

The Visual Vocabulary of My Name

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“Chitra,” I say in my phone call to her.

A pause at her end.

“Citra?” she echoes hesitantly, a little, fragile scratch on the roof of her mouth.

“Not Citra, the clear lemon-and-lime-flavoured soda,” I say. “I neither have its cool nor its zing.”

We giggle together.

My flippant, self-effacing humour helps lighten the mood as it ensures a painless hotel reservation at Washington DC’s Marriot.

Dissatisfied with my earlier hotel’s location, one that I have booked online from New York, I have struggled ineffectually to shift to another, one closer to the place of my meeting scheduled for the coming week. She sorts out this problem for me.

“Chitra, it is then,” she says, as we complete the formalities, her tonguing of it clear and correct this time. Her modulation lays emphasis on the low-mids, giving her tone a delicate symmetrical warmth. Hers is the voice of amber, one that tells you dawn is coming, I think to myself.

“Sorry about my earlier gaffe. By dropping a letter, I somehow made little your name, inside of language, didn’t I?” She sounds contrite. And very literate to me.

It is her attention to detail, her picking up on sensitivities that connects me to her invisibly, instinctively.

“Oh, nothing as serious as all that. And I am not prone to monomania,” I reassure with a snicker, emitting a sound that is a cross between a chuckle and a snort. “When in Vietnam, my colleague Mr Trung corrected my pronunciation of his name saying that it would be better than I call him Chung as that is how it is pronounced. I had been misaddressing him thus for six months. Oh, my mortification!”

“What does your name mean?” she asks, her words vibrant with curiosity.

“I want to know how you came to be given this name, the why of it. I would love to know its origin, meaning and how it evolved over the course of generations. I mean all the stakes, really,” she adds.

How unusual. A never-before experience. Of someone stepping beyond the curt boundary of handling inquiries and bookings to a level deeper than the fathoms of our short, shallow acquaintance.

She piques my curiosity.

“Whoa, I don’t think we have enough time right now for the lived experience and cultural ancestry of another world. I must warn you that each Indian name carries the weight of both,” I retort.

She surprises me.

“I know I will need a lifetime to understand the cultural nuances and identities of your country,” she says, her voice appealing, controlled and pleasant to listen to. “But I write a weekly column on culture for a magazine and I think an understanding of Indian names, your name, to begin with, would make for an excellent piece on cultural systems, all the things that make you who you are.”

“I get off my shift at five pm. I wonder if I may call you at seven after dinner when I settle down with a pen and many sheaves of paper. Would that be an intrusion? Please feel free to say no,” she says.

“I do really, really want to understand the origins of your name, how your culture views it, settle my inquisitiveness about your country, its ways of being in yesterday’s world and that of today, an interestedness I have held inside of my stomach for years. By the way, my name is Della and in no way as intriguing as yours,” she adds.

It is her turn to be self-depreciating.

I agree, with no hesitation, to her peculiar demand.

On the dot of seven, as the late evening falls in sheets of rain in New York, Della’s call trills. After a few pleasantries, I start. “To get to the meaning of my name, think of the first month in a traditional lunisolar Tamil calendar.”

“Oh, you are from Tamil Nadu in the south of India then?” Della breaks in excitedly, her normal clear, light, and pleasant voice, like ambient music played softly, wavering up and down.

My filter kaapi sizzles with excitement as I do and just as she does. She knows of my state in India. I have a feeling I am going to enjoy my dialogue with her, even luxuriate in it.

“Yes, from Madurai, among the oldest cities in the world, the only city to have streets named after each month of the Tamil calendar. And whose rhythms pound around the deity Meenakshi Amman temple, her worship with flowers, sandalwood, vermillion and turmeric, and around the multitude of parrots who create symphonies with their chorus of ‘Madurai Meenakshi’ as with their swags, ruffles and flounces.”

“Oh, I have written about your city’s folk-dance poikkaal kuthirai aatam where the dummy figure of a horse's body swings to and fro singing tales of joy and despair. Of how the light-weight material of cloth at the sides covers the legs of the dancer to make it seem like the horse is dancing,” Della tells me, begging pardon for the mispronunciation of the folk dance.

“Oh wonderful,” I gush, both amazed and relieved with her knowledge of my state, my ancestry, her mind map of Madurai.

“I love the way the dancers tie wooden legs to their feet so that the sounds evoked are like the hooves of the horse. In my piece, I have narrated the skill and training that goes into it and how they dance in accord with woodwind instruments like Nadaswaram and drums like Pambai,” Della says.

In her voice, I hear the celebration of my land, its traditions.

“I also do know about the omnipresent fragrance of jasmines in the air of your dry, hot city and the living art of making fragrance for a global market,” Della says in a rush. “But do forgive my interruptions and carry on with the origin of your name, I can’t wait.”

Her animation is infectious.

“My name perhaps does not have a single origin. So you are in for a centrifuge spin as I try to separate its various strands,” I caution.

“Fascinating,” she says in response. “I am ready for the whorl of its buried etymology.”

“My name, perhaps, came to me as I was born in the Chithirai masam or the month of April which happens to be the first month in the traditional Tamil calendar. When naming me, my parents probably had in mind brilliant sunshine, lush green, nodding fields of paddy, welcoming homes trellised with creepers of jasmine, gleaming red oxide floors, tall, shiny bronze lamps, early morning kolams, geometric yet artistic designs made with rice flour outside doors...in short, all the expectations of new beginnings and of a fulfilling life,” I explain.

“Or maybe they named me so because I was born under the fourteenth star, the Chitra nakshatra, often called the bright star of prosperity. As the fiery red Mars is its ruling planet, this star is believed to bestow the person born under it brilliance, intelligence and intuition. Wishes my parents probably desired for me,” I say. “Whether I have made their dreams come alive is debatable,” I tell her, my mirth zigzagging down airwaves.

“I don’t understand what the fourteenth star means. Does the Indian perception of stars vary from the western understanding of it?” Della queries.

I gather my thoughts before I answer. “There are twenty-seven nakshatras (stars) and twelve rashis (zodiac signs) in Indian Vedic astrology. Each nakshatra is divided into four padas or quarters and each rasi is assigned to particular nakshatras.”

Complicated. She and I agree.

“Della, now maybe my name came about because I was born on the night of the Chitra poornima when the moon bloomed full. On such a night, each year, it is believed that the sun and the moon together create powerful earthly energies. Its living proof is in Kanyakumari at the tip of India that you perhaps recognise as Cape Comorin. We call it the triveni sangamam, a meeting place of three seas: the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal. Here, on Chitra poornima, a saffron sun emerges to cast its spell even as the silvery moon is yet to bid adieu. Imagine this astonishing sight against the agitated ebb and flow, push and pull of the tides. This wonder is believed to have beneficial effects on people born on this night. The belief is that people born on this night find their way in life rather than circle through sorry cul-de-sacs.”

“You can see that purpose in me can’t you?” I ask wickedly.

“Can I?” She is equally wicked.

“A word on the full moon in the Indian cosmology,” I say. “The first lunar day or tithi starts the day after amavasya or new-moon day. After fifteen tithis there is *poornima*, after which the counting of *tithis* starts again for another fifteen days where it ends with the quiet dissolve of amavasya again.”

There is silence at the other end. Though not like the one we began with.

“Chitra, I think someday I will be able to measure the truth of this name, the weight of its ancestry coming as I do from a world of radical individual freedoms. Yet I am certain that my magazine script on this name, your name, will light up rooms in my head, and, hopefully,

those of my readers, as I delight in all the complications you have piled up to this name,”
Della says.

It is a tribute I accept from Della.

She, purely by an accident of a conversation, has made me reflect on the magic of my own name and chronicle its meaning just as she will do. A name that over the years has been buried beneath the dust and familiarity.