

ARTICLE

## MUSINGS AROUND THE HYPHEN IN HARISH-CHANDRA

BY C.S. ARAVINDA

The circumstances leading to the occurrence of hyphen in the mathematician Harish-Chandra's name has been written about.<sup>1</sup> The focus in this note is not quite Harish-Chandra, but certain linguistic aspects of the name and how this hyphening happenstance sits well with the finer nuances of Sanskrit.

*What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.*

This line appears in the celebrated play *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, in which Juliet regards the name as a label—a mere identifier rather than an essential part of the person, Romeo, who stands before her.

Person and persona are two different perceptions. A name may convey ethnic origins, but it seldom reveals the full character or inner identity of the person.

Be that as it may, the name 'Harish-Chandra' in formal forums as well as in publications, and 'Harish' in informal addresses by his family and friends have a revealing ring to them, particularly so when pronounced. The 'i' in 'Harish-Chandra' in standard pronunciation in the Indian context is a short syllable, that is, 'i' as in 'Himalaya'. Whereas, pronounced separately, the 'i' in 'Harish' is a long syllable, 'i' as in 'Pizza'.

### HIMALAYA, NOT HIMALAYAS

SOLI MEHTA

I HAVE BEEN meaning to write about this for some time now, but a recent paragraph by Prof. Ram Rahul in his book "The Himalayan Borderland" places the subject in its proper perspective.

I quote :

"I have used the collective name Himalaya (Him, snow, plus alaya, home) in place of the commonly used Himalayas, which is a double plural and a grammatical monstrosity. Indeed, to use the word Himalayas is as absurd as referring to Englishmen as the Englishes or using the word alphabets for two or more letters and characters of an alphabet. Moreover, Himalayas jars on ears accustomed to the euphony of Sanskrit words and phrases. It is curious that it is only in English that the name suffers a corruption. In all the other languages of the world, including other Western languages like French and Russian, it is what we in India have called it from time immemorial."

(HJ Vol. 32, 1972)

A note that appeared in the *Himalayan Journal*, pointing to a commonly committed error in English. COURTESY OF C.S. ARAVINDA

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<sup>1</sup>See page number 204, of "Harish-Chandra, 11 October 1923 – 16 October 1983", by Robert Langlands in the *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society* Volume 31, Nov 1985; and <https://bhavana.org.in/harish-chandra-making-of-the-mathematician/>

While the formal and informal versions of the name in question here both indicate his origin from India, there are certain overtones to the words themselves, such as the nuance of the short and long syllable pronunciation of the letter ‘i’.

Just the name Harish-Chandra, without the initials or an added qualifying last name suffix, does not quite give any clue as to which part of the large country of India he is from. But the two words Harish and Chandra, connected by a hyphen and pronounced together, tell an entirely different story.

In its more familiar conjoined form, and typed in roman script as Harishchandra, and googled, the popular Wikipedia page- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harishchandra>- tells the story of a king by that name, seen as an epitome of truth in Indian mythology, appearing in several classic source works including the great epic poem Mahabharata; the particular part in the Wiki page reports “In Mahabharata, Narada tells Yudhishtira that Harishchandra is a rajarshi (king-sage), and the only earthly king who finds a place in the assembly of gods.”

The story of the king Harishchandra from the legends is so widely celebrated in the seemingly endless cultural fabric of India from historic times that it is retold with all its composite subtle nuances in epic poems in several prominent languages of India.

While the alluded Wiki page is a metaphoric rabbit hole of a world of information, enticing anyone into a standalone exploration, one thread, of some relevance in our context, is in a section titled “In popular culture”. It opens with the sentence “Poet Raghavanka’s *Harishchandra Kavya* from 12th century in Kannada language is a very popular and acclaimed epic on the life of Harishchandra”.<sup>2</sup> The extent to which this story is perpetuated from time immemorial, so to speak, is reflected in these lines from the same page: “The Kannada movie *Satya Harishchandra* was based on 12th century Hoysala poet Raghavanka’s work, starring Rajkumar.”<sup>3</sup> The film was awarded the President’s silver medal for the Best Feature Film in Kannada, and was hugely successful at the time of its release, and is seen as a milestone in Kannada cinema.”

Of particular relevance of the story that one gleans here is the prefixed word *Satya*, literally meaning ‘truth’ in Sanskrit, to the name Harishchandra, which describes his steadfast adherence to ‘truth’, even in the face of grimmest of situations. The testing circumstances driving him to end up as a guard at the entrance of a cremation ground, he would not let his destitute wife, once queen Chandramati, take the cadaver of their son Rohitashva, died of snake bite, inside without paying the necessary fee. It is at this moment, as legends tell the story, that the gods decide that the earthly king has earned a worthy a place in the heaven.

Going beyond the legends, and delving a bit into the etymological origins of these words them-

<sup>2</sup>A translation of this nearly millennium old classic into English is published by the Harvard University Press in their Murty Classical Library of India series <https://www.murtylibrary.com/books/the-life-of-harishchandra>.

<sup>3</sup>By popular accounts, arguably the most iconic actor in the history of nearly a century old Kannada film industry.

selves, one can trace the word Harish, or Harisha in Sanskrit, as being formed by combining two words *Hari* and *isha*, meaning ‘ray’ and ‘lord’. Taken together they come to mean ‘lord of the rays’, which primarily connotes either the sun or the moon. Interestingly, the word ‘hari’ has as many as fourteen distinct meanings, rendering it open to all kinds of interpretation. One of its meanings is ‘ray’ (*Amarakośa*, 3.3.175),<sup>4</sup> which leads one to interpret the meaning of ‘Harisha’ as mentioned above.

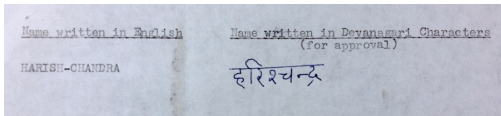
As a Sanskrit word, ‘Harishchandra’ is made up of two units: *Hari* and *chandra*, with additional ‘sh’ sound emerging when the two component words get together in a compound, governed by a rule in the system of Paninian grammar (*Aṣṭādhyāyī*, 6.1.153). Monier-Williams’ *Sanskrit–English Dictionary* gives the meaning of the word harishchandra (*hariścandra*, in the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration scheme) as ‘having golden splendour’.<sup>5</sup>

— **ścandra** (*hāri-*), mfn. (see *candra*) having golden splendour, RV.; m. N. of the 28th king of the solar dynasty in the Tretā age (he was son of Tri-śaṅku, and was celebrated for his piety; accord. to the Mārkaṇḍeya-Purāṇa he gave up his country, his wife and his son, and finally himself, to satisfy the demands of Viśvāmitra; after enduring incredible sufferings, he won the pity of the gods and was raised with his subjects to heaven

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Interestingly enough, as regards the hyphenated version, a standard way to indicate the joining of two Sanskrit words into one compound word, when written in the Roman script seems to be, to put a hyphen where the joining happens. For example, the joining of *Chandaḥ* and *Sūtram* would be written as *Chandaḥ-Sūtram*. Thus, such a joining of the words ‘Harish’ and ‘Chandra’ into a compound word will be ‘Harish-Chandra’, but in this conjoined form, the pronunciation stress on the syllable ‘i’ automatically switches to the short mode.

It is tempting to ask if Harish-Chandra was actually aware of this. There is an apparent evidence supporting that this may indeed be the case, because there is no change in the way he wrote his name in the Devanagari script before and after his change to the hyphenated version in the Roman script.



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The occasion to provide this information is his response, to the request from the Indian National Science Academy (INSA) at the time of the award of the Srinivasa Ramanujan Medal 1974, for engraving his name in Devanagari letters on the medal.

In that sense, the ways he wrote his name in the two scripts—Roman and Sanskrit—at different stages of his life, with the hyphenated version in Roman script that he adapted from some point on as elaborated elsewhere, do sit consistent with the prevailing linguistic practices.

<sup>4</sup>The reference here means that the source for this is a verse number 375 in third section of the third kāṇḍa of *Amarakośa*, the oldest available Sanskrit lexicon composed in memorizable verse form by the poet Amarasiṃha, who flourished in the 6th century CE.

<sup>5</sup>See Monier-Williams, (1872), *A Sanskrit–English Dictionary*, Clarendon. p. 315.