"Holy Hindu Names, Batman!"
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In July the world's superhero was neither a glastnosting Gorbachev nor a eurorailing George Bush. It was Batman - the mythic midnight "vigilante within the law" - who gripped the land. This is more than a crime-buster in a black cape. This is Big Business (the movie broke all records, grossing $100 million in the first week), Pop Culture (nostalgia was fueled by an awesome array of Batmania trinkets) and 20th Century Allegory (cinema gory, too).

Batman is a dark hero, imperfect and alone. To others he is millionaire Bruce Wayne, a man who has everything - money, good looks, art collections and admiring women. But it is not enough. His world is riddled with Kali Yuga badness. The cops are bad. The politicians are bad. Society is not coping, so he uses his resources to develop some high-tech weaponry and embarks on a secret career of extracurricular avenging. The last century had Alice in Wonderland, we have Malice in Plunderland. Dark times, we are led to assume, spawn shadowy heros.

Knowing readers would demand to know the Hindu connection with this phenomenon (we are the world's unrivaled champion moviegoers), I meditated. I stumbled immediately upon the fact that in Hindu legend Krishna and Siva are dark saviors, said by some to reincarnate whenever dharma wanes and the world grows too evil. That led me to study our hero's odd name for any Eastern connection. The answer came. Batman is code. It spells out "B(e) Atman." Atman, of course, is Sanskrit for "breath or soul." Batman is a symbol, we may surmise, of the soul within us all, the inner goodness which must conquer outer iniquity. Did Batman's originator. Bob Kane, take his 1939 comic book fable from stories of the East? Probably not. Still, the parallels are intriguing and may explain Batman's popularity among the youth. Like Bruce Wayne, the soul works in obscurity, beyond most men's ken. Like him, it can "fly." And like a yogi, Bruce Wayne lives in a deep cave, less interested in things of the world than in the return of dharma to his land and the reestablishment of peace in his mind.

Reflections on the Batman name lead me to muse about Hindu names in general. Hindu names are a wonderment, sometimes a riddle, always a fascination. Let's look briefly at several expressions of Hindu names.

Visitors to India are often confounded when first they encounter the Ganesha Cement Company, the Lord Rama Laundry or Sri Lakshmi Investments, Ltd. The juxtaposition of the sacred with the profane is somehow anathema elsewhere - one can hardly imagine the Jesus Christ Plumbing Co. But in India it works. It is fitting and common. Perhaps this derives from the Vedic insight that everything in life, everything in this world, is sacred - Creator and creation alike. Hinduism does not propound a good God and a bad world. The little things men do, their professions and families and mundane deeds, are part of the spiritual path, no less than formal worship. That being so, there is no sacrilege in using the names of the Divine in apparently worldly ways. In fact, this thought to make our work auspicious, to bring a consciousness of God into the matters of ordinary life.

Hindus do not generally follow the convention of a first name and a surname. Neither do the Hungarians or Chinese, who have their first name last and their family name first, making Deng Xioping the son of Mr. Deng, not Mr. Xioping. Similarly, a South Indian child whose father is Vanmikkanatha Pillai will be known as P. (for Pillai) Vanmikkanathan. His son will be called V. (again the father's name) Chidambaram, and so on. Thus, no "family name" is passed on from generation to generation. Outside India Hindus are beginning to adopt the family name convention and the daughter of Gopala Krishnan may be Ramadevi Krishnan.

Though caste is legally outlawed in India, names still convey caste distinctions, Iyer will indicate a South Indian brahmin, and Sharma will do the same for certain North Indians.

Hindus traditionally take names from the Gods, as did the peoples of ancient Persia and Greece. This naming practice is called theophoric. The Muslims do something similar by adding Mohammed to most males names. By knowing a person's name, one can usually judge to which of the major sects his family belongs. Ramadevi Krishnan, mentioned above, will very likely follow the Vaishnava tradition, while Mr. Chidambaram is certain to be a Saivite, or at least his family was. Hindu names are holy.

There is also a practice in Hinduism of taking a new name when one is initiated by a spiritual master at a ceremony called nama diksha or "name initiation." This is not so of everyone, but of the most dedicated, and of all swamis and holy men. Thus, young Narendranath Datta when ordained by Sri Ramakrishna became Swami Vivekananda.

For some holy men no name is ever given, and such a being must be designated in other ways. A famed silent sage in the Indian hamlet of Poondy who sat in one place for thirty years was simply called Poondyswami, meaning "the swami who lives in Poondy."

Length of names is a final matter. In this Hindus do not hold the world's record. That honor goes to an American Indian chief who died in Wisconsin in 1866. His heirs needed six tombstones on which to carve his complete name which contains 182 letters. The closest a Hindu name comes is that of a Fijian cricket player known in the press as: Tiruvaliyankudi Vijayaraghavachariya - a mere 35 characters or one-fifth the record. But that's just the name. Often one must add titles and honorifics (It is said that the longer one's name, the older the soul who bears it.). Thus the Hinduism Today staff writes to a young abbot who is addressed in a respectable 92 characters as: "His Holiness, Sri la Sri Jagadachariya Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Peetathipathi Sri Sankara Vijayendra Saraswathi" - Vijayendra for short.

No wonder then there is a trend toward shorter names, especially in the West. Devasenapathi, a California engineer, may become "Dave." I don't much care for that kind of truncation. Somehow it strikes me as befitting amateurs, while a name twice the length of the alphabet is worthy of an adept's skills and does not forfeit all the beauty and history and mythological meaning.

Our staff has compiled a list of some of the sweetest and simplest Hindu names. If you would like a copy send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the Editorial Offices address below.