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Sridhar Ramesh: Up until I was like 28, I always would say to people that they had to follow these strict like racial rules like if you're Indian, you call me a Sridhar. If you're not Indian, you have to call me Sridhar. And I need to know what race you are even without looking at you just from the way you address me.

[music]

Giri Nathan: I'm Giri Nathan.

Samer Kalaf: And I'm Samer Kalaf.

Giri: And this is Namedropping, a show about using different pronunciations of your name, depending on whether you're having an Indian thought, or a white thought.

Samer: In this episode, we talked to Sridhar Ramesh. He's a comedian and mathematician, who recently completed a PhD in logic from UC Berkeley. Congrats, Sridhar!

Giri: I came across his math writing when I was much younger. And then years later, I realized he was making strange jokes on Twitter. And it took me a while to figure out that it was the same guy. But then I did and I liked what he was doing. And he'd made a series of really good jokes about his own name, and about names in general.

Samer: Lately, he's been encountering an increase of people who take his name more seriously than he does. And it kind of puts a spoiler on his own sense of humor.

Giri: We kind of followed parallel life paths of we're interested in math at some point, and then start making dumb jokes on the internet at some point.

Samer: I think in addition to his comedy and math interests, he also has an interest in linguistics.

Giri: Yeah, his linguistics expertise was great for navigating some of the sounds that occur in our names, but aren't as common in English.

Sridhar: I don't know what causes the person to have the interests they have. But even in like, first grade, I was interested in both comedy and math. I think they both come from being interested in playing with logic, basically—in playing around with setting up rules, and then, you know, defying them or something like that. And actually, I wanted to do a lot of comedy for a long time. And then I got kind of distracted by pursuing the math degree, I felt. But then, towards the end of my time in grad school, I started, you know, doing improv and then met people and had a sketch group and got more serious about comedy for a while. It is true that I'm probably the only funny mathematician, and well, I'm definitely the only comedian who knows any math. So yeah.

Samer: yeah, we wanted by the end of the episode to make you stake your claim as the funniest mathematician in the world

Sridhar: Yeah. I think that's not that hard. That's not a high bar.

Giri: That's funny, because I initially just had that question in our prep document, like, Who do you think are the funniest mathematicians in history? And then these haters, my co host, and my producer, we're like, why don't we reframe that? Because it's very unlikely that there are any other funny mathematicians

Sridhar: Exactly.

Giri: So I know you had two different pronunciations of your name growing up. Can you talk a little bit more about how that got started?

Sridhar: Yeah, so my authentic name is Sridhar Ramesh. That's what my parents named me. My parents are Tamilian so we spoke both Tamil and English at home as a child. And when I was very young, I was fluent in both of them. I'm not that good at Tamil anymore. But, um, on my first day of preschool, I remember, my mother sat me down in the car before going into the school, and she was trying to explain to me, they're not going to know all the words you know, like the some of the words we use at home are Tamil, and some of them are English. So they're not going to say *thaneer*, they're gonna say water. They're not going to say *paal*, they're gonna say milk. They're not gonna say *amma*, they're gonna say mommy, things like this. So then I go into school, preschool, and they, I guess, read my name off a list. And you know, they don't know how to pronounce it. So they read it. And they say, Sridhar, and I think, Oh, this is my slave name. This is exactly what my mom was trying to tell me about. So I just go with it. I'm like, okay, I'm Sridhar, that's my, it's my name in this context from now on. And then I just sort of got used to it. So then, you know, I go to elementary school, and I keep the name Sridhar and then when I went from elementary school to middle school, half the people there still knew me as Sridhar, so I couldn't change it. I go to high school and some people know me as Sridhar. I couldn't change it. And then I just get used to it. So in college and everything I kept going by Sridhar with, you know, non-Indians. With Indians of course, it would be stupid if I introduced myself as Sridhar.

Giri: Yeah, you gotta code-switch.

Sridhar: Yeah, exactly. But so my whole, you know, up until I was like, 28, I always would say to people that they had to follow these strict like, racial rules. Like if you're Indian, you call me Sridhar. If you're not Indian, you have to call me Sridhar. And I need to know what race you are, even without looking at you just from the way you address me.

Giri: Were there any defectors in either of those camps who tried to adopt the other pronunciation?

Sridhar: There weren't, actually, for a long time, like when I was in elementary school and everything, nobody even bothered to ask like, how do you where do you pronounce it?

Giri: Where'd you grow up?

Sridhar: I grew up in New Jersey, in suburban New Jersey.

Giri: Oh okay, me too

Sridhar: Oh, right. Yeah, I heard that on the previous podcast. So you know, New Jersey has Indians around a lot. But in my particular town, I was the only Indian boy. There was like, I think two Indian girls and me. Nobody ever bothered to ask, you know, is Sridhar right? Are we pronouncing it wrong? Nobody cared. But then later on in life, I think when I was in grad school, the culture shifted or something where everybody—I mean, there must have been people like this before, but I don't know—everybody really wanted to show how sensitive and racially...

Samer: Astute?

Sridhar: Astute, yeah, that's a good word for it. They were—so then they became very insistent on my telling them the right pronunciation, but I was still kind of uncomfortable with that, in a way because I was so used to this thing that only Indian people call me Sridhar. And it's not, it's not super important. But like, if you really want to say it authentically, the consonant in the middle isn't exactly the thing people would say, and whatever. And they'd be really insistent on trying to get it perfect. But it doesn't matter to me, like I don't care, you know. So I would just say, just call me Sridhar. It's easiest. But then, eventually, it became untenable, like the tipping point of people's need to be astute, reached a level where I couldn't get them to give it up. So I started going by Sridhar with everybody. But what also happened was, I took a job at Google, and the vice president of my section of Google, his name was Sridhar Ramaswamy. So I tried to tell people, you should call me Sridhar. And they'd be like, but that guy's name is Sridhar. And I would just look dumb, so that kind of sped me along.

Giri: I had the exact same experience in college.

Samer: Yeah, I was gonna say, I feel like when you first introduced yourself to me, you kind of had—you said Giri, but you were like, usually nobody can pronounce what the actual consonant is

Giri: Yeah. So we can get to the DH sound in Sridhar's name too, but I guess the R sound in my name is kind of like a, like an alveolar tap technically. So it's a sound that a lot of English speakers can't make. So there was like a grad student when I was in college, who, he was a TA, and he asked his students to call him Giri, but I always hated the sound of that. And I would prefer they treat the R as a D. And like, give it to me like the adjective giddy, at worst case, than be Giri. But I remember introducing myself that way and people trying to like, hypercorrect me and be like, well, you know, I know there's a grad student, Giri, so one of you guys has to be playing me right now. But at least, at least he wasn't—at least I wasn't his subordinate at work. That sounds harder.

Samer: It's about seemed astute but also not getting pranked, basically.

Giri: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. Staying woke in all senses of the term.

Sridhar: Pardon me, I need to blow my nose. [blows] So you can edit that out of course.

Giri: No, that's good stuff. No, we're keeping that in.

Samer: That's gold, yeah. Yeah, that's gonna be our transition from question to question.

Sridhar: That's my attempt to pronounce Giri.

Giri: Yeah, every time you say my name we'll just play that sound over it. Do you want to explain the difficult-to-pronounce sound at the center of your name?

Sridhar: Sure. I, you know, I talk it up like it's so difficult. It's not that bad if people approximate it as a—so you got very technical with alveolar tap, I'll go technical as well. So in the middle of my name is a dentalized voiced alveolar plosive. And it's supposed to be aspirated. That's what the H after the D means. That's the Sridhar. But English doesn't really dentalize plosives, but the closest thing they have is interdental fricative. So it's sort of like a TH sound in a word like “breathe” or something. That's the approximation people use, and that's totally fine. I don't really honestly hear that strong a difference either. But if you made me pay real close attention, I could sort of tell, and English really doesn't care about the aspiration. And neither do I honestly, I mean, but that is what the H in the spelling indicates. It's this aspiration, this puff of air that you're supposed to make, which is more of a thing in North Indian languages, and I'm from a South Indian family, so it doesn't even really matter. But people if they really want to know like, the super authentic pronunciation, then you try and tell them but then they, you know, they can't really do it anyway. So why bother? There's so many sounds I can't really make. I mean, it makes sense that you wouldn't be able to do a thing you haven't practiced or that you didn't grow up hearing a lot. It makes total sense to me. It would be a foolish thing for me to start this war, like somebody else will come in with a Spanish name with a rolled R or something and I won't be able to do it and then I'll just, I'll be foolish if I was insisting on that. So, the only thing that's annoying is if people insist on trying and wasting time, but even that makes sense. Like, why not try? It's kind of fun to try. I get it.

Giri: Well, you're not even the most famous person with a aspirated D sound in the middle of their name.

Sridhar: That's right.

Giri: Yeah, you want to talk a bit about that?

Sridhar: There is Gandhi.

Giri: Yeah, he's pretty famous.

Sridhar: So Gandhi is quite famous, but his fame has not done him a lot of good in terms of people spelling his name correctly. I feel like constantly, I see with Gandhi, people always write G-H-A-N-D-I.

Giri: Yeah, they love, they love that.

Sridhar: They love that, yes, something about that spelling gives them joy. I find with my name also, everybody always always writes S-H-R-I-D-A-R because they're just so unaccustomed to seeing an H after a D, their brain can't register it. It's like that urban legend about how the Native Americans couldn't see Columbus's ships when they arrived because they'd never seen a ship before. It's a weird, quasi racist urban legend that people talk about. But it's like that with the white people's brains and an H after a D, they can't see it in that location. So they just move it automatically to the beginning of the word. They've at least seen an H after a G in words like "laugh" or an H after an S. Actually, the H after the S in my name makes a lot of sense. Because it is "sha" at the beginning.

Giri: Yeah, that one I can understand for sure.

Sridhar: Yeah, but Gandhi, it's sort of inexplicable, I guess it's like Ghana or something that's GH at the beginning. But yeah, anytime I see somebody spelled Gandhi correctly, I know this is an Indian person, or, or they're like the smartest person in all of America, all white, you know, culture. They have a PhD in history or something.

Giri: I have to agree. But for a while, you couldn't pronounce your own name correctly.

Sridhar: That's correct. So again, it would be foolish of me to really yell at people about pronouncing my name correctly. For much of my life, I couldn't make "sha" sounds or "tha" sounds. I had a thing with my tongue where I guess the frenulum was too tight or something. Eventually, in middle school, I had a surgery, they clipped this frenulum. And I went for, like tongue rehab at this hospital, and they would have me do exercises—

Giri: Like a Rocky montage?

Samer: Yeah. What were the exercises?

Sridhar: A lot of lifting weights. No, they like put Cheerios on your tongue. And you'd have to sort of move it to different parts of your mouth so that you would learn these movements with your tongue that you hadn't been doing before. And then of course, it'd be exercises of actually making certain sounds. And I also used to not be able to even hear the distinction between "suh" and "sha" or "zuh" and "zia." Or "tuh" and "fuh" and all these things. So for example, when I was in, like elementary school kids used to make fun of me by asking me to say 33, the number 33, but what I would say was turdy-tree, like a, like a tree covered in turds. And they'd laugh and laugh and I wouldn't even really understand because they sounded the exact same to me.

Giri: Wow. You were just noticing properties of the number 33

Sridhar: Yeah, exactly. I had this synesthetic thing where when I hear the number 33 I think of a tree covered in shit. So. But yeah, so I couldn't pronounce my own name. I would say Srider. I was still getting the vowels right. I still wasn't saying Sridhar, but I, I wasn't pronouncing it correctly, or authentically. Correct is, you know, it was correct to some standards, correct to what I said. But eventually I learned how to say it. But, yeah, I don't know. I kind of, I kind of miss it in a way. I mean, nobody, nobody knows anymore that my my internal monologue name for a long time was Srider. I miss that.

Giri: I think for at least the first six or maybe seven years of my life. I couldn't say my name either. Because I couldn't make R sounds so I was Giwi.

Samer: Giwi?

Giri: Yeah. So I miss that too. I guess I could start bringing it back, but I don't know how well it'd be received.

Samer: That's endearing in its own way.

Giri: Yeah. Maybe we want to get really old on the other side, I can, I'll start bringing it back.

Samer: I was gonna ask about I believe you mentioned that your family when you were growing up would call you by different nicknames. Is that true?

Sridhar: Yeah. So uh, when I was young, my parents would often call me *chinju*, which is sort of from the Tamil word *chinna*, which means small. So just kind of like saying small guy. But then you get older and people don't want to call you *chinju* so much anymore. You're not that small anymore.

Giri: Cuz you're not a little guy anymore, yeah.

Sridhar: Yeah, exactly. They'd have to start calling you the Tamil word for medium sized guy. You know, it makes sense. But I kind of missed the closeness of having—even my parents, every now and then like once, in a blue moon, they'll call me *chinju* still, and they'll fill my heart. But most of the time, they just call me Sridhar. The one that is continued, that is my sister, always, 100% of the time my entire life—or 99.9% of the time, I'll explain in a second—she never calls me by my name. She's always only called me *anna*, which is Tamil for older brother. And you know, even if she's talking about me to family, or something she'll say *anna*, she's like, never says my name, you know?

Giri: Yeah.

Sridhar: Which again, it sounds like maybe it's a kind of punishment for her. Like, she's forbidden from saying my name. But no, it's it's one of those organic things. And it's endearing to me that she calls me *anna*. But I remember when I was in college, we went to the same college, my sister and I, and there was like, a period of like, a month or something, where she started calling me Sridhar. Because she said, Oh, I have this friend in college I made and her

name is Anna. And it's confusing. And I feel I think she was probably embarrassed, is the honest truth that she was calling me this kind of like big brotherly name, instead of calling me by my name, it felt kind of childish, or something to her maybe. So she started calling me Sridhar for a bit, but it really hurt my feelings. Because it was like, you know, we've we've had this thing for almost 20 years, and we're family. And, you know, it makes me feel nice when she calls me *anna*. That's the only thing she'd ever call me. It's like, if you had suddenly started calling your parents by their first name, you know.

Giri: Right. I can speak from the other side of that, because I feel like I've called my sister her given name, like less than 10 times in my life, including, like, in reference, writing about other people. So I always call her *akka*. And the few times I do call her by her first name, I feel like I'm like a baby dressing up as a police officer or something. Just to try to call on some authority that I don't actually have

Sridhar: Are you Tamilian or South Indian?

Giri: Yeah, yeah. We're Tamilian as well.

Sridhar: Oh, okay. Yeah. So *akka*, older sister. Exactly.

Giri: Yeah, I, I can't say that I've ever felt embarrassed about using the term in front of other people. It to me, it like, yeah, builds kind of that intimacy and reminds me of when we were kids and stuff, but um, I also didn't have a friend named akka to create confusion in my texts, or whatever.

Sridhar: Yeah, exactly. Her friend wasn't even named Anna though. She was named Anna. I don't know why she should be confused. But yeah.

Giri: I'm gonna start calling you *chinju* and *anna* to make up for—although that's a very confusing combination

Samer: Little big brother guy

Giri: In opposite directions, yeah

Sridhar: That's true, I never thought about that, you're right.

Giri: Well, yeah, let's let's talk a little bit about your last name. On the off chance that any non South Indian people have made it this deep into the podcast, do you wanna explain the naming convention?

Sridhar: Yeah. So my last name Ramesh is—actually it's not like a family name has been handed down from generation to generation. It's just my father's given name. His name is Ramesh, his parents named him Ramesh. What happened with a lot of South Indian families—when they grew up, they didn't have this convention of your given name's your first name and you have this family name is your last name. It would be more like you have this one

name. And then maybe they'd put some initials or something in front of it to be like a family name.

Giri: Right

Sridhar: And then when they immigrated to the US, I don't know if they were dumb. They probably weren't dumb. But for whatever reason, they decided they were going to take their given name and make it their legal last name. Like all the Indian men who immigrated that I knew growing up. Their legal last name when they came to the US is just their given name. And they take something else and they make it their legal first name. So my father's legal name now is Nallapillai Ramesh, but Nallapillai is just like the village that his family had come from. If anybody ever calls him on the phone and they say "Can I speak to Nallapillai?" he knows it's a telemarketer. Like, that's not his actual name. But the timing of it is so good for him because now I have this last name Ramesh and my kids are gonna—you know, I don't think I'm gonna be able to make them have a last name Sridhar, I think they'll rebel against that. So they're gonna have the last name Ramesh, their kids are going to have the last name Ramesh, all of the accomplishments of me or any of my descendants, they're all going to be to my father's credit. He picked exactly the right time to make his name live on in history.

Giri: Yeah, just got locked in.

Sridhar: Is that the situation with you? Or

Giri: It is

Sridhar: actually, I don't know. It is?

Giri: Yes, it's, there's another layer of complication to it. But my dad's given name is Swaminathan and then in the immigration process, he split it up. So the Swami became his middle name, and then Nathan became our last name. And then his—for his first name, he took his father's given name.

Sridhar: Yeah, yeah, that makes sense.

Giri: Yeah. Which is also interesting, because you're kind of like cosplaying as your dad.

Sridhar: Yeah, that's true.

Giri: But then I, yeah, then the the quirk of splitting the name at that joint is that now I just have this very easy name to provide at coffee shops and restaurants, which is convenient

Sridhar: Right, yeah. My parents, they named me Sridhar Ramesh. There's no easy coffee shop name in there. But then after me, my, like, my aunt or something convinced them to name my sister Sheila. Because it will sound like a Western name even though Sheila is also an Indian name. But I like that I have this distinctive name. I don't care about not having any Western sounding aspect to it.

Giri: Yeah.

Sridhar: My cousins also, they got named Maya and Mira. Again, they're Indian names, Maya and Mira. But they kind of sound like Western names also. Like everybody else after me they decided to have more easily Western sounding names, I guess. But—

Samer: You carry the burden

Sridhar: I think just I think that just makes them weak, you know?

Giri: Yeah, builds character.

Sridhar: You know, A Boy Named Sue. So.

[music/ad break]

Giri: So you said once that you change the pronunciation of your name in your interior monologue, depending on whether you're having a white thought or an Indian thought.

Sridhar: Yeah, exactly. And I always say white versus Indian, like, those are the only two races in the world. But yeah, because you know, like I said, I grew up—always it was that Sridhar was the name with non Indians, and Sridhar was the name with Indians. But you spent a lot of time with non Indians in your life if you live outside of India. So you know, probably the majority of the time, people were saying my name they were saying Sridhar, so it gets in my head. And in my interior monologue, I do find myself saying Sridhar a lot, still to this day. But, you know, sometimes I say Sridhar, sometimes I say Sridhar, and I've noticed it naturally, sort of dependent on is the thought I'm having one that I think I would repeat to non Indians in some kind of context, is it some kind of performative thought, am I thinking of a joke where my name happens to come up that I think I might say to a bunch of white people or something or is this an authentic thought that I'm really having? And then almost all the time actually, in my interior monologue, my last name I don't say Ramesh, I say Ramesh almost all the time in my interior monologue. Because I feel like how often do you say your last name with your family? Like never.

Giri: That's true.

Samer: Yeah.

Sridhar: You hear it in like school contexts and stuff. And so I kind of think of Ramesh as basically a correct pronunciation in a way that—I know I say correctness is subjective but even to the extent its subjective—Sridhar is sort of fake but Ramesh I kind of feel like I'm fine with that, if people think Ramesh is the way to say my last name, that that seems reasonable. I, I'll take a little bit away from my father, he doesn't get to have his proper name be my last name.

Samer: I think this is the part where I can somewhat relate because I don't hear my original last name around my family or even like at work really necessarily, so it doesn't come up that much.

But originally, it's supposed to be Kalaf because there was a K-H-A-L-A-F. My dad dropped that so I'm not sure why, it didn't really make it that much easier. Because then it would be like Kalaf, Kalaf which is what I go by now. But it as you said like correctness is subjective but it's kind of interesting because I haven't thought about like introducing myself as Samer Kalaf and like—like basically if it's relatives, I guess, or friends of relatives because the relatives already know my last name, but...

Sridhar: Yeah, well, again, also, I mean, I think that's probably a consonant that a lot of people don't make, right. That's like a velar fricative.

Samer: Yeah. it's hard to get people to say “kha”

Sridhar: Right

Sridhar: I could grab some tissue and blow my nose again. It might approximate it. [blowing nose sound]

Giri: Well, I like the idea that everyone's gonna be radicalized by this podcast, you're going to be introducing yourself as Samer Kalaf.

Samer: Yeah.

Giri: We're gonna have Chinju Nallapillai.

Sridhar: Yeah, yeah

Giri: We're gonna have I'll go back to Giwi for that one, too. Do you ever meet other Sridhars in day to day life?

Sridhar: Oh, yeah, well, like I said, when I was at Google, this vice president was Sridhar and that was annoying. But in general, it's not that common that I meet other Sridhars, it's pretty rare. Even though my name—I've never looked up the statistics but I imagined globally my name is fairly popular, or at least as one country where it's quite popular, but I never in my life almost never meet them. But on the rare occasion, when I do meet other Sridhars, it's like infuriating to me. It's like when you meet you know your evil twin or your clone or somebody and you're like I gotta kill them before they kill me, like I want to be the only one with this name. Obviously if I grew up like a Billy or—Billy, I don't know why I'm saying Billy—if I grew up like a Brian or Chris or something, I'd be accustomed to meeting a lot other people with my name, I wouldn't even think about it, but because I'm so used to being the only one, I want it to be that, you know, if people say Sridhar anywhere in the world, that's me. It's like a bat signal for me. So I...

Samer: I do feel like I really get—not territorial, but if I do hear of another Samer, I'm kinda like, hmm. I want to be the only one with this baggage.

Sridhar: Yeah, exactly.

Samer: Even though it's probably ways that we could relate probably, and we'd probably have a very fruitful—

Giri: It's better to find the tiny differences between your experiences that you can use to drive each other apart

Samer: Suss out each other's weaknesses, basically.

Giri: Yeah, exactly

Samer: I had a kind of adjacent question, which is, I know in your Twitter bio it says, born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in rural Missouri.

Sridhar: Oh yeah.

Samer: Adopted the pen name Sridhar Ramesh from riverboat slang. And I know obviously, that's a reference to Mark Twain but are there people who think that's actually the origin of your name? Do you ever come across that?

Sridhar: Yes! It's surprising.

Giri: That's incredible

Sridhar: It's surprising, I make a lot of jokes about my name. I guess they're good jokes to make because nobody else will independently come up with the same joke except for like the five other Sridhars in the world—

Giri: But they're not funny so you're in the clear

Sridhar: Yeah, exactly. But people take them seriously sometimes, shockingly, like the whole joke of it is how absurd it would be for Sridhar Ramesh to be riverboat slang right? But people on Twitter constantly message me and they call me Samuel, and

Giri: What do you think this is a product of are they just uncomfortable assuming that you're joking about that?

Sridhar: I think it's just need to be authentic and they're like I need to call you by your real name. They want to be astute and not racially insensitive. And then there's this other joke I've made and I have this in like dating profiles and stuff is: at work there's a white guy now at work who's named Sridhar, so now everyone calls me Indian Sridhar. And I have this thing, like I said I have this on dating profiles, because I just thought it's like funny. It's a good thing to look funny. But people constantly message me they're like, oh my god, I'm so sorry that happened to you. They're so insensitive. And I try to explain, no, it's a joke. I don't see this relationship going anywhere. But I think you should know that's not true.

Giri: I guess that's a useful filter for you then.

Sridhar: Yeah.

Giri: Yeah, people with bad senses of humor and/or too much empathy.

Sridhar: Yeah, exactly. I don't want to date someone who has too much empathy for me.

Giri: So we talked about the other side of things of like, your non Indian people trying to appear racially astute with the pronunciation but what do you how do you feel about Indian people choosing or not choosing to kind of anglicize the pronunciation of of their name and how that sort of trended differently over time too?

Sridhar: Yeah, because I feel like when I was growing up, a lot of the Indian people I knew anglicized their names. Like every Nikhil I knew went by Nick. I say it like I knew 100 Nikhils. But you know, I knew a couple.

Giri: You're from New Jersey.

Sridhar: Yeah, yeah, exactly. And you know, there's all these popular Indians, who made it in, in like, became celebrities at some point. So when I was a kid, there was no Indian actors, but eventually there were people like Kal Penn or Mindy Kaling or whatever. And those are all anglicized names. I forgot what Mindy's real name is. It's like Vera Chokaalingam or something. Yeah, yeah. Vera Mindy Chakalingam and Kal Penn, his real name is like Kalpen Modi. So, and then, you know, it's like Bobby Jindal, whose name is Piyush Jindal, and he took Bobby from The Brady Bunch.

Giri: I didn't know that!

Samer: Oh

Sridhar: Yeah. In general, it was common for people to anglicize their names. But then at some point, the vibe shifted and like I said, everybody wanted to be racially astute and whatever, but also Indians, all the Indians shifted from where growing up, I felt like you know, I was way more Indian in a way as a child, like I, I, I had an Indian accent for a little bit and I don't know, I was much more like alienated from American culture when I was young. And now I'm much more like assimilated whatever. But as a child, I never really talked about feeling very Indian or something I just would try and blend in or something and then the vibe shifted to where you were supposed to really talk a lot about your whatever it is racial thing or whatever minority status you were, you're supposed to talk a lot about how how that impacted your life. Like that's all anybody would talk about for a while. And then as far as his vibe shift, yeah, you're supposed to not anglicize your name or something. I sounded like a cranky old man giving an anti-woke rant here but there was some kind of shift

Giri: We're booking you a spot on Bill Maher right now

Sridhar: Yeah, exactly. So I don't know if you felt the same way or I don't know, I could be completely off because this is just my experience in how I felt in that Indian American thing

Giri: I think that tracks for me as well. Definitely noticed, like people being more proactive about other people's presentation of their names. I kind of picked kind of this weird middle ground early on in my life where I was okay having people use kind of this blunt mispronunciation of my name that felt closer to the right, closer to target than what would be more phonetically obvious to them. And then I've just been kind of riding with that. But I've definitely noticed that that vibe shift that you describe among other Indian people.

Sridhar: Yeah, I can't think of any Indian actors who have made it more recently than the ones that I was thinking of who anglicized the names? I guess there's a Pakistani guy. There's Kumail Nanjiani, he didn't really do any anglicizing. I was gonna say, there's Kamala Harris.

Giri: Oh, yeah. I can't believe we didn't talk about that one yet.

Samer: Yeah.

Sridhar: Yeah. Kamala Harris. You know, I knew a Kamala growing up. So I always say Kamala, but she does these videos about how to pronounce her name and they're like aggrieved, like, how dare you mispronounce my name kinda in theme, but she says Kamala Harris in these videos. And Kamala is not the authentic thing. Of course, she can say whatever she wants, but the authentic pronunciation is Kamala with a schwa in the first syllable. So it's sort of weird to get up on the cross about people mispronouncing your name, but then give them this also, semi anglicized or semi, whatever name. It's funny that I call it anglicization. But it's not like English doesn't have uh-sounds also.

Giri: Yeah. Right, right

Sridhar: But I think what happens also is whenever English speakers like read a foreign name, they always assume all the A's have to be ahs, that there can't possibly be an uh sound.

Giri: I think that's exactly what's happening, yeah.

Sridhar: They're thinking of, I don't know, Spanish or Italian or something.

Giri: They want these long beautiful vowels

Sridhar: Yeah, they want these exotic things, I guess. But it could be exotic to be uh, why not? In the same way they'll read J's in foreign things, and they'll think they have to be juhs. So they'll say Raj instead of Raj or, or Beijing instead of Beijing or something. So yeah, they always assume every foreign name has to be maximally foreign, you know.

Giri: Yeah, I remember being very thrown by the Kamala Harris thing to kind of, for the reason you're describing like, if she's gonna have people use this mispronunciation she should be kind of ashamed and understanding about it like we are

Sridhar: Yeah, exactly.

Giri: You can't be, you can't get on a pedestal about it.

Samer: So you've been popular on a few different social media platforms outside of Twitter. Have you noticed any differences in people's reactions to your name on those different parts, or—?

Sridhar: Well, one of the social media platforms I was popular on was Quora, and Quora is like 75% Indian. So their reaction was just oh, another Sridhar.

Samer: We have a, we have a Quora power reader in the studio right now.

Giri: And yeah, this is a dramatic reveal portion of the podcast where I explained that I was like a very early Quora follower of yours.

Sridhar: Oh, I didn't know that.

Giri: And then only years later, after I'd given up on both Quora and math did I realize you were making weird jokes on Twitter, I was like, is this the same guy? I have this faint memory of this guy. I guess we converged along the same interests, so it's fine.

Sridhar: Oh that's interesting

Giri: But yeah, at this point, you've written for both an audience of 1000s of strangers on Twitter, or on Quora. But you've also written for a very small academic audience, maybe even an audience of two, in some cases, or an audience of one. What, are there any similarities or differences in terms of how you think through those two types of writing?

Sridhar: I always find it a lot easier—well, specifically, in the context of—well, both of them actually, it's a lot easier to write, when you know who your audience is, right? You can—for mathematical writing, you can tell what they already know and what they don't and what would be useful for explaining something to them. And then with comedy, when you know your audience, it's a lot easier to avoid people getting offended, of course, you know, you know what their, what their lines are, or also you know, what their sense of humor is, so it's easy to hone in on that. But it's also sometimes fun with comedy when you're writing for a broad audience where you know some people will get the joke and some won't, and some of the people who don't get the joke their reaction will be funny to the people who do get the joke if they misinterpret something that was sarcastic as sincere or something. And there's also the dynamic, I think, where, you know, there'll be people you know, in your life, who everybody's like, Oh, that person is so funny. They should do comedy. They're so funny. They make all their friends laugh all the time, they make, you know, the office laugh or whatever. But then if they go, and they do stand up or something, it just doesn't work. They don't connect. And it's because they're funny with their friends who know who they are, and they know who their friends are, and they know how to target things. They don't have the thing of, if I'm with a broad audience, and there's no charity for me, they don't know anything about me, and I don't know anything about them. You know, it's trickier to figure out how do I be funny in a context like that. And so that's part of being a

comedian. But it is nice sometimes when you're just at a party, and you know exactly how to make like the people that you really know well, like, fall over laughing.

Samer: yeah, I feel like inside jokes get a bad rap sometimes. But it's also very effective.

Giri: Yeah, I mean, those are like, yeah, they're just like, there's like more wiring like, laid down beforehand and it's like a more intense response sometimes.

Samer: Yeah.

Sridhar: Well that's exactly the thing we were saying about names. Like, there's this warmth when you make an inside joke, because you're calling on these years of history that you've built up with this person. So if my sister makes a joke with me, and it's not an inside joke, it hurts my feelings. I feel this coldness.

Giri: This could be wrong, but I'm wondering if—to me it seems there would be some amount of exhilaration when you're making a joke and you're uncertain about whether it's gonna connect or not, whereas when you're doing your mathematical writing, it feels like it would be kind of frustrating if the person you're trying to communicate with isn't necessarily following along

Sridhar: I guess that's exactly true. Yeah, yeah. In math it's purely frustrating when I can't just directly beam my thoughts into somebody, there's no sense of ooooo, am I going to discover the fun of whether this connects or not? It's just always a disappointment, yeah. And it's not also, the flipside thing—with comedy, you make a joke and you think it's funny, and maybe you're even confident you'll get a laugh, but you don't know the size of the laugh it'll get, right? You don't know if it's gonna make them chuckle or if it's really gonna get like a big response, and that's fun. In math it never happens that way, where it's like an unexpectedly big response. It's like, I get it, that makes sense, that's the best it ever gets. Nobody ever is blown over and is like, oh my god, I did not imagine such towering genius could exist in a mere mortal body. I do find it frustrating with math that there's this possibility that something that's completely clear in my head doesn't come out so clearly. I wish it weren't that way, but it is how it is.

Samer: There was another question we want to ask you about academia. I know Giri had heard of this professor who described how a lot of people in his field seem to have a hard time remembering his name, even though he's published a lot. And he—was it that he tried a different name or tried publishing under a different name and he got a better response?

Giri: Um. To take his quote, he, he described the sort of the struggle as getting a white American reaction to a, quote, generic Indian name with too many A's. Now that this guy has turned down a request to appear on the pod, I guess I can reveal that I was a little bit skeptical that a South Indian last name would trigger any alarm bells in the field of computer science. I was wondering if you had any kind of like, relevant experience with with your name in academia, or did you feel like it affected how you published your work, or—?

Sridhar: Well, I'll tell you a story about my name in academia that is maybe not that enlightening in this particular regard, but you just you brought it to mind. My advisor, you know, I met my

advisor at some point early on in grad school and introduced myself to him and asked him to be my advisor, and so on. And then years and years later, I was trying to talk to him about something. I forget what it was, but for some reason, I was talking to him and I had some reason to say my name. But I forgot what my advisor called me. I couldn't remember if he called me Sridhar or Sridhar, because most of the time, you don't bother saying somebody's name when you know them and you're in the room with them and ou're just like, hello, and hey and whatever. And I forgot what I introduced myself to this guy as years and years ago. So I had to stop and I had to be like, I forget, I'm sorry, what is my name to you? And it was sort of embarrassing, but of course, I explained why I was asking and it was fine

Giri: it's like a much more boring version of like having an affair and having to keep your lies straight. And getting caught.

Sridhar: Right yeah. It was so embarrassing I had to leave grad school, I can admit now

Giri: I'm glad we have that on the record finally

[music]

Samer: Thanks for listening to Namedropping. You can find more of Sridhar's work on Twitter @radishharmers. You can find us on Instagram @namedroppingpod, or send us an email at namedropping@defector.com. Namedropping is hosted by me, Samer Kalaf, and Giri Nathan. And produced by Ozzy Llinas Goodman. Our editor is Justin Ellis. And our supervising producer is Alex Sujong Laughlin. Our production assistant is Jae Towle Vieira. Thanks to editor in chief Tom Ley and the rest of the Defector staff. Defector Media is a collectively-owned, subscriber-based media company. If you love this podcast and want to support us, subscribe at Defector.com.

[music]

Sridhar: Every now and then my parents will drop little hints to suggest they've become aware that I have this Twitter account. I think it's because my cousin told them

Giri: Snitches, yeah

Sridhar: And not to put the cat out of the bag, but I don't think they're following too closely. Actually also what happened at one point was I had one tweet go real viral. And like my aunt saw it on some completely separate thing like it was reposted to Instagram and Facebook and whatever. And so I think through that also, they became aware

Giri: Anytime a tweet is getting shared to Facebook it's probably bad news.