What's In a Name?
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In My Opinion

What's In a Name?

...A lot more than I used to believe

Mukund Venugopalan

Venugopalan. Mukund Venugopalan." It is not as dramatic as "Bond, James Bond," but it is my name. As you can see, Mukund Venugopalan is a complicated name to roll off the tongue. When I was younger, I used to believe names were taken for granted by some and viewed as a curse by others. I believed myself to be in the latter group. Oh, why was I not given the chance to name myself? "Mukund Venugopalan." No one in my neighborhood, at school, or any other place for that matter, could properly say or spell my name. At one time, I wished my name were Michael, like that cool TV guy with the talking car. When I enrolled at the Prairie School in third grade, my physical education teacher dubbed me "Mu." The idea of being able to escape humiliation was very appealing, and I accepted the name graciously. My family moved to Chicago in 1993, and as I entered junior high school, "Mu" was converted to "Muki" (pronounced "moo-key"). Muki has been my name since 1993. But this is not the end of my story.

Sometime last year, I stumbled across an article in an Indian

newspaper. I do not remember the issue, the title or the author, but I do remember the message. Indians in America (or any other foreign country) must learn the ways of their new homes, but they must not forget to respect their roots. This message had an immediate effect upon me. Names are not just for the sake of being labeled; they are an important way of preserving identity. By hiding behind names that were easy for others to pronounce, I was forgetting, and even insulting, my heritage. The name Mukund identifies me as a Hindu with origins from the Indian sub-continent. Mukund represents one of the thousand names of Lord Vishnu. Since He can bestow on us moksha and liberate us from the endless cycles of births and deaths, Lord Vishnu is also known as Mukund. I have always taken pride in my ethnic origin, but until last year, I was unaware of the pertinent existence of Mukund Venugopalan.

Although names may appear to be selected for the simple purpose of addressing someone, there is also a cultural basis behind them. Hindus commonly pick the name of a God, such as Krishna, Vasudeva, Rama or Sita. Some people name their children based on their chosen Deity, or Ishta. Vaishnavites typically name their offspring after Lord Vishnu or one of his incarnations. Saivites, on the other hand, pick one of the names of Lord Siva, such as Parameswara, Neelakanta or Chandrasekhara. Then there are those who like the great Vedantic names. For example, the name Amrita represents immortality, and Nirup reflects the formless aspect of God. Hindu names may also be derived from the supreme qualities of God. Prem symbolizes eternal love, and Charu, eternal beauty.

Names are often given to babies during an auspicious

ceremony called namakarana samskara. This function may be simple or very elaborate. While the details vary from region to region, the basic function has its roots in tradition and spirituality. In front of a lighted lamp, decorated with flowers and fruits, the name is uttered into the right ear of the baby three times. Thus, a Rama, Krishna or Siva is reborn. These names, which are as old as civilization itself, have been kept alive for centuries by Hindus all over the world. So, the next time you address your friend Govind, stop for a moment and think what it really means and how it came about.

I have made it a point to be known as Mukund Venugopalan (pronounced "muh-ku-nth vae-nu-go-paal-an") when I enter college. I find the timing of this change quite appropriate. "Mu" was left behind with sixth grade. Now, "Muki" will disappear too. But if I could somehow travel back in time, I would like to tell my physical education teacher to call me "Mukund" for one simple reason--it's my name.