

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: *Free-lance writer Richard Crasta (b. 1952) was born in India and has lived in the United States since 1980. He studied at American University and Columbia University. Crasta has completed a novel titled The Revised Kama-Sutra.*

WHAT'S IN A NAME? [The Indian-American/January 31, 1992]

Richard Crasta

No wonder a newborn baby cries. It is hungry, naked, and--if it is an American--already owes the government \$12,010.57, its approximate share of the U.S. national debt.

But if that baby happens to be, like mine, the American-born child of recent immigrant parents from Asia or Africa, it has all the more reason to cry, because its parents must face the genuine problem of whether to give the child a name from their old country or their new.

And until an adventurer named James M. Fail came along, the burden weighed even more heavily on me, a three-time father who had always regarded with utmost seriousness, with almost somber awe, the responsibility of naming a child.

Let me clarify. Though my name is Richard, I am, from my history to my abject dependence on regular injections of red pepper, a real Indian from the real India. Living in a part-Catholic, innocent corner of South India--the multiethnic town of Mangalore--I had always been proud of my name (Richard the Lionhearted was big in my childhood storybooks).

Of course, when I went to work in North India, I did encounter chauvinist people ignorant of the fact that Christianity, dating from the first century, was India's third most populous religion, and who implied, with exaggerated smiles and pseudo-British accents, that my name was not quite Indian. It was also at the time that Richard "Tricky Dick" Nixon was spreading his notoriety, and there were moments when my name was called out in public and I wanted to duck.

But when I came to the United States I decided I would, despite my history, give my child a name that was more recognizably "Indian."

And then, five years later, my first child, a son, was born.

Give him an American name, advised many of my friends (meaning, of course, give him an Anglo-European name), passionately. He'll have enough problems in school with his looks without an extra oral reminder to bring attention to them, without having to battle teasers and mispronouncers, without being scarred by it all for life. So said (among others) a white American father who had named his two adopted Korean girls Jacqueline and Susan.

I know what it is like to have a foreign face and an "American" name. Americans will often ask, when I introduce myself, "But what is your *real*, your *Indian* name?" Sometimes, peeved, I will answer with "Abdul the Bull Bull Abbasid"--something tongue-twisting--and I am amazed at how credulously most people will accept my Abdul bull.

On the other hand, I thought, any child born here is going to be an outright American no matter what name I give him. America is so addicting. Now, at age five, my son is already a perfect consumer of American television and its commercial offerings, parroting with an innocently straight face their sales pitches as infallible fact. Unless we move back to India before he reaches the age of unreason (between seven and seventeen)--that is, well beyond the age of sweet unreason--he is unlikely ever to choose to adopt his parents' country. So why not leave him some little stamp of his heritage--a little memory aid--an Indian name? So long as one doesn't go

overboard with tongue-twisting ethnicity, calling one's children Mbongo Bow-wow or Mu Mu Zwingli or Venkatagiri Pillaiswamy, isn't an ethnic name your vote (and your child's) for the principle and future of cultural diversity and well-exercised tongues in the America of the twentieth century?

But then, what is permanent about a name that my son could easily change when he grows up--as indeed adult immigrant Indians (and others) under the assault of massacred and mispronounced names are constantly doing in America--from Balwinder to Billy, from Subramaniam to Sam, from Saraswati to Sarah, from Krishna to Chris?

I have often, woolly-headedly, wished for a world where names and national origins didn't matter. Until then, however, we finally decided out of concern for our child's well-being and happiness to choose an "American" name.

At the time, I was under the spell of James Joyce's *Ulysses*; and Bertrand Russell had always been my kind of philosopher, passionate and caring, not cold and academic. And, moved by novelist Ralph Ellison's admission that his being named after Ralph Waldo Emerson had been the formative influence in his life, we named our son James Russell. But by the time of his christening party, a month later, his name was expanded, like the federal budget, to accommodate a variety of special and parochial interests, such as in-laws, Indian pride, and my sense of humorous resignation. The name on the cake read: James Russell Charles Ashok Prabhu Crasta.

Then we read about a man named James M. Fail who, despite his failure-prone last name, had *succeeded* wildly--having, with an absurd thousand-dollar personal investment (and the right connections), raked in a dizzying \$1.8 billion in American government subsidies to build up a savings and loan empire. Wow! For a miserable fraction of that amount, a measly half-million, I'd be willing to change my name to Genghis H. Hoolamoola and still be so ecstatic that I'd spend half my remaining days lying on my back, wiggling my arms and legs in the air, and gurgling with pleasure like a baby just stuffed with infant formula. Hadn't I put myself through a lot of unnecessary agony?

And if the whole internal brouhaha was a personal sorting out of a personal identity crisis, its result is a small squeak of protest against those Indians who pretend that their name encapsulates the exclusive, inalienable essence of Indianness; who spit out your name at you; who preach internationalism, then practice cultural chauvinism; who say on the one hand that Hinduism is a way of life, an inclusive, absorptive, and tolerant religion, and on the other hand, dressed in tight pants and pointy shoes with Pantene heads, Mac Fast Foods burger in hand, speak amongst themselves with mild scorn of Indians with names different from their own. Once, I had seriously considered changing to a more "Indian" name, but had been stopped by the bureaucratic work. Now I ask, "What's in a name? A Narayana Nambudiri by any other name is often as ridiculous."

ESSAY TOPIC: What does Crasta observe about the relation of a person's name to that individual's personal identity and identity within a culture? To what extent does your own experience support these observations? In formulating your answer you may use examples from your direct experience, your observation of others, or any of your reading.