

Backgrounder

Fun Facts about South Asian Names

Names From Places

A **toponymic** or **topographic** surname (last name) is a name that comes from a place name. This can include specific locations, such as the person's place of origin or residence, or of lands that they owned, or it can be more generic, derived from topographic features.

Many last names are connected to villages in Punjab. All Sikh families from a certain village can have the same last name. Researching this topic with elders can be very interesting and exciting.

For example, **Dosanjh**, a surname common among the Jatt Sikh, probably has a toponymic origin, deriving its name from Dosanjh, a village in Punjab. The name Dosanjh also “means a union of two.”

Names From Occupations

Last names also can reveal ancestral occupations or traditional types of work. For instance **Vakeel** (lawyer) in Gujarati communities or **Seth** in Hindu communities which signifies a banking tradition in the family.

Last names can also give away the occupation attached to caste for South Asian communities. For example, **Naidu** is a chief of a village while **Ghosh** denotes a cow herding occupation. In urban settings, these associations persist mostly for first-generation immigrants with diffusion of occupation association occurring in more mixed and less class conscious societies.

■ Topography

Topography is the study and description of the physical features of an area, for example its hills, valleys, or rivers, or the representation of these features on maps.

Outside South Asia

This naming approach isn't unique to South Asian names, and is also seen in communities like the Dutch. For example, the last name **Bakker** was for people who were bakers, while **Visser** was for people who were fishermen.

■ What's Your Last Name?

Try looking up your own name in one of these genealogy sites:

- Ancestry.ca: [ancestry.ca/learn/facts](https://www.ancestry.ca/learn/facts)
- FamilySearch.org: [familysearch.org/en/surname](https://www.familysearch.org/en/surname)

Common South Asian Names

Kaur ('princess') for girls and **Singh** ('lion') for boys are common Sikh middle names (some girls may use Singh as their last name).

Some families will drop the last name and make the middle name their last name. Some do this because they believe in a casteless society, as last names give away castes of a family—castes are based on occupations which have social ranking and hierarchies like in most societies in the world.

Kumar is a common Hindu middle name for boys. **Kumari** is a common Hindu middle name for girls.

Mohammad is a common middle or first name for many Muslim boys.

Resources

Want to learn more?

- **Watch:** *Navigating Name Diversity: Why Getting It Right Matters* globalnews.ca/news/7755403/name-diversity-getting-it-right/
- **Read:** *65 Common Punjabi Surnames or Last Names with Meanings* momjunction.com/articles/common-punjabi-surnames-caste-last-names-list_00573731/

