

Origin and Meaning of Some Indian Names

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“O color, o color my garment in Thy Name.”
— popular Hindustani refrain.

IT IS A COMMONPLACE that in India all aspects of life are, more or less, colored by religion or mythology. Names are no exception. Many Hindu names use the traditional trinity: Brahma (the creator, from the root *brih*, “to expand”), Vishnu (the preserver), and Shiva (the destroyer) in all sorts of combinations and permutations. Thus we have names such as Brahmadeva (Brahma plus “deva,” meaning “god Brahma”), Shivaraja (“Shiva-like ruler” or “Shiva the ruler”), etc. The sacred word or syllable *Om* (“logos”) gives *Om Prakash* (Prakash meaning “light”), and Brahma Prakash.

Orthodox Hindus believe in *parayana*, “reading a *Purana* or Epic as a daily devotional exercise,” as part of *dharma* or “duty laid down by religion or custom.” Naturally, Pauranic (“mythological”) names are favored. Examples are Ganesha (Shiva’s elephant-headed son who bestows prosperity and wisdom) and Bhageerathi (“another name of Ganga or the Ganges”). The epics Mahabharata (*maha* means “great” and *Bharata* means “India” after the name of India’s mythical founder Bharata, son of Shakuntala, heroine of Kalidasa’s *Abhijnanasakuntala*, “The Recognition of Shakuntala”) and *Ramayana* (“the lay of the delightful one,” Rama being an avatar of Vishnu) are inexhaustible “gold mines” for finding and selecting names. Both the epics are stupendous works: the *Mahabharata* alone, according to *The Reader’s Companion to World Literature* (The New American Library, 1956, p. 265) consists of 100,000 couplets “and is by far the longest poem that has ever existed – about eight times the combined length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.” No wonder it is a great source of Indian names, e.g., Arjuna (literally, “white, clear,” but attributively and figuratively known as *Savyasachin*, “ambidexter,” for Arjuna could use his bow with the same skill with either hand), Bhima (literally, “The Ter-

rible One," but in the epic, he is called *Vrikodara*, "wolf-bellied," on account of his insatiable hunger), Yudhishtira whose epithet is *Ajatasatru* meaning "one who has no enemy; friend of all born creatures." The most illustrious name in the *Mahabharata* is Krishna (literally "the black one"), the eighth incarnation of Vishnu, who gave the *Bhagavada-Gita* ("the blessed Lord's song"). Krishna was given all sort of names and nicknames: Madhusudana ("the slayer of the asura or demon Madhu"), Madhava ("the Lord of Lakshmi"), Purshottama ("one of the names of Vishnu meaning a supreme being"), Govinda ("cow-keeper"), Gopal ("go" is "cow," and "pal" means "protector"), Viswarupa ("all-pervading, all-including form," as described in the *Bhagavada-gita*, chapter XI), Vasudeva ("son of Vasudeva or the Supreme Spirit that pervades the universe"), Narayana (one of the names of Vishnu), etc.

Then there are innumerable names with Rama as part. Some examples are Ram Lal (Lal meaning "child" in Sanskrit and "jewel" in Urdu), Ram Nath (Ram plus "nath" meaning "master"), Ram Das ("dasa or servant" of Rama), Ram Dutt ("Ram's gift"), Rameshwara (Rama + Ishwara, since a + i in *sandhi* or combination yields in Sanskrit e) or "Rama as God."

Explication of some prominent Indians' names

The full name of Mahatma ("the high-souled") Gandhi was Mohan Das Karam Chand Gandhi. Mohan ("beloved") is one of the epithets of Lord Krishna; Das means "servant"; Karam is "action"; Chand (Sanskrit *chanda*; Hindi "chandra" or "chandra-ma") means "moon" in Hindustani; and Gandhi is one of the merchants' - Vaishya - subcastes. The name of Jawahar Lal Nehru is also interesting for purposes of explication. Jawahar in Urdu is "jewel"; Lal means "a precious stone" in Arabic and "a little child" in Sanskrit; and Nehru is "one who lives near a *nehr* or canal." The present prime minister's name Indira is the feminine form of Indra ("the chief and king of the gods"), although her father loved to call her Indu ("moon"). Tagore's name was Ravindranath (or Rabindranath) Thakur. Ravindranath can be broken down as Ravi ("sun") + Indra + Nath. Thakur means a brahmin caste owning land in Bengal (or "landlord"); Tagore is its anglicized form having no meaning for an Indian.

Similarly, Rajagopalachari¹ can be explained as Raja ("king") + gopal ("cow-protector") + Acharya ("spiritual preceptor"). And, the part "Menon" in Krishna Menon may possibly have something to do with the Sanskrit word *manan* ("reflection," "thinking"), just as the epic name of Karna ("the illegitimate son to Kunti," mother of Arjuna and the other Pandavas) may explain the name of the Indonesian leader Sukarno.

Sikh and Moslem Names

Sikh names, probably, show much more eclecticism and elasticity of spirit than any other names in India. Some are purely Hindu names with *singh* ("lion"; also true of Rajput names) added. A few examples are Arjun Singh, Bhim Singh, Krishan (in Punjab "Kishan") Singh, Bishan ("Vishnu" originally in Sanskrit) Singh, Ram Singh, Govind Singh (the name of the tenth *guru* or "teacher"), Parkash ("Prakash" meaning "light" in Sanskrit) Singh, Shiva Singh, and so on. But the Sikhs also show their cosmopolitanism, pragmatic nature, fondness for a military career, travel and a sense of adventure in their choice of names. Karnail ("colonel") Singh, Jarnail ("general") Singh, Samundar (in Sanskrit *samudra* meaning "ocean"), Jahaz ("ship") Singh, Hari ("God") Singh Everest are among familiar names which the Sikhs use. For some really unusual names one needs to go to the religious and highly colorful, if also idiosyncratic subsection of the Sikhs called the Nihang Sikhs. A Don Quixote-like anachronism today, these stalwarts wear enormous turbans (even for Sikhs) and carry all sorts of weaponry on their persons, adorned by multi-colored apparel. But the best thing about them is their special vocabulary wherein everything and everybody is masculinized. Thus *dal* (lentils) becomes *dala* and *bhaji* becomes *bhaja* ("vegetable"), *ghori* ("mare") *ghora* ("horse"), etc. No wonder; their names are meant to sound supernatural: Pahar ("mountain") Singh, Akash ("sky") Singh, and so forth. I often wonder how Mark Twain during his tour of India missed Nihang Sikhs and their jaw-breaking, sesquipedalian names.

¹ Cf. Dronacharya (Drona + Acharya), the royal preceptor in the *Mahabharata*; Shankaracharya (Shankara + Acharya), India's philosopher famous for his exposition of the *Maya* doctrine — a doctrine, which, incidentally, Emerson considers the "greatest in the history of intellect."

Moslem names, too, use Din ("religion"), Allah, or Khuda ("God") a good deal. Thus Allah Baksh or Khuda Baksh means "given by God." Then there are names which combine an attribute of Allah with an inflectionary principle. Thus Niamatullah (Niamat + Allah) means "a gift of God," *niamat* being a "gift." Similarly, Rahmat ("mercy")-ullah ("Allah") is another common Moslem name. Again, as in Hindu, Rajput and Sikh names (Tara – "star" – Singh and Tara Chand or "star moon" are instances), so in Moslem names, sacred names are often found in combination. For example, the name of the Pakistani leader and founder was Mohammed (Islam's founder and great prophet) Ali (the prophet's close relative) Jinnah, although he was better known as *Quaid-i-Azam* (*quaid* means "leader" or "path-finder," and *azam* means "chief," or "first").

Funny and Folksy Names

On the folk level, Hindus, Sikhs and others in India use names which are a class apart. Some are indeed funny: Tota ("parrot") Ram; Mishri ("candy") Lal; Chatur ("clever") Dev; Dhule ("bridegroom") Ram; Chhotu ("shorty") Ram; Dhani ("wealthy") Ram). Others are flamboyant: Jwala ("flame") Dev, Anguri ("grape") Ram, Megh ("cloud") Raj, Yad ("memory") Ram, Amar ("immortal") Singh, Vijya ("victory") Singh, Hira ("diamond") Lal, Nain Sukh ("eyes' delight"), Jhanda ("flag") Singh, etc. Some are philosophical or artistic: Daya ("compassion") Ram, Shanti ("peace") Lal, Din ("poor") Dyal ("merciful"), Sunder ("beautiful") Lal, and Asha ("hope") Ram.

But there are some names given at birth to ward off the forces of evil. Examples are Rura Ram, Rura Singh, Ruldu Singh, Ruldu Ram, etc. *Rura* means "rubbish," or "a big dungheap"; *Ruldu* means "one who wallows in dirt." Such names and nicknames are supposed to counteract the effect of the evil eye, bad fate (*kismet*), and sundry misfortunes to which human beings are really or allegedly subjected by the ironical gods, especially in a land where floods and famines have been a recurrent feature for quite some time now.

Feminine Names

For feminine names, Hindus add *Devi* ("goddess"). Two examples are Satya ("true") Devi and Sita (literally, "a furrow," wife of Rama, the god-hero of the *Ramayana*) Devi. The Sikhs add *Kaur* ("woman"), as in Balwant ("strong") Kaur. Moslem names can, sometimes, be highly poetical or delicately tender, e.g., Anarkali ("pomegranate blossom," beloved of Jahangir, the Moghul emperor) just as some Hindu feminine names are full of poetry and the beauty of Nature: Chambeli ("jasmine"), Kusum ("flower"), Pushpa ("bloom"), Kanwal ("lotus"), Komal ("soft"), Snigdha ("warm-hearted"), Anu ("little") and Radha ("Krishan's beloved"). Some Hindu women's names are, of course, mythological. The most famous of these, probably, is Urvashi (Tagore has a hauntingly beautiful poem written about her), the heavenly *apsara* (celestial singer and dancer) who rose out of the sea when the ocean was churned for finding *amrit* or the immortal nectar. Other famous examples are Lakshmi (Vishnu's consort), Parvati (Shiva's wife), Sarasvati (Brahma's consort, goddess of learning), Sarama (wife of Vibheeshana who befriended Sita), Saryu (a tributary of the river Ganges), Maya (the architect of Asuras), Agni (goddess of fire), Leela (the inexplicable principle of *Maya* or cosmic illusion), Vayu (the Wind divinity, parent of Hanumana, the monkey-god), Rishabha (the *second* note of the Indian musical gamut – Shadja, Rishabha, gandhara, madhyama, panchama, daivata, nishada or *sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni*), Nagini (wife of Naga, a semi-divine serpent), Yakshini (a class of demi-goddesses, subjects of Kubera, the god of wealth), and Rati (wife of Kamadeva or Manmatha, the Hindu Cupid).

The same principle extends to the naming of towns. For example, Amritsar, wherein the Sikhs have their famed Golden Temple, means "the pool of nectar"; Dharamsala, where the Dalai Lama of Tibet is lodged, means "the abode of Dharma or Faith"; Jullundhur is named after a mythological titan bearing a similar name; Ludhiana, where the Americans have an extensive agricultural program going, means "the place of the Lodhis," Muslim warriors who founded the town. Similarly, Jagannath Puri means the *Pur* ("village") of Jagat-Nath ("Lord of the Universe" in Sanskrit), which in combination or agglutination ("sandhi" in Sanskrit)

changed "n" into "t." But how and precisely at what stage it took the corrupted English form "Juggernaut" is an interesting matter for linguistic investigation.

But the Indian names that stand out are those which are high in sense and sound and can be rolled on the tongue. A few good examples are Radhakrishna, Ramakrishna, Brahmananda (*ananda* means "bliss"), Yogananda, Yogarasa (*rasa* means "essence" – a crucial term in Indian aesthetics), Vivekananda (*vivek* meaning "awake"), Buddha ("the enlightened one," an epithet of Gautama or Siddhartha), Vidyasagar (*vidya* meaning "knowledge" + *sagar* or "ocean"), and Bhanu Singh ("lion of the sun," pen-name of the early Tagore). Of course, an unforgettable one is Kipling's invention worthy of a place in any Hall of Fame. For Gunga Din is a happy synthesis of the Hindu Gunga (India's most sacred river and like Thoreau's "Walden Pond," "a drop of God") and the Moslem Din ("religion" or "faith") – an ultimate surrender to the creative act.

Slippery Rock State College

ANS ANNUAL MEETING

The society has been granted the following space and time at the MLA meeting in Denver, Colorado:

- Dec. 29: Place-Name Survey 2:30–4:30 Biltmore Room
- Dec. 29: Executive Committee 4:30–6:30 Biltmore Room
- Dec. 29: Dinner 7–10 Gold Room
- Dec. 30: Meeting 8:15 a. m. – 4 p. m. Gold Room

All meetings are scheduled in the Denver Hilton hotel. All times are p. m. unless indicated otherwise.

Other information will be available when the program is distributed.