

A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Indian Christian Names

The Case of Telugu Catholics and Syrian Christians

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Foreword

I am pleased to write the foreword of this book by Smita Joseph, the talented girl from JNU who, right from the time I met her, struck me as a diligent researcher and a promising academician. It is a pleasure for me to read her work on socio-onomastics and write these lines.

The field of socio-onomastics coined by Walther in the 1970s, broadly speaking, studies names from a sociolinguistic perspective. This book reflects its vitality and growth, representing the discipline in its varied interests. The chapters of the book first discuss the background of the field, followed by the histories of the communities investigated (i.e., the Syrian Christians of Kerala and the Telugu Christians/Catholics), and moves on towards presenting an analysis of names of the two communities, based on the most recent research by Scandinavian and Finnish researchers.

The most important contribution of this book to existing work in socio-onomastic research is its treatment of the official and unofficial names of the two Indian Christian communities in terms of the functions they fulfil in the lives of the community members. *Other names*, for instance, have important functions in the lives of members of the community. The author argues that the function of dual names among Telugu Catholics is to conceal the Christian identities of community members. Caste is a very important social concept in India, and especially among the Telugus. Throughout this book, the author shows how caste influences community members to use either Hindu pre-convert names, which have an underlying Christian meaning, or unofficial Christian names that fulfil their Christian identities in personal networks.

This work is based on empirical data and thus highlights empirical issues and applications, making the book useful to the current generation of linguists and sociolinguists. The author strikes a balance between qualitative and quantitative approaches and analyses of data. In addition, both reflexive and constitutive approaches to naming have been used. In this respect, the analysis of personal names from community members' perspectives would enable us to argue that names are given consciously by name-givers. The name-giving motivations are similar to the motivations for sociolinguistic variation. These can be spelt out as follows: the desire to align with in-group members and dissociate with out-group members (giving names that strengthen the group identities), the desire to do things that are prestigious in the community (giving names that are fashionable or based on community values), the desire to avoid things that are not prestigious or are stigmatised in

the community (avoiding names that are considered as old fashioned or stigmatised), etc.

The author shows that naming practices are derived from sociocultural needs. For the caste-ridden Telugu culture, caste pride is manifested through the use of caste titles that are appended to their personal names. The author shows that the use of dual naming is also an outcome of caste. Since the caste groups who want to avail reservation benefits avoid using Christian or Christian-sounding names, the use of dual names is effective. They serve the dual purpose of concealing a Christian identity and thus availing the reservation benefits meant for the Scheduled Castes, etc., and at the same time, such names also fulfil the function of maintaining and constituting a Christian identity in one's personal networks.

The author shows that though caste may not be an important social variable among Kerala Syrian Christians, the use of naming styles that are similar to the upper castes in the neighbourhood fulfils the function of being upwardly mobile. Similar naming trends include the use of pet names, the use of Sanskrit names as first names and the use of family names. The naming trends among Syrian Christians show that name choices have been quite dynamic in the community. The author correlates the trends in naming to several factors at different points in history. The use of Syriac names has been attributed to Jewish ancestry, while the use of pan-Indian names is due to regional and/or North Indian culture. This is a fascinating account of how region, history and culture, for instance, can directly impact the choice of names. Another interesting component about naming discussed in the chapter was the changing patterns between the older and newer generations while assigning names. While the older generation chose names from a select, pre-determined repertoire (i.e., the name of one's paternal or maternal grandfather or grandmother, etc.) that was based on one's order of birth, the newer generation parents have shown to have more volition in assigning names to their children. Thus, this study highlights the importance of cultural specificity while analysing names.

Of particular interest is the discussion on the adaptation strategies in naming used by both groups. The two Christian communities followed naming patterns that were similar to the upper caste Hindus. As discussed in the preceding paragraphs, the caste-conscious upper-caste Telugu converts have been found to append caste titles to their personal names (e.g., Reddy, Naidu, etc.). Among Syrian Christians, the common adaptation strategies include the use of nominals (e.g., -kutty, -kunj, etc.) and Pan-Indian first names. This study encourages more socio-onomastic work on Indian Christians in order to uncover the variation in naming styles within and across different Christian communities.

The book is an interesting read and attempts to capture the dilemma of identities using names as a focal point. It is intriguing to observe how a minority community is handling its naming domain and how it tries to make decisions regarding its place in the society at large using names as a tool. Furthermore, a comparison and an empirical and in-depth study of two different communities make the reading even more interesting. This book will definitely encourage more researchers to make further studies in the field of socio-onomastics and add to the available body of knowledge.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This book gives a socio-onomastic account of the Syrian Christian and Telugu Catholic personal naming system. The present book is an attempt to bring together research findings from socio-onomastics. I have attempted to focus on names in their cultural and social contexts. The perspective adopted on names is that through the act of naming various cultural and social functions are realised. In other words, names are not merely meant for “identificatory or reference” purposes (Ainiala & Östman 2017, 1-18).

Socio-onomastics started as a sub-field within onomastics. Onomastics is a discipline devoted to the study of names. While onomastics has mainly focused on the origin and structure of names, socio-onomastics looks at the functional uses of names. Though the field addresses the historical aspects of names and naming, in recent times, the focus has been on the use of names in the creation of social identities. Such a perspective focuses on the significance of the use or the functions of names in daily interactions, such as variation in the use of names, the reasons why certain names are avoided, the association of certain names with derogatory attitudes, etc. A very fascinating development in socio-onomastic research is the way name users perceive the names used by them (Ainiala & Östman 2017, 2).

Socio-onomastics considers the socio-cultural contexts in which names are used. This applies to the study of all kinds of names such as place names, personal names, pet names, etc. (Ainiala & Östman 2017, 2). As mentioned in the preceding discussions, this book takes a socio-onomastic approach to the study of the personal names of two Indian Christian communities: the Syrian Christians of Kerala and Telugu Catholics.

1.0 How this book has been organised

In Chapter 2, “A Historical Background of Telugu Christians and the Syrian Christians of Kerala”, I have discussed the origin of the two communities. The two communities have different origins and backgrounds in terms of time span, linguistic factors, ethnicity and socio-cultural contexts. The Syrian Christian community, for instance, is the oldest Christian community in India. Their origin can be traced to the pre-Christian era. According to tradition, St. Thomas, one of the Apostles of Jesus Christ, came to Muziris (an ancient port in Kerala) and converted the Jews and the native populations.

This was how Christianity spread first in the country. The language used for liturgical services was Syriac and in the course of time, the community translated their liturgical services in Malayalam. It is suggested that these linguistic developments impacted the naming styles of community members. For instance, their names were initially Syriac and later Malayalam in form. On the other hand, the origin of Telugu Catholics is attributed mainly to the Jesuit priests of the Carnatic Mission. This community of Christians is quite young (it is just five centuries old) in comparison to the Syrian Christians (nearly 20 centuries old). Since the origin of Telugu Catholics is recent, their names in the data collected were found to be mostly Hindu (i.e., of Sanskrit-origin) and many members were observed to have appended Hindu caste titles to their personal names (such as Reddy, Naidu, etc.). In other words, as far as the names of Telugu Catholics are concerned, there are fewer names that show Christian identity in comparison to Syrian Christian names, which were found to be mostly Christian.

Chapter 3 discusses the motivations for the choice of first names among Syrian Christians and Telugu Catholics. It was found that parents consciously chose first names for their children. For instance, it was observed that various factors played a role in the choice of first names (e.g., choosing a name that was positive and avoiding those that were negative). The names of the two communities were analysed through the concept of “stances” or “social positionings”. Stance can be understood as the position taken by parents while naming their children. For example, in the data collected, it was observed that while a few parents took a stance of keeping traditional names, others decided to keep new, invented names. Hence, for the two communities, different types of stances or different combinations of stances came into play. For Syrian Christians, for instance, parents either kept meaningful names or rhyming names. But, for Telugu Catholics, it was a choice between keeping names with singular meanings or those with dual meanings. A major interpretation that can be drawn from the concept of stance in name motivations is that parents actively contribute to the construction of social identities through the act of naming. This entails that naming is not a reflective process but rather something that is done actively. The chapter also discusses the major categories of name motivations that emerged for the two communities. It also contrasted the name motivations of the two communities. The category of traditional names for the two groups was different, for instance. For Syrian Christians, traditional names were those that were inherited from grandparents or parents whereas for the Telugu Catholics, these were pre-convert names that aligned with a pre-convert Hindu identity. Another major discussion in the chapter is whether the place of birth has any role in naming. This was done with respect to the names of Syrian Christians.

Chapter 4 explores the outcomes of language contact on Christian names. This has been done keeping in mind contemporary research on contact and naming that demonstrates that in the event of contact between two languages, new names are adapted into the personal nomenclature of the languages in contact, or the replacement of the old personal naming system by a new one, or some other kind of cultural compromise in naming styles. The chapter investigates the different ways by which Christian names show adaptation in the Indian context. This has been done by looking at the proper names of Telugu Catholics and Syrian Christians. I have explored the various compromise strategies (e.g., the use of double personal names, etc.), for instance, used by these two Christian groups as adaptation or accommodation strategies. Additionally, the chapter also investigates the motivation to keep pet names or other kinds of unofficial names for community members.

Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter of this book and it also synthesises the findings of chapters 2, 3 and 4. The chapter also discusses some possible directions for future research in the area of socio-onomastics.

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