

Adoptive family: A puzzle and a masterpiece

by

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Adoption is a value-laden social arrangement which varies from society to society and changes over time in relation to the surrounding socio-cultural contexts. Similar has been observed in Indian context where the field of child adoption has undergone both legal and social changes. For example, in past, two religion based adoption laws dominated the society. The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (HAMA) of 1956 provided for adoption of children by married couples/single persons from the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain communities, while the Guardians and Wards Act (GAMA) of 1890 provided for guardianship for Muslims, Christians, Parsi and Jewish communities (Government of India report, 2012). These laws coupled with negative societal attitudes towards the adopted child, significantly discouraged child adoption within the country and diluted several attempts to formulate a general secular law on adoption. With gradual societal changes observed in the contemporary society with an increase number of non-relative or stranger adoptions from traditional kinship adoptions, The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act (JJ Act) was implemented in the year 2000. Under this Act people from different caste and communities could adopt an orphaned, abandoned, and surrendered child with an aim to restore the dignity and self-worth of the child (Shenoy, 2007). More recently, The Juvenile Justice Bill (2014) has been introduced by Ministry of Women and Child Development which aims to introduce a foster care system in India, for those who don't want to adopt but foster a child (Press Trust of India, 2014). This step is effective for older children who tend to remain in institutions for larger period of their lives. With this proposed bill, a channel will be

created for older children to be raised in a foster family rather than in an institution.

Socially, the field of child adoption has grown in the past few years with more Indian families coming forward to adopt a child. With various awareness programs, adoptive parents' groups, online forums, adoption is more accepted in the society in contrast to the hidden stigmatized status in the past. Still, the main concern which surrounds many adoptive families is 'telling the child' about adoption. Barbara Tizard (1977) in her book *Adoption: A Second Chance* stated that it is never a simple process where communication parallels two goals associated with sharing the adoption story with the child as well as talk about the birth parents to give them some significance or reality. This makes adoption an ongoing process and when to tell the child and how to tell them becomes an event in itself (Pavao, 2003) as it is a key to establish a secure sense of identity in the child. This process to 'tell the child' becomes more difficult especially in Indian context where a 'closed adoption' system or a 'clean break system' of adoption has been followed since 1984. Disclosure being the core of adoption is blocked or sidelined due to this system which legally cuts all the ties of an adoptive child with the biological family. In this scenario, it becomes equally necessary for the adoptive parents to communicate the fact of adoption with the child. This article is a small effort to answer this puzzling question, which is just one of the pieces to complete the masterpiece of a family, formed by several such pieces that keep evolving with each new day. As shared by Joyce Pavao, an adoptee herself and a former Founder and CEO of Center for Family Connections in Boston/NY

that there are *at least* two journeys taken in the process of adoption: journey of the birth family and the child's life with them, however brief and the journey of the adoptive family and the child's life with them. Adoption is melding of two or more stories or two or more journeys for the adopted child. Therefore, it becomes important to know how to talk about those journeys to gather the important information that we need to assess and care for the whole child.

Disclosure is not a one-time approach; it's a gradual journey of every adoptive family to answer the child's identity questions of 'who they are' and 'where do they come from'? Though there are adoption books given out by the agencies and stories shared by other parents, all providing a helpful base but the important part of this process is '*you as a parent should be comfortable with the idea*' to discuss it with the child. The lesser the comfort leads to greater delay in sharing and hence, larger the confusion within the child. Based on my interactions with several adoptive parents and social workers, two thought processes were dominant reasons for this discomfort, one, the fear of child abandoning the adoptive parents after knowing the reality and two, equating the curiosity of the child to know about his/her birth family as a mark being failed as a parent. In a recent study by Mohanty and her colleagues in 2014 on 86 Indian adoptive parents revealed that only 12.8% of the Indian parents had told their child about adoption, and 31.4% were planning to tell and 54.7% had declined to tell their child about adoption. The reasons cited by adoptive parents of this study ranged from stigma associated with adoptive families, lack of perceived social support issues related to infertility and the age of the child. This shows that India is still struggling to make the idea of adoption accepted at both macro and micro domains of the society. Books like *Babies from the heart* by Nandini Sengupta (2011), *Adoption in India* by Vinita Bhargawa (2005), *Ours by Choice* by Nilima Mehta (1992), discuss various ways and techniques through which sharing the fact of adoption can be a simpler process. As a child psychologist, through my interaction with families and reading various literatures, one thing that needs to be highlighted with every adoptive family is, to be

honest with the child, since beginning about the journey of child from agency to home and discussions about birth parents. Children always connect to the honesty of the parents. The story always begins at the beginning. Even though they are young to grasp the meaning of the term adoption but subliminally, these stories and parents' efforts (e.g. maintaining a baby book, visit to agency) are always registered in the child's consciousness. This subliminal conditioning is used by the child to connect with the larger picture of adoption and presence of two parents, later in life when they are 8 or 9 years old. One way to do this is to make the word 'adoption' as a part of your daily vocabulary rather than announcing it to the child at one particular age and time. As Nandini Sengupta, an adoptive parent mentions in her book *Babies from the Heart (2012)* about the age of adoption disclosure. She discussed it with an adoption agency who pointed out that one can talk to the kid around the time when they are two and half or three. In other words, when the child can express herself verbally, it's fine to initiate the topic of adoption. Therefore, there is a need to encourage parents for adoption disclosure since childhood and a greater need to make them aware that searching and knowing one's root is a normal part of adoptee development.

According to both Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) guidelines and Juvenile Justice and Maintenance Act (Care and Protection of Children) 2010, every adopted child has the right to trace its root and the law supports this decision only when the child reaches the age of 18 years. The law does support the adoptive child in his/her search but makes the provision for the birth family who may not wish to be contacted. In case the birth family declines to meet the child, no further query will be made. The area of 'search' by the child is another sensitive domain for which adoptive parents have to prepare themselves and the child for any kind of outcome. The 'search', according to the point of view of adoptive person, *is* a need to understand their genealogical heritage and a desire to understand the reasons for their placement for adoption and *not* to substitute their adoptive parents (Howe,

2009). Any kind of query by the child and reasoning presented by the parents go a long way to understand the initial reactions and subsequent developing relationships (O'Neill et al., 2014).

The difficulty today is that people are unsure of adoption disclosure and to what extent the information should be revealed to the child. A country, like India, is governed by multiple castes, maintains confidentiality on identity of birth mothers and restricts the "Search" by grown up adoptees (Mehta, 2013). It is only by

the efforts by few families that 'openness' in communication has begun to occur along the continuum of family dynamics. This valued journey must be shared with other parents who are still in contemplating phase, post adoption. This article is a small effort to motivate and guide the Indian adoptive parents on how best they can discuss the adoptive status with the child. I would like to end my discussion with few lines from a quote by Khalil Gibran from the book *The Prophet* (1923), which reflects the ideal parenting goal of life:

"Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you,

And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,

For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them,

but seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children
as living arrows are sent forth".

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