

When FT correspondent *James Crabtree* and his wife chose to stay in Mumbai for their son's birth, they got a new perspective on the city

Few things about living in India are predictable. Even so, I was surprised to find myself sitting cross-legged on the floor one evening back in July 2014, flanked by two Hindu holy men, as they conducted a naming ceremony for my newborn son. His name was more unexpected still: Alexander Francis Viswanathan Crabtree.

Incense curled around me as the elder priest chanted, scattering marigolds from a silver platter by my feet, and drawing patterns in sand on another plate. Scented oil was poured over my hands as the monsoon rains battered the window panes. A hairy brown coconut was perched atop a nearby pot – only later someone told me it represented a Hindu deity. My wife Mary sat on the sofa, holding our baby, while a dozen friends looked on in bemusement. Feeling befuddled myself, I remember trying to recall how a western atheist of good standing like myself had ended up in such a spot?

The idea had surfaced six months earlier when an Indian neighbour heard we were expecting our first child. We had moved to Mumbai from London in late 2011, settling in Colaba, an area in the south of the financial capital filled with ramshackle houses and popular with expatriates, just a short walk from the famous seafront Taj hotel. For the next two years I wrote happily about Indian business for the FT



James at the Yazdani bakery in Fort

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Rites of passage



James, his wife Mary and their son Alexander near their home in Colaba, south Mumbai — Photographs: Asmita Parekar

Foreign babies are rare in India outside big cities like Mumbai, so we felt a sense of kindly curiosity

while we travelled avidly at weekends, from skiing in the Himalayas to tiger safaris in Madhya Pradesh.

Then, in autumn 2013, everything changed. Instead of weekend jaunts, we checked out maternity wards or tried to import baby car seats. When the time came, our neighbour told us, we had to have a Hindu naming ceremony, which she would organise with her family's priests, a father-and-son pair. Sure, I said. Sounds interesting. Why not?

It is a cliché of expat life that expectant parents fly back home for the birth, but the idea never really appealed to us. Instead, we sent carefully worded emails to our families, with stories of



Horse-drawn carriages in Colaba

India's excellent medical institutions and world-class doctors. We eventually picked Breach Candy Hospital, a place favoured by well-to-do locals and whose maternity wing has sweeping views of the Arabian Sea.

Our early months with Alexander were filled with the same mix of anxiety

and exhaustion that hits all new parents, albeit with Indian twists. On his first trip out of the house, for instance, we walked by the Gateway of India, built by the British in 1911, and on to tea at the Taj. When the monsoon finally ended we spent happy afternoons sitting in deck chairs on the lawns



A bicycling bread seller in Colaba



The family at the Taj hotel

of the colonial-era Breach Candy club, or splashing about in its giant India-shaped pool.

Meanwhile, I began putting Alexander in a baby carrier and going for walks, ambling over to the Maidan in Churchgate, a large open space where teams gather to play cricket, or up to Fort, the historic heart of the old city of Bombay, where we would pick up his favourite snack – a freshly baked bun with butter – from Yazdani, an old Parsi bakery. For the locals, the sight of a giant red-headed foreigner striding around with a small red-headed foreigner strapped to his chest provided reliable amusement.

Foreign babies are rare in India outside big cities like Mumbai, so we felt a similar sense of kindly curiosity as we began travelling again, carting Alexander off to literary festivals in Rajasthan in northern India or to the historic French quarter of Pondicherry in the south. Walking through an Indian airport with my son is perhaps the closest I



The family standing in front of a sign reading 'Mumbai' in Hindi, next to the Gateway of India

Heads turned to the baby, and strangers approached, embarrassed and smiling, asking for selfies

will come to celebrity, as heads turned to watch the baby, and strangers approached, embarrassed and smiling, asking for selfies.

Back at home, we learnt the benefits of being parents in India, not least the plentiful childcare. There was even the unheard of option of night nurses, women who stay through the night to help look after the baby, allowing parents to rest. We turned that down, thinking we should learn the hard way, perplexing Indian friends. Others seemed confused that we put Alexander to bed at the primly European hour of 7pm, while many Indian babies head off to sleep rather closer to midnight.



A street in Fort, the historic heart of old Mumbai

Not everything was perfect. Mumbai has few parks, intense traffic and stifling heat. Most streets have no pavements, while those that do are beset by potholes and hawkers, making them impassable by stroller. By comparison, London, or our new home in Singapore, where we move next month, seem like parental

paradises, overflowing with green spaces and child-friendly museums.

There were other complexities too. As we walked round our neighbourhood, Alexander and I often passed homeless street children, who would run smiling alongside us, holding up thin arms and asking for small change. It is often said



Alexander Francis Viswanathan Crabtree



Breach Candy Hospital, where Alexander was born

that India is a land of contrasts, but few are more jarring than that between the grim conditions in which many children live and the profoundly child-loving culture in the country as a whole.

It is the latter that we will remember most from our time in India — how strangers dote over infants and the lengths to which friends would go to mark the arrival of our own — a sense embodied most obviously in our naming ceremony, a ritual that neatly encapsulates the Indian sense that the arrival of a baby should be a social celebration.

Then there was the name: Viswanathan, which translates rather grandly as “lord of the universe”. Indian parents often delay naming children until long after the birth, but we picked Alexander within a few days. Still, our neighbour told us, the holy men would give us an auspicious letter, and all we need do was pick a middle name beginning with it.

What happened next was a blur. The elder priest stood at our door and, with

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\$500,000 A small one-bedroom apartment in Breach Candy

\$1m A two-bedroom apartment near the Taj hotel in Colaba

\$2m A three-bedroom, art deco flat overlooking the Maidan in Churchgate

Crabtree's verdict . . .

Pros

Cosmopolitan and safe

English is widely spoken

Charming colonial architecture

Cons

Little to do for children

Heavy monsoon rains

Bureaucratic visa regime and complex rules for foreigners buying property

Favourite places

St Thomas Cathedral in Fort

Colaba's Port Trust public gardens

Sailing round Mumbai harbour

the ceremony about to begin, handed me a booklet filled with cursive scripts and astrological symbols. He looked at me meaningfully and said: “The letter is V.” Panic set in. Naively, I had thought we would have days to mull it over. The priest looked impatient; an answer was needed. My mind raced for a suitable Indian name — any Indian name — beginning with V. Vikram? Vijay? Then, a flash of inspiration: Viswanathan, after “Vishy” Anand, the Indian chess champion, who I had come to know and admire during our time in the country.

And so it was decided: Alexander Francis Viswanathan Crabtree; an immodest mouthful of a name, and an extra-long business card in the making. Being truthful, that third leg isn't actually on his passport, the papers for which we filed quickly in the days after his birth. But even so, I hope Alexander comes to enjoy his secret Indian middle name. And even if he does not, I will remember fondly how he came to have it, and even more so the country that welcomed him into the world.

James Crabtree is the FT's Mumbai bureau chief. Next month he takes up a sabbatical position as a senior visiting fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore