

## Episode 2: Breaking the stigma

Date: 07 October 2018

**Eswari:** (00:00)

I took the baby from the car seat and I held her to my heart. I felt so happy and I got tears in my eyes.

**Priya:** (00:09)

Dear Pari, you just heard your grandmother talk about the first time she saw you. We had just reached her house from the airport. There she was, waiting outside the house, at the gate, with aarti (lamp) to welcome us. She then picked you up from the car seat and at that moment, I was transported back to my childhood as I was reminded of my own grandma's love and warmth. And then you gave this toothless grin- we still have that photo- you in a cute orange dress- with your signature Pari smile. A smile that always goes up to the eyes -. That was the second time when we fell in love with you. And all my fears and apprehensions of bonding with you vanished. We went shopping for you that day- as your dad's parents had organised a naming ceremony for you and my parents a cradle ceremony! Ceremonies which are usually arranged with a gap of few months were arranged with a gap of a day! It was amazing!

**Rakesh:** (1:46)

For your naming ceremony the room was decorated with ribbons and balloons. You slept through it all in amma's lap while we both performed the rituals. You were very tiny, light and felt fragile... I couldn't stop smiling through the ceremony- I was a dad. You were my daughter. Our angel. Our Pari.

**Priya:** (2:09)

The next day was your cradle ceremony, incidentally also my dad's 60th birthday and we had planned a party much in advance. With you coming into our lives, my mother transformed the party into a cradle ceremony too. So imagine the surprise when guests walked in for a 60th birthday party and saw a cradle decorated with marigolds and with a baby in it! It was really funny! The surprise, shock on some of our relatives' faces we will never forget! And they all had so many questions-we were overwhelmed with the acceptance we received from our closest family and friends that we set aside all these questions and doubts.

**Rakesh:** (2:58)

Soon a day would come when you will have a lot of questions about your birth story... Where did I come from? amma's tummy? How did I get here? Who is my tummy mummy? we will try to answer as many of those questions as we can. However, we know that at some point you may face with cruel questions in school or in a park. And we always wonder if we should protect you from this other truth- The truth that not everyone is, and will be so accepting and open to forming a family

without genetic connection...or do we just show you rainbows and blue blue skies?

**Rakesh:** (3:38)

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.

**Priya:** (4:07)

Do you Remember Sneha and Gaurav's story from last episode? About the stigma they faced from peers and family. That is just the tip of the iceberg. The pressure of conforming to societal norms is so intense that parents choose not to inform anyone about the arrival of the child. Like a parent told us recently "even if I wanted to shout from the rooftop about how happy I was about the arrival of my child I decided not to because I wanted to avoid negativity- with intrusive questions".

**Priya:** (4:26)

This episode will explore the silent and yet loud stigma about adoption. Many adoptive families choose to not share openly about their decision to adopt because this choice continues to remain an undesirable one in the society. It is construed as an open admission to infertility and in turn stigmatising infertile couples Prospective adoptive parents also discriminate against children who are waiting to be adopted.

**Rakesh:** (4:55)

And we came really close to this reality when we went to adopt our daughter. At the adoption home , there was another cute baby let's call her Devi. She was a little older than our daughter and we saw the most adorable bright eyes and a smile that just could light up the room! Devi's prospective parents had travelled over 36 hours from Kerala to reach the adoption home. We remember being there when she was brought out to be introduced to them. We were excited that Devi was going to go to her forever home too.. But...they turned her down. The parents said she was not as "fair" as she looked in the pic that was shared with them. The people at the home said that it was not the case but the parents refused to even consider the option. They told us, that it would be difficult for them to integrate the child into their "community" and so chose to reject a child despite having waited months to get that referral... it was just heartbreaking for us that moment and one that made us intensely angry, we even thought for a second if we could adopt both the children, but that was not the right way to do things.

**Priya:** (6:13)

At the adoption home incharge told us that this was not an uncommon occurrence and many a times children have been rejected for appearance and also because they didn't seem to belong to a caste...Devi was again rejected a few months later on similar

grounds...an year later when we had our follow up meeting at our home with the incharge, he told us Devi had found a wonderful family in the US... Ironic isn't it? That a child had to find a home outside the country even as 1000s of parents wait for their referral? At what point in our cultural landscape did adoption become a taboo? For as long as I remember, Indian families had many instances of intra-family adoptions. I know of multiple instances in my family, going back to my grandparents generation, that children were adopted or raised by those couples who didnt have children. Fast forward a few decades and here we are in 2018; families move homes to hide this from neighbours and many others are unsure about how to even present this to their peers. And no we are not exaggerating. They do happen! And then of course the constant taunts and bullying that adoptees face because they are adopted.

**Rakesh:** (7:22)

Just before we were going to bring Pari home, we informed our neighbours who were also the owners of the apartment we were living in.. I remember them being very ecstatic about it and aunty giving us sweets to celebrate! I was genuinely touched and amazed with that reaction. Of course, not everyone reacted the same way. I remember a member of extended family asking me if I knew the caste of my child...

**Priya:** (7:54)

Varsha Swamy is an adoptee and an adoption counsellor based in the US. She provides pre and post adoption counselling to both parents and children. We spoke to Varsha about the stigma that families face

**Varsha:** (8:09)

A huge reason that the stigma even comes up is from a lack of awareness, that people have no idea about the adoption community or what adoption is and what goes on in adoptive families. because of lack of information and awareness there is also a lack of sensitivity and from that comes some of these questions that you are just like what are you asking do you not recognize it ? Somebody can be hurt by these questions Just like any other situation apart from adoption where a stigma exist around it and there is lack of information one of the best things that we can do is to use our passion from where our emotions usually get hurt. What happens usually is as a society when we are hurt we shut down , when we shut down there is less information that comes out because if you are shutting down the person who is brought up insensitive comments still doesn't know any better the next day and so they are going to ask another adoptive family even more you know insulting questions so what I have learnt and what I talk to about on a personal or a professional level is to definitely deal with whatever pain you might be experiencing but to allow that thing to power the ability to you to answer somebody's questions we can use a tactic I might agree to disagree with you and if you are willing to listen to me I am gonna provide you with more information.

**Rakesh: (9:43)**

Varsha also talked about the importance of learning and teaching others about positive adoption language. She said that use of words impacts how adoptees view themselves. She says it's equally important for parents to not stigmatise themselves.

**Varsha: (10:00)**

I think adoption language is one of the foremost things that parents need to learn and educate themselves about be it parents who are planning to adopt or parents who have already adopted because the use of words specially certain terms like using 'my own child' or 'the real child' or 'a normal child' can go a very long way in affecting how an adoptee takes in those words. If an adoptee hears a biological child being referred to as these certain questions can be planted in the adoptees minds as to does that make me not your child? does that make me not a real child? does that make me an abnormal child? what does that make me? and such questions can definitely impact the mind of the child when they are trying to grow up be it their identity formation, be it following the secure attachments be it any relation that they build from that point forward. Their confidence might take a hit, their self-esteem might take a hit and it all could be just from the use of very simple language that could you know either make or break a situation. I think it's very important to remember not to use words like oh you are so lucky that you are adopted. To make them feel like you need to be forever indebted, you need to be forever grateful because growing up with this can definitely impact the way you feel about yourself, the way you feel about your relationship with either your parents or with anybody so it's very important for parents to learn this language and to share as far and wide as possible even you know. Maybe the entire family and the extended family been educated but the adoptive child might be having problems because the teachers at school are not educated and they seem to be making comments about adoption that is affecting the way child feels about themselves. So, adoption language is very very important.

A lot of times when I talk to people about my personal life or when I talk to other adoptive family in my profession career I find that most of the times people keep quiet so if I tell a group that he I am adopted everybody goes quiet it is an awkward 10 seconds and then one person might ask one question here and I might be most secure most casual person ready to talk about it but the reason that they are so unsure of what to say and they become uncomfortable is because of the stigma that exist. so I think rather than telling people not to ask adoptees any questions as a rule of thumb or as an overall aspect is to recognise that everybody has a different adoption story some might not experience trauma whatsoever some might experience moderate levels and some might be so severe that they are not ready to talk about it whatsoever. so I think overall probably what we can ask society to do as a whole is to ask the individual hey I've got a couple of questions are you

comfortable to talk about it or I was wondering this and if you're not comfortable let me know. and to open those channels of communication because if anybody approach me personally I would be able to answer anything you wanted to even about maybe a breakup I just something very personal that the next person might not be able to talk about or not be ready to talk about and they would tell you that so I think in order to open communication channels and overcome stigma talk to them find out what they are comfortable talking about but be sensitive about it and if you want to talk to somebody from the adoption community to at least educate yourself on maybe not the full blown thing but at least some level of what adoption language is so your question at least comes across in a sensitive manner.

**Priya: (14:06)**

We asked Varsha if she was ever bullied or made fun of because she was adopted. She told us that she was so comfortable with the knowledge of being adopted as it was not a topic that was hushed away at her home and was an open topic that she didn't realise how her peers perceived adoption.

**Varsha: (14:24)**

Because adoption was a very open topic in my household from a very young age there wasn't a time when i was sad at the dinner table going oh by the way you were adopted etc etc that was the big that reveal to me was not traumatic whatsoever. So as i grew older more information was brought in an age appropriate way so probably earliest were when i am you know i was brought in by a stork and later it would be the you know a toppa amma or a stomach amma and then you have you know me who is your mom and me who is your dad. So i would always recognise they would two set of different parents versus just one. when i was 8 what happened was there was a girl who suddenly caught me off guard and said why are you walking around talking about adoption like it is the best thing like you are so special and so happy do you even know what adoption really means ? and i was like what? and, she said it just means that your parents didn't want you and they threw you in a dustbin why are you so happy about that for? and, i remember just staring at her and i went home i just burst out crying to my mom not knowing what's happening and my mom and my dad also was also roped in because we used to have family meetings we always talked amongst ourselves and they would explain it to me that you know they are people out there who might not understand or who might think it's okay to make these comments and that just because adoption is a part of you in your life just like how maybe our religion is our ethnicity our personal information.

I think it was the first time when I was 8 years old that my parents taught me the concept of filtering so she said you don't necessarily have to walk around with a label on your forehead saying I'm adopted

but I could be I could use and talk about it as and when with the people that I wanted to my close people or my people that I trust, the people that I love and not necessarily walk around with a label on my forehead nor does it mean that it is a secret or I should be ashamed of it in any form or way. So, this sort of balance that they taught me at that point that helped me deal with the fact that there are some people out there who because they don't understand it really well they decide to make pretty hurtful comments about it. but that incident was definitely a moment that I will never forget because it was a turning point in how I viewed because till then everything was special and rainbowy and magical and I think it was the first time somebody like burst the bubble on that happy moment.

I think the one thing that I want to just end with is by saying that adoption is in the plague nor is it a bed of roses. It is very complex issue and I think the key to handling these complexity is awareness and sensitivity.

**Mass media on adoption:** (17:31)

<Audio of Bank Ad>

<Rockstar audio>

< comedian joking about adoption >

**Rakesh:** (19:03)

Were you wondering what they were all about? You just heard three parts of our daily life-advertisements, movies and online entertainment. Insensitive language on adoption, is so common, that not many seem to even realise how they continue to strengthen stereotypes- that an adopted child will always be different from a biological child; will be loved less and has to remain in eternal gratitude towards their parents. That such content can pass through multiple levels of review only shows how deep rooted our ignorance and prejudice against adoption is.

**Priya:** (19:39)

Avinash Kumar heads Families of Joy Foundation a non-profit based in Delhi The NGO brings all stakeholders to adoption on a single platform, offers resources and services in adoption, including counselling across major metros in India. He was until recently a member of CARA steering committee. We spoke to Avinash about the impact of mass media in shaping and conditioning the stereotypes around adoption and how this in turn impacts the parents and their choices

**Avinash:** (20:08)

So I started watching some of the very popular movies right from the 50s and 60s as recent as something in the 2000s and you will be shocked to see there is no positive adoption language, you come across this is an adopted child, the real mother left it, they abandoned it, it is full of those phrases which is pathetic so that is one. Secondly, nobody ever shows or highlights the legal process of adoption -what they

always tend to show is over simplify the process as if one it is a favour to somebody and secondly it is as if you just go out you get a child and you bring it in the home. then there is never ever a focus on telling a child about adoption. So the mindset of the community is one adoption is a remedy or a last resort for somebody trying to build their family it should typically happen after you have exhausted all other options. but the most surprising ones is even in 21st century there is a film called Rockstar and in this film the protagonist says that you know I don't have I have realised somebody told me unless you have pain in life you cannot succeed as an artist what do I do ? I have no pain, I had a good childhood I didn't have this, I don't have that and he says I am not adopted and I was shocked that this can happen in this day and age by a genuine superstar who agrees to deliver such a dialogue saying that I am not even adopted as if it's a curse or its tragedy or travesty that has fallen up on him. And, nobody makes any big deal or hallabuh about it.

**Narration:** (21:47)

When we started our adoption process, we too wanted to choose a child under a certain age group because we believed that it may be difficult to “bond” with an older child.. Many also want children who “look like them” match their skin tone... What this means in absolute numbers is that over 80 percent of parents chose to adopt from this category of 0-2 years, indirectly stigmatising older children and those with special needs. Both these are categories of children we considered, but weren't confident enough to adopt from because of varied reasons- bonding, lack of proper knowledge, facilities for people with special needs... See how stigma is a full circle?

**Priya:** (22:33)

Narration: Nishank heads India's first e-group for prospective adoptive parents and adoptive families called People Group for Child Adoption in India. This is a Google group with over 2000 members and over 1800 in a vibrant Facebook group. The group also meets offline periodically in Delhi. Nishank's group was our first stop when we had decided to adopt and had questions. Just reading the discussions gave us invaluable insights into what was to come. We spoke to Nishank about the group and how he feels it has helped tackle stigma.

**Nishank:** (23:05)

Some of us very strongly felt that this whole facebook group has been helpful in at least breaking the taboo around adoption, the stigma around it that it should not be a hush hush thing that people should be more vocal about it there is nothing wrong that they are doing so at least in that ways facebook has played a more catalyst role. “and somewhere the adoption meets have also helped in big way

I think the whole this community thing evolves around the fact that you can relate to some people, some people come out more forward to help you out which also gives you that emotional support which i don't think an specialized adoption service can provide you that so i feel these kind of support groups at least helps you to say connect with a few of them that really helps you in carrying forward your adoption journey.

**Rakesh: (23:58)**

Like Nishank says, the onus of sensitising people belongs to each one of us. We only hope, that you, our listeners, will take some part of this episode forward and hold open conversations about adoption and normalise it. We don't want to be praised and we definitely don't want to be shamed and we ask for this for the sake of our children.

**Priya: (24:27)**

As discussed earlier, mass media does not educate people about the adoption process. In fact it has propagated the myth that you can simply pick up a child who has been abandoned off the road or off a trash bin and take them home. This is not the case. There is a legal process to follow and laws that regulate adoption. In the coming episode, we will bring to you an interview with Colonel Deepak Kumar, CEO of the body that regulates adoption in India- CARA.

**Rakesh: (24:59)**

We are touched by the response we received from many of you and thank you all for the support. We received a lot of messages on Facebook, WhatsApp and other social media. This is what one of the listeners Sugandha had to say

**Sugandha: (25:13)**

“the moment when Rakesh said ki jab hospital main father's name pucha and without hesitation I gave mine I don't know I cried... I am an emotional wreck right now.. Interviews are nice it is nice to hear people talk directly from heart.”

**Priya: (25:32)**

Starting this week we are starting new blog series in partnership with The Logical Indian, so please send your articles to us at [hello@sunoindia.com](mailto:hello@sunoindia.com). You can reach us on Facebook, twitter or Instagram. As independent producers we rely a lot on you to spread the word. If you like our podcast, please take time and let your friends and family know about it. Please use #DearPari in your communication on social media.

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

**Pari: (26: 17)**

Amma, Nanna, Pari.