

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GSA-15  
 India: "Sensible everyday names"

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 New Delhi

30 January 1965

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Dear Dick,

For T. S. Eliot the naming of cats was a difficult matter. Nor is the naming of Indians "just one of your holiday games". But for the armchair anthropologist, Indian names are fun all the same, indicating as they often do a person's geographical origins, his community (religion), his caste, sometimes his group within the community, and in general demonstrating the cultural diversity that is India.

A look at the telephone directory in Calcutta, where I was last week, shows that names like Das, Das Gupta, Dutt, De (also spelled Dey), Bose (also rendered Basu), Sen, and Sen Gupta are very common names--the Smiths, Joneses, and Johnsons of Bengal. Sen, De, Das, Ghosh (also spelled Ghose), and others are all Kayastha names. The Kayasthas are an ancient caste, originally of scribes, and can be found in most places in North India but particularly in Bihar, the United Provinces, Orissa, and Bengal. A name like Das in Bihar, however, may not mean that its owner is a Kayastha; he may be of another caste. The Kayasthas are an especially interesting caste for their rung on the caste ladder, and thus to a large extent their position in society, varies greatly from province to province. Kayasthas in Bengal rank close to Brahmins, claiming membership as Kshatriyas, the second of the four varnas, or classes, of the Hindu social structure. And Bengali society, generally speaking, accepts them as such. In neighboring Bihar Kayasthas are neither ranked nor rank themselves quite so highly. Moving westward one more state into Uttar Pradesh one finds that Kayasthas are considered a middle-rank caste of uncertain varna and in their own eyes they rank little higher. The late President of India, Rajendra Prasad was a Kayastha from Bihar and the present Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur, is a Kayastha from U.P. Lal Bahadur received the title (really, an academic degree) Shastri, usually a Brahmin caste name, as a result of his studies in Hindi and Sanskrit.

Other Bengali names known to all are Mukerjee (also spelled Mukherjee, Mukherji, Mookerjee, etc; I counted nine different spellings in the telephone directory), Banerjee, Chatterjee, Tagore, Bhattacharya, and so on. These are all Brahmin names. Several of these names, like Mukerjee, I'm told, are not strictly speaking caste names, but are family names with a Brahminical designation. This is in contrast to

Sharma and Joshi which are Brahmin caste names throughout India. Many Bengali names, particularly among Brahmins, have Sanskritized forms. Common ones are Mukhopadhyay for Mukerjee and Chattopadhyaya for Chatterjee.

Before going on it might help to put in a word about caste, but a brief one because it is a huge and complicated subject that has not been entirely sorted out by historians and because I am hardly an authority on it. (For perhaps the best short account of the origins and development of the Indian social structure I recommend A.L. Basham's The Wonder that was India, published in hard covers and paperback by Orient Longmans Ltd.) The successive waves of Aryans who came to India from about 2000 B.C. onwards brought with them a rough stratification of society into classes. By about 900 B.C. a fourfold stratification had become rigid. Inscribed in the Vedas, the scriptures of the new society, this division into four varnas came to be regarded, in Basham's words, as "fundamental, primeval, and divinely ordained". In Sanskrit the word varna means color and indicates, Basham wrote, that the stratification brought by the invaders developed into its final form after "contact with people of different complexion and alien culture". The varnas also had a functional aspect. At the top of the hierarchy were the Brahmins or priests. Next came the Kshatriyas or warriors, the members of the ruling class. Then came the Vaishyas, who were husbandmen, merchants, etc. Last came the Shudras or serfs, whose duty it was to serve the members of the three upper layers. Below the four varnas in Vedic times was a fifth group, probably composed primarily of aboriginal tribes, that later became the untouchables of modern India, Whether this group was within or outside the Aryan fold is uncertain, and whether the untouchables were Hindus or beyond caste and thus beyond the pale was an issue of great political importance in the nineteen twenties and thirties. It has not disappeared even now, and their social status, even with untouchability outlawed by the Constitution, remains a matter of dispute.

Varna does not mean caste or jati. The several thousand castes that presently exist grew up outside the varna structure during comparatively recent times, and, to cite Basham again, "the two systems have never been thoroughly harmonized". Certain castes can be placed with reasonable accuracy in a particular varna, but often they cannot-- as with Kayasthas. In the mass of lower and middle class society, using these words in an economic sense, caste is much more important than varna. It is uncertain how caste as it is now known came to exist. Traditionally, castes were based on craft and the members dined with and married only caste-fellows. These distinctions and practices are breaking down and mutating under modern conditions; the structure has a new flexibility and fluidity. Caste continues to be socially and psychologically important, however, and politics has given it a new dimension. Therefore it is not only interesting but still often important to know what a person's caste is.

Getting back to names, we might look at the Hindi-language heartland of Uttar Pradesh. There names like Dwivedi, Tripathi (also rendered Trivedi), Pandey, Shukla, Mishra, Dube, Bhargava, Pathak,

and Bajpai are Brahmin names. Trivedi means a man learned in three (of the four) Vedas, and Dwivedi means a man learned in two Vedas. These days few know the Vedas, but the names persist. The Tyagis are a caste found only in U.P., and presently a man named Mahavir Tyagi is Minister of Rehabilitation with the job of resettling last winter's refugees from East Pakistan. The Tyagis consider themselves Brahmins, but the Brahmins don't agree, and in consequence they are often called 'Taga-Brahmins', 'Taga' being the village word for Tyagi. Kayasthas in U.P. have names like Saxena, Mathur, Bhatnagar, Mehrotra, and Srivastava. Sir J.P. Srivastava founded one of the better known mercantile families in India. Names like Agarwal, Gupta, and Seth in U.P. mean that the person is a member of one of the castes in the Vaisha varna.

But names, like everything else in India, are not that simple. Many persons today use names that give no indication of their caste. And there are many exceptions to the general pattern. A Bhargava in U.P. may be a Vaishya or a Brahmin. Seth means a flourishing businessman and a Brahmin who succeeds in business may come to be called Seth and the name may be passed on to his children. The name Varma may indicate that the person is a Kayastha or that he is from a Kshatriya caste. The same is true of Singh, which usually indicates a Kshatriya and more particularly a Rajput, but may in U.P. mean a Kayastha and occasionally a Brahmin. In the Punjab many Singhs are Sikhs, but they may also be Rajputs. Singh means lion and befits a Sikh peasant with his untrimmed beard and graceful carriage or an old Rajput with his wind-seamed face. But the lions of Delhi have fancy turbans, and hairnets sleeking their beards. They hunch in cafes mewling about their profits.

Although many times names are shared by various sections of the country, they frequently show where a man or his family comes from. A Das may be from Orissa, Bengal, or Assam. A Mehta may be from U.P. or he may be a Gujerati from Bombay. Or names can be a mixture. I have a friend called Subash Chandra Kashyap. Subash and Chandra are Bengali first names, but Kashyap is a U.P. family name. Names like Pai, Shenoy, Malliya, and Kamath originate in the Konkan, an area along the coast from Bombay south to Calicut. Most Konkans are Saraswat Brahmins. Rao (also spelled Rau) is also often a Konkani name, but many Raos are also Telegus. B.N. Rau, the well-known member of the World Court, India's representative to the United Nations in the early fifties, and advisor to India's Constituent Assembly was a Konkani. The author, Santha Rama Rau, is his niece. To make things interesting, however, his brother spells his name Rao. Other names are distinguishable as Kashmiri: names ending in 'ru' such as Nehru, Kunzru, Katchru, and Takru. Kaul and Katju are also Kashmiri names and these, as well as the four above, indicate Kashmiri Brahmins, a very self-contained and self-aware group on the inside of Indian affairs.

Names ending in 'kar' like Ambekar, Ambedkar, Gajendragadkar (the present Chief Justice of India), and Dandekar are Maharashtrian. And Dave, Kher, Deshmukh, Atre, Ranade, Apte, Gadgil, Deshpande, Kale, and Yagnik are Maharashtrian Brahmin names. Patwardhan is also generally Maharashtrian. The word meant and still means the keeper of the

village records, but it has become a family name as well. The same is true of Patel, a word meaning village headman and also denoting a large farmer caste in Gujerat, but now used as a family name. Sardar Patel, who with Gandhi and Nehru comprised the great triumvirate of the independence movement, came from this group.

South Indian names are in a class by themselves. They are so long and unpronounceable that even southerners reduce them to initials. There is a traditional system for constructing them--now not always followed. Among Tamil speakers the village name is placed first, then the father's given name, then the child's given name, and last (sometimes but not always) the caste name. Telegu speakers do the same excepting that the family name is used instead of the father's name. Thus a Telegu boy might be called Thirumala (village) Katakam (family name) Atmarram (given name). In this case there is no caste name. A Tamil boy might be called Nuggehalli (village) Krishnamurthi (father's given name) Narasimha (child's name) Ayyangar (a Brahmin caste). And as N.K.N. Ayyangar he would become a civil servant in Delhi. Other caste names such as Chettiyar and Reddi are very common in the eastern half of South India as Nayar (also spelled Nair) and Tiyar are in the western half, for example in Kerala. The Minister of Health, Dr. Sushila Nayar (GSA-14) is from the former group. In the Southwest the naming system is much like that to the east. First will come the place (village) name, then the father's name, then the given name, and last the family name. Our neighbor upstairs, for example, a retired Konkani lawyer, is named Kasaragod Kamalaksha Manohar Kamath. Menon is another family name of the area, as in the well-known (V.K.) Krishna Menon.

Children in most parts of India are given their names at a special ceremony that takes place between eight and thirteen days after birth. In the U.P., according to Indian friends, the family pandit or purohit, the Brahmin who customarily performs rituals for the family, indicates the letter with which the child's name should begin after studying its horoscope. Parents may and often do ignore this advice, however, and give the child a name simply because its sound and meaning pleases them. Or a name may be chosen with the purohit's advice and used only for religious purposes. Although these names are often transliterated as two, they are really one name. For example, Das means slave or servant of the god(s) and Govind(a) is one of the names of Vishnu. So a child may be called Govinddas with perhaps another name like Seth, meaning businessman, added on. Or a child may be called Shyama, meaning dark, because Krishna was dark--he is depicted as blue in religious paintings--or he may be called Sunder, meaning beautiful. Kamalaksha (Kamalakshi for a girl) means eyes like a lotus. Manohar means one who catches the eye. Girls are named in much the same way and generally take their husband's name at marriage. Sometimes a husband will give his wife a name that he likes better. I am told that this was the case with Mrs. Pandit, Prime Minister Nehru's sister. Named Swarup Nehru after her mother, she married Ranjit Pandit who gave her the name Vijayalakshmi. Ever since she has been called Vijayalakshmi Pandit.

To the researcher interested in tracing family relationships this naming system is most unhelpful. Although it is becoming

commoner to adopt a family name so that Motilal Nehru calls his son Jawaharlal Nehru in the same way that Richard Nolte's son is Roger Nolte, often father and son have completely different names. The father of Sri Prakasa (actually Sriprakasa), for example, one of the senior members of the independence movement and later Governor of Bombay, was named Bhagavandas. In 1903 a man named Hiri Lal had a son, Chandra Bhanu, who today is called C.B. Gupta (Gupta is a caste name) and who is a power in Uttar Pradesh politics. For the researcher the only way out is to find someone who knows the family history including all the names used by the members. Hindus keep track of their families with their own geneologies or they consult the family purohit at one of the major holy cities such as Allahabad and Benares. In these cities, a friend (whose purohit is at Allahabad) told me, there is a purohit who keeps a huge register of the families in a particular district. Each time a member of the family goes on a pilgrimage, he signs the register and often adds other information. In this way a man from Faizabad can trace his forbears in much the manner of an American of earlier vintage looking at the fly-leaves of the family bible.

As the names so far talked about show that their owners are Hindus of one sort or another, so other names may indicate that the individuals are Muslims, Parsis, Christians, or Sikhs. And sometimes one is able to tell the region from which a Muslim or a Christian comes by his name, but here the laws of probability may trip one up. Parsis, of course, are concentrated around Bombay--the large community that once lived in Karachi and the rest of Sind have largely emigrated to India--and the Sikhs live primarily in the Punjab, although a taxi anywhere in India may now have a Sikh pilot. Muslim names are often what one would expect, containing Ahmad or Mohammed, but they may be wholly Indian such as Humayun Kabir, the present Indian Minister of Petroleum, or Chaudhry Khaliquzzaman, a member of the Muslim League who remained in India after Partition for a short time and who subsequently went to Pakistan. Humayun was a Muslim ruler of India and Kabir was a Hindu reformer. Khaliquzzaman is quite evidently Muslim, but Chaudhry is often a Hindu name. Names like Anthony, George, and Wilson in India today usually denote an Anglo-Indian as surely as Masters's Patrick Taylor and Victoria Jones. Christians who are not Anglo-Indians sometimes have English names, but most often they have Hindu-sounding Indian names. H.C. Mookerjee, an English professor in Calcutta and leader of the Bengal Christian community, was an example, along with Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, a close associate of Gandhi. The exceptions to this seem to be the Roman Catholics of Goa and the Bombay area who often have names like Anthony and Mary or outright Portuguese names like D'Souza.

Despite living in the Punjab, I know little about Sikh names. Singh may be a tipoff, but it may not be as I've explained already. Compounded with certain other names to yield Sobha Singh, Surjeet Singh, Jaswant Singh, etc., it is Sikh, and equally when it is the middle of three names, as in Bhopinder Singh Man. Other Sikh names include Ahuja, Ahluwalia, Manocha, Majithia, and Nagoke. Sikh names do not seem to stand out strongly against the surrounding background--which is no doubt due to the close association of Sikhism and Hinduism. Parsi names, on the other hand, are more easily distinguishable. English words for professions and trades when made into names almost always mean the person is a Parsi--Mr. and Mrs. Engineer or Contractor

or Doctor or Driver, for example. Names, often first names, ending in 'ji' are usually Parsi. Jamshedji Tata, founder of the Tata industrial empire and after whom the Bihar steel city of Jamshedpur is called, is an example. Then there are names like Cowasji Jehangir, Dadabhai Naoroji, and Homi Ruttonji Nanji. 'Ji' names can also be Muslim, such as Tyabji, or Hindu, for instance the 'ji' spelling of Mukerji or Banerji. Other well-known Parsi family names are Masani, Wadia, Dalal, Schroff, and Modi. Many times the form 'vala' or 'wala' at the end of a name is an indicator. The word to which 'vala' is attached may be a profession or a town. The Mr. Botlevala (I think I have the spelling correct) of Bromfield's Night in Bombay was descended from a man whose business was collecting old bottles. A person from the town of Tarapur might call himself Tarapurvala. A variation of this is the many Billimoria families that hail from the town of Bilimora in the former princely state of Baroda. Parsi names often have a distinctly Persian, as opposed to Arabic, flavor even to the non-expert like me. And many names are directly derived from the Persian. Girls may be called Mehernaaz, Sineene, or Roshan. There are names like Kaizad and Yazad. Rustom (often used in the short form of Rusi) is derived from the famous warrior of the same name who was immortalized in the epic Rustom and Sorab. Feroze is derived from Phyruz, a Persian emperor. Prime Minister Nehru's daughter Indira was married to Feroze Gandhi, Gandhi or Ghandy is also a Parsi family name, who died in 1960. Shah, despite its Persian connotation, is a purely Hindu name

The Bombay area has a variety of interesting names that are a product of its position as a cultural crossroads where Hindus, Parsis, and Muslims meet. On the Muslim side the influence of the Ismailis and of the two Ismaili sub-sects, the Bohoras and the Khojas, is especially strong. The Ismailis, as is well known, are an offshoot of the Shias, who are one half of the basic, Shia-Sunni schism in Islam. The Ismailis are in turn split into several groups, among them the Bohoras and the Khojas. The difference between them, as I understand it, is that they support the claims of different brothers to the succession of the Fatimid Caliphate. The Khojas are the representatives in India of 'the Assassins'. The Bohoras are mainly a trading community (their name is derived from the Gujerati verb 'to trade') and themselves were split after 1540. Just to confuse matters, there are Sunni and Hindu, as well as Ismaili, Bohoras. Most Bohora and Khoja families were originally of Hindu stock. I can rarely distinguish between Bohora and Khoja names and here I've taken the easy way out, referring to both as Ismailis. Ismaili names, however, are usually distinguishable from the names of the more orthodox Sunni and Shia Muslims. They are more 'Indianized' and less plainly Arabic in their derivation. Curiously enough, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, was an Ismaili (and a Khoja) from Bombay and his daughter still lives there married to a Parsi named Wadia. Patel, usually a Hindu name can also be Parsi, and Bombay produces combinations like Jehangir Pestonji Patel. Mohomedbhoy Ibrahimbhoy Rowjee has in many ways a Parsi ring to it, but the name is Ismaili and the man was once Diwan to the late Aga Khan. If a name, like Jaipuria, sounds as if it might be Parsi but there are Hindu names preceding it, like Seth Mungtu Ram, then it is a Marwari name. The Marwaris are Hindus from Rajasthan who have spread out over India and who, due in part to their clannishness,

have built up large commercial and industrial concerns. 'Mistry' in Hindustani means workman, and it can be a Hindu or a Parsi or an Ismaili name. In one Who's Who that I have, there are several Mistrys. One is Jethalal Purshotam Mistry, a Gujerati Hindu, and another is Ebrahim Suleman Mistry, an Ismaili--and perhaps a Bohora of the Sulayman sub-sect. Equally a mixture is Suleman Dawood Merchant. Merchant is also Parsi, Hindu, or Ismaili. Suleman and Dawood (derived from Daud) are both Ismaili names and are the names of the opposing sub-sects of the Bohoras. Mr. Merchant is an Ismaili. The entry about E.S. Mistry, by the way, notes that he is adventurous and enterprising, hardworking and diligent, that his straightforward dealings have earned respect for him, that he receives the devotion of his employees because he treats them as equal, and that, a self-made man, he is "very popular in business circles because of his suave manners".

So much for this exercise in Indian culture. But just to leave you something to wrestle with, what sort of a name is Khurshid Cooper?

Yours sincerely,

*Red Austin*

Granville S. Austin

Received in New York February 4, 1965.