

[The Importance of Hindu Names](#)

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FAMILY

The Importance of Hindu Names

A proper name is a child's lasting connection to our ancient heritage

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It is unfortunate that, not realizing the significance of the name, many Hindu parents thrust Western names on their beloved children. Our ancient Hindu sages developed the tradition of selecting names that sound pleasant and have an auspicious meaning. Frequently they are names of our Gods or Goddesses. Elaborate naming ceremonies reinforce the significance of a name. In our everyday life, a name helps identify an individual and his cultural and religious identity. From my observations over more than four decades in India as well as in Australia and the USA, I have perceived the following reasons why parents choose a name outside our Hindu tradition.

1) Ignorance: Some parents are ignorant about the significance of a name and impulsively give some random name to the child. Many educated parents in India think it is "cool " to give Western names to their children. Those of us who understand the significance of names should teach others that a beautiful and meaningful name leads to higher self-esteem as well as a pleasant impression of the person on others. As an extreme example, if someone is referred to as "Mr. Stupid, " we are likely to form a negative impression before even meeting the person. In our scriptures the subject is covered in great detail. In the Ramayana the meanings of names are elaborated at the time of the naming ceremony for Lord Rama and his brothers, Lakshman, Bharat and Shatrughan. It is emphasized that these names were chosen after careful deliberation. We owe it to our children to give some serious deliberation before sticking them with the name by which they will be identified for their entire life.

2) Persecution: Some parents feel that identification as a Hindu will lead to persecution. It is amazing that some professionally successful, first-generation immigrant parents with their traditional names think that a Hindu name would somehow adversely affect their children's success in this society! Although this is true in Muslim countries, it is certainly not the case in North America. In some rural parts there might be a bias, but that is more often race-based, and no one can change that. African Americans adopted Christian names and religion, but that did not end the racial bias against them. On the other hand, some sacrifice to protect one's heritage is justified. Generations of Hindus suffered atrocities during Muslim rule, but most of them refused to surrender their Hindu identity. Hindus in Bangladesh are still suffering persecution but remain unwilling to give up their heritage. Compared to those sacrifices, the disadvantages of Hindu names in North America are marginal and, hopefully, short-lived.

3) Enticement: Some first generation immigrants see a financial gain, such as free child-care services from close American friends. This is a question of the value one puts on a tradition. All parents love their children, and if made aware of the value of a name, most of them would not be willing to trade naming rights to their children for a short-term convenience. Education would help in many such cases, but it would be a daunting task when parents themselves have been raised in a cultural vacuum where a monetary gain outweighs everything else. In the story of Lord Rama, it is stated, "Teaching right and wrong to a very greedy person is like planting seeds in a dry and rocky ground."

4) Inferiority Complex: Some people subconsciously believe in racial inequality based on color--for instance, white being superior to brown, and brown being superior to black. Many deny this, but we all know that generations of Hindus in Africa did not adopt African names, but after coming to Western countries embraced Western names. There is no reason to feel defensive about being a Hindu. From a historical perspective, the contributions of Hindus to mathematics, astronomy, medicine, arts, music, philosophy and to the concept of human rights are unparalleled. From a current perspective, Hindus in North America are model citizens, the most educated, wealthiest and law-abiding ethnic group. It is time that we start taking pride not only in our individual achievements, but also in the achievements of our entire community. I urge Hindu youths who have been given alien names to learn about their heritage, take pride in it and adopt meaningful names to reflect that pride in their heritage.

5) Political Ambition: Sometimes people take on meaningless Western names or nicknames in the hope of winning elections or political favors. Although it is

reasonable to assume that most Americans would relate better to a Western sounding name, the assumption that it will translate into greater acceptance is questionable. North America is a continent of immigrants, and the vast majority of people judge someone by what one has to offer rather than by the name. People from every part of the world live on this continent and most people have difficulty pronouncing names from different parts of Europe, let alone the rest of the world. Moreover, as stated earlier, Hindus in America have earned a positive image as being hard working, intelligent, educated, successful, law-abiding citizens. Therefore, the advantage of a Hindu name could outweigh the slight disadvantage. The election of Swati Dandekar to the Iowa State Assembly in 2002 is a living example that a Hindu does not have to compromise his/her name to be successful in political life. From another perspective, we owe it to our rich tradition to overcome any negative bias with our sincere and hard work, rather than abandoning the Hindu heritage for some short-term selfish objective.

There may be many more reasons why some Hindus in India and abroad are giving Western names to their children, but the root issue is the value one puts on the tradition. If a tradition is valued in a family, then the children are taught that value and the tradition lives. If little value is placed on a tradition, then children stay ignorant about it, or accept it as something passed on from generation to generation but of no particular value. It is unfortunate that, although Hindu traditions are based on logical and well-researched concepts, many of us do not put much value on them. In contrast I have observed Muslims and Christians putting a high value on their traditions. We seldom come across Muslims giving Western names to their children.

The Vedic heritage is our most valuable asset, and our name is the most prominent marker of our identification with that heritage. Preservation and enhancement of a culture needs continuous and determined effort, just as agriculture needs constant attention to water, fertilization and weeding. Given a lack of attention, a fertile field turns into a patch of weeds. Similarly, lack of attention results in degeneration of a rich culture. Vedic culture proclaims the whole creation is one family and concludes every ceremony with the prayer, "May every being be happy." The loss of this heritage would be a great loss not only for India, but for the whole of mankind. We should remember that our names are the most visible sign of the value that we place on our heritage. It is time to make a determined bid to maintain and nourish our valuable heritage, starting with our children's names.

For links to many Hindu name web sites visit
<http://www.lowchensaustralia.com/names/india.htm>