

Episode 1: Homecoming
Date: 30 September 2018

Priya: [00:00] Dear Pari, Rakesh and I still remember the day we first saw you...! No parent will ever forget the first time they see their child. Your big black eyes, your half smile, and your jet-black hair. You were so tiny. You had the biggest bindi...! Holding you, our four-month-old baby, for the first time felt so unreal for both of us.... Yes, you heard it right. I held you for the first time when you were four months old!

[00:41] Welcome to Dear Pari', a ground-breaking podcast series presenting facts, busting myths, and tackling stigma around adoption. It will bring to you varied viewpoints from adoptees, parents, adoption experts & government officials This podcast is being brought to you by Suno India, a podcast platform for issues that matter.

Hi, my name is Priya and am Rakesh and we are hosts of Dear Pari.

Rakesh: [01:17] This episode will bring to you stories of how people are dealing with lengthy wait times. It will also touch upon the role of extended family and the questions most families face when they decide to adopt.

Priya: [01:31] I first heard about adoption when I was a teenager when aunt adopted a baby girl. I remember asking a lot of questions about it. It, I saw my cousin grow up into a confident young girl. And realised a child just needs love and care. Since then, I thought if I were to become a mother, it would be through adoption.

Rakesh: [01:59] I always felt that adoption was a noble act that some selfless people do or something that only people who could not conceive did. Like many men, I was also conditioned to think that having a baby is a measure of masculinity, but after being with Priya, many of my opinions have changed, including that of how to start a family. Being a family is about sharing a bond, sharing love, sharing life.

Priya: [02:28] In 2015, five years into our marriage, Rakesh and I read that the process of adopting was made easier. We decided to know more and once we felt sure that we were ready we registered with CARA as prospective adoptive parents. You will hear these terms on and off, so do try and remember them. CARA is the Central Adoption Regulatory Authority, the govt body that regulates adoption in India and PAPs stands for prospective adoptive parents.

Rakesh: [02:59] Before we registered, we told our parents about this decision to adopt. Since we both worked for NGOs, our parents thought that this was an

act of charity. There was no opposition as such, but we knew the questions were gathering.

Priya: [03:18]

Why adopt? Will you have a child later? Your biological clock is ticking Priya, shouldn't you first have a child and then maybe adopt? You know it won't be the same as having a biological child. Just some of the many many things I was asked and told.

Rakesh: [03:41]

After a few days, a social worker visited us to carry out the Home Study Report. This is the first step which evaluates you as parents. The way this is carried out varies from agency to agency and it is at this step, that usually causes delay in registering. When the social worker visited us, she asked us a lot of questions- about our motivation to adopt, how we will parent our child, what kind of support we would receive from extended family and if we will disclose to our child that she was adopted. The interview lasted over two and half hours and we used the opportunity to also ask her a lot of questions. At the end of the interview, she told us to be prepared for a wait of atleast an year.

Priya: [04:26]

In the last week of January of 2016, we got a mail from CARA saying that we had been matched with a girl and we both were so excited. She was a beautiful baby girl from one of the North Eastern states and we were thrilled to have received her profile. I called the adoption home only to be told that the referral was a mistake, as the child had already been matched with another set of parents. I was heartbroken... But there was more to worry about. As per the rules back then, if you don't reserve the child within 48 hours, you lose your seniority. Since this wasn't our fault, we went to CARA office and asked them to ensure our seniority in the list was not affected. Thankfully, we were told that it wouldn't happen. A few days later CARA introduced an option to bring home a child from 'anywhere in India'. Until then, parents had to choose three States. So, we quickly did this and were bumped up the list-as not many parents, in early 2016, actually chose this option. A few weeks later, came the referral of our Dear Pari. All this happened in a span of five months- rollercoaster of emotions! I know five months is not a long wait by today's standards at all.

Rakesh: [06:04]

We received the email on 15th February 2016. I remember calling Priya and she was excited...but in a measured way as she was yet to get over the confusion from the first referral.

It was a week day and we were at work. We both decided to log in at the same time to see the referrals-back then CARA used to send parents information of 3 children at once--this was the part we hated the most in the entire process-as we knew we were gambling with the lives of children. We saw Pari's pic- she was the child with most information such as in terms of her medical records, child development indicators. Priya called the agency to tell them that we had been

matched with a child and the person in-charge told us to come, prepared to take the child home. And we weren't expecting that at all. In 3 days, we had to make travel arrangements- to booking flight tickets to nearest airport, hiring a car and buy baby related stuff- friends and family quickly helped us make a list of things we would need to take with us for a 4 month old. **BUT** we had forgotten to take a crash course in changing diapers which lead to a stinky disaster. That's a story for another day!

Priya: [07:33]

After reaching the nearest airport, we took an hour off to go to the beach. I remember clicking silly selfies with Rakesh and talking about how our lives were about to change forever in about six hours' time. We reached the place where our daughter was later in the afternoon and we had to go meet the adoption home representatives. we were quite anxious and were unsure what to say. And I remember him asking do you want to come and see the child and we both just looked at each other and said yes, together.

Rakesh: [08:19]

I was standing at the door and Priya was called in first. The room had many babies. The caretaker then lifted a small baby and handed her to Priya.

Priya: [08:31]

She placed this beautiful baby gently in my arms and I couldn't stop looking at her and thinking this is this is so real...I am going to be mom. I just remember looking into my daughter's eyes and just thinking that the entire universe was in it.

Rakesh: [08:57]

For me, that moment when it hit me that I became a dad was in the local district hospital. We had taken our daughter for a regular checkup as she was running a slight fever. I was standing in the queue waiting to register at the counter. The man at the counter asked me what's the name of the baby- I gave her name and then he asked me for father's name and without a second thought I gave my name.

Priya: [09:31]

Two days of back and forth between the district court and hotel were saying um we finished all the legal formalities and we became foster parents for our Pari.

Rakesh: [09:46]

That evening, we made calls to our extended family and friends to inform them that we were going to be parents. The reactions ranged from utter confusion to extreme joy when we broke the news!

Priya: [10:00]

We then started our journey back to the airport. It was a six-hour drive. We held her for some time and then for a while she slept in the car seat.

Priya: [10:13]

By the time we reached the hotel, it was quite late. Exhausted, all we wanted to do was sleep. But the only one who could sleep was Pari as both of us were scared that we would turn and crush her, as obviously, we weren't used to sleeping with a baby between us. This anxiety kept us awake all night and we just couldn't wait to get onto the first flight home to my mother's place. That night we realised that the wait to start our family had just ended.

Narration

(Rakesh): [10:52]

In 2015, the process of adopting went online. This meant that prospective parents had to register online with CARA. This centralised the process and it became one big pool of interested parents. What this also meant was that the Specialised Adoption Agencies in districts had no say in selecting parents for children, as parents were being matched by the online system. Once the system went online, more urban parents queued up. This coupled with CARA's awareness drive on adoption also added to the increased demand for adoption. Currently there are 19000 parents waiting to adopt just over 2000 children under the recently amended Juvenile Justice Act also known as JJ Act. . However, many adoptions continue to happen under the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act 1956 also known as HAMA. Did I say only 2000 children are available for adoption at any given point- yes. But aren't there more than 50,000 orphaned children as per some estimates? Yes. So where are these kids going? Well, you will hear more about this in coming episodes. With these kinds of skewed ratios, being patient is a big virtue for PAPs as the current wait time is anywhere from a year and half to 2 years.

Deepa: [12:25]

Hi! I am Deepa and I am a journalist. I'm residing in Chennai.

Rakesh: [12:31]

We spoke to Deepa who has been waiting since a year to adopt and asked her why she and her husband decided to adopt and how they are dealing with the waiting.

Deepa: [12:42]

More than me it was Vasant who was always keen in adoption. So, that idea kinda came to me through him. So, I was fine with both but for me like as a woman I just wanted to feel how birthing is. both of us we were interested in adopting a second baby. So, we thought our first baby would be our biological child and we wanted to adopt a second baby. in 2016 I was pregnant but during the second scan they found out like my foetus was having a congenital disorder and the child cannot survive for long even if you know I had a delivery. So, doctor suggested that I should abort the kid that was a very low phase of my life. I wasn't really into this idea of having a biological kid. I think down the lane probably there isn't much difference between a biological child and an adopted child, a child is a child. once After deciding that we took a decision about adoption, that's when I started seeing this in

a new perspective and I was more fascinated by the entire idea. So, you know like it just starts off as just two complete strangers and then they bond, and they gel so well and that very idea it fascinated me.

Priya: [14:17]

Deepa told me that while the initial registration process was fairly straightforward, the wait period for the home study report--when a social worker visits you to assess you and your family's readiness to adopt was a nerve wracking one. It took her nearly two months for this to happen. She also told us how she finds the various Facebook group for adoptive parents in India more informative than CARA's website as despite having access to the website and knowing her seniority, she still feels quite lost in understanding how or why the seniority level drops or rises. To explain this further to you, prospective parents are assigned a certain number, basis their seniority which is in turn decided by various factors such such as when you registered, =, age and gender of child you selected and so on.

Deepa: [15:01]

Ah... Actually, we were mentally prepared to wait because before registering CARA we did a little bit of homework. So, I knew that it is going to be like for a biological kid you know, you have to wait for 10 months. But this is going to be longer than that. We knew that so we were mentally prepared but what really puts you off is the seniority coming down is painfully slow so that is one problem actually.

Priya: [15:39]

For many parents the wait time is a frustrating one. We asked Deepa how she and her husband are dealing with the wait time.and she suggests couples use it constructively.

Deepa: [15:49]

You can use this time to rethink probably because you think if you are ready to take a decision for adoption maybe you can use these years to to rethink on that and you can use this time to convince your extended family--because that is very important in a country like India. so, it's not just you and your kid, there are your parents, your parents in law at least all of you should be on the same page.

Rakesh: [16:18]

We asked Deepa what would help moving forward

Deepa: [16:19]

it would be great actually if if this period comes down. There is some discrepancy over the number of children available so like you visit an orphanage and you see children there but I understand not every child can put on adoption but then still like you physically see a lot of children but then the numbers State wise numbers are like really low do you know it's in single digit in many states so I really wish to know why this difference is there and I don't even know whether that's good or bad.

Eshwari: [16:53]

Nijamga meeru adopt cheskundam anukunara (did you really mean to adopt). means really you wanted to adopt.? are you ready for that mentally and physically and more than that i had a doubts and fears in

Priya: [17:21]

my mind about what others will say because people are ready to say so many things when somebody is ready to do some good thing So how you are going to react for that, emaina regret avthara(will you regret?) You just heard my mother. My mother knew that i wanted to adopt but she still had her concerns in terms what the society would say and how people would react to this decision to adopt. I talked to my mom about what she thinks is the role of an extended family

Eshwari: [17:36]

The role of an extended family from both the sides it plays a key role, after the decision taken by their kids to adopt a kid because once we accept and respect the decision of adoption taken by our kids as a parent we have to give support because not only parents at that time we become the grandparents so whether it is a biological child or adopted child whatever it is, a child is welcome to the family we have to treat them equally. So, it is better elders to be more open minded and accept a decision and we should not too much probe or re-question ask them to re-think their decision kind of a thing. They are adults enough to take their own decisions and then go ahead with it.

Rakesh: [18:26]

Parents who choose adoption face a lot of resistance and stigma. Often times, the resistance is loud and clear and other times, it is unsaid. We spoke to a couple Sneha and Gaurav. They struggled to convince their parents and faced lot of stigma because of their decision to adopt. The following conversation is in English and parts of it is in Hindi. We will provide a translation on our website www.sunindia.in for those who don't follow the language.

Sneha: [18:56]

Actually, Gaurav has been talking about adoption throughout. He has always been telling his parents that he wants to adopt, but maybe they didnt take him seriously. Log bolthe rehte hain, but actually main kaun kartha hain types. But then when we finally decided to register with CARA, that time before registering, we had informed both sets of parents. Gaurav's parents were hesitant like why you want to go for it- since we didnt have a medical problem because you know in our society- adoption still is considered as a last resort you know like that. They had clearly told us that they weren't up for it. So, at one point of time- we decided let's just give them some time because you can't just go on and on ruining your peace of mind because you know any which ways the waiting period is really really tiring and simultaneously if deal with these you know, it becomes too much to handle. So, we decided then that-let it be. let them decide on their own and when the child comes maybe they will decide.

Priya: [20:01]

What were some of the questions they asked you

Sneha: [20:02]

Log kya kahenge, what will society say. what if someone doubts my son's manhood or my daughter in law's womanhood. they had doubt

that you know woh kaha se aya hoga aur kiska hoga. So all those doubts were there in terms of own flesh and blood and What will be the child's origin in terms of caste, creed or religion you know like that.

Priya: [20:35]

Sneha told us earlier that Gaurav always wanted to adopt. We asked him why and he said he never knew why but he always knew he would do it. Gaurav's favorite memory is of when he saw his daughter for the first time. He told us that he doesn't think he can love anyone more than his daughter.

Gaurav: [20:53]

Jab maine apni beti ko sab se pehle dekha tha toh dil main ek hi feeling ayi thi ki isse jyada pyaar main kissi se na karta hu hoon aur na karunga. Woh feeling main baayan kar nahi sakta, kyunki woh feeling meri aankhon main, actually main rajput hoon meri aankhon main aasoon nahi aate par Raahi ko dekher aankhon m aansu aate h. Isliy jab bhi kuch hota h isse aaj bhi, toh aankhon main aasoon aate hain. Itna hain ki meri beti meri dil ke kareeb hain (laughs) woh mera 13 mahine ka period na, maine kisi ke saath share nahi kiya, woh feeling, woh 13 mahine mere zindagi k sabse muskhil the kyunki uska intaazar maine sabse zyaada kiya. Zindagi ka sabse lamba wait mera, meri beti k saath hi raha h 13 or 13.5 mahine, aur jab woh aayi thi, wo first day mujhe yaad hain, kyunki jab woh apni mummy ki gaud main thi tab bhi woh mujhe dekh rahi thi. Woh feeling hi kuch alag thi, balki sneha mujhse pehle dekhe aagayi thi. Main waha documents pura kar raha tha aur maine Raahi ko dekha tha to aise laga ki duniya ka sabse luckiest person main hi hoon.

Gaurav: (Translation)

When I saw my daughter for the first time that time I felt that I could never love anybody as much as I love her. I can't even explain that feeling to you because that made me tear up. I am a Rajput and I don't cry easily but whenever I see Raahi, I get tears in my eyes. So that's why Whenever something happens to her even today I feel emotional. My daughter is very close to my heart and those 13 months, I have not shared with anyone. Those 13 months was the toughest of my life because I waited for her the most. My life longest wait is with my daughter which was 13 to 13.5 months and when she came, that first day I remember, though she was in her mom's lap but she was just looking at me, that feeling was different. Though Sneha saw her earlier as I was busy with document work and when I saw Raahi, I felt I was the luckiest person in the world.

Rakesh: [22:02]

In our society, the pressure to take the family name forward is intense. Gaurav shared with us how this pressure played out when he informed his family about their decision.

Gaurav: [22:13]

Hum do bhai behen hain, meri behen badi hain main chota hoon. To yeh ek lauta ladka ek lauta ladka ek lauta ladka h, aur main yeh kuch khandaan badhayega vansh type ke kuch words p believe nahi kartha.

Kyunki ladka ho ya ladki koi bhi aapka parivaar aage bada sakta hain. Aur ek aur itna famous the nahi the ki agar ek bacha biological na ho to ki humare duniye pe asar padega, toh Aaj tak yeh feeling jiss jiss se bhi share ki hain usne mana hi kiya . School time main bataya, college time m bataya, father ko bataya friends ko bataya, sab yehi bolte the ki apna hona chahiye, biological hona chahiye. Yeh feeling jab Sneha ke saath relationship m aaya tha tab share kari thi toh Sneha n hami bhari thi. First person aur last person baaki toh sabne mana hi kiya hain. Haan Registration ke samay father aur mother ke saath discussion kiya tha toh unhone kuch ok nahi kiya tha unhone seedhe seedhe mana hi kar diya tha. Sister ka bhi answer golmol tha, kuch aisa khaas nahi tha. aur raahi ek hafta hospital main admit hui thi tab family wale aake bolte the ki yeh kaisa bacha leke aaye ho yeh kya hain aur ab raahi ki sehet kafi acchi hogayi hain. Ek mere chacha chachi the woh sabse jyaada happy the aur mere cousin sisters Raahi ke aane par. Unka maana tha ki bahut dinon baad ghar main bacha aaya tha. Woh aaj tak raahi ko puch the hain mere mummy main haali bhi aana laga hain aur abhi potti ke saath ab lagaav acha hogaya hain.

Gaurav: (Translation) We are two siblings, my sister is elder and I am younger and there is this feeling that am the only son only son and I don't believe in this type of things, that I have to take the family name forward, because boy or girl they are both capable to do this and am not so famous that if I don't take my family name forward that it will be a big loss to the society. Till date with whomever I shared this, they have only said no to the idea. I told during school days, college, told my father and friends and everyone used to say no its important to have biological child. After Sneha and I started dating, I told her and she said yes. She is the first and last person in my life who was agreeable to the idea. During registration, I told my mother and father and they didn't say much but rejected the idea outright. Even sister's answer was not straightforward and when Raahi got admitted to the hospital for a week, then everyone in the family said what kind of child have you brought and so on. Only my uncle and aunt and cousin sisters were encouraging of the idea as they were happy to have a child in the family after all these days- and even today care a lot about Raahi. Now Raahi is healthy and hale and my mom and dad too are coming around and are bonding with their granddaughter.

Rakesh: [23:58]

Sneha and Gaurav's story of convincing the family over the time has ended on a good note. Gaurav's parents have come around and are now bonding with their granddaughter. But it is not just the near and dear who need to be sensitised. Neighbours, schools, teachers, you, me we all need to learn and unlearn our own stereotypes about adoption. More importantly, parents who chose adoption should not be shamed that they chose this route.

Priya: [24:27]

Our own experience has shown us that often, just having a conversation about adoption makes many people uncomfortable. Either they praise us, say how noble we are- we aren't- adoption isn't charity- it is as selfish an act as having a child- or they advise us to have our own child and tell us that it will never be the same. We have also been asked about the caste of our child, if we knew her 'origins' and so on. We cringe when we hear jokes on adoption-and there are so many out there-from Bollywood to your next-door-standup-comedian all of them make fun of adoption. Next time you hear a joke on adoption or are about to make one. we hope you will pause. More on this in our next episode which will deal with how society stigmatises families who adopt and the impact this has on parents and children alike.

Rakesh: [25:22]

Thank you for listening to this episode of #DearPari. Please share your experiences or thoughts on this topic with us. You can send in your comments or voice notes to hello@sunoinda.in. We depend a lot on you to spread the word, so, if you like this episode, please do share it with your friends and family. We welcome you to subscribe for free on our website www.sunoindia.in. <Outro Music Begins> Subscribers will receive the episodes as soon as they are released and also exclusive content. You can also find us on Apple Podcasts, Soundcloud and any other podcasting app of your choice. Follow us on Facebook Twitter and Instagram. Please use #DearPari

Priya: [26:06]

We would like to thank Nikhil Rao of Indian Ocean for original music, Priyanka Kumar for artwork, Tarun Nirwan, our digital lead & Kunika Balhotra, our communication officer and many other friends whose timely feedback has been of utmost importance!

Pari: [26:35]

Amma, Nanna, Pari.