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TRENDS IN THE NAMING OF MODERN INDIAN CHILDREN

Kanika Som

Introduction. Naming of children becomes an important ritual in the lives of Hindu Indians. Children are often named after epic gods, goddesses, heroes, and heroines. Names are also made up to reflect desirable qualities or personal features.

This paper reviews the trends in the naming of modern Indian children, which have passed through different phases since the times of Rig Veda, the Upanishads, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and the dramas of Kalidas. Such names were, by their very nature, classic, but starting with the nineteenth century, with the inception of the Indian Renaissance in Bengal, the names had initially linkages to the medieval past and then moved on to more innovative ones.

However, most recently, the wheel seems to have come full circle, for one observes the phenomenon of naming children with long, classical names. A plausible reason could be the longing to maintain mooring to the past in the midst of the tension of modernism.

Rites and Rituals. When a child is expected in a Bengali family, its name is sometimes selected in advance — one for a boy and another for a girl. In other instances, superstition prohibits the selection of names until after the birth of the child. When the child is around six months, the naming ceremony takes place, along with the weaning ceremony of the child taking first solid food. The combined ceremony could be very simple or ostentatious, depending on the status of the child's family. The priest invokes the blessing of gods and all the close relatives and friends are invited to join the ceremony. The child is given a name, the maternal uncle feeds the baby with some solid food (preferably rice pudding), and the direction of the baby's future inclination is gauged from the selection it makes from a number of objects — money, books, etc. Of course, it is showered with gifts.

Indians, and Bengalis in particular, are rather fussy in naming their children. Friends and relatives are urged to find "good" or unusual names, while the parents consult their sources, such as a dictionary. Finally, three or four names make it to the final round, and the one which gets universal approval is chosen and the child is given that name. Grandparents very often play a great part in this process. Some Bengalis are obsessed with finding the most "unheard-of before" names for their children. People in other parts of India are much less obsessive, but of late they have started to follow the Bengali trend.

Sources, Connotations and Trends. As mentioned earlier, Hindu Indian names are taken from either the grand religious tomes or epics, all written in Sanskrit, the mother of the North Indian languages and also the language in which everyday religious rites and ceremonies are performed all over the country, in both the north and the south.

All these names have specific connotations, and it is believed that some of the qualities of these beings would rub off on to the new born. And the same logic applies when names are specifically made up to reflect certain desirable physical features or moral virtues.

The Rig Veda. The most ancient sources are the Vedas. The Rig Veda, c. 2000–1500 B.C., has been characterized as the "first extensive composition in any Indo-European tongue, [being] a collection of 1028 hymns." It includes names such as Indra, titular king of the gods, also the god of thunder and rain; Agni, the fire god, the incarnation of the sun and water; Rudra, a storm god and embodiment of wildness and unpredictable danger, the precursor of Siva; the Maruts, the storm gods; Aditya, the sun god, son of Aditi; Vishnu, a beneficial and preserver god, one of the later trinity, with Brahma, the creator, and Siva, the

destroyer (of all evils); Aditi, mother of Aditya, the female principle of creation; Sarasvati, the goddess of speech, avidly worshipped by Hindu students to this day both in India and abroad; and celestial nymphs such as Urvashi and Reva.

The Upanishads. Chronologically come next the Upanishads, c. 800–400 B.C., that “represent for the Hindus approximately what the New Testament represents for the Christian.” The names of gods and goddesses, used for invocation, and also those of kings and savants, used in question–and–answer sessions, are quite popular. Some of these are: Nachiketa, a prince who went to the abode of the Yama, the god of Death, to learn of life and death; Krishna and his mother Devaki, although their names appear to be later interpolations; Gautama, the sage, also a name for Buddha (563–483 B.C.); and Janaka, the king. Among the names for girls, Gargi and Matreyi, both learned, continue to be popular. Matreyi, in particular, is remembered for the response to her husband when he wished to settle his material possessions before retiring to a life of meditation: “What should I do with things that cannot give me the eternal? Give me instead knowledge!” Among the prohibited names is Ajatasatru (literally, one who has no enemies), king of Varanasi, who had taught knowledge to a sage who “was a good talker but vain”; in Buddhist mythology, he is said to have ascended to the throne by assassinating his father who had embraced Buddhism.

The Ramayana. Next comes the Ramayana, written c. 5th century B.C., in the form of 24,000 verses in seven books of the deeds of Rama, the prince, an incarnation of Vishnu. For boys, his name as well as those of his siblings Lakshana and Bharat, his sons Lava and Kusha, his father Dasaratha, and his father–in–law King Janaka continue to be popular. For girls, the popular names are Seeta, Rama’s bride, also known as Janaki, daughter of Janaka; Urmila, Lakshana’s bride; Kaushalya, Rama’s mother; and Sarama, wife of Bibhishana, the good brother of the demon king Ravana. The taboo names are Ravana and his wife Mandodari, as well as Kaikeyi, at whose instance Rama and Seeta were banished for fourteen years, and Manthara, the hunch-backed maid who had instigated Kaikeyi. Seeta is the ideal of Indian womanhood, and there is no greater blessing to a bride than “Be like Seeta!” However, many do hesitate to name their daughters after the long-suffering Seeta.

The Mahabharata. Depicting in 100,000 couplets the struggle between two royal clans, the Mahabharata is a rich source of names such as those of the five Pandava brothers: Yudisthira, the epitome of virtue; Bhima, the brawny one; Arjuna, the romantic warrior–prince, to whom Lord Krishna had recited the Bhagavat Gita; and Nakul and Sahadeva. Bengalis prefer names such as Sanjaya, the oracle; Debabrata, the virtuous; Jay and Vijaya, the conquerors, etc. For girls, the more popular ones are: Devayani, daughter of a sage; Ketaki and Tapati, two flowers; and Sumati, one with a good mind. The taboo names are those representing the less virtuous ones, such as Duryodhana, Sakuna, and Kichaka for boys. For girls, the less preferred names are Draupadi, who had to marry the five Pandavas, and Kunti, their mother, who had consorted with three gods in order to conceive her sons.

Kalidasa. The next rich source of names is the dramas and epics by Kalidasa (c. first century), such as Sakuntala and Dushyanta (from “Avignana Sakuntalam”) and Tilottama and Urvashi, two celestial nymphs.

Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, and Saratchandra Chatterjee. Until around the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the traditional names held sway. However, with the advent of the renaissance in Bengal, heralded by the historical novels of Bankim Chatterjee (1838–1894), a new series of names became popular, particularly those given by the Nobel Laureate Tagore (1861–1941) and Sarat Chatterjee to the characters in their novels and stories. Although derived from Sanskrit, these names were shorter and sounded modern, such as Amit, Sandeep, Gora, Sovon, and Alok for boys and Sarmila, Sohini, Aparna, Lalita, and Ketaki for girls.

Literary Onomastics

The 1950s and '60s. After the Second World War, in the 1950s and '60s, shorter, Western-sounding names became popular, particularly for girls, such as Reena, Dolly, Lily, Meena, Gina, Lekha, and Lata. Many of these were Sanskrit-based. Of late, these have ceased to be popular.

The 1970s and '80s. A trend started in the late 1960s for the reversion to classical Sanskrit names. The beauty of naming is that one could make up such names. For example, while Sujata means a well-born female, the name of the woman who gave Buddha his first morsel of food after he had attained enlightenment, it is simple to have a name Sujato, meaning a well-born boy. Similarly, the name Arup-Ratan: Ratan, derived from the Sanskrit *Ratno*, means jewel, and Arup means transcendental; thus together they mean a jewel (of a person, boy) of indescribable quality. Long-stemmed names such as Devayani, Sanghamitra, Ratnavali, Anuradha, Pragna Paramita, and Lopamudra for girls and Savyasachi, Aniruddha, Avimonyu, Anirvan, Bishakhkumar, and Kaushik for boys, taken from the Vedas, the Upanishad, and the epics, have now become prevalent among modern Indians.

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