze of the state, intensely suspicious of what its citizens were getting up to and confident of its own power and authority over them. The questions that he rattled off were like sallies with some sharp instrument. It was easy to tell that he was enjoying his work. He looked like he might have some anonymous governmental name—such as Ajay Gupta, or Sharad Patil—which he shared with another six thousand people in the country and yet never dreamt of changing. Dnyaneshwar might have been up to tackling him stoutly on another day, but not after all that he had gone through this morning. He began to feel nervous again, as if he was taking an oral exam at school in front of a teacher known for slapping students.

Finally the bony old man in front of him departed, muttering to himself—what should a man at his age want a change of name for, when the person who would answer to that name was himself on the verge of popping off for good?—and it was Dnyaneshwar’s turn. He stepped up and handed over his papers for scrutiny. The official looked closely at the originals and xerox copies of his ration card, his passport and his driver’s licence, studying especially closely Dnyaneshwar’s photograph on all of these. Dnyaneshwar began to feel self-conscious, as if he himself was being stared at. The official turned to his application.

‘What’s this?’ he said. ‘The two names are the same.’

‘The same?’ echoed Dnyaneshwar nervously. ‘No—’

‘What’s this, under “Old Name”?’

‘Dnyaneshwar Vishweshwar Kulkarni.’

‘And this, under “New Name”?’

‘Dnyaaneshwar Vishweshwar Kulkarni. Dnyaa—. Aa—. There’s an extra “a”.’

The official threw up his hands. ‘Another one of you extra-

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vowel types!

Dnyaneshwar shifted uneasily and pushed his spectacles a little higher up the bridge of his nose.

‘And which quack numerologist suggested this? What did he claim—your entire life would change? You’d be showered with riches? You’d find a beautiful blushing bride?’

‘He’s very well-respected,’ submitted Dnyaneshwar. ‘Many people’s lives have changed after taking his advice.’

‘Lazy, lazy! That’s what you people are,’ growled the official, by now completely exceeding his brief. ‘Always wanting easy shortcut methods to success! Our work has gone up tenfold because of people like you. See this line? Sometimes there are sixty people on it! The queue reaches down all the way to the ground floor. Peanut and ice-cream sellers come here just as they do on the beach! There’s not a moment’s peace to be had any more, all because of madcaps like you. What’s the point of your parents giving you a name if you won’t keep it?’ He turned to the people around the room, and was rewarded with grunts and nods, as if a breeze had suddenly stirred the corn stalks in a field. ‘When I came here in 1994, sometimes there wouldn’t be a single person in a day!’ he declared.

Dnyaneshwar felt an immense stubbornness rising within him. ‘That’s really not my problem, sir,’ he said, reaching into his pocket and depositing two hundred rupees on the table. ‘The government offers a particular service and I’m making use of it. Here’s the fee.’

The official stapled all Dnyaneshwar’s papers together, muttering to himself; his boots had disappeared beneath his desk. ‘And if things don’t work out, will you be back to change your name to what it was? Or will it be time to throw in yet

another “a”? Dnyaaa-nesh-war Kulkarni.’

‘That’s really my own personal business,’ said Dnyaneshwar. ‘Is there anything else I must do?’

‘Your name is changed. Go!’ said the official with a sarcastic laugh, continuing with his churlish sport, for Dnyaneshwar knew well that applications took three weeks, even a month to be cleared, and it was only in the government gazette of the month after that that an official announcement appeared. ‘Go, Mr Dnyaa-neshwar Kulkarni, go.’

Dnyaneshwar said, ‘Thank you very much for your time and patience,’ picked up his receipt, and left. As he made his way back down the corridor he could still hear the official repeating his name loudly for the entertainment of all his colleagues, drawing out its first syllable with devilish glee. Dnyaa-neshwar Kulkarni! Dnyaa-neshwar Kulkarni! Dnyaneshwar’s face burned with rage; he walked without seeing or hearing anything. He had been looking forward to this for so long, but now he felt not as if some momentous event had taken place in his life, but rather that he had given himself up to be insulted, cheapened, made a monkey of. His old name, and old life, were behind him, but his new name, at its very moment of conception, had been sullied; he felt a kind of distaste towards it. The cheek of these government servants! Luxuriating in their power over the common people, who had no choice but to present themselves at their desks to get their work done, they gave voice to whatever rubbish was there in their minds, knowing they had a captive audience the likes of which could not be found anywhere. Worthless, self-loathing creatures themselves, they attempted to debase others in order to bring them down to the same level, finding in this work an enormous satisfaction, making almost a science of it, achieving

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excellence in no other work but the perfection of these methods! He wished he'd at least stepped on the official's boots and pretended it was a mistake—that'd have shown him, the mark of his own shoes on top of his! But no, even that would have been dangerous, for the fellow had his application form, and he could have done anything with it. Imagine if he'd spitefully put two 'x's at the end of his name, at the same time viciously omitting the extra 'a', and had it published in the gazette. Dnyaneshwarxx. How ridiculous would that be! Briefly, there was nothing to be done with such people when they crossed your path; one just had to stand them. The great texts preached that the world was full of fools and upstarts, and the truly wise were those who suffered them without letting disharmony invade their souls; that was just what had to be done in this case. Heavens! What a wretched day it had been. Clearly some dark cloud still hung over him; a river flowed between Dnyaneshwar and Dnyaaneshwar, connected by a bridge, but he was still on the near bank. When would he cross?

Loud voices and pounding feet broke in on his thoughts. Dnyaneshwar skipped away to one side just in time to avoid three youths advancing down the railway overbridge, weaving in and out at high speed to catch a train just pulling in below. 'Is this your father's property?' he hissed. The railway overbridge! How had he made it here again? Almost as soon as Dnyaneshwar thought of the one person he absolutely did not want to run into right now, that very same bespectacled figure in the pale blue shirt appeared in front of him—poof!—as if by some black magic.

'Hey mister, have you bought a ticket this time around? Or are you just taking a walk down the bridge again?'

‘I—I don’t have a ticket again...But I was just using the bridge to get across,’ pleaded Dnyaneshwar. ‘Look, try to understand. I was going over for some work at the Directorate of Records when you caught me the last time. See—see, here’s my receipt. I was going back, and I’d made up my mind to take the road around the station, but somehow—’

‘A fine story!’

‘I swear on God that it’s the truth! Look, my name is Dnyaneshwar, but I wanted to change it to—’

‘To this day I’ve never come across a sucker like you, caught twice on the same day,’ said the TC. ‘All right, be off!’

‘Eh? What did you say?’

‘I said that if I catch you here tomorrow I’m going to fine you again.’

‘Thanks very much,’ said Dnyaneshwar, greatly relieved, but the TC was already on the prowl again, taking two nimble steps to accost a little man trying to make himself inconspicuous and scuttle past.

Dnyaneshwar proceeded across the bridge and down the steps on the other side, saying fool! fool! fool! to himself. How could a man blame anybody or anything when he threw himself headfirst into trouble like this? But he’d not actually wanted to take the bridge; his feet had somehow led him there. It was hard to figure it all out. The sun was so strong that it made him screw up his eyes; he fished inside his bag for his bottle of water and drank thirstily. He felt immensely fatigued, and hungry too; anything, even a vada-pav from a streetside stall, would do. Better to find a restaurant, though, and get out of the heat for a while.

He walked into Girgaum, passing rows of automobile spare

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parts shops with morose, ashen-faced proprietors gloomily ingesting their lunches. Where was an eating-house when you wanted one? Taking lefts and rights at random till he found himself on unfamiliar streets, Dnyaneshwar finally came across a Gomantak restaurant, very basic and run-down, and entered it. Only two or three people were inside, picking rather sullenly at their food; Dnyaneshwar was easily the best-dressed person in the entire place. Two young waiters in shirts and shorts stood to attention near a peeling wall. As Dnyaneshwar sat down at a white sun mica-topped table, one of them came forward with a glass of cold water and a menu so ancient and faded and crisscrossed with so many handwritten modifications and corrections that it was almost impossible to read, it might as well have been written in Tamil. Dnyaneshwar felt gloomy; instead of looking forward to his meal, he began to think of getting home as quickly as possible and going off to sleep.

‘What fish do you have?’ he asked peremptorily.

‘Surmai or rawas, sir.’

‘I’d like a piece of fried surmai then. Be quick.’

‘Right, sir,’ said the boy, and disappeared into the kitchen.

Dnyaneshwar was too tired to think any more about what was happening in his life and where it was going. He stared dully at the thickset droop-jowled proprietor perched on a chair at the counter by the entrance, his heavy-lidded eyes half closed, gravely beating his palm in time to the Konkani music playing from a small speaker above his head. Dnyaaneshwar—the name had twelve letters in it; twelve was his lucky number; there were twelve months to the year; twelve was a multiple of three, another auspicious number. But would the name change his luck? Would the change be apparent immediately, or would it

manifest itself over a period of time?

The waiter arrived with his fish—in fact, a great deal more than just fish. Dnyaneshwar realized that the restaurant actually served a set thali for lunch; all you did was choose what kind of fish you wanted with it. On his plate were all sorts of things: a cup of rice, two chapatis, a piece of batter-fried surmai, three little bowls with different things in them, some chopped onions and a green chilli, and a dash of what looked like a chutney of some sort. Dnyaneshwar was not too displeased. It didn't look like a bad spread at all.

He put his head down and began to eat, tasting everything quickly. The fish was excellent—salty and crisp on the outside, succulent on the inside. One of the little bowls was a chickpea curry; the second yielded a small piece of a second kind of fish in a sharp, piquant gravy; and the curious lotus-pink liquid inside the third turned out to be a tangy kadi made from kokum, excellent as a digestive. The thick chutney, into which he dipped a piece of onion, was made of garlic. He mixed the rice and the gravy, and ate it with bites of fried fish, onion and chutney without even raising his eyes from the table once. After he had taken the edge off his hunger he slowed down and began to draw out the rest of his meal. Truly, what food one got in every little nook of Mumbai city! The throbbing in his temples went away, and the centre of his being seemed to shift from his head to his stomach. A wave of contentment slowly washed over his senses. The morning's ordeal, the ticket checker, the official at the Directorate—all these things seemed like a dream.

Dnyaneshwar downed the last of his kokum kadi, and within a minute the well-trained waiter arrived with the bill. Only thirty-five rupees—what value for money! Dnyaneshwar

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decided to order a Coke and drink it slowly, then put down a fifty and leave the change. His senses tracked the drink all the way down from his throat to his stomach. The rhythm of the Konkani music was rather pleasing—dhum-ti-tap! dhum-ti-tap! tappiti-tappiti-tappiti! In fact, he'd been planning a vacation in the Konkan for years, but somehow it had never worked out.

He paid up, picked up his bag, waved a hand at the waiter, and nodded at the proprietor on the way out. He felt agreeably heavy and sated. Outside it was just as hot as ever— it'd be a long trek back home now. He looked around, unsure of which direction to take, then stopped.

A little way down the road was an old, rather decrepit cinema, the Imperial, and outside it was a large poster, amateurishly painted with garish colours, advertising the film *Deewaar*. Surely it couldn't be the *Deewaar* from the seventies, starring Amitabh Bachchan, Shashi Kapoor and the gorgeous Parveen Babi? But so it was—he recognized most of the scenes on the poster. Dnyaneshwar stood on tiptoe: he'd seen *Deewaar* a dozen times before on TV, but never on the big screen—he'd only been a baby when it came out in the seventies! He looked at his watch—it was a quarter to three, only another quarter of an hour before the afternoon show. For a moment all his other thoughts faded away, but as he stood waiting to cross the road a peculiar sensation took hold of him. The lead character in *Deewaar*, though a skeptic at first, comes to believe in the power of talismans; he realizes that every man has his powers, but he also needs luck. From his days of struggle as a labourer he is used to keeping a metal badge with the number 786 on it always in his shirt pocket; one day it saves him from a bullet in the heart, after which he begins to believe in it, and over the years it brings

him fame and fortune if not happiness. That such a film should appear before him on a day like this was nothing less than an omen in itself. He'd keep the ticket that he would buy now—he'd fold it carefully and keep it, and carry it around always in his pocket.

Dnyaaneshwar skipped across the road and was soon lost in the crowd milling around the booking office of the cinema.