Sheila Embleton

embleton@yorku.ca
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7245-1845
York University
Toronto, Canada

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Names in India: History, Colonialism, Renaming, Contemporary Issues

Abstract

With a population of just over 1.4 billion, India has just become the most populous country in the world, and the seventh largest by land area (3,287,263 sq. km). India has enjoyed a rapid recent rise to prominence on the world stage, both politically and economically. Yet very little is known by "Western" scholars about naming in India, whether naming of people or of places. India is a very diverse land, with many cultures, religions, languages, climates, and geographies. Added to this are India's colonial past (British, French, Portuguese), various other rulers and influencers over the years (e.g., Mughals), social factors such as the caste system, all leading to very complicated systems of naming, with much regional and ethnic variation. This paper will give an overview of relevant history and colonial influences, before moving on to several phases of post-colonial renaming/respelling of toponyms (e.g., Bombay/Mumbai, Madras/Chennai). I will then turn to personal naming systems, looking at different systems as determined by social class and caste, religion, gender discrimination, and other features such as northern (Indo-European) vs. southern (Dravidian). Throughout, there will be attention to the sociological and sociopolitical contexts of contemporary India, as well as the influence of English and "Western" culture.

Keywords

India, renaming, decolonization, personal naming systems

1. Introduction

ICOS is the largest gathering in the world for onomastics scholars, which is why this is the best possible venue for what I hope to accomplish in this paper.[1] In brief, most research and publication in onomastics today relates to Europe or to North America. There are of course good historical and cultural reasons for this, but it does lead to many other areas of the world being comparatively neglected, even invisible, in onomastic research. I am referring to Latin America, Africa, Asia, and to a large extent Australasia. My goal is to give you an overview of names in one of these neglected areas, India, which recently surpassed China as the most populous country in the world, home to 1.4 billion people (1,428,627,663 as of July 16, 2023, according to Worldometer), just over one sixth of humanity, both with some history as well as contemporary trends, which include decolonization and other cultural trends, covering both place names and personal names, in this extremely diverse country. This is overly ambitious of course for the time allotted to one plenary conference presentation, so the following merely scratches the surface, and attempts to interest others in the names of India. There are of course many other areas I simply cannot cover, including more theoretical work on decolonization and on renaming, on renaming due to regime change or Indigenization, some mention of every Indian state (28 states plus 8 "union territories") or major language group, nor the significant Indian diaspora abroad and the considerable cultural interactions that inevitably brings. For excellent studies of Indian personal naming patterns and their evolution in the diaspora, see Rajend Mesthrie's research in South Africa (Mesthrie, 2017; Devan, 2018; Joseph, 2022, pp. 25–27) and Thilagavathi Shanmuganathan et al.'s (2021) article on the Telugu in Malaysia.

As a brief roadmap for this paper, my order of topics is: history, the colonial era, decolonization (as seen through the renaming of cities and streets),

[1] I warmly thank the conference organizers, particularly the late Barbara Czopek-Kopciuch, for inviting me to deliver one of the plenary lectures. It was truly unfortunate that we could not all be together in person, especially as Krakow is such a wonderful city, and I was looking forward to being there again, along with my onomastic friends and colleagues, spending a wonderful week together.

the interaction of religion and caste in personal naming, a few examples of personal naming patterns, concluding with some recent name-relevant items from the Indian media.

In order to understand some of the complexity and diversity of India, I will need to begin with a brief overview of some history, north vs. south and other regional differences, ethnic/linguistic groups (Indo-European vs. Dravidian, which correlates highly with north vs. south, but also other smaller linguistic groups), religions, caste, and so on. There is huge diversity in climate and in topography (high mountains [the Himalayas in the north], glaciers, low hills, flat plains, deserts, jungles, mangrove swamps, lakes, wide rivers, rushing mountain streams, etc.). There is huge cultural variety in many respects: in dress (even in styles of wearing/draping a sari), of foods and cooking-style, of house-style, and so on. Of great importance for names, naming patterns, and name changes are religions and languages. There are six major religions in contemporary India, four of which originated on the Indian subcontinent. In decreasing order of size, these six are Hinduism, Islam, Christianity (various sects), Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism. In addition, there is the world's largest number of Parsis/Zoroastrians, together with a dwindling Jewish community, Bahais, and various native animistic religions. The official language situation is more complicated. In British India, prior to Independence in 1947, English was the administrative language, and the only language used in higher education. Upon Independence in 1947, despite bitter contestation, English was retained as a national language, initially only until 1965, and later extended for practical purposes indefinitely. The attitude towards English has varied tremendously over the years, and for those who wish to know more, I recommend Mukherjee (2009). Hindi (in the Devanagari script) is the official language of the Union or national government. Hindi is widely spoken across northern India, acts as a lingua franca across much of India, and is widely taught in schools throughout India. There are 22 official languages,[2] of differing regional status, but all of which may be used in the 245-seat Upper House of Parliament, the Rajya Sabha ('Council of States'). English is called an additional official language and is used nation-wide. The 543-seat

[2] Indo-European (Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, Urdu, Odia, Punjabi, Assamese, Maithili, Kashmiri, Nepali, Sindhi, Dogri, Konkani, classical Sanskrit), Dravidian (Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam), Tibeto-Burman (Manipuri, Bodo), Austroasiatic (Sandali).

Lok Sabha, Lower House ('House of the People'), has a "notwithstanding clause" that allows official languages beyond English and Hindi. The official languages split into two main language groups: Indo-European in the north and Dravidian in the south. There are other languages from the Sino-Tibetan (especially its Tibeto-Burman branch) and Austroasiatic families (including as official languages), and many non-official languages and dialects. The state boundaries largely coincide with linguistic boundaries. The 2011 census has 31 languages with over a million native speakers, and if some dialects considered separate languages by many are separated out, there are approximately 60 languages with over a million native speakers.

2. History

The history of India is obviously a vast topic, so I will only give a brief summary, including points that are relevant for naming.

I will begin with the Indus Valley civilization, with the cities of Harappa and Moenjodaro, now both in Pakistan, and also Lothal (near Ahmedabad in modern Gujarat). There were nomadic tribes who cultivated crops and domesticated animals. An urban culture emerged around 3500 BCE, peaking around 2600–1700 BCE. This was roughly in the area of modern Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Sindh (the latter now in Pakistan). There was trade with Mesopotamia. The decline of this Indus Valley civilization began from the beginning of the 2nd millennium BCE, with various theories of either floods or decreased rainfall (interfering with agriculture) or Aryan[3] invasions. Our word *India* itself is derived from Indus, which is derived from Old Persian *Hindu*, from Sanskrit *Sindhu*, the historic local name for the Indus River. The Greeks referred to the Indians as *Indoi* (*Ινδοί*), the people of the Indus. The modern Indian constitution and usage in many of the current languages of India also recognizes *Bharat* ([ˈbʱaːrət̪]) as an official name of equal status to *India*. The name *Bharat* is derived from the name of the legendary king *Bharata* in Hindu scriptures.

[3] *Aryan* is from a Sanskrit word for 'noble'.

Hindustan ([ɦɪnd̪ ʊˈst̪ aːn]), originally a Persian word for 'Land of the Hindus', generally referring to North India and Pakistan before Independence in 1947, is also occasionally but increasingly rarely used as a synonym for all of India. From around 1500 BCE, there were Aryan/Indo-European arrivals into north India, into the fertile basin of the Indus and Ganges rivers. With respect to language, this was the era of Sanskrit, the Prakrits and the various vernaculars, that is, the parent languages of Hindi and other languages of north India. These population movements caused the Dravidian speakers to move further south. It was during the time of the Vedas, the Hindu sacred scriptures, 1500–1200 BCE, that the caste system became formalized – and the caste system is very important for naming, as we will see below.

There were also a number of invasions that tried to conquer India but failed. I mention these only to show that knowledge of India was more widespread in the ancient world than those of us who learned our history in North America or Europe generally realize. Darius the Great, King of Persia (521–486 BCE) annexed Punjab and Sindh, but got no further. Alexander the Great invaded in 326 BCE, but did not go beyond the Beas River (in Greek, the Hyphasis River) when his armies in effect mutinied, refusing to march further east and take on the Nanda Empire in the Magadha region (north India). A series of dynasties and kings followed. I will simply list some names and details, to give an idea of the complexity: Nanda in 364 BCE, Maurya (founded by Chandragupta Maurya, 321 BCE, Emperor Ashoka who ruled from Pataliputra/present-day Patna and who was Buddhist), Sunga, Kanva, Shaka, Kushana, Gupta (319–500 CE), Rajput in Rajasthan (emerged 500–600 CE). Huns (under Toramana, ruled 493–515 CE) invaded northwestern India at the beginning of the 6th century CE ending the Gupta reign, followed by many kingdoms, Cholas in southern India in 850, etc.

Meanwhile, in religion, there was the rise of Buddhism (in Bodhgaya in the state of Bihar, and nearby Sarnath, very close to Varanasi, in the state of Uttar Pradesh) and of Jainism, both around 500 BCE, both questioning the Vedas and critical of the caste system. These religions never spread widely in India and especially not in southern India, although Emperor Ashoka took Buddhism to Sri Lanka.

Throughout all this period, there was trade with the Egyptians, overland with China, with southeast Asia, and with the Roman Empire both overland and through southern ports (spices, pearls, ivory, silk, in return for Roman gold). Much of this trade with the Roman Empire was in Kerala, but some was also

on the east coast; for example, Arikamedu, a few kilometers south of Pondicherry, traded with the Romans in the 1st century BCE. Two thousand years ago, Jews from the Holy Land came to Kochi in Kerala, and in 800–1200 CE there were Arab/Swahili traders from East Africa coming to Kerala. Discounting theories that Jesus spent his "lost years" (between his youth and the start of his ministry, at approximately age 30) in India, in Kashmir but maybe elsewhere and somewhat inspired by Buddhism, Christianity maybe arrived with St. Thomas the Apostle in 52 CE, but certainly Christianity arrived at least no later than with Thomas Cana, a Syrian Christian merchant who came in the 4th century CE with 400 families to Kerala. And they remained. Over a millennium later, St. Francis Xavier also came for three years (1542–1545) and is buried in Goa (even though he died in China in 1552).

The beginnings of the more modern period coincide with the era of European exploration and colonialism. Just before that, there were Muslim invasions into north India from the northwest, Chauhan lost Delhi to Muslim invaders in 1192, and by 1200 almost the whole of north India was under Muslim control. They defended their empire from Mongol invasion in the 1200s. Delhi was conquered by Tamerlane (also known as Timur or Taimur) in 1398. Babur became the first Mughal[4] emperor after conquering Delhi in 1526. There were a few brief recaptures of Delhi in 1540 and 1556, but basically it remained Mughal until falling to the British in 1857 (the last Mughal Emperor was Bahadur Shah II, also known as Zafar). The alliance of Hindu kingdoms against the Muslim threat to south India led to the Vijayanagar empire, centred on Hampi (in Karnataka). Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese explorer who discovered the sea route from Europe to India (where Columbus failed, by going in the wrong direction), arrived in Calicut (now Kozhikode, Kerala) in 1498 and began trading. He died in Cochin (now Kochi, Kerala) in 1524, where he was initially buried before being returned to Portugal. In 1510, Portuguese forces under Afonso de Albuquerque captured Goa. On December 31, 1600, Queen Elizabeth I of Britain granted the first trading charter to the East India Company. The year 1631 saw the beginning of the construction of the Taj Mahal in Agra by Shah Jahan (reigned 1627–1658), in memory of his wife Mumtaz Mahal. He also constructed Lal Qila (the Red Fort), a famous landmark in Delhi, and

[4] Mughal, Mogul, and Moghul are alternate spellings. This is a Muslim dynasty of Turkic-Mongol origin.

converted the Agra Fort into a palace (that later was his own prison under his son Aurangzeb). In 1674 Shivaji established the Maratha kingdom, in western India and parts of the Deccan and North India. He gave himself the title Chhatrapati ('Lord of the Universe'), which we will see later in renamings, and was a particular hero as a lower-caste Shudra (more on caste later). The French had a more minor presence. The French East India Company (*La Compagnie française des Indes orientales*)[5] began in 1642, the first French factory was established at Surat (south Gujarat) in 1668, and Pondicherry was established in 1673. After various battles and transfers between France and Britain (sometimes affected by the outcomes of wars in Europe), the five remaining small French territories in India became fully part of India in 1954 (ratified by the French Parliament only in 1962).

Then the British in Bengal became a player. The Rajputs struggled amongst each other and were in any case essentially vassal states to the Mughals. The Afghan ruler Ahmad Shah Durrani captured Lahore and Kashmir and sacked Delhi in 1747. The first military victory of the East India Company was in 1757 under Robert Clive. In 1801 the Sikhs united in a kingdom in Lahore (now Pakistan). The Mughals continued to rule weakly until 1857, when the First War of Independence (meaning independence from Britain), also known as the Indian Uprising or the Indian Mutiny, led to a transfer of power from the East India Company to the British Crown, with respect to iron, coal, tea, coffee, cotton, and mills. The period following is known as the British Raj (1858–1947), with Independence on August 15, 1947, and partition (India/Pakistan) one day earlier, August 14, 1947. Then in 1971 East Pakistan became Bangladesh, thus further fracturing the subcontinent. There were still various boundary issues, including to this day with China, with Kashmir/Pakistan, with the Rann of Kutch (Gujarat/Pakistan), and in the northeast (with Bangladesh).

[5] I will leave aside the question of the (current) singular vs. (former) plural versions of India, as seen in English *India* vs. *The Indies*, and in French *Inde* vs. *les Indes*. Deroy and Mulon (1992), in their well-known dictionary, suggest as a reason for the shift from plural to singular that in the French world India has been only recently associated with the idea of a unified state and the old custom of designating the country as multiple regions gave birth to the plural form. I thank André Lapierre for this observation.

3. Renaming and respelling of cities

Now I will turn to the renaming and respelling of cities, and streets within cities, in the post-colonial era, which begin in 1947, as probably the first known and first visible onomastic acts of decolonization in India to be noticed outside India, signalling this new post-colonial era. For a quick overview of the Indian situation, see Tharoor (2013); for broader discussion of decolonization and changing power relationships via renaming beyond the Indian context please see Caiazzo and Nick (2020), Kostanski (2011), Puzey and Kostanski (2016), and Zuvalinyenga (2021).

There were actually very few changes in the first years after the end of the British Raj. Mostly these were street name changes, likely as those are less complicated to enact legally. I will come to that later. There were very few city/town name changes; the first, in 1948, was *Cawnpore* to *Kanpur* (in Uttar Pradesh, founded in 1803, an important military station in British India), which wasn't so much a change as a respelling to more accurately reflect actual Indian pronunciation, rather than the British rendition of it. The first more widely known change was in November 1995, when *Bombay*, the capital of Maharashtra, became *Mumbai*. A pro-Maratha regionalist movement, Shiv Sena, came to power in municipal elections in 1985, and undertook this symbolic change. Although actual origins and etymologies are obscured, and there are many slightly different variants, it is usually said that the Portuguese named the settlement *Bom Bahia* 'good bay', hence Bombay, and since the name was given by the Portuguese and taken over by the British, that made it a colonial name to be targeted for change.[6] It is also said that the Koli fisherfolk, who were settled there, named their settlement in Marathi after the Hindu goddess Mumba. One cannot help but notice the phonetic similarity of *Bom Bahia* and *Mumba*, and wonder about double or convergent etymology, or possibly folk etymology. Note that many uses of *Bombay* persist, over 25 years later, with the airport still having the letters *BOM*, the prestigious engineering university

[6] Modern Portuguese would be *Boa Baía*. *Bom Bahia* as an old form from Portuguese has been assumed by Portuguese authors to be a corruption made by non-Portuguese speakers. I owe this observation to Agostinho Salgueiro.

still being *IIT-B*, *IIT-Bombay*, etc. The demonyms in current use, *Mumbaikar*, *Bombayite*, and *Mumbaiite*, show that same variation. In 1996, *Madras*, the capital of Tamil Nadu, became *Chennai*. The British (specifically the East India Company) had founded a settlement at a fishing village called *Madraspatnam* in 1639. Even though the etymology is obscure, it is a Tamil name, whether from a fisherman *Madarasan*, or from the local Muslim religious schools (*madarasas*), or from the name *Mudirasa* which is one of the several names of the person who granted the city to the British in 1639, or from *madhu-ras* from the Sanskrit and Tamil words for honey. There is even another suggestion, not Tamil, likely a folk etymology, that *Madras* comes from Portuguese, *Madre de Dios*, 'mother of God', referring specifically to the Church of St. Mary. The origin of the new name, *Chennai*, ironically is not Tamil but rather Telugu, a related but definitely different Dravidian language. It comes from Damarla Mudirasa *Chennappa* Nayakudi, the Raja of Chandragiri, a Telugu speaker from what is today the state of Andhra Pradesh, who granted the British the right to trade on the Coromandel Coast. As with *Bombay/Mumbai*, many uses of *Madras* persist (e.g., *MAA* for the airport designation, *University of Madras*, *IIT-Madras*, etc.).[7] Later, in 2001, we have *Calcutta* becoming *Kolkata*, which is simply a more phonetically accurate rendition of the Bengali, yet still is symbolic decolonization. Again, *Calcutta* persists in the *University of Calcutta*, the airport designator *CCU*, etc. Similarly, *Bangalore* changed back to Kannada *Bengaluru* ('town of boiled beans', *Benda-Kaal-uru*) in November 2006, supposedly after an incident when an old village woman served cooked pulses/beans to a lost and hungry Hoysala king; the story may well be apocryphal. The British arrived in 1809, made it an administrative base in 1931, and renamed it *Bangalore* in an inaccurate rendition of the native Kannada pronunciation. According to 2021 population figures, these four cities, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Kolkata and Chennai are four of the five largest in India; I will come to the other one of the five, Delhi, later.

Many cities of smaller size also changed their names. One of the better known, and very significant for its religious and cultural importance to Hindus, is *Varanasi*, in Uttar Pradesh, on the banks of the River Ganges (*Ganga* in Hindi).

[7] Both *Bombay/Mumbai* and *Madras/Chennai* are well-known for their cuisine, including some particular specialties and cooking styles. Mostly these specialties and styles, as well as restaurant names, have kept the old name, although one can occasionally find the new name. I speculate that the old name sounds more genuine and authentic in this particular context.

Benares (also Romanized as *Banares* and *Banaras*) became *Varanasi* in 1956, but Manduadih railway station has recently been given the name *Banaras* (2019). *Banaras Hindu University* retained *Banaras* and did not change to *Varanasi*. Its engineering college became a prestigious IIT in 2012 and is known officially as Indian Institute of Technology (BHU) Varanasi, trying to keep the best of all three of its brands. Here is a list of some other city renamings: *Baroda* to *Vadodara* in 1974; *Poona* to *Pune* in 1978; *Trivandrum* to *Thiruvananthapuram* in 1991; *Cochin* to *Kochi* in 1996; *Pondicherry* to *Puducheri* in 2006; *Mangalore* to *Mangaluru* in 2014; *Mysore* to *Mysuru* in 2014; *Gurgaon* to *Gurugram* in 2016; *Alleppey* to *Alappuzha*; *Quilon* to *Kollam*; *Tanjore* to *Thanjavur*; *Cocanada* to *Kakinada*; *Ellore* to *Eluru*; *Trichur* to *Thrissur*; and *Calicut* to *Kozhikode*.

Some of those are quite recent and clearly this is still very much ongoing. Under the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, from the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, 'Indian People's Party'), there are now many more proposed changes, in line with the government's policy of promoting Hinduism, generally to the detriment of Muslims and India's Mughal heritage. One change of this most recent wave of changing Mughal names to Hindu names is *Allahabad*, a major city of over 1.5 million in Uttar Pradesh, to *Prayagraj*, which took place in 2018. There is talk of changing *Pune* (previously *Poona*, see above) to *Jijapur*, *Osmanabad* to *Dharashiv*, *Ahmednagar* to *Ambikanagar*, *Aurangabad* to *Sambhaji Nagar*, *Hyderabad* to *Bhagyanagar*, *Lucknow* to *Lakhanpur*, *Nizamabad* to *Indur*, *Islampur* to *Ishwarpur*, *Ahmedabad* (pronounced as if Amdabad/Avdabad, so not as obviously Mughal) to *Karnavati*, and *Thiruvananthapuram* (formerly Trivandrum) to *Ananthapuri* (which is for different reasons, said to be easier to pronounce for North Indians by dropping the first two syllables). Most stunning of all, some have proposed that *Delhi* (India's second largest city by population and the national capital) be changed to *Indraprastha* ('City of the god Indra'), a name found in the ancient Sanskrit epic, Mahabharata.

To conclude this section, it should be noted that there was massive renaming of states in 1947, right after Independence, away from the various historical (often princely) states and alliances, into states that tended to be linguistically based. For example, *Travancore-Cochin* became *Kerala*, where the majority language is Malayalam, and *Mysore State* was enlarged and became *Karnataka*, where the majority language is Kannada. Often this of course involved renaming, but I have not included those here, even though that took place in the immediate aftermath of decolonization. It was much more a function of the reorganization than any renaming of existing entities. Subsequently,

there have been some name changes of states, for example in 2011, *Orissa* became *Odisha*, to accord more closely with local pronunciation.

4. Street names

These were among the first renamings after Independence, as the regulations and processes are far less complex. For the cities named earlier, in some cases these changes required Union (i.e. federal level) legislative approval, in some cases state approval, and in other cases, more local approval. For street names, only municipal approval is required. For streets, there are colonial names that remain, some that have changed, and then also some cases where the name has changed, but the old name is still used, so maps (whether official or unofficial) may be discrepant from local usage (and importantly, taxi driver usage).

Here are some examples: In Delhi, *Connaught Place* is now *Rajiv Chowk*, but the old name is far more common, *Ring Road* is *MG Road* (*Mahatma Gandhi Road*), etc. In Madras/Chennai, *Mount Road* became *Anna Salai Road*, but the old name is still used, *Triplicane High Road* became *Quaid-Milleth High Road*, *North Beach Road* became *Rajaji Salai Road*, *Adam's Road* became *Swami Sivananda Salai*, *C-in-C Road* [Commander-in-Chief] became *Ethiraj Road*, *Lloyd's Road* became *Avvai Shanmughan Salai Road*, *Spur Tank Road* became *Major Ramanathan Salai*. *Salai* is Tamil for "road", thus some of these street names duplicate the "road" generic, in an example of pleonastic naming. In Bombay/Mumbai, *Nepean Sea Road* became *L. D. Ruparel Marg*, *Mount Pleasant Road* became *Bhau Sahab Hire Marg*, but the old names are still used. In Bangalore/Bengaluru, *Fort Road* became *Rajaram Mohanroy Road*, *Lang Ford Road* became *Kadilal Manjappa Road*, *Grant Road* became *Vittal Mallya Road*, *Richmond Road* became *General Thimmaiah Road*, *Broadway Road* became *Hajrath Kambal Posh Road*. In Calcutta/Kolkata, *VIP Road* became *Nazrul Islam*[8] *Avenue*, *Lansdowne Road* became *Sarat Bose Road*, *Southern Avenue* became *Dr M Saha Road*.

[8] This one is interesting because Nazrul Islam is a Bengali poet, a Muslim, and the national poet of Bangladesh. One wonders if this will become a target for a name change.

Britain was not the only colonial master. *Pondicherry*,[9] a former colony of France, has also had street name changes, after it officially became part of India in 1962. It is now officially known as *Puducherry*, but as we have seen before with other cities, the old name remains in many venues (e.g., *Pondicherry University*). *Rue Bussy* became *Lal Bahadur Sastri Street*,[10] but it is still on many maps including Google as *Bussy Street*. If you input *Lal Bahadur Sastri Street*, Google automatically takes you to *Bussy Street*, with no mention whatsoever of *Sastri*. However, on the OpenStreetMap site, it appears as both as *Bussy Street*/*Lal Bahadur Shastri Street* and further east on the map as *Lal Bahadur Shastri* alone (with the more common romanization of Sastri). *Goubert Avenue* (along the beach) is now renamed *Beach Road*, which is in actual active use. This latter is interesting, because it is decolonizing away from the language of the colonial master, namely French, but ironically to English, which is not seen as colonial in this Pondicherry context. It also has the advantage of being descriptive, because it literally runs parallel to the beach.

Some of the colonial era names were names of people directly associated with colonialism, particularly of governors, governors-general, and viceroys (e.g., *Connaught*, *Cornwallis*, *Dalhousie*, *Dufferin*, *Elgin*, *Hastings*, *Lansdowne*, *Minto*). Many of these names will be familiar to those from other former British colonies, like Canada, as governors often served successively in more than one location. In many cases the colonial era names were more generic (e.g., *Fort*, *Broadway*, *Southern*), or of towns or counties in Britain (e.g., *Surrey*, *Sussex*, *Brighton*, *Southampton*, *Kingston*, *Richmond*, etc.). All these types changed into names of local meaning or significance, most often personal names. Under the fervour of nationalism but also the impetus to decolonize, many roads, especially major roads, had their names changed, but the old names die out of use very slowly; even many decades later the change has not happened in many cases. There can be multiple reasons for this: lack of literacy in the population (historically and still now; remember this extends to being literate but not in the local script), habit, and some of the new names are longer and more cumbersome.

[9] French *Pondichéri*. The name is from Tamil *pudu* ('new') and *ceri* ('village').

[10] *Sastri*/*Shastri*/*Shastry* are alternate English spellings for the surname of the second prime minister of India, Lal Bahadur *Shastri*. Shastri's surname at birth was Srivastava, but as a young man, he changed it to avoid the caste-based upper-class surname Srivastava.

I do not have space to write about other types of renaming, for example of buildings, institutions, etc. I will give just two well-known examples from Mumbai. The *Victoria Terminus* railway station, popularly known as *VT*, has for some time been officially renamed *Chhatrapati Shivaji* (the great Maratha leader in the late 1600s referred to earlier, who also has the Mumbai airport named after him). *The Prince of Wales Museum of Western India* has also been named after him. I refer you to Luisa Caiazzo's 2017 American Name Society Annual Meeting presentation on Indian university names and their colonial legacy. Although her paper concentrates on different patterns of naming of universities before 1947 compared to after 1947, of relevance for my topic here are some examples of universities founded before 1947 that were renamed, such as *Agra University*, founded in 1927, and renamed in 1996 to *Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University*, and *Sagar University*, founded in 1946 (just one year before Independence), and renamed in 1983 to *Dr. Hari Singh Gour University*. Even so, the former name, *Sagar University*, is still most commonly used.

5. Personal names

I will turn now to personal names.[11] Crucial to the description of the personal naming system in India is a basic understanding of the role of religion and of caste.

One's name often immediately reveals the religion of the name-bearer. For example, some male given names are always Muslim, in many cases popular in the Muslim world outside India as well: *Ahmad*, *Akbar*, *Ali*, *Amir*, *Areeb*, *Faisal*, *Feroz*, *Husain*, *Javed*, *Moham(m)ed*, *Mohsin*, *Najeeb*, *Rabiz*, *Rahim*, *Rayan*, *Tahir*, *Zain*, etc. Some male given names are always Hindu: *Abhishek*, *Arjun*, *Arvind*, *Ashok*, *Ashwin*, *Chandan*, *Chetan*, *Deepak*, *Dilip*, *Hari*, *Kapil*, *Karthik*, *Krishna*, *Mohan*, *Om*, *Pankash*, *Parag*, *Parth*, *Prem*, *Rahul*, *Rajesh*, *Rajiv*, *Rakesh*, *Ranvir*, *Ravi*, *Sanjay*, *Sunil*, *Vijay*, *Vinay*, *Vinod*, *Viraj*, *Vivek*, etc. Also Hindu are

[11] I personally know someone with every single one of the names in this section, or else they are a well-known public personality.

all those male names ending in *-esh* (*Dinesh*, *Mukesh*, *Naresh*, *Nilesh*, *Rajesh*, *Ramesh*, *Shailesh*, *Suresh*), beginning with *Sri-* (*Srikant*, *Srinath*), and most beginning with *Raj-* (*Raj*, *Rajendra*, *Rajesh*). Some female given names are always Hindu: *Amaya*, *Amrita*, *Anjali*, *Anju*, *Archana*, *Arti*, *Ashmita*, *Bhakti*, *Chandra*, *Deepali*, *Dipti/Deepti*, *Gayatri*, *Geetika*, *Gitanjali*, *Himani*, *Indira*, *Indu*, *Kalyani*, *Kamala/Kamla*, *Lata*, *Meenakshi*, *Mitali/Mithali*, *Neeta*, *Nirupama/Rupa/Roopa*, *Pari*, *Parvati*, *Pooja*, *Prachi*, *Preeti*, *Priyanka*, *Rani*, *Ritika*, *Rohini*, *Savitri*, *Surya*, *Vaishali*, *Vineeta*, etc. Some female given names are always Muslim: *Areeba*, *Fahida*, *Farida*, *Fatima*, *Munira*, *Nasreen*, *Shamira*, *Taran(n)um*, *Uzma*, etc.

In Kerala, traditionally the first son inherits the name of the paternal grandfather, the second son inherits the name of the maternal grandfather, and the third son inherits the name of the father. The first daughter inherits the name of the paternal grandmother, the second daughter inherits the name of the maternal grandmother, and the third daughter inherits the name of the mother. If there are more children than that, names come from uncles and aunts. Joseph (2022) is an in-depth diachronic study of naming patterns and trends in two Christian communities in Kerala, the Telugu Christians and the Syrian Christians, as they interact with different language and cultural groups over many decades.

Increasingly many Indians (and I am not referring to the diaspora, where obviously it will be common) have Western first names like *Michelle* or *Natasha* that also fit the sound system of their mother tongue well, or Western names like *Ina*, *Sheila*, *Sonia*, *Tara*, *Dennis* or *Neil* which are very similar to native names. Other popular trends are to bestow personal names of popular film actors (and remember how huge the film industry is in India, including regionally, well beyond Bollywood); to invent first names by combining syllables from the parents' names; or to have some form of rhyming for siblings (e.g., *Binu*, *Tinu*, *Jinu*, cited in Joseph, 2022).

Some surnames are always Muslim: *Abdulla*, *Kazimi*, *Khan*, *Mullick*/*Malik*, *Qadri*, *Rizvi*, *Siddiqui*, etc. Some surnames are always Hindu: *Acharya* ('priest'), *Bhardwaj*, *Chandra*, *Gupta*, *Joshi*, *Malhotra*/*Mehrotra* (Kshatriya caste from North India), and all those beginning with *Rama-* (*Ramasami*, *Ramakrishnan*), etc.

Typical of the intersecting factors at work in Indian names, some names are either Hindu or Muslim but always northern. An example is *Tyagi* (<Sanskrit, 'the renouncer'), found in western Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Delhi, but some have migrated to Sindh and Punjab provinces in Pakistan. Another better-known example is *Chowdhury*, with many variant

spellings (*Chaudri*, *Choudhury*, *Chaudhari*, *Chaudhary*, *Chaudhury*, *Chaudhry*, *Chowdhery*, *Chowdhury*, or *Choudhry*), which is a hereditary title of honour, awarded by Mughals to eminent persons, typically landowners.

In the Sikh religion, all females bear the surname *Kaur* ('princess'), and all males bear the surname *Singh* ('lion'), as an attempt to do away with caste. All (male) Sikhs are Singh, but not all Singhs are Sikhs; there are many non-Sikh Singhs, for example, in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar (where they are usually from a land-owning caste), Rajasthan (where they are high caste ruling families, e.g., royalty in Udaipur and Jaipur). Many Sikhs bear a second surname, so that *Kaur*/*Singh* appears to Western eyes as a middle name. Common Sikh surnames are *Dhaliwal*, *Grewal*, *Gil(l)*, and *Virk*.

There are many other examples where the family name is an ethnic/religious identifier, for example the Syrian Christians in Kerala frequently have surnames ending in *-ian*, such as *Cherian*, *Kurian*, or biblical names such as *Jacob*. Some surnames are always Christian (*Abraham*, *Alexander*, *Anthony*, *George*, *Jacob*, *Johnson*, *Joseph*, *Nazareth*, *Peter(s)*, *Philip*). The names of Portuguese origin (e.g., *Fernandes*, *Ferreira*, *Gomes*, *Lopes*, *Monteiro*, *Noronha*, *Pereira*, *Pinto*, *Ramos*), reflecting the colonial legacy, are all Christian and typically from the Goa area or further south into Kerala. Note that these have the Portuguese spelling ending in *-s*, not the Spanish (i.e. *-s*, not *-z*, e.g., Spanish *López*, *Gómez*, *Fernández*, etc.).

The other important factor in personal naming is caste. This is an exceedingly complicated area; a succinct and readable introduction can be found on the BBC website ("What is India's caste system?", 2019), and astute commentary on some contemporary issues with respect to affirmative action for lower castes in the Banyan column in the *Economist* ("India's caste system", 2021). The Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination based on caste. There are various affirmative action policies, such as "reserved" seats in government jobs and in universities for some of the lower castes. The Sanskrit word for caste is *varna*, which means colour. In Hindu society, there is a 4-caste hierarchy, generally accepted to be more than 3,000 years old: Brahmins (priests, teachers) at the top, Kshatriya (landholder, warrior, ruler), Vaishya or Bania (businessmen, traders, farmers, merchants), and Shudra (labourer, artisan), and then outside the caste system (*avarna*), at the bottom, Dalits (formerly untouchables or Harijans, terms now considered pejorative) (e.g., street sweepers, latrine cleaners) off the scale at the bottom. The upper 3 castes constitute about 15% of the population and have ruled India for about 3,000 years. About 50% of the Indian population is the Shudra caste (divided into hundreds of subcastes or

jati, some by occupation, e.g., cobblers, carpenters, and some geographical). Dalits and "tribals" are more than 20%. The remaining 15% or so are from other religions, about 11% Muslim, the rest Sikh, Christian, Parsee, Jain, Buddhist, etc. For a contemporary data-informed perspective, see Starr and Sahgal (2021). As does Joseph (2022), Starr and Sahgal note the fact that even though caste does not pertain to some other religions (e.g., Christians), Christians may nevertheless claim a caste, perhaps based on ancestral (pre-conversion to Christianity) relationships, in order to take advantage of some of the incentives (e.g., reservations/preference in government jobs/university admission) offered to lower castes.[12] "An estimated 65% of India's 20 [million] Catholics are former Dalits whose forebears converted in part to escape caste oppression" ("Even as India urbanises", 2020), and it is suggested that amongst India's Muslim population, while some may descend from (formerly) ruling Mughals, many may have converted from Hinduism to escape their low-caste status.

There are strong associations of some surnames with some castes or occupations (and remember that caste and occupation can be strongly correlated). For example, Agarwal (variant spellings exist, such as Aggarwal, Agrawal, etc.) made sweets. (This lends itself to remarks, e.g., in literature but also daily life, such as "he's not nearly as sweet as you might think from his surname", unfathomable without this piece of social knowledge.) Marwaris are businessmen, etc. The caste system was outlawed in the Indian Constitution of 1950, but it is still very much a factor in Indian society. People still know their caste, it shows up in "matrimonials" (i.e. ads seeking marriage partners) in the newspaper, it is still clearly known who is Dalit, and a recent survey found that a large majority of Indians have most of their friendships within their caste (70%) and think marriage should not cross caste boundaries (63%) (Evans & Sahgal, 2021). The caste system is still very much alive in many rural areas, where castes cannot sit together to eat or at weddings or other social functions, lower castes cannot go into a temple controlled by upper castes, and often must draw water from different wells.

There are other surnames which come from professions but the profession is given in English: *Banker*, *Merchant*, *Engineer*, *Judge*, *Pilot*, *Doctor*, *Reporter*, *Photographer*, *Tailor*, *Infantry*, *Contractor*,[13] etc. Hindi *-wala* is a frequent suf-

[12] Joseph (2022) refers to this, and it is also common knowledge.

[13] *Warrior* is not an example; it is a respelling of a Kerala name *Warrier*.

fixed morpheme for 'person employed in that particular industry' or 'person from X region'. In names that gives us some interesting English-Hindi compound names, such as *Stationwala*, *Electricwala*, *Treasurywala*, *Tobaccowala*, *Boatwala*, etc. Clearly these names originated during the British Raj. An example involving a place name is *Mumbaiwala*, which is interesting as it uses Mumbai, not Bombay. One unusual example is *Neemuchwala*,[14] from *NIMACH* (North India Mounted Artillery and Cavalry Headquarters), a town in the state of Madhya Pradesh right on the Rajasthan border. Some of these odd English-Hindi combinations exist in place names too, especially in northernmost India, for example, *McLeodganj* (location of the Tibetan government-in-exile near Dharamsala), *Robertsganj*, *Forbesganj* (*ganj* 'neighbourhood'), and *Double Chowki* (also *Doblechoki*, 'two crossroads', a town in the state of Madhya Pradesh, for whose name I have no definitive answer,[15] other than it does appear to consist of two crossroads on the map).

There are also names that are language/region specific. *Patel*, *Shah*, *Dave*, *Mehta*, *Modi*, *Desai*, *Gandhi*, *Soni* are all from Gujarat. *Nehru* and *Gilani* are from Kashmir. *Sen*, *Das*, *Ray/Roy*, *Ganguly*, *Dattagupta/Duttagupta*, *Dasgupta*, *Chatterji/Chatterjee*, *Bannerji/Bannerjee/Banerji*, *Mukherjee/Mukherji*, *Chattopadhyay*, *Bhattacharya*, *Bose*, *Ghose*, etc. are all Bengali; of these, *Chatterji*, *Bannerji*, *Mukherji*, *Ganguly* (and their spelling variants) are all high-caste. *Trivedi* and *Tripathi* are from Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh. *Mazumdar* is either Gujarati or Bengali. Names ending in *-kar* ('from') are high-caste names from the state of Maharashtra (also found in the Konkani language immediately to the south), for example *Chandrasekar*, *Dhanokar*, *Sarkar*, *Tendulkar*, *Trilokekar*, *Gavaskar*, whereas names ending in *de*/*-dey* are typically low-caste names from Maharashtra (*Badode*, *Jabade*, *Malwade*, *Ranadey*, *Shinde*). There are also such names in *-re* (*Sonare*, *Hazare*) or *-le* (*Bhonsle*). One notable exception is *Pande*(*y*)/*Panday*, which is a Brahmin (high caste) name from North India. Srivastava is upper-caste from north India. *Menon* and *Nair* are Kerala Hindu names. Christians commonly have a baptismal name as a middle name, which follows the familiar Western/Christian format. *Reddy* and *Rao* (caste names) are Telugu and most common in the state of Telangana. *Naidoo/Naidu* is an upper caste

[14] Husain Neemuchwala is one of my co-authors of a decade or so ago.

[15] *Dabalchooki* is a smaller town, 2 km east of *Double Chowki*, which is a phonetically similar name; maybe there is another explanation for both of these names. Or perhaps *Double Chowki* is a folk etymology of something else.

Telugu name.[16] *Srinivasan*, *Padmanabhan*, *Chidambaram*, *Krishnamachari*, *Pillai* (and names ending in *-pillai*; meaning 'child' or 'prince'), *Iyer*, and *Iyengar*, are all Tamil (or occasionally Malayalam). *Subramanian* and *Balasubramanian* are Tamil or Telugu. There are also other naming elements, repeated in many different surnames, for example, *lal* is 'red', *singh* is 'lion', *krishna* is a major deity in Hinduism, *acharya* is 'priest', *maha* is 'big', etc. In Dravidian languages (south India), *-lingam* is 'phallus' (a manifestation of Lord Shiva), for example *Jothilingam*, *Shanmugalingam*, *Sivalingam*, *Mahalingam*, etc. Indian surnames, especially Dravidian names, can seem very long to non-Indians and even north Indians. Sometimes the given names are also long, and it is common in India for initials to be used for the entire name or just the first name, or some other form of shortening. For example, my York University colleague *Anantharaman Kumarakrishnan* is just *Kumar*, and my late University of Ottawa colleague *Purushottam G. Patel* was always just *PG*.[17] This penchant for abbreviations is found with roads too, so for example almost every city has an *MG Road* (Mahatma Gandhi), but there are also many other examples, for example, *BT Road* in Kolkata is short for *Barrackpore Trunk Road*, and *GT Road* is short for *Grand Trunk Road* (throughout northern India, as well as Bangladesh to the east and Pakistan to the west).

There are also surnames which refer directly to a town or region of origin. Examples are *Puri* (city), *Bhutani* (country), *Mewari* (region), etc.

There is great regional variation, but a contemporary trend is homogenization to both north Indian norms and international norms, so for example to the pattern individual name, possibly another name, then family name/surname. Also, there are some areas in India where people still tend to have only a single personal given name. For example, there is a female freestyle wrestler from India, currently competing internationally, whose name is only **Jyoti**. When pressed, she has said her name is "Jyoti of India" or "Jyoti Pahlwan", where *pahlwan* is a style of wrestling in the Indian subcontinent. In order to transform this to prevailing norms, typically a place/village name or the father's personal name is added as a surname.

[16] For discussion of Telugu names in the diaspora in Malaysia, see Shanmuganathan et al., 2021.

[17] He told me that his middle name was so long he never used it, even in India, let alone Canada.

In Tamil, family names are not common, and people often have just their own personal name. Take for example the prominent politician *Chidambaram* (former Minister of Finance and Minister of Home Affairs). That is his entire name, but he is often referred to as *P. Chidambaram*, and people wonder what the *P* stands for. It stands for *Palaniyappan*, which is his father's sole name. It functions as a type of differentiator, based on the father's name. Interestingly, his wife, son, and granddaughter use *Chidambaram* now as a family name, so this is an example of change to the Western/north Indian pattern within a generation. So, for example, in Telugu (but also much of south India), Raman, son of Gopal, will be *G. Raman*, whereas Raman, son of Dinesh, will be *D. Raman*. But (either of those) Raman's son, Vijay, will be *R. Vijay*. To Westerners, it looks as though the family name is changing in each generation, but in fact it is a patronymic system, reminiscent of Iceland. For women, it is different again. Before marriage, a female will use her father's initial, so Ananya, daughter of Gopal, will be *G. Ananya*, but when she marries, for example, Vikram, she will be *V. Ananya*. To Westerners, it looks as though she changed her first initial on marriage, not her family name. Contemporary social norms are changing this, at least in some segments of society. If a woman works, she will tend to have her school diplomas, documents, etc., in her pre-marriage name. Changing a name is an immensely cumbersome and bureaucratic process in India, so the modern trend is simply to add the husband's name at the end. So Ananya may now be known as *G. Ananya Vikram*. A Westerner or someone from north India might think her surname is Vikram, but it is her husband's given name. An even more modern trend of simply retaining the birthname is occasionally seen but not common in India.

As an example of a more complicated situation because it also involves a caste name, take a male Telugu name, *Kandi Vijay Reddy*, which is family name, personal name, caste name. (In Western or north Indian format, this would be *Vijay Reddy Kandi*.) This would then often be *K. Vijay Reddy* in everyday use in India. In Western use, this would then most likely become *Vijay Reddy*, with Reddy re-interpreted as a surname.

The problems associated with incompatibility with Western naming systems affect such issues as issuance of visas and other bureaucratic activities, but also tracking publications in academia. See a very interesting article in *Nature* by three female south Indian post-doctoral fellows, who do not traditionally have surnames, which forces them into, in their words, publishing under their father's given names, but other publications being missed due to

inconsistent practices (Puniamoorthy et al., 2008). Another example comes from news stories surrounding the 2014 disappearance of Malaysian Airlines flight MH 370: "… Subaramaniam Gurusamy, 60, said in an interview from his home on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. His 34-year-old son, Pushpanathan Subramaniam, was on the flight…".[18]

To conclude, I will give three reasonably current stories from the Indian press, showing some current trends.

I mentioned earlier the social separation by caste, and often the absence of interactions between castes. I have seen this in action in how middle-class academic parents talk about and to servants, waiters, staff, etc., and also about their children's spouses or prospective spouses. I have also seen this in rural northern India, where for example those of lower caste do not sit with upper caste (or Western guests) at meals. Recall that caste is often conveyed by the surname. There are some interesting modern attempts to eradicate the immediate conveyance of social hierarchy in what should be neutral transactional situations. For example, in June 2011 in Himachal Pradesh, the police stopped using surnames (name plates, name tags, how they address each other) within the force of 15,000 personnel, to try to bring greater cohesiveness and sense of equity. Senior officers in Tamil Nadu and Kerala have shown interest in doing the same. In these areas of the south, the caste system is less strong, and the use of only the given name is also more common, so this would be less of a radical change.

My second example is of Gananan Wamanacharya, a retired scientist from the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, who has compiled a list of 60,000 unusual surnames in the state of Maharashtra (Kumar, 2012). He started to take an interest in unusual surnames because of his own unusual surname,[19] but also unusual surnames borne by a few of his colleagues. Many, but not all, of the names are unpleasant or derogatory in some way. He founded an organization, Adnav Sudhar Samiti (meaning Odd Name Reform/Correction

[18] *Subramaniam* is the personal name of the father, but becomes the patronymic for the son, appearing as if a family name to Westerners. Slight spelling variations in romanization (*Sub*(*a*)*ramaniam*) are common even within families.

[19] *Waman* was the personal name of a priest of a temple in Bijapur in Karnataka and *acharya* means 'priest'.

Committee),[20] which then helps people change these surnames (remember that changing a surname is both difficult and costly in India). Examples of such names are *Gadhve* ('donkey'), *Zurle* ('cockroach'), *Bhoote* ('ghosts'), *Makde* ('monkey'), *Kutte* ('dog'), *Landge* ('wolf'), *Undhir* ('rat'), and *Parkar-varkar* ('lift your petticoat'). His research indicates that these names were given 200–300 years ago, before surnames were regularly established, to these lower caste people by their masters/overseers. Other similar names that are "awkward" in modern times are names of base metals (*Tambe* 'copper', *Pitale* 'brass'), from the caste-based metalworking professions, or based on "defective" personal characteristics (*Bobde* 'stammerer', *Bahire* 'deaf', *Andhale* 'blind') or other unusual features (*Ashtaputre*, from *ashta* '8', *putre* 'children'). Wamanacharya's organization reports cases of women refusing to marry men with such names.

Finally, here is an example of an attempt to address gender discrimination through renaming. On Saturday, October 22, 2011, 285 girls in a central/inland district of Maharashtra, 250 km from Mumbai, received certificates with their new names (along with flower bouquets) from Satara district officials. The hope was to give these girls new dignity and help fight the widespread gender discrimination, evidenced in so many ways but also by the very skewed gender ratios[21] (due to abortion, infanticide, and neglect) in many parts of India and worse health outcomes for women. The names that they replaced included names such as *Nakusa* or *Nakushi*, both meaning 'unwanted' in Hindi. The names they chose included names of Bollywood stars (such as *Aishwarya*, as in Aishwarya Roy Bachchan) or Hindu goddesses (such as *Savitri*) or simply traditional names with happier meanings (such as *Vaishali*, 'prosperous, beautiful, good'), or characteristics they emulated (such as *Ashmita*, 'very tough' or 'rock hard'). These girls would probably all have been named at birth by their grandfathers, disappointed in the birth of a granddaughter rather than a grandson. This renaming ceremony was the idea of Dr. Bhagwan Pawar, district health officer in Satara, with a clear goal of improving health outcomes, both mental and physical,

[20] *Adnav* is unclear, but I believe *Ad-* is a rendition of English 'odd', and *-nav* is a rendition of Marathi *nave*, 'names'. I thank Faisal Beg for this suggestion.

[21] Over the past decade, the number of girls at age 6 for every 1,000 boys at age 6 has dropped from 927 to 914. In some states it is even lower (e.g., in Maharashtra, it has dropped from 913 20 years ago to 883 a decade ago). In Satara, it is even lower at 881.

for these girls. Names do matter – names can be one of the social determinants of health.

I hope this brief tour of names and naming patterns in India, with excursions into the rich history, the many facets of diversity, the decolonization, and contemporary trends, has helped raise your awareness of the rich possibilities for onomastic research in India.

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