ATTRIBUTES OF PERSONAL NAMES IN JAFFNA SOCIETY: THEN AND NOW

Subathini Ramesh

Abstract

The present paper examines the features of attributes of personal names in Jaffna society. One of the goals of a socio linguistic study is to find the patterns of attributes in the usage of personal names. As the value and significance of names differ from country to country or even from region to region, the variations in the naming customs need to be noted. Personal names have much significance in Jaffna society. Each generation has different types of names. The society is very conscious of the pattern of names. This study investigates the characteristics of the naming system found among Jaffna Tamils.

Introduction

It is no wonder that Kamil Zvelebil, the Czech Dravidiologist, venturing to call Tamil a world-language says "it is perhaps not an exaggeration when we say that Tamil as a 'world-language' is being spoken by about 40,000,000 people". Tamil has a distinctive position among the Dravidian languages owing to its geographical expansion, for it has spread beyond the frontiers of India. Apart from being the language of forty million people in Tamil Nadu, it is the spoken and written language of several millions of Tamils living in Sri Lanka, Burma, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Africa, Fiji Islands and Mauritius.

The strongest impact of purism in Tamil has been on words taken from Sanskrit. During its history, Tamil, along with other Dravidian languages like Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam etc., was influenced by Sanskrit in terms of vocabulary, grammar and literary styles, reflecting the increased trend of Sanskritisation. But Tamil vocabulary was never heavily Sanskritised when compared to the vocabularies of other Dravidian languages. Unlike in those languages, to a great extent, it expressed complex ideas (including in science, art, religion and law) without the use of Sanskrit loan words and this potentiality of Tamil is preserved even in modern times.

This paper attempts to isolate and describe characteristics of the naming system of Jaffna, Tamil Society which may be of interest to scholars of Dravidian languages. Some individual features may be found in other languages also, but at present no attempt is made to have any comparative study on that. There are many different nations in the world and each has its own culture and traditions. The origin of personal names has its connection with nature, place and culture. In certain societies, people observe naming ceremonies. For example, the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, the Africans in Nigeria and in many Communities in India have this naming ceremony after childbirth. In all countries, the primitives observed special customs and rituals in

naming their children. These practices are still seen in many societies. As human needs became more complex, more care was exercised on choosing names. Each generation in Jaffna society exhibits some variation in the choice of personal names. We cannot specify a particular generation that has personal names which are identical to any of the earlier generations. Personal names are very significant in a society. They are found in every culture and often pass from one language to another. It is obvious that the primary function of personal names in modern society is the identification of individuals.

Significance and custom

People in each country have their own favorite names. They are proud of possessing such names. The significance and the customs of naming differ from one generation to another within a country itself. Thus, the naming process involves the meaning and its associations with the culture, flaura, fauna, religion etc. Levi-Strauss (Barnes: 1982) argues that in naming, someone is always signified, either the namer or the named.

Just as the value and significance of names differ, the variation in the naming practice can also vary. In India, naming a child is a great process. Names assume special religious significance to Indians. Hindus in India take *naamkaran sanskaara* (the naming sacrament) as one of the sixteen Hindu *sanskaras* (sacraments). The naming sacrament is performed in consultation with an astrologer on the tenth or twelfth day of the birth of the child. This is why a name is very auspicious in Indian society. It is believed that the character and destiny of a person are determined by the selection of a name. Hence, people would prefer to make use of *Dharmasastras* and *Smritis* and other great works like those of *Paanini* and *Patanjali* to select names, though not very often, at least occasionally.

Further, in the naming process, social taboos and superstitious beliefs also form part of the custom. In Indian society, the Hindu way of life is very much influenced by superstitions. The uneducated and semi-educated people, particularly females have strong beliefs in superstitions. It is customary in many parts of India to use the names of children merely out of certain superstitious beliefs. Examples: *dumaari* (the smallest coin), *bhondu* (dullard), *goobar* (cow dung) etc. By using this type of names, people in India believe that the evil powers including the demon will not take any notice of children bearing such names and will consider them as insignificant and unworthy.

Role and significance in Jaffna society

Jaffna society is very conscious of the pattern of names. It has some additional roles due to social traditions and its age old culture. Thus, for Jaffna people, names are very symbolic and have translational meaning. So the role of name can give significance to the namer or the named. So it is remarkable that Jaffna people are too biased towards naming. It is mainly that name could play a role in revealing one's caste, religion, region and ancestry in Jaffna society. A name's role in

Jaffna people's religious life is highly authentic. Further, a name for the Jaffna Tamils plays a role not as a mere label of identification but as a signifier of many things such as the aspirations or expectations of the namer. This is deeply rooted in the minds of Jaffna people.

The people of Jaffna think that there is no happiness and no special importance if their children do not have suitable names. Therefore they take great effort to choose names for their children. Due to their greater consciousness in selecting names, they do not welcome any name arbitrarily. The socio-psychological attitudes of Jaffna society prevent them from giving names to their children at random. The religious background and the social set-up mainly based on the caste system are inextricably linked together and for that reason Jaffna Tamils are very attentive in naming their children. Even though people are not driven to the extremes of these social values in giving names, they have partial likings to reflect the social norms and customs in their names.

Importance of a personal name at different levels

Consider the following names:

tarumaraasa	a person of charitable nature
kuNarattinam	a person with good qualities

These names are welcomed by the Jaffna Tamil society since the society expects that the qualities denoted by these names will be acquired by the children.

Now let us look at another pair of example:

kumaaraswamy	Lord Muruga
laksmi	Goddess Wealth

These names clearly show how people in Jaffna have religious consciousness in their minds. But there are also reasons not to welcome these as personal names. In selecting a name, it is not only devotion to a particular deity that matters much, but also the aesthetic value of a particular name. The present generation does not seem to like these names. These names have perhaps forfeited their glamour as a result of frequent repetition and over emphasis. Hence new patterns are coined.

E.g. *KandappiLLai*   pet baby/child   *IḷayapiLLai* tender baby/child
   Iḷayaacci   tender (fem. person) *taamarai* lotus   *puspamalar* flower

Many societies in this world ascribe divine power to nature. The general practice of the Jaffna people is to choose names from the objects of nature just as the convention followed in many other parts of the world.

Different phases in naming show how people are conscious of old names and prefer to find newness in names.

E.g. *Cellaiah, civapiragaasa, varuṇ, tanuṣ*

Attributes of personal names in Jaffna

An attribute in connection with a personal name is a word that qualifies a person or his position. With this view, people in Jaffna consider attributes as unique features as they help for personal identification. So, identification is made clearer by using attribute in the form of an adjective either at the beginning or at the end of a name. Later on, people use merely the attribute and thus it almost amounts to one's personal name. This type of a name in the form of an attribute gets established when people come to understand the association between a particular attribute and a particular name. It is noted that the attributes for personal names usually do not occur in official dealings.

The basis for the selection of attributes for names can be varied. It may be one's peculiar physical feature, name of one's birth place, caste, religion, educational qualification or occupational term.

Physical features and personal qualities

In Jaffna, people use physical traits, features and personal qualities as attributes of a name. A certain amount of respect is shown for seniority and in normal circumstances nobody addresses an elderly person *kiLavan,* an attribute used for a male and *kiLavi* for a female. Sometimes circumstances force people to use these attributes to address a person with or without a name. But such usages are considered as disrespectful or even derogatory.

The attributes taken from physical features will have some distinct qualities. It may be the colour of a person or the size of a person. If a person is fair in complexion, people may address him as *veLLaiyan* alone. But in reference, this attribute will be used with his personal name like *veLLai pattan*. In either case, that particular person will not be offended by the attribute which people use to refer him. Females generally do not get this type of attribute; possibly a female is addressed and referred to by it, *veLLaicci* when the one who addresses is in a mood of anger. Incidentally, people may also use this attribute to address a small girl with fair complexion out of affection.

Similarly, the size of a person such as tall/short or fat /lean, is also used as an attribute of personal name. I have heard of a lady who is short, addressed and referred to as *cinnammaa* (*cinna* – 'short'). In this case, her real name is submerged. *ammaa* is often used as a respectful form for a female. There are some other attributes like this which can be used with personal names.

E.g. *neTuval puumaNi* (neTuval-tall), *olli maNiam* (olli-lean)

But in an unpleasant situation, these attributes can be used without the personal name with some minor change.

E.g. *neTumi   ollicci*

Some attributes are selected from nick names and pet names, which are based on physical features.

E.g. *vayiran cinnaiah* (big-belly cinnaiah - nick name)

baabaa raani (babaa - a pet name meaning baby)

The pet name *baabaa* as an attribute can be used in addressing and referring to a person. It can occur with or without a name. This attribute is always used only for females. But in the case of a nick name as an attribute, it can be used for males and females only in specific references. It is possible to use the nick name merely without the personal name.

In personal name coinages, considerations are made on one's qualities, actions, way of behaving etc. A Professor in a university is known as *tooni raajaratnam*. In fact, his name is Rajaratnam. While working at a university, he often used to refer to a name *tooni* (for Tony's book) in his lectures and by that the students used it as an attribute of his name and started to refer to him as Professor Tooni Rajaratnam. In due course, his given name went out of use. *tooni* i.e., the attribute alone is used to address him and also for referring to him.

Attributes selected from place names

One's birth place or dwelling place is used as an attribute to a personal name and it is very common in Jaffna.

E.g. *araaliyuur suntarampillai*

Sometimes this type of compounds consists of place name plus personal name with initials:

E.g. *araaliyuur navannaa suntarampillai*

In Jaffna, females do not use this kind of attribute with their names. Only males use it. By its continued use, the personal name is dropped out and merely the place name is used by the society to refer to the person.

E.g. *araaliyuur*

Sometimes, people use the name of one's place with gender marker *-an* as a substitute for personal name. They want to show respect to that person with such an attribute. This custom has the influence of an early period. They may use the honorific *-ar* with the attribute.

yaalppaaNattaan a person from Jaffna

yaalppaaNattaar person from Jaffna (honorific attribute)

This tendency of using one's place name as an attribute of name is frequently found among the people engaged in literary work. Some novelists and poets in the field of creative writing are fond of using this form of attributes. Generally speaking, instead of being used by others, they themselves use these attributes.

E.g. *varaNiyuuraan* a person from Varani

Telliyuuraan a person from Tellippalai

People also mention them by these attributes with or without their names. It depends upon the manner in which the writer uses the attribute.

Sometimes, female names get the attribute of their places with the gender marker -*aL*. Mostly uneducated people use this attribute to refer to a particular woman. It happens in unpleasant situations.

E.g. *nelliadiyaaL* a person from Nelliady

Contextually the above type of attribute occurs when a particular person resides in a different place other than her own place of birth. In this case, the attribute is used to address as well as to refer to a person.

Attributes selected from nationalities

Many people have migrated from their homelands to foreign countries. So they are referred to as *piranaaTTaan* 'a person from another country'. A person from India is referred to as *intiyan* or *vaTakkattaiyaan*. Females too, are referred to by this attribute by having the gender marker -*aaL*. These types of attributes occur independently i.e. without conjoined with any personal name.

Attributes selected from caste names

Generally these types of attributes precede personal names when they are used together.

E.g.	*taccu paakkiyam*	Carpenter	Pakkiyam
	kaTTaaTi maNiyam	Dhoby	Maniam

This type of attribute is used only in reference. The difference is noticeable in the use of attributes of high caste names. In high castes, only Brahmins get the attribute of their caste either with or without their names. Brahmins are addressed and referred to by the attributes *aiyar* and *ammaa* for males and females respectively. Sometimes these attributes are used along with their names.

E.g. *sivapaalan aiyar, kamalaa ammaa*

These types of attributes for Brahmins are used by the whole society of Jaffna irrespective of age.

Attributes selected from religious affairs

Hindu priests after completing their theological studies, get the title *kurukkaL*. Priests themselves use this type of attribute along with their names in address and reference. Very often, people use this attribute with or without the personal name of the priest to address or make reference to him.

E.g. *muttuccaami-k-kurukkaL*

Further, when an attribute is given to a Hindu priest by his devotees, it generally precedes the personal name. For instance, *paramaaccaariya swaamikaL* is

known among the Tamils as *nallai aatiinam swaamikaL*. *'nallai aatiinam'* is an attribute given by society to refer to that particular person because of his virtue and devotion to religion. Besides this, if someone is very much involved in religious activities or becomes a saint, he or she will be addressed and referred to by the attributes, *swaami* (male), *aTikaI* (male) and *swaamiyamma* (female). With these, personal names will not occur and merely the attributes are used.

Attributes selected from educational qualifications

In Jaffna society, educational titles like *paNTitar, paNTitamaNi* are use as attributes with or without personal names. Addresses and references can be made to a particular person by this attribute: *paNTitamaNi kaNapatippiLLai*. People from all backgrounds address him as *paNTitamaNi* or *paNTitamaNi aiyaa* (a respectful form). Similarly, titles like *vittuvaan* and *vittuvasiroonmaNi* are also used as attributes of names. Sometimes people use certain attributes with or without one's personal name on account of one's knowledge of literature.

Similarly, some other attributes are used with or without personal names in the field of drama and music. For the talents of a person in aesthetics, the attributes like *naTanacikaamaNi, cankiita puusaNam* and *tavil vittuvaan* are used with personal names only in references. Among such titles except *tavilvittuvaan* all others can be used as attributes with female names also.

Attributes selected from occupational names

The attributes of occupational terms are used either fully or in abbreviated forms with or without personal names. These are quite popular in Jaffna. The abbreviated form of the occupational attribute is seen to be the latest fad among the people of Jaffna.

a) Occupational attributes with personal names

Teachers and medical practitioners in Jaffna are addressed by their occupational names along with their personal names. Name of the person usually precedes the name of the person.

E.g. *vimala tiiccar* 'Vimala teacher'

The occupational attribute *tiiccar* is used only for females who work as teachers. Males who are also teachers get the attribute *maastar*

E.g. *aarumukam maastar* 'Arumugam master'

Monolinguals in Jaffna use the attribute *vaattiyaar* instead of *maastar*. This attribute will be used along with the personal name of a particular person.

Generally people use the occupational term *doctor* as *Taakkuttar* with the personal name in reference to a particular person. In this case, the attribute can either precede or follow the personal name: *Taakkuttar iLayatampi* or *iLayatampi Taakkuttar* but they also use other attributes like *vaittiyar, pariyaariyaar* etc. with

personal name of a particular person. The attribute *vaittiyar* always precedes the name whereas the attribute *pariyaariyaar* or *pariyaari* follows it.

E.g. *vaittiyar cinnatampy*   *naTaraasa pariyaari*   *naTaraasa pariyaariyaar*

There are some other occupational attributes with personal names which are common in Jaffna society.

E.g.   *pirakkiraaci tampimuttu*   Proctor Thambimuttu
       appukkaattu baalakrisnan   Advocate Balakrishnan

When these attributes follow the personal names, the honorific *-ar* is used with the attributes as in *'tampimuttu pirakkiraaciyaar* or *'pirakkiraaci tampimuttar'*.

b) Occupational attributes without personal names

In Jaffna society, occupational attributes are merely used i.e. without any personal names. Some of the terms used to refer to white collar jobs take the suffixes *-ar, aiyaa* and *ammaa* as attributes of personal names which can substitute the personal names. This type of attribute is used both in address and reference.

kiLaakkar
kiLaakkar aiyaa   } Clerk
kiLakkar ammaa

Here the honorifics - *ar* and *aiyaa* are used with the occupational term as an attribute for a male and *ammaa* for a female.

The noun by adding the suffixes - *kaaran* (male) and - *kaari* (female) obviously show the job of a particular person.

miinkaaran   a person who sells fish
paalkaari   a person (female) who sells milk

c) Abbreviated occupational attributes with or without names

Currently, people use many abbreviated occupational attributes. In educated circles, one can often find the attributes of occupational terms in abbreviation being used without any personal names.

E.g. *ji.ee*   G. A   Government Agent
     ji.es   G.S   Grama Sevaka

Initially the full forms of occupational terms might have been used but in course of time, people dropped the personal name and merely used the abbreviation of the professional designation. In this way the abbreviated form remains as a substitute for personal name as long as he is in service.

d) Roles as attributes

Some attributes are taken from the roles played in dramas and in some festivals. Kanapathipillai used some attributes with fictional names of characters in the play with the purpose of provoking laughter.

koTuppuccappi CaNmukam

poLutu muLaaiccaan Ponnuthurai

Consider the example *paNTaa* which can be assigned to a person as an attribute. This particular person has acted in the role of a servant in a play. The name given for him was *paNTaa* in that play. It is a typical Sinhala name. After his performance, he has been addressed and referred to as *paNTaa*. So his personal name has been substituted by the attribute. This type of attribute gets established in society as it is used generation after generation.

New trends in personal names

At different times, only certain types of names with specific characteristics are most welcome for choice. Names fall into disuse when they go out of fashion. People look for novelty in personal names. A person may take some pride if his name is not possessed by another in his society. New names are coined or borrowed, but usually within an acceptable frame of socio cultural norms cherished by the society. Old names are disliked and discarded, and sometimes branded as *karuNaaTakappeer*. When a name becomes too common in the society it loses its glamour. People are thus sensitive to old and common names on the one hand, and to new and uncommon names on the other hand. Names are changed under different situations for various reasons.

Most of the names that were in current use from the past are now considered out of fashion, to be sure, at least among the educated upper middle class. A large section among the educated seems to prefer short names from Sanskrit preferably with a sound [ṣ] initially, medially and finally. Names like Krish, Yadush, Abishek and Naresh for males and Kanishka, Mathusha, Thaksha and Hamsha for females seem to gain popularity.

Conclusion

In brief, most of the old names have fallen into disuse. New names have emerged and they too may face the same fate as that of earlier names. No doubt, personal names in Jaffna society are super abundant. However, some names get lost in society due to frequent repetition and decrease in prestige. Thus, change and avoidance of name have an ambivalent quality in marking some names obsolete. Discarding or adopting names reflects the socio-cultural manifestations of the Jaffna Tamils.

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