

Changing a name

by Manohar Singh Gill

PUNJAB lost Chandigarh in 1966. In 1968 Lachman Singh Gill became Chief Minister for a short while. In those nine months, he forced the PWD to build metal link roads to villages, and made Punjabi the state language. Having lost Chandigarh, he started the Mohali town development project, continuing the Chandigarh sectors, in a southward direction. The rapidly growing township continued to use the village name Mohali.

Some years later when Giani Zail Singh became Chief Minister, a suggestion was made to him by Manmohan Singh, an IAS

officer, to name the new town as Sahibzada Ajit Singh Nagar. Sikh history of the 17th and 18th centuries is centered around this region. Gianiji did so with alacrity. But the name never took off. It was too long, and even government offices at best called it SAS Nagar (Mohali). The idea of commemorating Sahibzada Ajit Singh basically failed.

Posted in Delhi, I watched this from a distance. I thought about it and felt that the name should be Ajitgarh. We had Chandigarh nearby. We also had Gobindgarh. Therefore, Ajitgarh would fit in phonetically and would be easy to use, being short and musical. A grand cricket

stadium had been built, and packed matches were being held regularly, with the commentary being relayed to the whole world. The name Ajitgarh would become known all over the world if used. Sadly, they talk of cricket in Mohali.

The new name — Sahibzada Ajit Singh Nagar — had failed to gain popularity because it was like a sentence. I wrote to successive Chief Ministers over the years, but all were indifferent. I felt frustrated, but like a terrier I would not give up the bit that was between my teeth.

In 1978, as Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister, I thought that the Thein Dam would be built

eventually, no matter how much the delay, so why not name the lake as Ranjit Sagar. After all, we had Gobind Sagar at the Bhakra Dam. Everyone knew that Ranjit Singh was intimately linked to the Ravi. I prepared a Cabinet note and pushed it into the next meeting. The worthy ministers busy with “barfi” and “samosas” waved it away without even a word of discussion. The Thein Dam was built long after, but the Ranjit Sagar name stayed.

I was determined to see that Mohali must be changed to Ajitgarh. Seeing no government response, I wrote a letter to The Tribune explaining my arguments. It was published, perhaps

noticed, but there was no action. Gianiji had retired as President, and was living nearby. One day I went to see him. I told him: “Gianiji, your name for Mohali has failed”, and I explained how.

Gianiji was gracious enough to agree, and asked if he could do anything to help me. Should he write a letter? I thanked him and politely suggested that in retirement even his letter may not go far. I said I would continue my effort, and so I did year after year, writing more letters to the rulers of the day.

I was most pleasantly surprised when, reading a Punjabi paper, I found that finally Ajitgarh had been accepted by the Government of India. ■