

Personal Names as Cultural Texts: Sacred Meaning and Hybrid Identity in India

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Introduction

A name has many homes. It goes through many minds, tongues, debates, dissections, and negotiations, before it actually reaches its owner. A name is not something that is simply given. It is bestowed upon its wearer. Divine, astrological, historical, and cultural forces join hands to find a word that situates itself almost permanently in the life of a person. A name is perhaps the foremost mark of identity for an individual, if not only in the social sense, in the legal sense as well. Once the name finds its wearer, the individual grows into the name, and conversely, the name grows into something that distinctly describes them. Soon, the name and the person become one, almost inseparable from each other. A name that is given by the family is one that contains years of family history, and its preferences. Over time, the same name may be refashioned by the individual or the people around them, in accordance to the relationship they share. A name is a single word, and yet it contains multitudes of meanings. For something that is such an integral part of one's identity and of one's past, names remain understudied.

In India, names are multidimensional. They function as more than just markers of identification for an individual. Names condense and showcase more than 3000 years of caste based history, a plethora of cultures and numerous variations of religions, originating from India and beyond. At the same time, in contemporary contexts, names also serve as reflections of a family's social mobility, inter-cultural relations and globalization. As a result, names become a site of convergence of spiritual and religious beliefs, shared cultural backgrounds, caste, inheritance, and modernity.

This paper is guided by three central questions: What are some of the naming traditions in India? How do names function as sacred spaces that represent the religious and spiritual beliefs of families? How do names act as expressions of an individual's hybrid identity and cultural history? As names are carriers of personal histories, archiving stories behind names, the meanings behind them and the traditions followed by families in the context of naming, can provide an insight into the cultures of communities. This paper follows a mixed methodology to create a database of stories behind personal names of individuals. These narratives were later analysed to reveal patterns in naming traditions within the Indian subcontinent.

While it is not within the scope of this study to discuss all traditions that guide the naming process, an interesting trend noticed amongst respondents was the association of names with the religious beliefs of families. This paper studies the nature of names as edicts of portable sacredness. In naming children names of deities and other religious elements, families perform an act of devotion. Moreover, naming their children after divine beings becomes an act of bestowing blessings from the divine on the child. Guided by the aforementioned research questions, the paper examines names as holders of personal and family narratives, spiritual beliefs and as testaments of hybrid identities.

Literature Review

Onomastics is the study of the etymologies of names. Onomastics contains two broad sections anthroponomastics (names of people) and

toponomastics (place names). Scholarly interest in names has existed for centuries. Hajdú's (2002) research traces the history of onomastics and explores how "[i]nterest in names or what could be called the germs of onomastics can be found in myths, legends of ethnogenesis and works of literature as long as thousands of years ago" (12). His work emphasises that naming is a social act, and has social, individual and psychological functions. Hajdú's work is of significance for it gives a comprehensive view of onomastics research over the years.

Previous research has given an analytical roadmap of the development of names throughout the years across regions of the world. The historical evolution of naming practices in the English context is done by Arnold (1905-1906), who demonstrates how names were influenced by multiple forces such as the monarchy and the church, and how naming traditions developed with developing times. Deliberations by Arnold also enumerate how laws passed by the governing body in countries like England, France, Germany, etc. caused changes to the syntax of names. Complementing this perspective, Vittmann's (2013) work on the Egyptian perception of naming traditions points out the contrasting but equally powerful understanding of names. In the ancient Egyptian worldview, names were intimately connected with essence. Vittmann's paper also demonstrates that names in ancient Egypt functioned simultaneously as ontological markers, religious statements, social records, and ideological tools. Also in line with Arnold's observation of the influence of power structures of names, is the work done by Bissonnette (1999), who examines the innate naming systems of Indigenous communities in California. Their work suggests that communities in central California had matrifocal naming practices, but later shifted to patrilineal systems due to Spanish colonization, external interpretations and incongruent translation.

What was common in the studies mentioned thus far was the reference to historic or spiritual elements in connection with names. To give further credibility to the association of names with religious beliefs, the

research done by Onukawa (2000) reflects upon the concept of Chi in the naming system of the Igbo community. Their research traces how the male and female variations of 'Chi'- a concept of God very different from the Christian concept of God, is used for naming. Additionally, the paper also sheds light on the shifts in beliefs that took place within the community after introduction of Christianity.

Within the Indian context, Embleton (2023) provides a primer for understanding the complexity of Indian personal names. Their research introduces a non-Indian audience to some of the common names in the country, and mentions how names can involuntarily divulge numerous details regarding caste, religion, gender and region of a person. An example given by Embleton gives a glimpse into the numerous, complex naming systems in India: a male Telugu name *Kandi Vijay Reddy* corresponds to family name, personal name and caste name. In the Western or North Indian formats, this would be reworked as *Vijay Reddy Kandi*, or simply *Vijay Reddy*, with *Reddy* being read as the surname (Embleton 2023, 22). This example shows how names can be identity markers and sometimes, names can also become grounds for discrimination. Expanding on this association between names and caste, Parasher-Sen (2006) notes how some communities have adopted neutral sounding names, or naming systems that omit any cultural markers in response to discrimination. The effects of differentiation, inclusion, and exclusion, determined on the basis of names, in the Western context have been examined by Palsson (2014), who argues that “naming systems operate - sometimes tacitly and sometimes in an explicit manner- as technologies of differentiation and belonging, much like racecraft and genomic essentialism. The study of names and practices of naming, as a result, should be included in studies of biopolitics” (Palsson 2014, 627).

Names have also been analysed from interdisciplinary perspectives. Sikandar et al. (2024) examine naming conventions from the perspective of linguistics and argue that names emerge from cultural, social and linguistic systems, and that they shape personal and collective identities

by connecting the individual to their own heritage, religion, community values and social expectations. Similarly, Finch (2008) talks about the relational dimension of naming in connecting one to one's own kin, as names are often chosen by parents or other family members, and is, in most cases, retained throughout life.

Taken together, the existing body of research shows that names are multidimensional entities. They are not merely labels for individuals, but stand for an individual or a society's past. Since ancient civilizations, names have been seen as social acts that encode belief systems, kinship and as systems of inclusion and exclusion. While existing research looks into the social, linguistic, cultural and historical dimensions of personal names, there remains much scope to examine names as representations of a family's religious or spiritual beliefs. Building on these scholarly works, the present study examines the general naming traditions in India, based on which, it will explore how names stand for more than mere means of identification for an individual.

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitatively driven mixed methods design, combining structured survey data with in-depth narrative analysis. The decision to foreground qualitative inquiry was guided by the nature of the subject itself. Names carry memory, belief, and personal history, and a purely quantitative approach would have flattened exactly what makes them worth studying. The structured elements of the survey provided a consistent framework across respondents, while the open-ended questions allowed individual voices and stories to surface on their own terms.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Data was collected through a structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms between March 29 and April 11, 2026. The survey

received 105 responses from individuals across a wide range of ages, regions, religions, and cultural backgrounds. The oldest respondent was born in 1957 and the youngest in 2010, giving the dataset a generational spread that allowed for meaningful comparison across time. Respondents came from cities and towns across India, including Hyderabad, Kolkata, Mumbai, Kerala, Delhi, Indore, Chennai, and Rajasthan, among others, as well as from Indian diaspora communities in Hong Kong, Bahrain, the UAE, and the United States.

The survey was distributed through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling across academic, social, and personal networks. Purposive sampling helped ensure the respondent pool was not concentrated within one community or demographic. Snowball sampling allowed the survey to travel beyond the researchers' immediate circles, which mattered given how geographically and culturally vast the subject of Indian naming actually is.

The questionnaire was organized into three broad areas. The first gathered demographic information: full name, year of birth, gender, and place of origin, alongside the language of the respondent's name and its meaning. The second section focused on the naming process itself. Respondents were asked who chose their name and what guided that decision, whether family tradition, religion, astrology, migration, a cultural reference, or the desire to honour someone. They were also asked whether a ritual or ceremony accompanied the naming, and whether their family followed any broader naming conventions such as shared initials, patronymics, matronymics, or markers tied to caste or community. The third section addressed the personal and social experience of carrying a name through life. Questions here covered emotional attachment to one's name, experiences of mispronunciation or misspelling, whether a name had prompted questions like "Where are you from?" and whether a name had shaped experiences in spaces like employment, schooling, travel, immigration, or online life.

The survey closed with an open prompt inviting respondents to share anything else they felt belonged in their name's story. Some of the most honest and unexpected material in the dataset came from this final question, which is perhaps the best argument for including it.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was collected from all participants before they proceeded. Respondents were told clearly what the research was for, how their responses would be used, and that they were free to withdraw at any point. Anonymity was offered to those who wanted it. This felt especially important given the nature of the questions being asked. Names sit close to a person's sense of self, and several respondents shared experiences of discrimination, displacement, or painful family histories in the course of telling their name's story. These narratives were handled with care throughout the analysis.

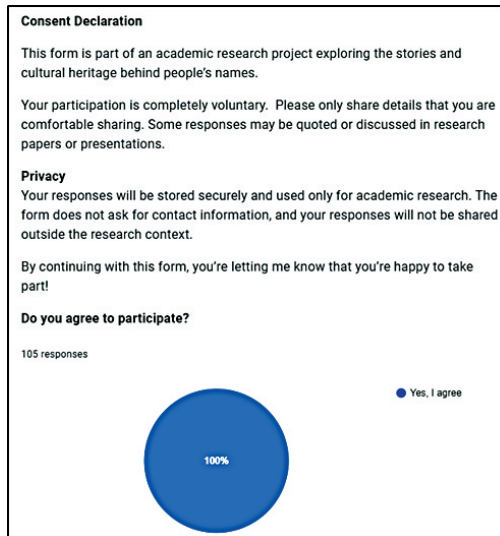


Image 1: Consent declaration obtained for collecting and using narratives for research purposes

3.4 Limitations

The survey's reliance on purposive and snowball sampling means the respondent pool is not statistically representative of India as a whole. The survey was conducted in English, which likely meant respondents tended to have higher levels of formal education, and that certain communities and oral naming traditions are less present in the data than they deserve to be. The dataset also skews younger, with a significant number of respondents born between 1998 and 2006, which means the findings may reflect contemporary naming trends more than historical ones, even where older traditions are described. There is also the straightforward fact that self-reported data has limits: not every respondent knows the full story of their own name, and several said as much directly. These are real constraints, and they point to how much more work remains to be done on this subject.

Results

Based on 105 survey responses, the results show that naming practices in India are not uniform or the same for everyone; they are shaped by cultural, religious, and social frameworks. The data shows that names are more than just identifiers; they are also places where systems of belief, family ties, and lived experiences come together.

The dataset shows that naming is an involved procedure that is affected by many things, such as religious traditions, ritual practices, family structures, language contexts, and experiences of migration in some cases. There are some patterns that keep coming up, like the role of astrology, the presence of naming ceremonies, and the influence of family traditions. However, these practices are not set in stone. Rather, they are always being changed, talked about, and rethought by different generations and in different situations.

The responses also show that names have meanings that go beyond their immediate linguistic form. They show religious and spiritual ties, define

values and goals, and often show how people have moved and interacted with other cultures. In this way, names can be seen as cultural texts that place people in certain traditions and allow for the expression of hybrid identities.

The following findings are grouped into four principal categories: naming traditions, the function of names as sacred spaces, names as expressions of value and aspiration, and ways in which names embody hybrid identity and cultural heritage. The following table gives a glimpse of a few relevant responses from the questionnaire:

Sr. No.	Name	Associated Narrative
1	Jyotish Dutta Vyasa	The beginning of the Universe and the vaginal opening of Maa Kali, resonating the first blip of light and the cycle of Universe's birth, death and resurrection in a cycle. This name was given as my maternal grandfather is an ardent devotee of Shiva, and it is them who choose the name for the child in our culture
2	Jahanvi Gaur	It means Goddess Ganga
3	Hari Govind Thampi Sreeja	It praises the Hindu god, Vishnu. I was born after my parents prayed at Tirupati. So to honor the tirupati balaji, they named me after the deity.
4	Vinayak Mani	Named after Lord Ganesha, who is the Lord of removing obstacles. On the 28th day after birth the naming ceremony is performed in my community. My mother wanted to name me Madhav but then we had an elderly member of the family who had the same name, they anticipated the notorious behaviour I might have and so named me something different.

5	Aditi Pillai	'Mother of all gods.' My father liked the name Aditi...the elders in the family name the child on the 28th day after birth.On the 28th day the birth nakshatra repeats hence this day is chosen.One of the parents,grandparents or any elderly person in the family whispers the chosen name in the ear of the child keeping the other ear closed with a betel leaf.Then repeats the same in the other ear
6	Aditi Lapalkar	'Mother of the Gods, limitless, boundless'... many a time children are named based on astrology... [and] religious ceremonies honouring the birth of new life
7	Manu Atu Shivdasani	I was named after Manu, the legendary figure of Hindu mythology, who was supposed to be a wise man. In some Sindhi families, in the earlier generations, they would drop the family name (surname) and would be known as; given name, father's name. For example, Rupchand Bilaram Shivdasani was known as Rupchand Bilaram. According to my horoscope, my name was to start with the letter, M, but my parents did not like the names that were suggested and chose Manu instead.
8	Swetha S	'Pure, White heart, and associated with Goddess Saraswati'. There was no particular naming tradition followed in my family or community. In Tamil Nadu, it was once common for people to add their community name as a surname. For example, my great-grandfather's name was Nataraja Mudhaliyar, where "Mudhaliyar" refers to the caste. This practice was followed across Tamil Nadu.However, in 1927, a pioneering social reformer and politician from Tamil Nadu initiated the removal of caste-based suffixes from names. Since then, many people in Tamil Nadu have chosen to use their father's name, mother's name, or simply initials as part of their name,

		depending on personal preference. For example, my name is Swetha Sankara Narayanan. My surname is based on my father's name, but instead of writing his full name, I use only his initials. My sister, on the other hand, uses my father's full name as her surname. It is completely based on individual choice.
9	Kandarpa Sasidhar	Name chosen after lord Shiva, my father is a Shaivite
10	Reah Iris Hakeem	Stems from a girl that my mom used to really like in her class. My middle name Iris, is to honour my great grandmother Iris, who passed away a week before I was born...there is a separation between our family based on the spelling of Hakeem- one lot is Hakeem, the other lot of Hakim and it was because of a family feud
11	Aaron George	Biblical Name - The Brother of Moses, literal meaning is 'mountain of strength'. Chosen through religious rituals as well as honoring family members.
12	Hans M Abraham	It is a shortened version of the name Johannes, which means God is gracious
13	Raahim Faaiz	'One who's compassionate and merciful'. My parents wanted a name that reflected a good human quality. We are twins so our parents wanted names that rhymed with each other - hence Raahim and Saaim.

Table 1: Select Results from the Questionnaire

Naming Traditions in India

The responses reveal that naming traditions in India are based on a mix of astrology, ritual practice, and familial bonds. Some people who answered claimed that they used astrological charts to figure out the first letter of the name. One account says that "the priest gives a letter and the family chooses from it," while another says that several names were written down and chosen through rituals that included observing and using representations.

Ritual becomes central to the naming process. Responses often mention ceremonies like Namkaran, Namakarmam, and baptism, which usually happen on the 11th, 12th, or 28th day after birth. A common part of the ceremony is whispering the name into the child's ear, which is sometimes done with actions like giving them milk, writing the name in rice, or saying it in front of family. These recurrent conducts show that naming is not just a matter of authority, but also of performance, which fits with the concept of Rites of Passage (Van Gennep 1960).

Family structures also influence naming conventions. Patterns like shared initials, sibling rhyme, and generational repetition are common. One respondent mentions that all male family members have names starting with the same letter. Another describes names chosen to match siblings' sounds. In some cases, surnames come from the father's name, ancestral house, or lineage markers like gotra. However, these traditions are not fixed. Some respondents talk about intentionally moving away from traditions, such as dropping caste-based surnames or using neutral naming systems to avoid social categorization. This shows the relational nature of naming highlighted by Janet Finch (2008), which emphasizes that names serve to denote both individuality and social connection.

Names as Sacred Spaces

The findings suggest that names reflect religious and spiritual beliefs. Many respondents mention names directly taken from deities,

mythological figures, or sacred ideas. One respondent explains that their name was chosen after a pilgrimage as a way to honour a deity. Another shares that their name is part of a set of sacred names linked to a goddess. In another case, a respondent connects their name to a family lineage dedicated to a specific deity. This shows how devotion is passed down through generations via naming.

In other instances, the sacredness is not only associated with the significance of the name, but also with its circumstances. For instance, one of the respondents claims that their name was selected through prayer by their parents when they were seeking the birth of a child. Another respondent states that they received a suggestion about the selection of the name from a spiritual guide or astrologer. It was also found that people sharing the same name had varying processes of choosing and naming. For instance, two respondents- Aditi Pillai and Aditi Lapalkar, share the same name. Despite this, Aditi Pillai recounted her name being chosen based on the preference of her family member, whereas Aditi Lapalkar narrated the guidance provided by astrology in their naming system. Interestingly, both also displayed differing interpretations of their names: Pillai defined her name as referring to 'Mother of all gods.', whereas Lapalkar included the qualities of 'limitless', and 'boundless' being associated with their name. These differences suggest that personal interpretation and variations in cultures change how an individual experiences their name.

This pattern extends across religious traditions. Biblical names are given through baptismal practices, often accompanied by the inheritance of saint names from grandparents. Islamic names reflect qualities such as compassion or generosity, while Parsi and other naming traditions draw from religious or cultural texts. In one case, a respondent from an interfaith household describes the deliberate creation of a surname that does not indicate religion, suggesting that even the absence of overt sacred markers is a meaningful engagement with identity.

In this context, the name operates as a form of portable sacredness. It allows religious meaning to be carried into everyday life, spoken repeatedly, and embedded within social interaction. As Vittmann (2013) suggests, names function not only as identifiers but as religious statements, and the dataset reflects this continuity.

Names as Expressions of Value and Aspiration

Alongside religious meanings, names frequently emerge as expressions of values. Respondents describe names meaning “faith,” “ideal,” “wisdom,” “compassion,” “victory,” and “newness.” One respondent explains that their name, meaning “ideal,” was chosen so that its meaning would be realised through their actions. Another describes being named to signify a “new beginning” within the family.

In several cases, these meanings are tied to specific life events. One response recounts a name meaning “victory” given after a medically uncertain birth, framing the name as a marker of survival. Another describes a name meaning “astonishment,” chosen in response to an unexpected premature birth. In yet another instance, a name meaning “joy” is linked to a deeply personal family moment, transforming the name into a narrative of emotional significance.

These examples suggest that names function as both memory and projection. They record particular circumstances while also articulating hopes for the future. This aligns with Sikandar et al. (2024), who argue that naming connects individuals to cultural values and expectations. The responses further indicate that individuals often come to “grow into” these meanings, reflecting Stuart Hall’s (1996) conception of identity as a process of becoming.

Names as Expressions of Hybrid Identity

Several responses in the dataset point that names function as sites of hybrid identity. This hybridity appears through linguistic blending, interfaith naming, and the effects of migration.

Several responses describe names composed of elements from different linguistic traditions. One respondent explains that their name combines elements from multiple languages, including a self-chosen addition that reflects personal aspirations. Another describes a name shaped by both regional and linguistic influences, with variations in pronunciation reflecting different cultural contexts.

Interfaith contexts further complicate naming practices. One respondent describes parents from different religious backgrounds choosing a surname that does not signal any particular religion, while another reflects on having a name that does not align with dominant naming patterns within their community. These examples indicate that naming can function as a conscious negotiation of identity rather than a straightforward inheritance.

Migration plays a significant role in shaping these hybrid identities. A respondent raised across multiple countries describes a name chosen for its ease across cultures. Another recounts inconsistencies in surname spelling linked to migration and documentation practices, pointing to how historical movement shapes naming systems. Others describe their names being shortened, altered, or mispronounced in different linguistic contexts, leading to adaptive strategies such as adopting alternate pronunciations or nicknames.

These findings resonate with Postcolonial Studies, particularly the concept of hybridity articulated by Homi K. Bhabha (1994). The name becomes a site where multiple cultural logics intersect, reflecting identity as layered rather than singular.

The Lived Experience of Names

While naming traditions provide structure, the lived experience of carrying a name introduces another dimension. Mispronunciation and misspelling emerge as recurring experiences across contexts. One respondent describes repeated errors in academic records, while another adopts a digital strategy to manage frequent mispronunciation.

These experiences are not uniformly negative. Some respondents respond with humour or indifference, while others treat them as moments to assert identity. Mispronunciation, in this sense, becomes a marker of difference, revealing varying degrees of cultural engagement.

Names also invite social interpretation. Respondents report being asked about religion, caste, or region based solely on their names, with some expressing discomfort at such assumptions. These instances highlight how names function as social markers, aligning with Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic capital.

At the same time, individuals exercise agency. Some modify or reinterpret their names over time, while others describe a shift in how they relate to them. This suggests that although names are given within structures of tradition, they remain open to negotiation through lived experience.

Names as Cultural Archives

Across the dataset, a clear pattern emerges that names function as compact cultural archives. They encode religious belief, kinship structures, value systems, and histories of movement within a single linguistic form.

As Embleton (2023) notes, names in the Indian context can reveal multiple layers of identity, including caste, religion, and region. The present findings extend this by demonstrating that names also carry personal narratives, emotional histories, and acts of negotiation.

A name is given at a particular moment, but it continues to gather meaning over time. It is not only a marker of identity but also a record of how that identity is shaped, interpreted, and transformed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, names are far more than simple labels of identification; they are complex cultural texts that carry histories, beliefs, and social meanings. The narratives collected in this study reveal how naming practices in India are deeply intertwined with religion, family traditions, and evolving social realities. Names act as vessels of portable sacredness, embodying devotion, memory, and aspirations for the future. At the same time, they reflect changing identities shaped by mobility, globalization, and hybrid cultural experiences. By documenting the stories behind personal names, this study demonstrates that names serve as powerful markers of identity, preserving both individual histories and broader cultural patterns across generations.

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