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THE BLOG

What The Hell Is In That South Indian Name?

I recently read a story in the *New York Times* about married women increasingly choosing to keep their last name. A less well known, but highly annoying and frustrating dilemma is how some communities in South India compose the last name. A common practice is using a series of capitalised letters (initials). This seemingly random set of letters works much like GPS coordinates that identify an individual.

16/07/2015 8:09 AM IST | **Updated** 15/07/2016 8:25 AM IST



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I recently read a [story](#) in the *New York Times* about married women increasingly choosing to keep their last name. A less well known, but highly annoying and frustrating dilemma is

how some communities in South India compose the last name. A common practice is using a series of capitalised letters (initials).

This seemingly random set of letters works much like GPS coordinates that identify an individual. The first of those letters represents your ancestral village while the other stands for your father's first name. Together, they identify you as the son or daughter of somebody from a particular village. While far from perfect, this nomenclature worked well in the pre-Facebook era -- before we were forced to provide a verifiable last name. Not letters, a full name.

"I expanded my two-letter initials -- DJ -- to a brand-new 20-letter last name. The name of my village, followed by my father's first name -- a decision I've regretted ever since."

My name quandary, however, started a little before Facebook. Living in India at the time, I applied for my first passport right before a work trip. Naively, I focused squarely on the red tape of the upcoming process, completely oblivious to what the future held in store. Like most of my friends, I expanded my very short two-letter initials -- DJ -- to a brand-new 20-letter last name. The name of my village, followed by my father's first name -- a decision I've regretted ever since. This was

the early 2000s, and the all-knowing blogging community was not around to walk me through this life-altering decision. Had bloggers existed, they may have cautioned that a long last name was simply an excessive use of the world's limited resources. Little did I know that people would seldom spell my name correctly the first time. Correcting and printing it multiple times would be a common occurrence. I would spend hours on the phone phonetically spelling it out.

I eventually left India and the public services ecosystem that accepted my two-letter acronym for electricity and telephone bills, bank accounts, rail or air tickets; I moved to New York. My first stop was the Social Security Office. After several attempts to spell my last name correctly, they finally got it right, but reduced my first name to one letter, L. I don't blame them. (Full disclosure: I also happen to have a longish first name.)

Almost all of the services I use have reduced my last name to a version that their software finds appropriate. Flying becomes a bit of a hassle when rookie agents at airline desks

grow over-enthusiastic in trying to stop a brown girl with a half-eaten last name from getting on a flight.

I don't suffer alone; I recently met someone who was paralysed by this decision and failed to pick a last name at all. Consequently, passport authorities declared him "FNU" (first name unknown). Yes, they automatically deemed his first name as his last name. Alas, it seems the last name is always more important than the first.

As a woman, I am told there is indeed a way out. Leaving feminism aside for a minute, I could theoretically take my husband's last name. But, my husband also happens to be South Indian. His last name is 21 letters long with a space in between -- a combination of the name of a town he never knew, (his parents left that place over 50 years ago, several years before he was born), and his father's first name. So that's a no go.

Several of my friends back home have taken their husbands' first name as their last name. I am told anecdotally that this initially acted as a simple solution but quickly became the cool thing to do. There are now several kids in South India, running around with two first names, equivalent to a Tim Tom or Ryan Brian. This might have been an option had an experience with increased security at an Indian airport not played out the confusing nature of two first names. A security guard once tried to find my name on his list; cross-checked the name with my first name and then gave me a puzzled look. I pointed out my father's name on the list and insisted that I was who I said I was. He said, "Miss, this is a boy, but you are a girl," trying to convince me of my gender and suggesting that I did not know any better.

You see my point here. A male first name is hardly the answer. Choosing a first name completely defeats the purpose of a last name. According to ancestry.com, "your last name gives you a sense of identity and helps you discover who you are and where you come from."

Having run out of possibilities, I decided the name of my village most closely expresses my true sense of identity. My family continues to live there and I own property next to my parents' home, which establishes my roots. Even still, I have been told that as a married Indian woman, I no longer belong to this family. I have

"Several of my friends back home have taken their husbands' first name as their last name...There are now

been "married into another family" or "given away" or "handed over" - whatever set of words defines your idea of an Indian marriage. So why choose a family name that no longer thinks you belong? It's like flying across the world to gate crash a lame party.

several kids in South India, running around with two first names, equivalent to a Tim Tom or Ryan Brian."

Living in America, changing your last name is easier than in most other countries. I will soon have an opportunity to make amends. So what will it be- my husband's first name, my ancestral village or a word that says - "miss, your problems are not real."

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