

# By Any Other Name

*Santha Rama Rau*

## **Rau, Santha Rama (1923- )**

Rau was born in Madras, India. Rau spent a childhood enriched by cultural diversity. Her family was obliged to accompany her father on the frequent travels dictated by his job as a high-ranking civil servant in India's British colonial administration. She attended Wellesley College in the United States, and graduated with honors in 1944. She became an instructor at Sarah Lawrence College and a free-lance writer.

She has written many travel books. Her abiding theme of the interaction of people from widely differing cultures has been well served by autobiography. The upcoming selection is drawn from a collection of autobiographical sketches entitled *Gifts of Passage*. She lives in New York, New York.

## **India's British Colonial Legacy**

India is located in South Asia and is the second most populous country in the world, with more than one-sixth of the globe's total population.

India is a subcontinent, separated from the rest of Asia to the north by the Himalayan mountain range. During its history, India endured partial "conquests" by Arab, Turkish, and Persian invaders. But when the British navy achieved supremacy during the nineteenth century, India fell completely to the British.

By 1858 the British ruled the country, with Queen Victoria also proclaimed Empress of India. British culture was entirely different from that of India. But India was a rich center of trade, and that mattered most to the British. The British made contributions to Indian society, but they transformed the Indian economy and Indian industry to suit the needs of the British Empire, using the wealth of India to benefit England. Even upper-class, wealthy Indians were treated as second-class citizens in their own country.

Eventually Indian political movements gave way to more active struggles, with no success and little change.

Then, Mohandas Gandhi led a national non-violent protest movement during the 1920's and 30's. Various boycotts began. Indians were to give up British titles or honors. They were to stop wearing British clothes. They were to stop paying taxes. During these years thousands of Indians were imprisoned. Although many Indians served with the Allies during World War II, India, as a country, refused to join the war effort. They did not want to be associated with the British. It took until 1947 for India to finally achieve independence.

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*The title of this essay comes from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet:*

*What's in a name? That which we call a rose*

*By any other name would smell as sweet.*

At the Anglo-Indian day school in Zorinabad to which my sister and I were sent when she was eight and I was five and a half, they changed our names. On the first day of school, a hot, windless morning of a north Indian September, we stood in the headmistress's study and she said, "Now you're the *new* girls. What are your names?"

My sister answered for us. "I am Premila, and she"—nodding in my direction—"is Santha."

The headmistress had been in India, I suppose, fifteen years or so, but she still smiled her helpless inability to cope with Indian names. Her rimless half-glasses glittered, and the precarious bun on the top of her head trembled as she shook her head. "Oh, my dears, those are much too hard for me. Suppose we give you pretty English names. Wouldn't that be more jolly? Let's see, now—Pamela for you, I think." She shrugged in a baffled way at my sister. "That's as close as I can get. And for *you*," she said to me, "how about Cynthia? Isn't that nice?"

My sister was always less easily intimidated than I was, and while she kept a stubborn silence, I said, "Thank you," in a very tiny voice.

We had been sent to that school because my father, among his responsibilities as an officer of the civil service, had a tour of duty to perform in the villages around that steamy little provincial town, where he had his headquarters at that time. He used to make his shorter inspection tours on horseback, and a week before, in the stale heat of a typically postmonsoon day, we had waved good-bye to him and a little procession—an assistant, a secretary, two bearers, and the man to look after the bedding rolls and luggage. They rode away through our large garden, still bright green from the rains, and we turned back into the twilight of the house and the sound of fans whispering in every room.

Up to then, my mother had refused to send Premila to school in the British-run establishments of that time, because, she used to say, "you can bury a dog's tail for seven years and it still comes out curly, and you can take a Britisher away from his home for a lifetime and he still remains insular." The examinations and degrees from entirely Indian schools were not, in those days, considered valid. In my case, the question had never come up, and probably never would have come up if Mother's extraordinary good health had not broken down. For the first time in my life, she was not able to continue the lessons she had been giving us every morning. So our Hindi books were put away, the stories of the Lord Krishna as a little boy were left in mid-air, and we were sent to the Anglo-Indian school.

That first day at school is still, when I think of it, a remarkable one. At that age, if one's name is changed, one develops a curious form of dual personality. I remember having a certain detached and disbelieving concern in the actions of "Cynthia," but certainly no responsibility. Accordingly, I followed the thin, erect back of the headmistress down the veranda to my classroom feeling, at most, a passing interest in what was going to happen to me in this strange, new atmosphere of School.

The building was Indian in design, with wide verandas opening onto a central courtyard, but Indian verandas are usually whitewashed, with stone floors. These, in the tradition of British schools, were painted dark brown and had matting on the floors. It gave a feeling of extra intensity to the heat.

I suppose there were about a dozen Indian children in the school—which contained perhaps forty children in all—and four of them were in my class. They were all sitting at the back of the room, and I went to join them. I sat next to a small, solemn girl who didn't smile at me. She had long, glossy black braids and wore a cotton dress, but she still kept on her Indian jewelry—a gold chain around her neck, thin gold bracelets, and tiny ruby studs in her ears. Like most Indian children, she had a rim of black kohl around her eyes. The cotton dress should have looked strange, but all I could think of was that I should ask my mother if I couldn't wear a dress to school, too, instead of my Indian clothes.

I can't remember too much about the proceedings in class that day, except for the beginning. The teacher pointed to me and asked me to stand up. "Now, dear, tell the class your name."

I said nothing.

"Come along," she said, frowning slightly. "What's your name, dear?"

"I don't know," I said, finally.

The English children in the front of the class—there were about eight or ten of them—giggled and twisted around in their chairs to look at me. I sat down quickly and opened my eyes very wide, hoping in that way to dry them off. The little girl with the braids put out her hand and very lightly touched my arm. She still didn't smile.

Most of that morning I was rather bored. I looked briefly at the children's drawings pinned to the wall, and then concentrated on a lizard clinging to the ledge of the high, barred window behind the teacher's head. Occasionally it would shoot out its long yellow tongue for a fly, and then it would rest, with its eyes closed and its belly palpitating as though it were swallowing several times quickly. The lessons were mostly concerned with reading and writing and simple numbers—things that my mother had already taught me—and I paid very little attention. The teacher wrote on the easel blackboard words like "bat" and "cat," which seemed babyish to me; only "apple" was new and incomprehensible.

When it was time for the lunch recess, I followed the girl with braids out onto the veranda. There the children from the other classes were assembled. I saw Premila at once and ran over to her, as she had charge of our lunchbox. The children were all opening packages and sitting down to eat sandwiches. Premila and I were the only ones who had Indian food—thin wheat chapatties, some vegetable curry, and a bottle of buttermilk. Premila thrust half of it into my hand and whispered fiercely that I should go and sit with my class, because that was what the others seemed to be doing.

The enormous black eyes of the little Indian girl from my class looked at my food longingly, so I offered her some. But she only shook her head and plowed her way solemnly through her sandwiches.

I was very sleepy after lunch, because at home we always took a siesta. It was usually a pleasant time of day, with the bedroom darkened against the harsh afternoon sun, the drifting off into sleep with the sound of Mother's voice reading a story in one's mind, and, finally, the shrill, fussy voice of the ayah waking one for tea.

At school, we rested for a short time on low, folding cots on the veranda, and then we were expected to play games. During the hot part of the afternoon we played indoors, and after the shadows had begun to lengthen and

the slight breeze of the evening had come up we moved outside to the wide courtyard.

I had never really grasped the system of competitive games. At home, whenever we played tag or guessing games, I was always allowed to “win”— “because,” Mother used to tell Premila, “she is the youngest, and we have to allow for that.” I had often heard her say it, and it seemed quite reasonable to me, but the result was that I had no clear idea of what “winning” meant.

When we played twos-and-threes that afternoon at school, in accordance with my training, I let one of the small English boys catch me, but was naturally rather puzzled when the other children did not return the courtesy. I ran about for what seemed like hours without ever catching anyone, until it was time for school to close. Much later I learned that my attitude was called “not being a good sport,” and I stopped allowing myself to be caught, but it was not for years that I really learned the spirit of the thing.

When I saw our car come up to the school gate, I broke away from my classmates and rushed toward it yelling, “Ayah! Ayah!” It seemed like an eternity since I had seen her that morning—a wizened, affectionate figure in her white cotton sari, giving me dozens of urgent and useless instructions on how to be a good girl at school. Premila followed more sedately, and she told me on the way home never to do that again in front of the other children.

When we got home we went straight to Mother’s high, white room to have tea with her, and I immediately climbed onto the bed and bounced gently up and down on the springs. Mother asked how we had liked our first day in school. I was so pleased to be home and to have left that peculiar Cynthia behind that I had nothing whatever to say about school, except to ask what “apple” meant. But Premila told Mother about the classes, and added that in her class they had weekly tests to see if they had learned their lessons well.

I asked, “What’s a test?”

Premila said, “You’re too small to have them. You won’t have them in your class for donkey’s years.” She had learned the expression that day and was using it for the first time. We all laughed enormously at her wit. She also told Mother, in an aside, that we should take sandwiches to school the next day. Not, she said, that *she* minded. But they would be simpler for me to handle.

That whole lovely evening I didn’t think about school at all. I sprinted barefoot across the lawns with my favorite playmate, the cook’s son, to the stream at the end of the garden. We quarreled in our usual way, waded in the tepid water under the lime trees, and waited for the night to bring out the smell of the jasmine. I listened with fascination to his stories of ghosts and demons, until I was too frightened to cross the garden alone in the semidarkness. The ayah found me, shouted at the cook’s son, scolded me, hurried me in to supper—it was an entirely usual, wonderful evening.

It was a week later, the day of Premila’s first test, that our lives changed rather abruptly. I was sitting at the back of my class, in my usual inattentive way, only half listening to the teacher. I had started a rather guarded friendship with the girl with the braids, whose name turned out to be Nalini (Nancy, in school). The three other Indian children were already fast friends. Even at that age it was apparent to all of us that friendship with the English or Anglo-Indian children was out of the question. Occasionally, during the class, my new friend and I would draw pictures and show them to each other secretly.

The door opened sharply and Premila marched in. At first, the teacher smiled at her in a kindly and encouraging way and said, “Now, you’re little Cynthia’s sister?”

Premila didn’t even look at her. She stood with her feet planted firmly apart and her shoulders rigid, and addressed herself directly to me. “Get up,” she said. “We’re going home.”

I didn't know what had happened, but I was aware that it was a crisis of some sort. I rose obediently and started to walk toward my sister.

"Bring your pencils and your notebook," she said.

I went back for them, and together we left the room. The teacher started to say something just as Premila closed the door, but we didn't wait to hear what it was.

In complete silence we left the school grounds and started to walk home. Then I asked Premila what the matter was. All she would say was "We're going home for good."

It was a very tiring walk for a child of five and a half, and I dragged along behind Premila with my pencils growing sticky in my hand. I can still remember looking at the dusty hedges, and the tangles of thorns in the ditches by the side of the road, smelling the faint fragrance from the eucalyptus trees and wondering whether we would ever reach home. Occasionally a horse-drawn tonga passed us, and the women, in their pink or green silks, stared at Premila and me trudging along on the side of the road. A few coolies and a line of women carrying baskets of vegetables on their heads smiled at us. But it was nearing the hottest time of day, and the road was almost deserted. I walked more and more slowly, and shouted to Premila, from time to time, "Wait for me!" with increasing peevishness. She spoke to me only once, and that was to tell me to carry my notebook on my head, because of the sun.

When we got to our house the ayah was just taking a tray of lunch into Mother's room. She immediately started a long, worried questioning about what are you children doing back here at this hour of the day.

Mother looked very startled and very concerned, and asked Premila what had happened.

Premila said, "We had our test today, and She made me and the other Indians sit at the back of the room, with a desk between each one."

Mother said, "Why was that, darling?"

"She said it was because Indians cheat," Premila added. "So I don't think we should go back to that school."

Mother looked very distant, and was silent a long time. At last she said, "Of course not, darling." She sounded displeased.

We all shared the curry she was having for lunch, and afterward I was sent off to the beautifully familiar bedroom for my siesta. I could hear Mother and Premila talking through the open door.

Mother said, "Do you suppose she understood all that?"

Premila said, "I shouldn't think so. She's a baby."

Mother said, "Well, I hope it won't bother her."

Of course, they were both wrong. I understood it perfectly, and I remember it all very clearly. But I put it happily away, because it had all happened to a girl called Cynthia, and I never was really particularly interested in her.

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

### **Recalling**

1. What happens to the narrator and her sister on the first day of school? What effect does this change have on the narrator?
2. What differences does Santha note between herself and the other Indian children at the school?
3. What does Santha do at the end of the school day? What does she do in the evening?
4. What reason does Premila give for leaving the school and not returning?

### **Interpreting**

5. What does this change demonstrate about relations between the British in India and the Indians?
6. How does Santha feel about the differences between herself and the other Indian children?
7. How does Santha feel about school? Why does she feel this way?
8. Is Santha bothered by this incident? How do you know?

### **Extending**

9. What does this essay reveal about the relationship between British culture and Indian culture during Rama Rau's childhood?
10. How does our culture, (language, religion, traditions), help define our personal identity?

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## **Introducing Levels of Questions**

Learn how to ask good questions about what you are reading. The strongest level of learning occurs when you, as a reader, can write and answer your own questions about the text. Use these guidelines in building good questions.

Level 1 questions are questions of fact relating to the text.

Level 2 questions require some analysis and interpretation of the text to find the answer.

Level 3 questions go beyond the text and are relative to worldly ideas and themes.

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Using the fairy tale “Cinderella,” practice questioning the text using the levels of questions above.

<b>Example Questions</b>	<b>Your Questions</b>
Level 1 Questions (fact)  What time did Cinderella leave the ball?  What did Cinderella leave on the steps of the palace?	Level 1 Questions
Level 2 Questions (interpretive)  Why are the stepsisters so cruel to Cinderella?  Why is Cinderella hated by the stepmother?	Level 2 Questions
Level 3 Questions (beyond the text)  Is there really a “happily ever after”?  Why are stepparents often portrayed as cruel in children’s stories?	Level 3 Questions

Now read “By Any Other Name” and create various Levels of Questions that relate to the memoir.

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### **Cultural Differences: British versus Indian**

Use the details from the memoir to fill in the chart below. Show the differences between the two cultures in the areas outlined. Based on the chart, decide which culture is dominant and which is submissive as represented in the story.

	<b>Clothing</b>	<b>Food</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Sports</b>	<b>Education</b>
British					
Indian					

Using the details in this chart, create a thesis statement (a statement that reflects the overall idea of the chart).

After completing the graphic organizer above and creating a thesis statement, write an essay that compares and contrasts the cultural traits of the two cultures represented in the story. Use the organizer above to help you write your essay and be sure to include the thesis statement in the introductory paragraph. In the conclusion, indicate which culture you believe to be dominant and which culture you believe to be submissive. Be sure to include information from the plot of the story to support your opinions.