

Chapter 13: Family, Names, and Life Events

Summary

Family sits at the center of social life in much of South Asia, and you can hear that in the words people use. Many South Asian languages have separate words for your father's brother and your mother's brother, for your father's mother and your mother's mother. This chapter explains those kinship words, joint families and respect for elders, then looks at how names are chosen and why not everyone has a surname. It explains caste honestly, including the laws against caste discrimination, and walks through the rituals that mark birth, growing up, marriage and death in Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist and other families, ending with how gender roles are changing.

Concepts Covered

1. Joint Family
2. Kinship Terms
3. Respect for Elders
4. Naming Traditions
5. Surnames
6. Varna and Jati
7. Caste System

8. Caste Discrimination Laws
9. Life-Cycle Rituals
10. Coming-of-Age Rites
11. Weddings
12. Arranged Marriage
13. Mehndi Night and Sangeet
14. Nikah
15. Anand Karaj
16. Funeral Customs
17. Gender Roles and Change

Prerequisites

- **Chapter 5: Faiths of South Asia**, for the basics of Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism and other faiths.
- **Chapter 6: Languages and Scripts**, for the languages and scripts you'll see in the kinship words.
- It helps to have read **Chapter 7: Festivals Through the Year**, since some family rituals happen at festivals.

Who's Who at the Party?



Hi, I'm Mora! If you've ever stood at a family wedding or a dinner and had no idea what to call the aunt who just pinched your cheek, this chapter is for you. Knowing the right word for each relative, and the story behind your own name, is one of the easiest ways to feel at home in your family. And if your friends are South Asian, it will help you understand why their family events are so big.

13.1 Four Uncles, One English Word

It's a Saturday evening in June, and Zara Hossain's cousin is getting married in a rented hall in St. Paul. Ben Lindqvist is the only guest in a hockey-team blazer, and Zara is steering him through the crowd.

"Ben, this is my Chacha," Zara says, and a smiling man shakes Ben's hand. Five minutes later: "This is my Mama." Another man, another handshake. Then a woman in a green saree hugs Zara and calls her by a name Ben has never heard. "That's my Khala," Zara explains. "And over there by the cake, that's my Fufu." Ben leans in. "Okay, wait. Your mama is a man? And those are all your uncles and aunts? In English I'd just say uncle, uncle, aunt, aunt."

Zara laughs, but then she thinks about it. Chacha is her father's brother. Mama is her mother's brother. Khala is her mother's sister. Fufu is her father's sister. Her Nanu, her mother's mother, is sitting at the head table, and Zara would never mix that word up with Dadi, her father's mother. Ben wants to know why one language needs four words where English uses two. And then he asks the bigger question: what else about a South Asian family works differently from his own?

13.2 One Word or Ten? Kinship Terms

Ben's family already gives him a head start. His relatives are from Sweden and Norway, and in Swedish you don't say "uncle" either. Your father's brother is your *farbror* ("father-brother") and your mother's brother is your *morbror* ("mother-brother"). Your father's mother is *farmor* and your mother's mother is *mormor*. Swedish speakers can tell, from one word, which side of the family someone is on. Many South Asian languages work the same way, and often go further.

Kinship Terms are the words a language uses for relatives: mother, uncle, cousin, grandmother and so on. Every language has them, but languages slice the family tree differently. English has one word, "uncle," for at least four different people: your father's older brother, your father's younger brother, your mother's brother, and the husbands of your aunts. Many South Asian languages give most of those people their own word.

This table compares a few of them, using Hindi-Urdu, the language family many people in northern India and Pakistan speak (Hindi is usually written in Devanagari script and Urdu in Nastaliq script; see [Chapter 6](#)).

Relative	English	Hindi-Urdu (many families)
Father's older brother	uncle	tau (Hindi) or taya (Urdu)
Father's younger brother	uncle	chacha
Father's sister	aunt	bua (Hindi) or phuphi (Urdu)
Mother's brother	uncle	mama (Urdu also mamun)
Mother's sister	aunt	mausi (Hindi) or khala (Urdu)

Relative	English	Hindi-Urdu (many families)
Father's mother	grandmother	dadi
Mother's mother	grandmother	nani

Two patterns jump out. First, **side matters**: the father's side and the mother's side get different words. Second, **age matters**: in many languages your father's older brother and younger brother are not the same kind of uncle.

Zara's family speaks Bangla, and the words she used at the wedding come straight from that table. In Bangla her mother's mother is নানী (*NAA-nee*), and Zara uses the affectionate form, নানু (*NAA-noo*), "Nanu." Her mother's sister is খালা (*KHAA-laa*), "khala," and her father's sister is ফুফু (*FOO-foo*), "phuphu" or "fufu."

Why separate words for each side?

Part of the answer is about who you live with and who you inherit from. Many South Asian families have traditionally been **patrilineal**: the family name and property passed mainly through the father's line. Your father's brothers might live in your house, while your mother's brothers live in her birth family's home, often far away. They play different roles in your life, so they get different words.

Languages of South India and Sri Lanka show a second pattern. In Tamil and Sinhala, your father's older brother is literally your "big father" (Tamil பெரியப்பா, *peh-ree-YAP-paa*; Sinhala ලොකු තාත්තා, *LO-ku TAAT-taa*), and your mother's older sister is your "big mother." Your father's sister and your mother's brother, though, get completely separate words.

Anthropologists call this a **Dravidian** kinship system: relatives linked through a same-sex pair of siblings (your father's brother, your mother's sister) are treated almost like extra parents, while relatives linked through an opposite-sex pair (your father's sister, your mother's brother) belong to a different category. In this system, the children of your father's sister or your mother's brother were traditionally seen as possible marriage partners in some communities, which is one reason those relatives have their own terms.

Not every language marks every difference. Tamil and Sinhala use the same word for both grandmothers (Tamil பாட்டி, *PAAT-tee*; Sinhala අම්මි, *AACH-chee*), while Hindi-Urdu, Punjabi and Bangla split them by side (dadi and nani in Hindi-Urdu and Punjabi; many Hindu Bangla speakers say thakuma and didima instead).

Same language, different words



Kinship words change with region and community, even inside one language. Many Muslim Bangla speakers in Bangladesh say chacha and khala, while many Hindu Bangla speakers in West Bengal say kaka and mashi for the same relatives. Ask your family which words they use before assuming the dictionary is right.

Words for people who aren't related

Kinship words also travel outside the family. Kids are often taught to call a parent's friend "Uncle" or "Auntie," or "khala" or "chacha ji," which turns the whole community into a kind of extended family.

13.3 The Joint Family and Respect for Elders

Imagine living with your parents, your father's parents, and your father's brother with his wife and kids. Meals are cooked for twelve, and your cousins are more like siblings. That is a joint family.

A **Joint Family** is a household where several generations and branches of one family live together and often share a kitchen, money and property. In the traditional form found in many parts of South Asia, the joint family is built around brothers: married sons stay in their parents' home with their wives and children, while daughters move to their husbands' families when they marry. In India, the law even recognizes a "Hindu undivided family" as a unit for income tax.

Living with extended family is common across the region. A 2019 Pew Research Center study of household types found that extended-family households were the most common household type in the world, covering 38% of people. It also found that the average person in Afghanistan lived in a household of about 9.8 people, and in Pakistan about 8.5, far above the Asia-Pacific average of 5.0 (counting from each individual's point of view).

Not every South Asian family is a joint family. Many city families are **nuclear families** (parents and children only), and many mix the two, like a diaspora family that brings a grandparent to live with them, as Zara's family did with Nanu.

Respect for Elders

Respect for Elders is the value that older relatives and community members deserve special honor, care and obedience, and that families should look after them as they age. You can see it in small daily habits across South Asia:

- **Speech.** In Hindi-Urdu, you address an elder with the polite pronoun **आप** (*aap*), not the more casual **तुम** (*tum*). Many families add "ji" to a name or title as a mark of respect, like "Chacha ji." In many families children never

call an older sibling or relative by their first name alone. They use a kinship word or "bhai" (brother) or "apa," "didi" or "baji" (sister), depending on the language.

- **Greetings.** In many Hindu and Sikh families, younger people bend to touch an elder's feet as a greeting of respect, and the elder gives a blessing. In many Muslim families, younger people greet elders first with "salaam" and may be expected to stand when an elder enters.
- **Care.** In many families, grown children are expected to care for aging parents at home rather than in a care facility.

Respect for elders doesn't mean elders always get their way, and many teens feel a push and pull between honoring grandparents and making their own choices.

13.4 What's in a Name?

Ben's name is simple: a first name, Ben, and a family name, Lindqvist, which his father and his grandfather also had. Many people assume every name in the world works like that. In South Asia, it often doesn't.

Naming Traditions are the customs a family follows to choose a child's name: who chooses, when, and what the name should mean or sound like. Here are some you might meet:

- **Sikh families.** In Sikh tradition, a baby's name is often chosen in a **Naam Karan** ceremony at a gurdwara. The Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scripture, is opened at random, and the first letter of the first hymn on that page becomes the first letter of the child's name. Most Sikh first names can be used for boys or girls. Then comes a shared name: **Singh** for men and **Kaur** for women. Sikh tradition links these names to Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, and one aim of giving everyone the

same name was to reduce caste prejudice. That's why Simran, the club's treasurer, is Simran Kaur Gill: Kaur is her Sikh name and Gill is her family name.

- **Muslim families.** In many Muslim families, a baby is named in the first week, often on the seventh day, sometimes with an **aqiqah**, a celebration in which an animal is sacrificed and meat is shared with family and the poor. Many names are Arabic or Persian in origin and are chosen for their meaning or to honor a prophet or a relative.
- **Hindu families.** The Hindu naming ceremony, the **namakarana**, is one of the traditional *samskaras* (Section 13.6). Some families ask a priest or consult astrology for a lucky first sound for the name.
- **Bengali families**, both Hindu and Muslim, often give a child two names: a "good name," ভালো নাম (*BHAA-lo naam*, "bhalo nam"), used at school and on documents, and a "call name," ডাক নাম (*DAAK naam*, "dak nam"), a nickname used at home. Zara has one too, but she only lets her family use it.
- **Sherpa families** in Nepal, like Nima's, traditionally name a child after the day of the week the baby was born. Nima (also spelled Nyima, "sun") is the name for Sunday, Dawa for Monday, Mingma for Tuesday, Lhakpa for Wednesday, Phurba for Thursday, Pasang for Friday and Pemba for Saturday. That's why so many Sherpas share the same few names.
- **Bhutanese families** usually do not have family names at all. A Buddhist lama is often asked to choose the baby's name in the first weeks of life, and most people have two given names, such as Sonam or Tshering, Dorji or Karma, that don't show family or gender.

Surnames

A **Surname** is a family name that is passed down from one generation to the next. In much of South Asia surnames exist, but they don't always work the

way they do in Minnesota.

- **Many people have none.** Traditionally, many Afghans used only a single given name, and so do many Bhutanese today. In Afghanistan, people were told apart by their tribe, birthplace or profession.
- **Some use the father's name.** In many Tamil families in India and Sri Lanka, there is no inherited family name. Instead, a person's father's given name, often written as an initial, comes before their own name. So R. Karthik would be Karthik, son of someone whose name starts with R. His children would then use K as their initial. Some Tamils who move abroad turn the father's name into a last name so forms make sense.
- **Some reflect history.** In Sri Lanka, Portuguese rule in the 1500s and 1600s left behind surnames such as Perera and Fernando, which became some of the most common names in the country. Dilan Perera's family name carries that history.
- **Some point to caste or community.** In many parts of India and Nepal, a family name can show a person's caste or community. This is one reason some people have dropped their family names, used a religious name like Singh or Kaur, or chosen a new surname.
- **Some change at marriage, and some don't.** In many families a woman takes her husband's family name when she marries, but many women keep their own.

Getting a name right



If a South Asian classmate's name doesn't fit the "first name, last name" boxes on a form, it isn't a mistake. Ask them how they'd like their name written and said, and use it.

13.5 Caste: Varna, Jati, and the Law

"Is caste still a thing?" Ben asks Ms. Okafor at a club meeting. She tells him it's a fair and serious question, and the honest answer is yes, in different ways, in many places.

Varna and Jati

People often use "caste" to mean two different things, so it helps to separate them.

Varna and Jati are the two ideas behind what English speakers call caste.

Varna (वर्ण, *VAR-na*) is a fourfold social classification described in old Brahmanical texts written in Sanskrit, such as the *Manusmriti*. Those texts list four varnas, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, and assign each one duties and occupations. **Jati** (जाति, *JAA-tee*, "birth" or "kind") is the group a person is born into. There are thousands of jatis across South Asia. A jati is usually local, often linked in the past to a traditional occupation, and in many communities people were expected to marry within it. In everyday life, jati is what matters most. Varna is the textbook framework that people later tried to fit the jatis into.

Communities that the varna texts left outside the four varnas were treated as "untouchable" and faced the harshest exclusion: they were kept out of temples, wells, schools and many jobs. Today many of these communities call themselves **Dalit** (दलित, *DUH-lit*), a word meaning "broken" or "crushed," which reformers began using in the 1800s and which Dalit activists have made a word of pride and protest.

Mahatma Gandhi used the term "Harijan" ("children of God") for these communities in the 1930s. That word is now a historical term: many Dalits reject it as patronizing, and B. R. Ambedkar, the Dalit leader who chaired the committee that drafted India's Constitution, disliked it. Many tribal

communities in India and Bangladesh call themselves **Adivasi**, a 20th-century word meaning "ancient inhabitants." They have their own histories and were largely outside the varna system.

The caste system

The **Caste System** is the social system, built over many centuries, in which people are born into ranked groups that shape whom they marry, what work they are expected to do, and how others treat them. It is historical and continuing: its roots go back more than two thousand years, and it still affects people's lives today. Three points help you understand it fairly.

1. **It isn't only Hindu.** A 2021 Pew Research Center survey of about 30,000 adults in India found that Indians of every major religion, including Muslims, Christians and Sikhs, identify with a caste category. Sikh teachings reject caste, and Islam and Christianity teach the equality of believers, yet caste distinctions still appear in many of those communities.
2. **It isn't only in India.** Caste shapes society in Nepal too, and caste-based communities also exist in other parts of South Asia and in the diaspora.
3. **It still affects marriage most of all.** In the same Pew survey, 64% of Indians said it was very important to stop women in their community from marrying outside their caste, and 62% said the same about men. Most said their close friends were mostly from their own caste. Only about one in five said there was a lot of discrimination against Scheduled Castes, the government's legal term for Dalit communities.

Caste Discrimination Laws

Caste Discrimination Laws are laws that ban treating people unfairly because of their caste, and that protect communities who faced

untouchability. The most important ones in South Asia are in India's Constitution, which came into effect on 26 January 1950:

- **Article 15** says the state shall not discriminate against any citizen only because of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.
- **Article 17** abolished "untouchability" and forbids practicing it in any form. Enforcing any disability that comes from untouchability is a crime.

Parliament later passed laws to enforce these rules, including the Protection of Civil Rights Act (first passed in 1955 as the Untouchability (Offences) Act and renamed in 1976) and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989. India also reserves a share of seats in legislatures, government jobs and public universities for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other disadvantaged groups, a policy usually called **reservations**.

Nepal passed the Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offence and Punishment) Act in 2011, which made caste discrimination a crime in private places such as homes, not just in public ones. Human rights groups still report that these laws are not always enforced in both countries.

The debate has reached the United States. In February 2023, **Seattle** became the first US city to add caste to its anti-discrimination laws. In September 2023, Fresno, California, did the same. That October, California's governor vetoed a bill that would have added caste to the state's civil rights law, saying existing protections against discrimination by ancestry already covered it. South Asian Americans were divided: some argued the laws protect people who face real discrimination, and others argued the laws single out South Asians and their faiths.

Whose Story?

People tell the story of caste very differently. Many Dalit writers and activists, following B. R. Ambedkar, describe caste as a system of oppression that religious texts helped justify and that must be ended completely. Many Hindus describe varna as a flexible idea about duty and talent that was later hardened into birth-based caste, and say that caste discrimination goes against their faith. Many Indian Muslims, Christians and Sikhs point out that their faiths reject caste, while researchers have documented caste divisions inside those same communities. In the United States, some South Asian groups see caste laws as civil rights protection, while others see them as unfairly targeting Hindus and Indians. Listening to all of these voices, and especially to people who have faced caste discrimination, is part of understanding the topic.

Handle with care



Never ask a classmate "what caste are you?" or guess someone's caste from their surname. It can be hurtful and is often discriminatory. If caste comes up, talk about the system and the laws, not about ranking any person or community.

13.6 Life-Cycle Rituals and Coming of Age

Every family marks big moments in a life: a birth, a first step into adulthood, a wedding, a death. **Life-Cycle Rituals** are the ceremonies that mark these turning points. In South Asia they are shaped by faith, region and family, and they usually bring the whole extended family together.

In Hindu tradition: the **samskaras**

In Hindu tradition, the life-cycle rituals are called **samskaras** (संस्कार, *sun-SKAA-ruh*, "making ready" or "refining"). Old texts list different numbers of them; a list of 16 became the best known, and the number and details vary by region and family. Some you'll hear about:

- **Namakarana**, the naming ceremony.
- **Annaprashana** ("first eating of rice"), when a baby eats solid food, often sweet rice pudding, for the first time, around six months old. In Nepal this is called **pasni**.
- **Mundan** or **chudakarana**, a child's first haircut, when the head is shaved.
- **Upanayana**, the sacred-thread ceremony (see Coming-of-Age Rites below).
- **Vivaha**, marriage.
- **Antyeshti**, the "last rite," the funeral.

Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist and other traditions

Muslim families mark a birth with prayers, by naming the baby and, in many families, with the **aqiqah** around the seventh day.

Sikh families mark a birth with Naam Karan. Buddhist families in Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Nepal often invite monks to bless a new baby, and many Christian families in South Asia mark a child's place in the church with baptism.

Coming-of-Age Rites

Coming-of-Age Rites are ceremonies that mark the move from childhood toward adulthood or full membership in a community. Some examples from the region:

- **Upanayana** (उपनयन, *oo-puh-NUH-yun*, "initiation"). In this Hindu ceremony, traditionally for boys from certain communities, a child receives the sacred thread, worn over the left shoulder, and is accepted as a student by a teacher. In Nepal it is called **Bratabandha** (ब्रतबन्ध). Boys have their heads shaved, receive the thread, and make a symbolic first round asking relatives for alms.
- **Amrit Sanchar**. In Sikh tradition, people who are ready to commit fully to the faith take amrit (water stirred with a double-edged sword called a khanda) in a ceremony led by five initiated Sikhs, recalling the Panj Pyare ("beloved five") whom Guru Gobind Singh first initiated, and join the Khalsa. There is no fixed age.
- **Puberty ceremonies for girls**. In many Tamil families in Tamil Nadu and in the Tamil diaspora, a girl's first period has traditionally been marked by a family celebration, sometimes called manjal neerattu vizha, with a turmeric-water bath, new clothes, food and gifts. Rituals differ by community and region. Some families still hold big celebrations, while others, including some critics in Tamil Nadu, argue the custom puts unfair attention on girls and should change.

Your family counts



Your family might do some of these rituals, all of them, none of them, or a mix of old and new. That's normal. A short ceremony in a Minnesota apartment is just as real as a big one in Lahore or Dhaka.

13.7 Weddings

Weddings in South Asia are often multi-day events that join two families, not just two people, with separate ceremonies before, during and after the main

rite. Guest lists of hundreds are common. Details differ hugely by faith, region and family budget, but a few pieces show up again and again.

Arranged Marriage

An **Arranged Marriage** is a marriage in which parents or other relatives help find and suggest a partner, and the couple then decides whether to go ahead. Arranged marriage has been common in South Asia for centuries and still is, alongside "love marriages," where the couple meets on their own.

What arranged marriage looks like has changed a lot. In many families today, parents or relatives suggest possible matches, sometimes through friends, community networks or matrimonial websites and apps. The two young people meet, talk, sometimes over months, and either can say no. Some couples meet on their own and then ask their families to "arrange" the rest, which some writers call a "self-arranged" marriage.

The most important word here is **consent**. An arranged marriage, where both people freely agree, is very different from a **forced marriage**, where one or both people are pressured or made to marry against their will. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 16) says marriage must be entered into only with the "free and full consent" of both people. Islamic law requires both the bride and the groom to consent, and Sikh teaching expects the couple to agree. In India, the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 lets a court annul a marriage if consent was obtained by force or fraud. Forced marriage is a human rights abuse, and arranged marriage done with real consent is not.

Mehndi Night and Sangeet

The days before a wedding are often the most fun. **Mehndi Night and Sangeet** are two pre-wedding celebrations popular in many North Indian, Pakistani and diaspora families.

- At a **mehndi** night, the bride's hands and feet are decorated with **mehndi** (henna), a paste made from a plant that stains the skin reddish brown. Artists draw flowers, vines, paisleys and peacocks, and female relatives and friends get small designs too. There's usually music, food and dancing.
- A **sangeet** (संगीत, *sun-GEET*, "music") is a night of singing and dancing. In many families it was once a smaller gathering of women singing folk songs. Today many families stage dance performances by both sides of the family, often to film songs.

In Bangladesh and West Bengal, both Muslim and Hindu families hold a **gaye holud** (গায়ে হলুদ, *GAA-ye HO-lood*, "turmeric on the body"), where friends and relatives smear turmeric paste on the bride and groom amid songs and yellow and orange clothes.

Nikah

A **Nikah** (نكاح, *ni-KAAH*) is the Islamic marriage contract and ceremony. At its heart, the bride and groom each give their consent in front of witnesses, and the groom agrees to give the bride the **mahr**, a gift of money or property that belongs to her alone. An imam or other officiant often leads the ceremony, recites prayers and verses from the Quran, and the couple and witnesses sign a marriage contract, called a nikah nama in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Afterward comes the **walima**, a wedding feast hosted and paid for by the groom's side. Many South Asian Muslim families combine the nikah with older regional customs like mehndi or gaye holud.

Anand Karaj

The **Anand Karaj** (ਅਨੰਦ ਕਾਰਜ, *uh-NUND KAA-raj*, "blissful ceremony") is the Sikh wedding ceremony. It takes place in front of the Guru Granth Sahib, usually in a gurdwara. Many Sikh weddings take place in the morning. The center of the

ceremony is the **laavan**, four hymns composed by Guru Ram Das, the fourth Sikh Guru. As each hymn is sung, the couple walks around the Guru Granth Sahib, the groom leading the bride, who holds one end of a scarf that he holds too. Four hymns, four rounds, and they are married. The Anand Marriage Act of 1909 gave Sikh marriages by this rite legal recognition in British India, and India amended the law in 2012 to let these marriages be registered under it.

Hindu and Buddhist weddings

In many Hindu weddings, the couple's marriage is witnessed by a sacred fire. The central moment is often the **saptapadi** ("seven steps"), when the couple takes seven steps or circles the fire together, making a promise at each one. Rituals vary hugely between, say, a Telugu wedding in Hyderabad like the ones Arjun's cousins have had, a Gujarati wedding and a Nepali wedding. In Sri Lanka, many Sinhala couples marry on a poruwa, a decorated wooden platform, in a ceremony with a traditional officiant, betel leaves and blessings from both families. Buddhist monks do not usually lead the wedding itself, and many Sri Lankans trace the poruwa custom to before Buddhism reached the island.

Wedding	Tradition	Where the key moment happens	Key moment
Hindu (many regions)	Hindu	Around a sacred fire, under a canopy	Saptapadi, seven steps or rounds
Nikah	Muslim	Home, mosque or hall	Consent before witnesses; mahr; contract signed

Wedding	Tradition	Where the key moment happens	Key moment
Anand Karaj	Sikh	Gurdwara, before the Guru Granth Sahib	Four laavan, four rounds of the scripture
Poruwa ceremony	Sinhala (Sri Lanka)	Decorated wooden platform (poruwa)	Rituals with an officiant; both families bless the couple

13.8 Funeral Customs

Death is hard to talk about in any culture, but knowing what a friend's family is doing helps you show up for them. **Funeral Customs** are the rites families follow when someone dies: how the body is cared for, the funeral itself, and the period of mourning afterward.

- **Hindu families** usually cremate the body, often within a day. In the Antyeshti, a son or close relative traditionally lights the funeral pyre, and the ashes are later placed in a river, for many families the Ganga. A period of mourning follows, and rituals called shraddha honor the dead in later years. Details vary by region, community and the age of the person who died.
- **Muslim families** bury the body as soon as possible, often within a day. The body is washed and wrapped in simple white cloth, a funeral prayer called the janazah is said, and the person is buried facing Mecca. Cremation is not allowed in Islam.

- **Sikh families** usually cremate the body. In the Antim Sanskar ("final rite") the family recites prayers, and the ashes are scattered in running water. Sikh tradition discourages gravestones or monuments.
- **Buddhist families** in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan may cremate or bury. In Sri Lanka, families often offer food (dana) to monks on the seventh day after a death, again about three months later, and at the end of a year, dedicating the merit to the person who has died.
- **Parsi (Zoroastrian) families** in Mumbai have traditionally placed the dead in a dakhma, or "tower of silence," where the body is exposed to the sun and birds instead of being buried or burned. As vultures have become rare, some families now choose cremation or burial.

If a friend's relative dies, a simple "I'm so sorry" is always welcome. Ask your friend before attending a service so you know what to expect.

13.9 Gender Roles and Change

Back at the wedding, Ben notices that the women are mostly in the kitchen and the men are mostly greeting guests. Then he notices Zara's Khala, a surgeon, giving a speech, and Zara's cousin, the bride, signing her own marriage contract. Both things are true, and that's the story of gender in South Asian families today.

Gender Roles and Change is about the expectations families and societies have for women and men, and how those expectations are shifting. In many traditional South Asian families, men were expected to earn money and represent the family in public, and women were expected to run the home, raise children and care for elders, often in their husband's family's house. Daughters often received less schooling than sons and moved away at marriage.

Surveys show that many of these expectations remain strong, but views differ. In a Pew Research Center survey of about 30,000 Indian adults, carried out in 2019 and 2020 and published in 2022:

- 54% said both men and women should be responsible for earning money for the family, while 43% said it is mainly men's job.
- 62% said both parents should share responsibility for taking care of children, while 34% said it is mainly women's job.
- About nine in ten agreed, at least mostly, that a wife must always obey her husband.

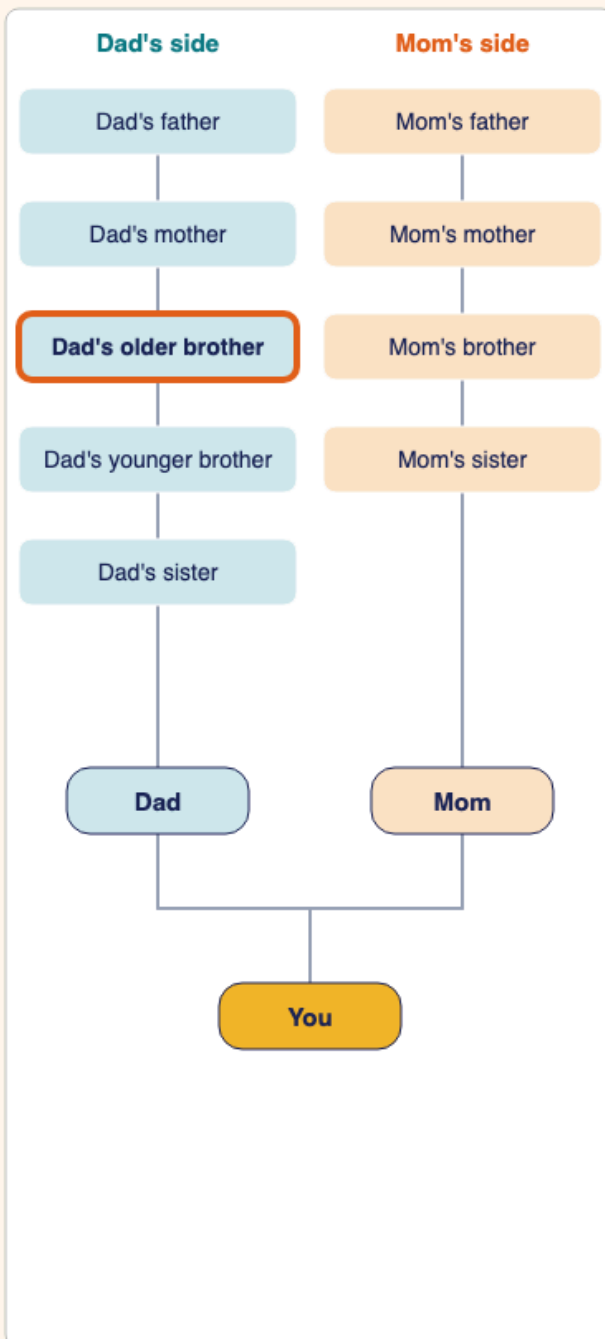
At the same time, South Asia has been home to some of the world's firsts for women in politics. In 1960, Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) became the world's first woman elected prime minister. In 1988, Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan became the first woman elected to lead a democratic government in a Muslim-majority country. Women have also led governments in India and Bangladesh, and in 2025 Sushila Karki became Nepal's first woman prime minister, leading an interim government until a new government took office after the March 2026 election.

Change is happening at home too, as more couples choose each other and many diaspora families split chores in new ways, while keeping roles they value, like grandparents' place in raising children. Change looks different in a village in Sindh, an apartment in Dhaka and a Minnesota suburb.

Diagram: Kinship Explorer

Kinship Explorer: Who Is "Uncle"?

Click a relative to see what many families call them in five languages.



Dad's older brother

In English: just "uncle"

Hindi-Urdu

ताऊ · پُتا

say: TAA-oo · TAA-yaa
Hindi tau, Urdu taya.

Bangla

চাচা · জেঠা

say: CHAA-cha · JAY-thaa
Muslim families often say chacha or boro ("big") chacha;
Hindu families often say jetha.

Punjabi

ਤਾਇਆ

say: TAA-ee-aa

Tamil

பெரியப்பா

say: peh-ree-YAP-paa
Literally "big father".

Sinhala

ලොකු තාත්තා

say: LO-ku TAAT-taa
Literally "big father".

Many languages also mark age: Dad's older brother and Dad's younger brother get different words.

Words vary by family and region.

Dad's older brother ▼

Next relative

☒ Color Dad's side and Mom's side

[Back to Kinship Explorer Lesson Plan](#)

Interactive simulation: <https://aaryavvatts-lab.github.io/south-asian-culture-textbook/sims/ch13-kinship-explorer/main.html>

Open the Kinship Explorer fullscreen

MicroSim specification: Kinship Explorer

sim-id: ch13-kinship-explorer

Library: p5.js

Status: Implemented

Bloom Level: Understand

Bloom Verb: explain

Learning Objective: The learner will explain why many South Asian languages have separate words for relatives on the father's side and the mother's side, and for older and younger relatives, by comparing kinship terms in five languages.

Canvas: responsive width; 880 px drawing area plus 80 px control area.

Controls: relative menu, Next relative button, "Color Dad's side and Mom's side" checkbox; click or tap any relative in the tree.

Behavior: A family tree centered on "You" shows nine relatives, with Dad's side on the left (teal) and Mom's side on the right (marigold). Selecting a relative shows the single English word next to the term many families use in Hindi-Urdu, Bangla, Punjabi, Tamil and Sinhala, in the original script with a respelling. Notes mark where usage varies by family, religion or region (for example, Muslim and Hindu Bangla speakers). Every spelling is logged in the chapter fact log.

Start with "Dad's older brother" and "Dad's younger brother." In English both are "uncle," but notice how many of the five languages give them different words, and how Tamil and Sinhala call them "big father" and "little father." Then click "Mom's brother." Which word stays almost the same across all five languages?

Next, compare "Dad's mother" with "Mom's mother." Then untick the color checkbox and see if you can guess from the words alone which side a relative is on. If your family uses a different word, your family isn't wrong.

Ask Your Elders

Your interview for this chapter

Talk with a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, family friend or community elder about family words, names and big family events. If you don't have a South Asian elder to ask, interview a club advisor, a local temple, mosque, gurdwara or cultural center volunteer, or a classmate's family (with permission). Ten minutes is enough.

Before you start: Bring a sheet of paper and draw a simple family tree together as you talk. Ask if it's okay to take notes.

Questions to ask

1. What did you call each of your aunts, uncles and grandparents when you were a child? Did anyone have a nickname?
2. How was your name chosen, and who chose it? Does it have a meaning? How were names chosen for me and my siblings?
3. Did you grow up in a joint family or a smaller household? Who lived in the house?
4. Tell me about one wedding, naming ceremony or other family celebration you remember well. What happened, and what did you eat?
5. How have family roles changed since you were young, or since our family moved? Who cooks, who earns, who decides?
6. Is there a family custom, word or name you hope I'll keep and pass on?

Listen for: the Kinship Terms your elder uses and whether they split the father's side and mother's side; how the family's Naming Traditions and Surnames work; and any signs of Gender Roles and Change between their childhood and yours.

Save it: Write down one quote or story in their words, with their permission. If they agree, you can share it with the [Roots & Rivers Story Archive](#).

? Your turn: compare two answers

Compare the kinship words your elder used with the words in the Kinship Explorer. Which matched, and which were different? If a friend interviewed someone from another language or faith, make a two-column list of the words each family uses for the same relatives.

"Every family does it a little differently, and there is no wrong answer here."

Common Misconceptions

Myth: All South Asian marriages are forced.

Reality: Many marriages are arranged, which means families help find a partner, but in an arranged marriage both people freely agree and can say no. Forced marriage, without real consent, is a human rights abuse that South Asian faiths and laws reject. Many South Asians also choose their own partners.

Myth: Caste only exists in India, and only in the past.

Reality: Caste is a historical and continuing system. It still shapes marriage and social life in India and Nepal, appears among people of many faiths, and has become a civil rights issue in the diaspora, including in Seattle and

California in 2023. Laws in India and Nepal make caste discrimination a crime.

Myth: Everyone has a first name and a family surname.

Reality: Many Bhutanese people and, traditionally, many Afghans have no family name. Many Tamils use their father's name as an initial instead of a surname, and Sherpa children are often named for the day they were born.

Myth: Joint families are disappearing everywhere.

Reality: Living patterns are changing, especially in cities and abroad, but extended-family households are still common in South Asia. A 2019 Pew study found that the average person in Afghanistan and Pakistan lived in a household of more than eight people, and many diaspora families still bring grandparents to live with them.

Check Yourself

? 1. Why do many South Asian languages have different words for a father's brother and a mother's brother? ✓

In many patrilineal families, the father's brothers belonged to the same household and line of inheritance, while the mother's brothers belonged to another family and played a different role, such as a special part at weddings. Different roles led to different words.

? 2. What is the difference between varna and jati? ✓

Varna is a fourfold classification described in old Sanskrit texts. Jati is the local birth group a person actually belongs to; there are thousands of them, and they shape marriage and community life.

? 3. What did Article 17 of India's Constitution do? ✓

It abolished "untouchability," forbade practicing it in any form, and made enforcing any disability arising from it a crime.

? 4. What is the difference between an arranged marriage and a forced marriage? ✓

In an arranged marriage, families help find a partner, but both people freely consent and can refuse. In a forced marriage, at least one person is made to marry without real consent.

? 5. What happens during the laavan in an Anand Karaj? ✓

Four hymns by Guru Ram Das are sung, and as each one is sung the couple walks around the Guru Granth Sahib. After the fourth round, they are married.

Exercises

Remember

1. Name the four varnas listed in the old Brahmanical texts.

Answer ✓

Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras.

2. What is the Sikh name given to all women, and what is the name given to all men?

Answer

Kaur for women and Singh for men.

Understand

1. Explain in your own words what a joint family is and why it might lead to different words for relatives on each side.

Answer

A joint family is a household of several generations and branches, traditionally married brothers living with their parents, wives and children. Because the father's relatives live together and the mother's relatives live elsewhere, they play different roles, and languages give them different names.

2. Explain why a Tamil speaker might call their father's older brother "big father."

Answer

In the Dravidian kinship system, relatives linked through same-sex siblings (like a father's brother) are treated almost like parents, so the father's older brother is periyappa, "big father."

Apply

1. A new student at your school writes her name as "S. Lakshmi" and seems annoyed when a teacher calls her "Ms. S." Using what you learned about

Tamil naming, explain what might be going on and how the teacher could fix it.

Hint: what might the initial stand for?

2. Draw your own family tree with at least eight relatives. Label each one with the word your family actually uses, and mark which side they're on.

Hint: ask a parent if you're not sure of a word.

Analyze

1. Compare the Nikah, the Anand Karaj and a Hindu wedding with saptapadi. What do all three require or include, and what is different about where and how the key moment happens?

Hint: look at consent, witnesses and the role of scripture or fire.

2. The Pew survey found most Indians say there isn't a lot of caste discrimination, but most also say it's very important to stop inter-caste marriage. What might explain both answers being true at once?

Hint: think about the difference between how people see discrimination and what they practice.

Evaluate

1. Seattle added caste to its anti-discrimination law, while California's governor vetoed a similar bill. Using the arguments on both sides from this chapter, which approach do you find more convincing, and why?

Hint: consider both protection for people who face discrimination and the worry about singling out communities.

2. Some people say "joint families are disappearing." Evaluate this claim using evidence from the chapter and from your own community.

Hint: is there one answer for a village, a big city and the diaspora?

Create

1. Design a one-page "Who's Who at a South Asian Wedding" guide for a friend like Ben who has never been to one. Include at least six kinship words, two pre-wedding events and three tips for being a good guest.

Hint: check each word with someone in your family or a classmate's family.

2. Write a short scene (one page) in which a teen asks a grandparent how their name was chosen. Show what each of them learns.

Hint: use real details from your own interview if you can.

Key Takeaways

- Many South Asian languages use different **kinship terms** for the father's side and mother's side, and for older and younger relatives, while English often uses one word like "uncle."
- **Joint families** and **respect for elders** are strong traditions across the region, but households are flexible and changing, especially in cities and abroad.
- **Naming traditions** vary widely: Sikh names chosen from the Guru Granth Sahib, Sherpa day names, Bengali "good names" and "call names," and many people without family **surnames**.
- The **caste system** (built on **varna and jati**) is historical and continuing. India's Constitution and laws in India and Nepal ban caste discrimination, and the issue now reaches the diaspora.

- **Life-cycle rituals** and **coming-of-age rites** differ by faith and region, from samskaras and Bratabandha to aqiqah and Amrit Sanchar.
- South Asian **weddings** often last several days. An **arranged marriage** depends on the couple's consent, unlike a forced marriage, and the **Nikah** and **Anand Karaj** each have their own heart: consent and contract, or four hymns around the scripture.
- **Funeral customs** differ by faith, and **gender roles** are changing at different speeds in different places.

You know the family now!



You can now tell your chacha from your mama and explain why it matters. Next, in **Chapter 14**, we'll open the books and bedtime stories that families have passed down for centuries.

Quiz: Family, Names, and Life Events

Test your understanding of Chapter 13. Choose the best answer, then click **Show Answer** to check.

Question 1

In Hindi-Urdu, Bangla and Punjabi, what relative do many families call "mama"?

- A. Mother
- B. Father's younger brother
- C. Mother's brother
- D. Mother's mother

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **C**. In all five languages in the Kinship Explorer, mama is the word many families use for the mother's brother. It does not mean "mother," which is the misunderstanding Ben has in the chapter's opening scene.

Concept Tested: Kinship Terms **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 2

Which article of India's Constitution abolished "untouchability" and forbade its practice in any form?

- A. Article 15
- B. Article 17
- C. Article 16
- D. Article 370

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **B**. Article 17 abolished untouchability and made enforcing any disability arising from it a crime. Article 15 is related, since it bans the state from discriminating on grounds such as caste, but it is not the article that abolished untouchability.

Concept Tested: Caste Discrimination Laws **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 3

What is at the center of the Sikh Anand Karaj wedding ceremony?

- A. Seven steps around a sacred fire
- B. Signing a contract with a mahr before witnesses
- C. Standing on a decorated wooden platform called a poruwa
- D. Four hymns (laavan) sung as the couple walks around the Guru Granth Sahib

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **D**. In the Anand Karaj, four laavan composed by Guru Ram Das are sung, and the couple circles the Guru Granth Sahib once for each hymn. Seven steps around a fire (saptapadi) belong to many Hindu weddings, not the Anand Karaj.

Concept Tested: Anand Karaj **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 4

Which statement best describes the difference between varna and jati?

- A. Varna is a fourfold scheme in old Sanskrit texts; jati is the local birth group people actually belong to, and there are thousands of them.
- B. Varna is the modern legal term for caste; jati is the ancient religious term.
- C. Varna applies only to Muslims and jati only to Hindus.
- D. They are two names for exactly the same four groups.

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **A**. Varna is the four-part classification described in Brahmanical texts, while jatis are the thousands of local birth groups that shape marriage and community life. Treating them as the same four groups is a common mistake.

Concept Tested: Varna and Jati **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 5

Why do Tamil and Sinhala call a father's older brother "big father"?

- A. Because he is always the head of the household by law
- B. Because the languages have no word for uncle at all
- C. Because in the Dravidian kinship pattern, relatives linked through same-sex siblings are treated almost like parents
- D. Because he is usually physically taller than the father

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **C**. In the Dravidian pattern, a father's brother or a mother's sister is grouped with the parents ("big father," "big mother"), while a father's sister and a mother's brother get separate words. Tamil and Sinhala do have separate uncle words, such as *mama*, so option B is wrong.

Concept Tested: Kinship Terms **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 6

What makes an arranged marriage different from a forced marriage?

- A. Arranged marriages happen only in villages.
- B. In an arranged marriage, families suggest a partner but both people freely consent and can refuse.
- C. Forced marriages are legal if the families agree.
- D. Arranged marriages never involve the couple meeting before the wedding.

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **B**. Consent is the dividing line: in an arranged marriage the couple decides, while a forced marriage happens without real consent and is a human rights abuse. Many arranged matches today involve long conversations and meetings, so option D is wrong.

Concept Tested: Arranged Marriage **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 7

Nima, a Sherpa student whose family is from Solukhumbu, Nepal, tells the club that her cousin was born on a Monday. Based on Sherpa naming traditions, which name might the cousin have?

- A. Pemba
- B. Nima
- C. Phurba
- D. Dawa

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. Sherpa children are traditionally named for the day they were born, and Dawa is the Monday name. Nima (Nyima) is the Sunday name, so a child born on Monday would not usually get it.

Concept Tested: Naming Traditions **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 8

A teacher is setting up a class roster. A student from Bhutan has two given names and no family name. What is the best way for the teacher to respond?

- A. Ask the student how they'd like their name written and said, since many Bhutanese people have no family surname.
- B. Use the second name as the surname, since every name has one.
- C. Ask the student to choose a new surname for school.
- D. Use the student's father's name as the surname.

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. Many Bhutanese people have no family name, and names are often chosen by a lama. Assuming the second name is a surname (option B) is the most common mistake, so asking the student is the respectful choice.

Concept Tested: Surnames **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 9

The 2021 Pew survey of India found that only about one in five Indians said there was a lot of discrimination against Scheduled Castes, yet 64% said it was very important to stop women marrying outside their caste. What does this comparison suggest?

- A. Caste no longer matters in India.
- B. Caste matters only to people who say there is a lot of discrimination.
- C. Caste still shapes choices like marriage, even when many people don't see it as discrimination.
- D. The survey only asked about people living in the diaspora.

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **C**. Many people did not describe caste discrimination as widespread, but most still wanted to keep marriage within caste, which shows caste continues to shape social life. Option A ignores the marriage finding entirely.

Concept Tested: Caste System **Bloom's Level:** Analyze

Question 10

Compare a Hindu cremation, a Muslim burial and a Sri Lankan Buddhist almsgiving. Which statement correctly analyzes them?

- A. All three require burial within 24 hours.
- B. Muslim tradition calls for prompt burial and forbids cremation, while many Hindu families cremate, and Sri Lankan Buddhist families often offer food to monks at set times after a death.
- C. All three forbid any ritual after the funeral day.
- D. Hindu and Muslim families both scatter ashes in a river.

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **B**. Islam calls for burial as soon as possible and does not allow cremation. Many Hindu families cremate and place ashes in a river, and Sri Lankan Buddhist families often give dana to monks after seven days, about three months and a year. Option D is wrong because Muslims do not cremate.

Concept Tested: Funeral Customs **Bloom's Level:** Analyze