

What is in a Name?

by

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I had occasion to ponder this question a lot when I had a baby, and my husband and I fought over her name. We had no problem with her firstname; my husband suggested a name, which I immediately liked, and we settled on that. What we disagreed about was her surname.

Before saying anything further, let me confess that I come from a community which does not have surnames. I have a given name, and for the purposes of documentation, the first letter of my father's name is prefixed, with a full stop separating my name from my 'initial'. But I had never thought that this automatically put me out of the picture so far as selecting a surname for my child was concerned.

I am sure most people would assume that the child takes the surname of the father, but I never did, nor did I think my husband would ever assume that. But of course I was wrong. We never did sit down before marriage and discuss all this in detail, nor would it have made any difference even had we done so. Circumstances change, people change, and what seemed right ten years ago no longer seems right.

Well, anyway, what did happen was that I wanted a combination surname, with each of us supplying a half; I even had the name ready, and my husband initially agreed, so that was how she was registered in the document we had to get a few days after her birth. But then came the formality of (From *Indian Folk Art*)



The Goddess Shasti, protector of children.
(From Indian Folk Art)

getting her Indian passport (we are in Japan now), and my husband balked at having to use that name in this document. Well, the argument was long and bitter, and I finally gave in.

Several times subsequently, I have asked myself why I gave in when I felt so strongly about it. Well, I first gave in because I was tired of arguing; when I thought about it the next day, I also thought of Kahlil Gibran's poem on children— 'Your children are not your children, they are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself'. It seemed to me futile to argue about names in the face of such lofty sentiment, which I believed in.

Now I comfort myself with this thought. There had been a time in my life when I felt very bad about the fact that it was my father's name which had been attached to my name, and not my mother's (there are some

communities which favour the mother's name); not that I liked my mother's name better, but I just felt something was wrong. I hope my daughter feels the same one day. Also, while I do believe in feminism, I don't want to push it on my daughter. You have to choose to be different; you cannot have this kind of a belief forced on you. I certainly think that should my daughter grow up to want to be in the mainstream, she would find a combination surname a terrible embarrassment.

But isn't there something wrong? It is the woman who bears the child for nine months, and most women nourish the child too; all a man gives is a sperm. How does this give him so much right to insist the child belongs to him? Strangely enough, this was exactly the argument my husband used; that I had given the child so much, I should let him give the child at least the name he chose.

But two thoughts trouble me even now. First, what do you do when two ideals you believe in lead to contrary actions? Belief in women's equality would mean that I insist my child's name represent her father's ancestry and mother's ancestry equally. Belief in Kahlil Gibran's ideal of child-raising means that I let my child choose, when she is capable of choosing, the name she wants to have. The second thought which troubles me is this: if even women and men who believed in women's equality did not practise it, how are things to change? □