Names in stellar frames

A few years ago there was considerable excitement in Maharashtra at the news that one of its distinguished and revered poets had been honoured by his well-wishers by having a star named after him. Indeed, once in a few years you hear of someone getting a star named after him or her or the nominee of the buyer. “Buyer”, because money has to change hands. For a sum of the order of, say, $25, the dealer of stars will issue a certificate to the buyer confirming the ownership of the star. The buyer, psychologically, feels elevated as the donor of the starry gift to the nominee, given as a token of respect or affection. Or, if the star is for the buyer, it brings with it the pride of owning something that lies far away in the spacious firmament on high.

The qualification “far away” is the key element in this transaction. For, a little thought will convince you that the seller has no legal title to the star collection. If the seller were selling real estate or a used car, the buyer would have insisted on verifying that the title of the item to be sold is clear. For, in that case the buyer would build on the house or drive the car. Then, what about the star lying hundreds of light years away? It is simply an object to point to neighbours with the bottomline: “This is my star.”

There are many organisations of this kind, making easy money by selling stars or other heavenly assets like fishing rights on the moon, or minerals on planets. And one wonders about the legality of it all. Legally, can any organisation take upon itself the right to name stars, a right which entitles it to issue a certificate of nomenclature to an individual for a consideration?

The International Star Registry (ISR) founded in 1979 in Toronto is one such organisation. It makes money by selling star-naming certificates and other memorabilia. Obviously, the idea has been commercially successful and the fact that such ventures are allowed to function in countries conscious of consumer rights suggests that their owners have been suitably regulated. Is there a thing right side of the law. But is there a world body that is fully authorised to name such heavenly bodies?

The answer is “yes”; a body that comes nearest to fulfilling this qualification is the International Astronomical Union (IAU). The official names of planets and their moons are given by the IAU. The IAU was established in 1919 with the objective “to promote and safeguard the science of astronomy in all its aspects through international cooperation”. It is, in principle, a happy combination of nation states contributing to its international programmes and individual astronomers having academic freedom. The IAU is the internationally recognised authority for assigning names to celestial bodies and any surface features on them. It was the IAU, for example, that in 2006 demoted Pluto from a planet to a dwarf planet.

The IAU takes note of the fact that astronomy is an ancient science and most of its names come from long-standing traditions. Most of the objects in our solar system received names long ago based on Greek or Roman mythology in Europe and the still older traditions from Egypt, China and India. The IAU has, therefore, tried to respect this tradition in its rules for naming certain types of objects in the solar system.

The IAU has taken over the older star names, many of them Arabic in origin, like Aldebaran, Algol etc. But in practical terms an astronomer is hardly going to find such names of any use in locating stars on the celestial globe. Think of a geography student given the task of locating a place on the terrestrial globe. The student will be greatly helped if, rather than the place name, the information in the form of latitude and longitude of the place is given. The astronomer also needs two coordinates to locate a heavenly light source. Thus, the figures 6587+561 may appear very strange as a name for a celestial object, but these numbers contain information much more useful than any fancy name could give. Thus most stars, galaxies and quasars carry such catalogue names only.

However, the naming department of the IAU has work to do when naming surface features of the moon and other planetary satellites. Thus, craters on the moon are named after famous persons. The other objects are comets, named after their discoverers, with the famous exception of Halley. Edmund Halley, a contemporary of Newton, had noticed that comets had previously visited the vicinity of the earth almost periodically, approximately every 76 years. He argued that these visits were by the same comet circling round the sun, just like a planet driven by Newton’s law of gravitation. Based on this assumption, he correctly predicted when the comet would arrive next. This comet now carries Halley’s name.

It was last seen in 1986 and will come again in our vicinity in 2062.

Asteroids are also named, some after their finders and some after famous people. Distinguished Indian names include Ramanujan, Raman and Chandrasekhar, while amongst the young finders, Akshat Singh, Anupama Kotha, Niraj Ram Nath, Hamsa Padmanabhan and several others have asteroids named after them. There are stars, very small in number, which have been given human names officially. The criterion generally is some important research done by the person. E.P. Bearnard did important studies on a star that came to be named Barnard’s star.

The IAU is often asked its view on the various companies issuing star names for a price. The IAU deplores the practice and stresses the fact that these names have no legal standing whatsoever nor would they appear in any astronomical literature. In spite of this, the human ego is somehow attracted to the idea of having a star named after himself or herself. As long as this attitude exists there will be people cashing in on it.

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