

[Hindu Names: Askew, Askance and Awry](#)

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Hindu Names: Askew, Askance and Awry

Yashika Singh, Durban, South Africa

When it comes to names, things can get pretty thought-provoking here in South Africa. In the 136 years since our ancestors first arrived from India, many of our traditional Hindu names have undergone an interesting transition. Mrs. Muniammah Moodley, 32, mother of two with a full-time job, is a traditional Hindu, but she goes by the name Mannie. "It was so embarrassing to introduce myself as Muniammahto anyone, so I changed it to Mannie." In the living room of her modest, single-level home in Phoenix, one wall is covered with framed pictures of the Deities, and a shelf is crowded with brass diya lamps, murtis and religious artifacts. We sit together and chat about names, their meanings and their importance. She admits shyly that no one had ever actually explained to her the meaning of her Tamil name: "mother of sages."

Mannie explains that she is diligent about maintaining Hindu culture and observes all the customary religious duties at home. I ask her if she would consider using her name again, knowing what a beautiful meaning it has. She explains that since everybody knows her now as Mannie it would be hard to change back.

Mr. Harisagar Ramnath is a 48-year-old school principal, known to almost everybody, as "Harry." He, a proud Hindu, observes various fasts, does regular pujas and prayers and attends satsangs on a regular basis. He uses "Harry," because it is

easier for people to pronounce. He knows the meaning of his name, "Ocean of Lord Hari(Vishnu)."

Parvati Singh, age 38, is known as "Pary" (pronounced Parrie). Pary grew up in the Apartheid era in a segregated residential area where Indians and colored(racially mixed) people lived together. Colored people said they couldn't pronounce Parvati, so they nicknamed her Pary. She prefers that people call her by her real name, but since so many mispronounced it, she decided it was better they call her Pary.

For Munniammah, Harisagar and Parvati the pressure to change their names came mainly in the workplace, ranging from subtle psychological influence to something like an "order." Bosses are to this day usually "white" Christians who don't like long, "funny-sounding" Hindu names. So they rename their employees with names familiar to them. Dhaneshwar("God of wealth") becomes Danny; Malinibecomes Molly; Subashiniis cut to Sue; Janakaturns into Johnand Devendrais shortened to Dave. Most of the time there is no respectful permission-asking: "I hope you don't mind, may we call you John?" It's just, "You're John now, Natarajan," or, "We'll call you Sue. Sara-sweetie!"

I would guess that a startling 90% of the one million Hindus in South Africa have in some way altered their traditional names. Reasons range from the obvious to the absurd. Although we have maintained our temple culture, satsangs and other rites and customs, and are justifiably proud of having done so, most of us know very little about our Hindu philosophy and next to nothing about the religious significance and importance of our names. The most popular excuse we give for switching over to Westernized nicknames is, "It's easier for everyone to pronounce." In truth, for the older generation with deep Apartheid scars, this translates roughly as: "I am an Indian, dark-skinned, a minority in a white-owned land and though I

can't change the color of my skin, I can make my name 'white' for convenience." This assessment may seem crude, but it's not unfair. However, for the youth today the situation is a little different. It's more than just a skin-color inferiority reflex. Kids want to be Western--in food, dress, music, lingo, likes and lifestyle. A Western-sounding name is the flashiest, fastest ticket into this new world. It would surprise a first-time visitor from our motherland of India to see how things have become here. American/European pop music blasts out of cars, taxis, trains, buses, even in big department stores. At public school, "American Day" parties and US-style "Debutante Balls" are telling examples of how much South African youth of all religions and races are adopting American pop culture.

Dhanraj Naidoo is a classic example. Now 18, he calls himself "Donnie" after the "Don," the underworld king of the mafia in the movie *The Godfather*, played by Marlon Brando. Dhanraj feels that using Donny brings him more respect.

Eleven-year-old Nirvana's name means "eternal union with the divine, liberation." But her mother changed her name to that of a popular TV character, Shaina, in the soap opera *Loving*. Movie-star-izing of names is very catchy here.

In order to appear "cool" at school or on the playfields, boys choose names close to those of tough, macho movie stars. Ramon becomes "Rambo." Sivandran, age 10, of Phoenix, wearing a Stallone look-alike scarf dramatically tied around his forehead and holding a wooden gun in his hand, yells: "I'm 'Sly' (Sylvester) Stallone!"

Sometimes a completely new name is taken, the birthname rejected altogether. Take Ganasagree, for example. Her name means "ocean of good qualities." But her parents nicknamed her Vanessa, after Vanessa, the Miss South Africa of 1977, the year Ganasagree was born.

Other changes happen freely. Pravashnee can never remember being called her real name. Her parents started calling her "Sugar Doll" or "S.D." when she was very young. Prajesh's parents renamed him Doodle when he was a boy because he loved to sing the nursery rhyme Yankee Doodle Dandee. Bishnuram (Vishnu-Ram) says he was given the name Johnny at his city job because they wanted him to have a more "fashionable" name. Somiantha told me she hates to be called by that name and changed it to Somantha, a celebrity name, and uses Sam mostly. Prashant was nicknamed Ivan, after the Russian Czar, Ivan the Terrible. His parents said it was because he was "so mischievous as a child." Prashant, ironically, means "full of calm."

Jugadheesam Perumal, 15, now lives in a former "whites-only" area. (Under Apartheid it was illegal for him to even enter this area after dark, much less live there.) His new white neighbors changed his name to "Jughead" after the comic-strip character. He doesn't mind and says it fits in with his friends at school: Archie, Mark, Reggie, Veronica. "Just like the comic book!" he laughs. Like others, he says his Hindu name embarrasses him. Other name corruptions include: Meenakshi ("Goddess of Madurai with beautiful fish-shaped eyes") to Minnie; Govinadammah to Gwennie; Kesari ("lion") to Cassandra and Amnerisha to Amy.

Sidebar:
Insights from an Insider

South African Hindus today are very preoccupied with all the ramifications of post-Apartheid politics. Everyone is scrambling to "get ahead." Before this, we were busy being Apartheid "survivors," and the rightness or wrongness of adopting Western names was not so high on our lists. Now many youth want to follow Western pop culture.

On the positive side, there's a new trend developing worldwide: "Be ethnic. Grab your roots and show them off!" Cultural pride, cultural distinction, not homogenization, is "cool." I read about American-Indian girls wearing beautiful beaded moccasins to school. Their white classmates were saying, "Wow! get me a pair!" instead of, "Hey! Gross. Where's your Nikes!" Black African guys are trading in neon-purple polyesters for stylish, knee-length African tribal chiefs' tunics. I even heard that the suave, strictly jeans-and-tee-shirt college girls of Bangalore are now into "ethnic, rural Indian" apparel--admittedly Paris-made, but still 100% homey in Indian motif. And with the "global family" I-respect-your-culture-please-respect-mine protocol being taught to young kids all around the world, the old excuse, "I'm sorry, your name is too hard to pronounce," is increasingly considered just bad manners. So, perhaps Pam will be Padma again. Maybe we'll like the sound of it and get a thrill out of telling people what it means--"lotus flower," a symbol of purity and enlightenment in our religion.

Sidebar:

In My Opinion

Sri Swami Saradanandaji, Ramakrishna Mission
In Hinduism, sacraments, samskaras, such as the namakarana, or name-giving, play a very important role at each a stage of a child's journey in life. The child takes over the family name which is carried through for generations so that the lineage does not die. Of course, a lot had to do with the caste (jati) system, so that the title or status of the family could be easily recognizable. Marriage partners were also chosen on this basis as well. However in SA, unfortunately, the surname of a family denoted the class and not the character of the individual concerned.

Pundit Anil Haripersad Singh, priest at Shallcross, Durban South African Hindus are so Westernized that they feel ashamed of recognizing their sacred names, which are full of meaning. They are not proud of their culture and heritage and are ashamed of being born a Hindu. Therefore, they take on second names which are usually shortened, Western, Anglicized names. But the name of a person is very important. It has a molding influence on the character. On the day of the namakaranasamskara, the child is initiated and formally welcomed in a sacred way into this world. But before this event, the name is chosen by parents, with the help of a pundit or astrologer, based on the star, nakshatra, under which the child was born. Each nakshatra has four time divisions which correspond to four syllables. From these root sound syllables, a beautiful name is chosen. Youth need to be better educated to appreciate the beauty of our Hindu culture, to be more involved in cultural activities and also better recognize their contribution to the community. The meaning of their names should be clearly explained to them.

Raksha Singh, 20, university student, member of the National Hindu Youth Federation
While being "progressive" South Africans, we should still always be proud Hindus and not deny our identity. I have noticed when I'm in racially mixed company these days, many Hindus openly let others know that they feel their names are beautiful and ask others to pronounce them correctly. I interact often with many students from different linguistic and ethnic lines. On a couple occasions, a Zulu student insisted on calling me "Raks" (as in rox), instead of Raksha. He told me it was a "cool" name for me. I got extremely disgusted, rejected the name, retaliated, and told him if I called him Siva (his name was Siphon) or some other alteration, he probably wouldn't like it. So, no, I will not just change my name to suit anybody else's silly whims! By the way, Siphon now has more

respect for me and my religion. But most youth are trying to be a part of our Anglicized, Western society. Changing their names to be "hip" is the norm. This decimation of Hindu names saddens me. It's true that people of other faiths sometimes laugh at our names and laugh harder when we are unable to explain what our names mean. Youth then get embarrassed and opt for a "cool" English name. So it is extremely necessary to know the meaning of one's name, understand it and then maintain it both in pronunciation and spelling. Hindu names especially have such great beauty. Many are like mantras and can be recited for spiritual upliftment. By keeping our original, correctly-spelled name, we help spread its beauty every time someone says it.

Saras Padayachee, mother and former lecturer in Hindu Studies

One of our most important Hindu samskaras is the naming ceremony. When the child is born, the grandparents, not the parents, choose the name. During the namakarana of my son, my elder brother carried the cradle and my wedding sari was used to wrap the baby. Eleven young girls carried trays of sweets, betel nuts and flowers etc. Fireworks were set off to mark the auspicious occasion. The grandmother pinched the child to make it cry and water was sprinkled onto the child while a sacred mantra was recited. In this respect, we have done well to maintain this tradition here. But another custom I am not proud of is that we perpetuate the idea that parents should always have a male child. This is not a healthy attitude. It's sexist and makes girls feel unwanted. We need both boys and girls.

Pravesh Hurdeen, 32, Hindu youth leader and teacher
Youth shorten their names to suit the "young vibey mood." But actually, there are plenty of beautiful short Hindu names no one chooses--Koyal, "cuckoo bird," Varsh, "successful, excellent person," Rita, "brave, honest." Retaining one's name

is important because it secures the identity. It also carries a message of the character the person should strive towards. It is essential that careful thought be given to the choosing of the child's name. Astrologically chosen, it reflects inherited karmic tendencies from past lives as well as aspirations for spiritual unfoldment in this life. Youth should be told that the sweetest thing that can be heard is the correct pronunciation of one's name, whether in the office, school or in public. It fills one with a sense of pride in his or her culture and tradition.

Amit Sunjith Singh, 19, a university student

It is important to maintain our Hindu names, especially in the "new" desegregated SA, where we are mixing with different ethnic groups for the first time. It's important for us to explain to them our name and even share with them something about our Hindu heritage. We can learn about their cultural roots and names as well. Although my family is Hindu, my keen interest in Hinduism and dharmic activities started only recently when I met some youths who boldly declared themselves Hindus and were working very hard to promote Hindu dharma at the World Hindu Conference in Durban a few months back. I could see they were maintaining their Hindu identity amidst school and social life. I felt, well, if they could do it, so could I.

Sandesh ("Sandy") Bipat, 22, engineering student

My parents nicknamed me Sandy when I was a child because I used to play in the sand and dust. At school my teachers called me Sandesh, but friends called me Sandy. I agree that Sandesh is too formal. But I also admit I don't know really what it means other than something about a "message." [Sandesh means "mission; message; gift." Poetically it refers to a message or gift from lover to beloved through clouds and waves.] I like Hindu names and actually like calling others by their full Hindu names. But I don't worry too much what people call me. I do dislike someone named Jivaratna calling himself "J.R." after J.R. of the DallasTV series. That's silly, unless of

course the fellow was as mean and cunning as the TV character!