

Episode 4: Identity
Date: 22 October 2018

Priya:[00:00] Dear Pari, remember the story we told you about the day the judge declared you ours? Well, that day was truly a momentous day for us. But deep down, we also knew that we have now given you a whole new identity while erasing what little identity you had before.. Only we know your name before it became Pari and we will share that tiny piece of information with you when you are old enough. But we don't know if your birth mother or father gave you that name or if it was the adoption home.. We were aware of what giving you a new name meant the day we got the foster agreement... but it sank in only the day we got your birth certificate. I remember, holding it, looking at it and wondering aloud, how we would have that conversation of who you were before you became our Pari.

Rakesh:[00:52] 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:[1:26] One of the foremost concerns that most parents, including us, have when we decide to adopt is that of identity of the child. How one shapes it beyond the labelling of an adopted child and what, we as parents, have to do to ensure it is a fairly smooth journey. In this episode we will bring to you perspectives on shaping the identity of an adoptee and why it is important to have honest and open communication line with children who have been adopted. To discuss this aspect from a psychological point of view, we reached out to Saraswati Bhaskar, an adoption counsellor based out of Chennai. She is an adoptive parent herself and has been an adoption counsellor for over 16 years now. We had a wide ranging discussion on counselling for adoptive parents, adoptees as well as on the topic of identity, which you will hear in this episode as well as in later episodes.

Saras:[2:17] the individuality and identity is important for either a biological child or an adopted child. The biological child there is genetic coding you can always say your grandfather used to get angry or your father was short tempered so you are you know kind of deal but here there is no nothing to validate support that thing. Before going into the psychological aspect i can share my personal experience with my daughter. At that time, they gave a folder and we saved it as the most precious information because that is the only folder that we have to show as her identity. With regards to psychological aspect of it, she we have always told her when she was you know she wanted to find for search for roots we are there to support however she will do it only after she finishes her +2 or when she turns 18 as a major until then she is our responsibility or my responsibility we told her. so when she turned 18 we gave that folder to her and this is what it is and if you want go to the agency go for it and we will take in all the costs that is involved. That is when she told us ma the only identity i know is with you people why would I look for someone who chose to move on with her life? why would i want to look for her? She made me cry at that time. I really was touched by her in fact it happened in panel discussion that happened in Bangalore. We both were invited to talk and she was sitting in the teenager's panel. The same question when it was asked what about your identity? Do you want to search for roots is when she told that no i don't need to because the only identity I know is from day

1 is my mom and dad and if my birth mother chose to move on with her life, why shouldn't I? so that was the closure she had for her but not all people will have .

Priya:[4:25] So for parents like us who want to at some point we will want to reveal and when we are asked this question but why did they give up ? why did my mother give me up ? or why did my father give me up? how would you advice parents to tackle those kind of questions about the why and who am i? that kind of questions.

Saras:[4:47] The only thing you know is from the psychological point the birth parents chose not to destroy the child. why? because she loved the child, she wanted a better home for the child, she realised that she cannot be providing the best care but certainly someone responsible that the agency will find. those are the things because at no time we put down the birth parents. you can always say this I don't know the background but what I know is your mother must have really loved you not to get dispose you off, to kill you, to put an end to your life. For her, your life was more precious and she believed that someone more responsible and affordable can take care of you.

Rakesh:[5:39] We also spoke to Saras about what those adopting older children need to know and keep in mind to make the transition easier. She says that mandatory counselling for older children and parents would be very beneficial as it will help with the child adjusting with the family and vice versa. Col Deepak spoke about this in our previous episode and said that lack of counselling facilities was leading to huge number of disruptions in adoptions of older children.

Saras:[6:09] Because children are used to or have a pattern some habits and as I told you an example of a child being raised in a Catholic orphanage being given for adoption to Hindu Brahmin family what kind of the struggles that child went through and the parents went through. so the challenges number one is matching the family background, the religion, and the food practices vegetarian or non-vegetarian these are all very important as much as it sounds kind of you know petty matters it does have an impact. the second thing is in giving the children for adoption at the older age I also had an agency here in Chennai where they would prepare the child for adoption so when the matching is being done while one side the prospective parents are coming and I am evaluating them. they also bring the child to evaluate the child's emotional readiness and prepare the child if possible so we groom the child also on assimilating in the new environment and the challenges that the adults when the parent choose to adopt and older child is also the assimilation process.

Priya:[7:42] We wanted to get an adoptee's perspective on this topic and so we spoke to Varsha Swamy. Some of you may remember her from episode 2. Varsha is an adoption counsellor and an adoptee herself. She is Saras Bhaskar's daughter and currently resides in US. I had read about Saras and Varsha a few years ago in a newspaper article and their story stayed with me -as it was a positive story of de-stigmatising adoption while also breaking the common misconceptions around disclosure etc. They are also among the very few adoption counsellors in India who have first-hand experience in the topic. So we felt it only apt to bring their professional and personal experiences into this podcast.

We asked Varsha if knowing she was adopted had an impact on her sense of identity and individuality.

Varsha:[8:31] I asked numerous questions and it started as early as four years old all the way till six years so that's imagine every single night my parents had listened to you know all of the various questions that I had ask them as to was i not wanted? And why did they leave me? Was I not good enough? What was it about them or what was it about me? Why did you choose me? You know in Tamil **thopa** means stomach and Amma means Mother. so as early as I can remember my mother always used to refer to my biological mother as thopa amma and she would be my amma amma so that was the very first time that was able to recognise that unlike everybody around me who had won mother I had two. And, so I would be able to differentiate between the two and then be able to ask the number of questions did. And, in general identity information starts with the multiple questions that people have you know for somebody who was not adopted they would just ask questions about maybe their ethnicity, their religion, what they want to be? Who they want to be? for me most of the questions that I asked to myself or to my parents were literally about my adoption and I think that formed a huge part of who I am today and how I am today and have a view situations, the relationships that I am in are all centred around the answers that i got and I think from a personal standpoint I have nothing but happiness and gratitude for my parents for not shutting me down when I had these questions because a huge part of why I am comfortable and confident and secure in my relationships today it's because of the time that they took to answer all of these questions. Because all of them would not have been rational I was a 4 year old or 5 year old just spitting out whatever came to my mind and they took the time to answer my questions that played a huge difference in how my identity and everything played out.

Rakesh:[10:50] Another aspect that we were keen to know more about was if Varsha was curious about her birth story and how her parents responded to this.

Varsha:[10:59] I think the curiosity pretty much came when I was a teenager I have a very close knit family put on my mom's side and my dad's side so when I saw People talking about you know Oh! Your looks are from your mom and like my mom's side literally they are four sisters my mum has three siblings and all of my multiple cousins all of them look the same, talk to same, act the same and obviously through my environment I obviously have a lot of similar traits but genetically and biologically in the background I would always have doubts as to how how would my parents look? how would my mom look? do I also look like her? what mannerisms do I have? so these are questions that I always had a good wonder if I ever got a chance to meet her I would want to know basically three things what does she look like? do I look like her? is she doing ok? and genetically what's my history? like you get to see both sides of your family you see diabetes etc you are like oh okay well that's probably not my genetic history then what is? so these were mainly the three areas that I had questions in but not so much so to be like okay let's go down the area of search. I actually wasn't really that interested perhaps because I was not necessarily interested just regularly or might have been because I was so secure in my relationship with my adopted parents that i never really had a need to go out and find out what was there beyond that. so I think in my mind more of just putting things at ease Just being like I'm sure there ok and I wish them the best I think about them all the time and just wish good things for them and I'm ok with not necessarily knowing. But when I did bring it up When I Was a teenager my parents were very supportive and said whatever needs to happen can happen if we need to go to the organisation if we need to talk to people

if we need to start process we are there with you and ultimately I was the one who decided that I wasn't necessarily interested in that search.

Rakesh:[13:14] Varsha also shared with us the importance of acknowledging the birth parents. She said it would be detrimental to the development of a child's identity to not acknowledge that aspect of their past and to not shy away from answering questions linked to their birth story.

Varsha:[13:30] When you are adopted you always need to remember that it's a Triad. first it has the adoptive child, the biological parents and the adoptive parents. It forms a triangle, the second that you try to form a line and cut out one part of the Triangle you end up with the problem because in neglecting the biological parents you are neglecting a huge part of that child's identity, history and everything which is essentially their birthright. My story did not start here I had a story before my adoptive parents came into the picture and being able to openly talk about that story with the family that you have now which is the adoptive family is a huge part of forming that secure relationship with your child so I have numerous memories of my mom and I talking about you know my mom would obviously say you look so beautiful and I think that I am very sure I have images of your birth mum I am sure she has the same long neck and dusky skin and I am sure she has the same beautiful hair that you do and all of this positive commentary made me feel so good to know that my mom is secure about the relationship and that made me feel secure to talk to her about it that made me feel secure to you know look at my mum in the same beautiful like that my adoptive mother views my biological mother in and to be able to say you know I wonder how she is doing at any given moment we could be eating lunch and I wouldn't have to talk to her about it like it was something that I was scared to talk to her about or protecting her feelings because she made it very clear that she is forever grateful to my biological parents. she is forever happy to talk tell me about them and that formed the path that I could have asked all these questions on that formed the environment that made me feel comfortable

Priya:[15:39] A common belief among parents wanting to adopt is that the younger a child, the better it is for parents-as it makes it easier for them to mould their identity because the child has no memory/recollection of his/her past. So the child has no trauma. But multiple studies have shown that a child as young as 4-5 months old senses being separated. Also the trauma of rejection/separation can hit adoptees at a later stage and time too. We spoke to Varsha about this aspect and how or what leads to this.

Varsha:[16:10] I think adoption is a topic under which multiple different lives and scenarios exist so some people were adopted I can even say fortunate to be adopted at a very young age before maybe even their memory like maybe a three month old or one-year-old where they don't necessarily remember everything and then you have a fairly older adoption at 5 years old and 9 years old where they remember the adoption agency they might even remember the adoptive parents. because across the world you have closed adoption systems and open adoption systems and and it is literally different for everybody so I think overall it's first of all important to remember the across scenarios adoptions are different, so it's important to also remember to deal with them differently. secondly the concepts of abandonment and rejection come in or you can call them trauma where as an adult we find it difficult as a full blown, full grown we find it difficult to deal with the concepts of rejection and abandonment. With all of the life experience, with all of the life support that we have in our lives

today so i think it's important for people to remember that as early as you now 4 years old if you suddenly have questions of why did she leave me? And, who? What was wrong with me? Why couldn't she keep me with her ? And, I should say 'they' why couldn't they keep me with them? You know, was I no good enough? and what made you guys choose me? were you compelled to choose me or was I some last minute option because biological kids didn't work out? fertility didn't work out and so you just you now picked me up from somewhere? So, a lot of these questions do come up and how parents deal with them are extremely important and also comes up where in parents say okay if they were adopted really young maybe if I don't help them whatsoever just give them all of the love and nourishment then they wouldn't even know they were adopted. They wouldn't have to deal with rejection and abandonment. However, professionally and personally having spoken to multiple adoptees from honestly all over the world, most of the times somewhere or the other either slip ups happen with either the family themselves or extended families they end up having doubts. They look different, they act different and most of the times, adoptees say you know I have a feeling or I know and in that instance if you missed the chance to tell an adoptee early on what happens is eventually they might find out and that lead through all kinds of identity problems, relationship problems because of lack of trust, the you know the code of trust is broken between the parents and the child and dealing with that trauma is in fact much much worse. And, above and beyond everything it is the birth right of the child to know what the story is because like i mentioned before the adopted parents came into the picture there was more to the story in this person's life and if you choose adoption you need to be able to recognize this factor and provide that because it is the child's birth right to know what it is and to also be ready to deal with what the entire story entails, the trauma that might come and to help your child through that versus hiding it from them in the name or pretence of protecting them.

Rakesh:[19:59] Internationally, Right to Know is considered as an important part of one's Right to Life and Right to Privacy. The right to know one's identity has also been guaranteed in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1993 Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in respect of Inter-country Adoption. In India, as per adoption regulations passed in 2017, it is the duty of each specialised adoption agency to keep the information about every child's adoption including source and circumstances in which child was admitted to an adoption home. The guidelines also state that children under 18 can jointly, along with their parents, apply for this information and those above 18 must be assisted in their root search by the child welfare committees. But one wonders if these government bodies actually have the resources to help carry out this critical search for an adoptee's identity. As a parent, i also wonder often, if 15 or 18 years down the line, our daughter decides to know more about her identity, will she actually find all the information?

Priya:[21:15] Our identity completes us. As individuals, we have strong regional identity, religious identity and even one defined by our caste and class. One's identity may seem like an abstract concept but, in reality it often evokes strong emotions. So, imagine the confusion an adoptee feels when they find out that they had another identity which was erased to be given a new one. As we heard through the course of this episode, adoptive identity is developed by a variety of factors such as the degree of openness in the adoption process, how the child views the concept of adoption, and also the age at which child was adopted.. For an adoptee, it may be one that they accept with ease or a label that's stuck-leaving them with more questions than before. In our next

episode we bring to you voices of two adoptees with varied life experiences in their journey of adoption.

Rakesh:[22:18] In September, Suno India organised a Flash Fiction writing contest. We invited submissions on the themes of patience, revelation and rebirth as part of this contest. Our jury included Deepa Balsavar, an award-winning children's author, mother of an adoptee herself and Sumitra Raghavan, author of children's books working at Flintobox. You will now hear the winning entry 'Arrival' written by Protima Sharma read by Deepa Balsavar.

Deepa:[22:47] Deepa Balsavar reading the flash fiction winner story. You can read the Protima Sharma Arrival [here](#).

Priya:[26:50] 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.

Rakesh:[26:58] Also, don't forget to check out some interesting articles written by our contributors at blog.sunoindia.in

Priya:[27:05] 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:[27:32] Amma Nanna Pari

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