(spice of life)

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Will the children of immigrants -- no less American than Bruce Springsteen -- ever stop having to answer the question "Where do you come from?"

BY CHITRA DIVAKARUNI | last week, when my sons and I were at the post office, we took a detour to examine the pole in front and admire the big red, white and blue flag flapping energetically in the wind. Like any good mother of small children, I wanted to make this into a learning experience.

"Children, what flag is that?" I asked.

"American flag!" said Abhay, who is 3.

"Our flag," said Anand, who is 5. Then he looked at me questioningly. "Right, Mama?"

It took me a moment to answer. I was remembering a very different flag, orange and white and green, the Indian flag, the way it flew in the breeze in front of my old school. It would appear on the theater screen at the end of every movie we saw in Calcutta, and then we all stood up straight and sang the national anthem. Every year on Aug. 15, we hand painted small paper versions of this flag and proudly waved them at independence day parades.

I love America. I've loved it for all of the 20 years I've been here. At first it was a love laced with amazement and gratitude, so overwhelmed was I by the many

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openings and freedoms America gave me. Later, after I chose to become a citizen, I learned to love it more intimately and critically, like one loves family. I learned to take on responsibilities, to push for change, to be a part of the American people. I was happy to think I made a difference, even if it was a small one.

But this morning, standing in the beautiful California sunshine, trying to answer my son's question, I felt a surprising twinge in my heart, as though I were losing something very dear all over again.

"Mama?" prompted Anand, a look of doubt in his eyes.

"Of course it is, sweetheart. Of course it's our flag," I assured him. There was something else I needed to say, something important about the complexities of culture and allegiance and patriotism and ancestry, how they change and yet do not change, but I didn't have the words for it. So we bought our stamps and aerograms, and then we went home.

That night I couldn't sleep. I sat at our dining table and thought about what it had meant for me to be Indian, and what it meant for my children to be American. I thought of the great gap -- mental as much as geographic -- that my moving to this country had created between the generations of my family: my mother, who lives in a little Indian village, myself, balanced precariously between two continents, and my children, whose primary ties will always be to the Bay area. The language Anand and Abhay speak, both literally and metaphorically, is so very different from the Bengali and even the Indian English my mother and I grew up with. When I had blithely boarded the Pan Am airplane that brought me to this country, I'd had no premonition that any of this would happen.

Perhaps it was the upcoming 50th anniversary of India's independence that prompted these dark night musings. But I believe all immigrant parents go through them at some time or other, when they must weigh the gains of what they have given their American children against the losses.

The gains are more immediately obvious, of course: a great education, wonderful career opportunities, freedom of movement and speech and thought, the ability to sample a vibrant multicultural world. But the losses are there too.

First among them is the lack of extended family -- grandparents, uncles and aunts, even cousins of cousins -- and the comfortable sense that your parents' house is only one of the many homes in which you

belong. Some of my happiest early memories are of the times spent with my grandfather, who taught me to read and to play chess and to love trees. Or of my aunt, who used to comb my hair free of knots and tie it lovingly into double plaits with red ribbons. Or of my third uncle's wife, who made the absolute best fish-fries in all of Calcutta. My children will never have that same sense of fitting with serendipitous ease into the pattern of other lives. We are all too busy here, and family gatherings have to be carefully orchestrated. When my children go to visit their grandmother in India -- perhaps once every two years -- it is an exciting venture to an exotic place, not a return to a dear, familiar one. As they grow older, I fear their excitement will fade (I see this in the older children of friends), and they'll prefer spending their vacations with their friends, Americans like themselves to whom they won't have to explain, over and over, about Power Rangers and Baskin-Robbins and Disneyland. And yet ... Will my children ever fit into this country in the way a person of European background can? Even though they were born in America no less than Bruce Springsteen, many people will look at them and always see foreigners. "Where do you come from?" is a question that the American children of my Indian friends routinely have to deal with. Boston, they say, or San Francisco, or Dayton, Ohio. And the questioner responds with, "No, I mean, where do you REALLY come from?" When times are bad, and there's a recession, or a war, the question changes. It becomes, "Why don't you go back where you came from?"

In my dark kitchen I bow my head to pray for strength -- for India, facing, on her 50th anniversary of freedom, the severe challenges of poverty and illiteracy and communal violence. And for us all, children of the Indian diaspora, here on the other side of the world, who have our own challenges. I pray that we may be able to preserve the values we've gained from our past: love of family, of traditions, of spirituality and the simple life. That we may combine them with what we've learned in our new home: energy and enterprise and how to fight for our rights. This, perhaps, is the best legacy we can leave our children: The art of being Indian-American.

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Do you worry about what your children have lost by being raised in America rather than the country of your birth? Tell us about it in Table Talk.

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