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Expression of Ideology through Names: A Look into the Sikh practice of naming.

In studying sociology and culture evolution, many facets of the inner workings of society reveal social structure and thought. Out of the many, the trends of 'naming' offer a direct glimpse into the changing patterns of culture behavior and thought. Shakespeare's famous line "What's in a name" from the play *Romeo and Juliet* frequently comes into play in our daily lives. Prior to meeting someone, we judge the person by his/her name; deriving all the possibilities of his/her character by the sound of his/her name. In that way, names are a window into the 'other' person's character, unconsciously prompting us to formulate initial impressions of the person. In some cultures, the trends of naming are driven by fashion trends, inevitably influenced by popular media. In contrast, in some cultures the trends of naming reflect changes in cultural norms, and thinking. According to many social theorists, 'Names do not invariably have fashion cycles, in many societies babies must be named after saints---but there is always some turnover, and the rate of churning up shot up in 'Western' countries in the twentieth century' (Pinker, pg. 312). The inclusion of the adjective 'Western' points towards a certain trend in naming practices in the Western society: names that are popular during a certain time period may decline in popularity in the coming generations. Turnover patterns are more visible with respect to the names given to females; an 'Edith, Ethel, or Bertha is a senior citizen; a Susan, Nancy, Debra is an aging baby boomer; a Jennifer, Amanda, or Heather is a thirty something, and an Isabella, Madison, or Olivia is a child' (Pinker, pg. 312). In contrast to Western societies, names in Eastern societies are a reflection of the prevailing cultural thought.

During 1469 CE, Punjab witnessed the birth of a religious leader, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, who

would later abolish the caste system, and advocate for equality of gender (Nesbitt, pg 13). Prior to the birth of the revolutionary leader, Punjab was mired in the caste system, which was characterized by notions of ‘varna’, and ‘jatti’:

Varna(varan in Punjabi is applied to the tiers of in the fourfold hierarchy which has Brahmins (the priestly class) at the top, above Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and in the (in the lowest place) Shudras. Jati on the other hand, signifies the multitude of occupational groups such as potters, goldsmiths, and tailors (Nesbitt, pg. 116).

Within this caste system, a person’s surname indicated his occupation, and social status. For instance, a person who was a shoemaker (jati) would have the name surname *Das*, and would belong to the Shudra caste (varan). Upon witnessing these acts of injustice in naming, Guru Nanak Dev Ji formulated the Sikh religion, which called for the disintegration of the caste system, and consider all human beings as equals. In order to initiate equality in naming, the leader decreed that everyone be named such that some component of his or her name contained some element of religious significance (Gatrad, pg 562). Not only did this prevent people from associating with caste, it also allowed people to move up the socio-economic ladder. Consider the following examples of common names of people that associate themselves with the Sikh religion (Gatrad, pg.562):

Amarjit	Forever Victorious
Balraj	Powerful King
Baljit	Mighty Victorious
Manjit	The one who can control his Mind
Ranjit	Conqueror of the Battle
Sukhdev	God of Peace
Sukhraj	King of Peace

All of the names listed above carry religious significance, even abstract ones such as Amarjit. The aforementioned name consists of two words: Amar (Immortal)+Jit (To Win), which lend the following meaning to the name: 'To achieve Jeevan-Mukti' (to free one’s soul from materialistic attachment, and hence achieve salvation). In addition to the elimination of caste, these names are

also unisex; both a boy and girl could be named 'Amarjit'. In a society where both Shudras and women were considered impure, the introduction of names that carried religious significance equalized social conditions for all members of society. However, the equalization of names for men and women posed a certain problem: how could one determine if a person was male or female by looking at the name? In order to solve this problem, all males initiated into the Sikh religion were given the last name 'Singh' (meaning 'lion'), and all females were given the last name 'Kaur' (meaning 'Princess') (UK, pg. 46). In essence, all Sikh names take on the following format:

Personal name (with religious components)+Singh/ Kaur

To this day, the naming practice initiated in the fifteenth century by Guru Nanak Dev Ji is followed by Sikhs in India, and in the diaspora. The northwestern state of Punjab underwent revolutionary changes in social practice upon the introduction of the naming system, which was reflected by the adoption of the caste-free naming system by the population at large. As a consequence, the naming practice adopted by the public at large during that time period, directly reflected their desire to move beyond social stratification to build a stronger society. In a society plagued by the caste system, this change in the mindset of the people was revolutionary in the sense it allowed for the system of naming to permanently settle in. This contributes to the reason why Sikh names do not undergo a 'fashion cycle'; all names contain similar elements of religious significance. For instance, 'Manjit' and 'Amarjit' both refer to the ability to control one's mind from materialistic desires, and focus on living a pure life. Also, the end result for both names is the achievement of Jeevan- Mukti (salvation). In an implied sense, these concepts are 'evergreen'; they were important for generations in the past, and they are important for the present, and the future generations.

Works Cited

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