

Episode 5: The Heart Speaks

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Rakesh:[0:00] When we started this podcast, we were keen to make sure that the voices of Indian adoptees were heard. While the taboo of adoption still exists, it is being broken slowly and steadily by many parents out there who advocate for adoption as a way to a family. But not a lot of adoptees' journeys are out there. So, we felt that this series wouldn't be complete without these voices. In this episode we spoke with two adoptees with varied life experiences.

Priya:[0:46] 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.

Rakesh:[1:17] The first story that you will hear is that of Eshita. 26 year old Eshita is from Delhi and currently lives in the US.

Eshita:[1:26] I was adopted when I was 2 and a half. I don't remember anything from that time of my life but yes my parents have told me the story about how I was adopted. They had my brother who is a biological child and they wanted a daughter so they did not want to go through the biological route so they decided to adopt and I was actually born in Rohtak. I was taken in by an orphanage in a small town near Ambala. I think I came home on 3rd March '93 so that is my homecoming and we celebrate it every year. I have had a pretty normal journey I would say because I have had fights with parents, fights with brother and I grew up in a normal kind of a way and I remember my mum telling me that initially when I came into the house I did not express myself much so I was I did not speak much did not say anything but I used to smile and when I was with my brother I used to laugh a lot and he used to say that come mumma see she is laughing and as soon as my mom or dad used to enter the room I used to stop laughing you know because I was comfortable with my brother. I think after a few months I warmed up to everybody and then it was pretty normal after that and I have yeah my parents are the most important people in my life and my brother we have secrets that we don't share with anybody we have our own sort of bro-sis code that you know like all normal so it is nothing it has been a pretty normal journey for me.

My parents are my parents like those are I don't categorize them that these are my adopted parents and I have biological parents that I want to go back to or you know just meet them or some I know some adoptees have that curiosity and that is great if you find peace in that if you want to go back find out that is great it is just not me. I am not curious I am happy with all the information that I have right now and I am at peace with it.

Priya:[3:28] In the initial years she told us that being adopted made no difference to her sense of identity. But it was only later, when her parents were looking for a partner for her, did she realise how being adopted is still a 'label' and not the norm.

Eshita:[3:42] So I think when the time came when you know we were looking I was looking to get married we had put on the online matrimonial profile for me and that is when and I was very clear from the beginning that I will tell whichever family I am going to be honest with them that you know I am adopted. so that is when my bubble broke because then I realized that it is not normal for them. For people you know if they are seeing okay this girl is going to marry our son they are like oh they are a little hesitant and you it is a sort of a taboo in India that you know she is adopted he is adopted and that is when I got a lot of questions and I am like really people think this way because I never experienced that before so they ask random questions like they thought that something is abnormal about me so that is why I am adopted and I am like that is not the case I am a pretty normal child.

One of the questions that my mum was asked was that were you having difficulty getting pregnant that is why you adopted and my mum was like no that was a choice that me and husband made that we wanted a daughter and that is why we adopted. It was very hard for them to believe that somebody would do this out of choice, oh you could get pregnant but you did not have a biological child that is weird. Why would you not want your own blood? They're like in the end she is not your blood she is as much as our child like our biological child right the difficult part was to explain to them that yes as much as the family that you are. i met my husband and he was obviously very accepting, his family was very accepting so that gave me a sense of trust you know that if they accept the adoption aspect of my life they will accept you know they will accept other aspects of my life as well

Rakesh:[5:32] Like we mentioned in earlier episodes, lot of families in India are scared to disclose to their child that they are adopted. The fear or reluctance stems from stigma and stereotypes linked to adoption. We asked Eshita, as an adoptee, what she feels about this

Eshita:[5:50] It might sound a little harsh but I think that is the worst thing you can do to a child, like if I am growing up thinking that I am somebody and then suddenly one fine day somebody tells this oh you are not this, you are actually this I would be blown like I would be what I trusted the parents or the person you trust the most in the entire world right? I think you should tell the child from the very beginning, I was told via books via you know meeting other families or platforms like the one you have, you know people meeting other people meeting other adoptees so I was always made aware of it. It was never hidden from my brother or from me so I think definitely definitely disclose to your

child that he or she is adopted because they will become comfortable if you are comfortable,

Priya:[6:53] Eshita told us how her parents handled questions on her birth story and adoption. She said the key to these conversations was honesty and being open about her journey.

Eshita:[7:04] I think mummy papa were always very honest about everything even if i had questions about you know where i was born? where i was they actually took me to the orphanage when i was in 8th standard and i met my caretaker there i did not remember anything you know that is a part of me and it will always be a part of me so it was nice to go and see where i was living for 2 years and who all took care of me so they were on that journey with me they are like if you think you will be more comfortable, they asked me before hand do you want to go back to the orphanage i was like yeah i want to go check it out and see how it is and even if i had questions, they were always honest about it, always open to it, they never said ki you can't ask this question or when you grow up we will tell you or something like that, they knew that this is my level of understanding and this is how we should tell her this is what it is and never hide anything from me so i think if your child ask you a question even if you think your child is not ready for it you can still you know try to make him understand the best you can, just don't lie about it or say that this is not an important part of your life and this is not important right now so then the child will get a feeling of oh you do not care about me even if this is an important part in my life than why is it not important to you? so i think mummy papa were always honest, always open to any question i had always open to you know always ask my permission before they wanted to disclose it to anybody, bhaiya used to ask me before if he wanted to tell any of his friends somebody or the other he was close to

Priya:[9:00] Some parents adopt out of choice, some because they are unable to conceive and have a desire for a child but then some adopt for reasons beyond these. We spoke a 40-year old adoptee who believes that she was adopted for the sole reason of fulfilling her mother's need for attention and love from her father. Since she doesn't wish to disclose her identity, for the purpose of this podcast, we are calling her Kavita. Kavita was adopted when she was a 9 month or 10 month old baby and taken to another country. Growing up, it wasn't disclosed to her that she was adopted and it was only when her family shifted to India was it mentioned by a cousin. She was repeatedly lied to about this by her parents. We warn you that parts of her story are disturbing, so please take this as a trigger warning from us.

Kavita:[9:49] My journey is a little complex because it started when I was abroad in another country where I was taken after adoption... no one told me anything but later when we did shift to India permanently, cousin mentioned to me. After which there was another person who had some problem with my parents- So basically there was a tiff with them and she screamed out to me I hope you

know that you are adopted. When I questioned my parents, they said no she is lying. later in my teens, my so-called-mom decided to make up a story for some weird reason and am a logical person-and I didn't see the reason for her making up this story of why and how I was born-claiming I was premature, then she says your birth took place in a toilet early morning and lot of things that didn't really make any sense.

Through Facebook, I connected with an old classmate of mine from the country that I was in during my childhood and she said do you remember that when you were in second standard and you told the teacher that your parents you know beat you a lot and that you were adopted the teacher being Indian just shushed me and told me to shut up and go and sit in your place and don't ever talk about this.so I never really got a clear picture and it is only when I started questioning people like close to people close to my mother- about who i really am and stuff like that I found out that yes that there were lot of gaps in my story and that's when I started investigating on my own and piecing things together the biggest red flag is the address on my birth certificate which is for an ashram in Mumbai and I need to point out here I wasn't treated their like their blood. they used to fight and I used to get beaten up for some reason. I can give up some example. a piece of a strip of wood was taken, rock salt was put on it and I was to kneel on that for 4-6 hours and I had to stand up without falling down and if I fell down I would be beaten again. I would be beaten with leather belts, till the buckles didn't fly off of the belt , and then wood hangers would be used to beat me and they used to beat me to make me stop crying and then a point came in my life when I just stopped crying and I just used to count the beatings. the family on my father's side never treated like me their own or as their own. They used to call me local name which meant adoptee- in the local language and the latter part was when property was refused to my father because I was dirty blood- so he didn't get his ancestral property because I was dirty blood.

Rakesh:[13:20] Kavita told us that she wondered, all her life, if it was because she was adopted that she was mistreated or if their own biological child too would have had to suffer the same fate?

Kavita:[13:32] When I look back now, yes my father wasn't ready for me. He was lied to about who I am and where I came for my mother's ulterior motive. he wasn't ready for a child and was pushed onto him. She has even said this to me with her own mouth- I never gave you bath, I never took care of you I never dressed you up, I never hugged you, I never kissed you. I never cuddled you, I made your father do it so that by loving you he would start loving me. initially I do remember maybe when I was 4-5 they used to fight, hit each other and when they couldn't do that they would start hitting me. At that time I didn't understand. I always thought I did something wrong I was told you are too short, you are too dark, you are too ugly, your voice is bad...look at the other children look at this one that one they are all better than you are worthless,

you are nothing.so you know i don't know if he would have done it with his own child.

Rakesh:[14:42] Kavita told us another shocking incident in her life . When we heard that we couldn't comprehend how parents can do something like to a child.

Kavita:[15:01] It was Christmas or new year so someone came with a box of quality walls chocolates box so yes I didn't touch for 2 weeks or so and one day temptation got the better of me I opened took two chocolates I hid it under my pillow unfortunately my mom came to dust my bed she discovered the chocolates. she started thrashing me. I was alone with my mother she started hitting me, thrashing me and banging me against the wall she had my hair in her hand and banging me on the wall all of a sudden she put me on the floor, her legs on my chest had her whole body weight on my chest she took her hand she covered my nose my mouth and said I don't need you anymore I got what I wanted in my life I don't care whether you live or die and I just remember couldn't breath and was seeing black.

Priya:[16:08] Fortunately for Kavita, the building manager of the apartment block rang the bell just then and she says this bell saved her life. Kavita struggles with her identity- not just as an adoptee but also in terms of the culture she was initially raised in and the one she is now having to accept and embrace in India.

Kavita:[16:26] My identity I was taken to other country when I was a kid. I was brought up with the know how's of that country. There was not too much tradition and culture to worry about. I was comfortable there. I was known as an Indian living there when we moved back I didn't know the local language of the state I was taken to, so I had a problem because nobody wanted to talk to me . They used to be call me madam hifi and foreigner and no one wanted to talk to me and through school and college did not have many friends. I used hurt myself, -there were many attempts of suicide. May be, now I am working on it so it is a struggle, very big internal struggle but. I don't think am good enough. I don't think anyone should take the trouble of loving me. I don't think anyone would take trouble to be me friends.

I also believe that you know, whatever I do is not right. I cannot say no and this has been very very bad thing for me because as a teenager I was a mess because I couldn't say no. It is easier for people to pretend that you are bad person only to serve themselves of the guilt of things they did to you. I believe this. My parents always told me, that I was the bad one, I was bad, I was worthless, I was ugly, I didn't have a good voice, I am not good enough and today I realise because they did that to me to cover up the wrong they did to me. Even on her deathbed, I went and asked her, you are going now, tell me the truth, at least get it off your chest before you leave but she shut her face and turned her face as in I am not going to tell you I am going to take this secret why I brought you, how I brought you, from where I was brought you to the grave, .. am struggling with my identity--

Rakesh:[20:03] Kavita strongly believes and advocates for mandatory psychological evaluation of parents before a child is put up for adoption. This is something that Saras Bhaskar, the adoption counsellor we spoke to in our previous episode felt should be done too. Only last year, after the tragic death of Sherin Mathews, did the government of India make psychological evaluation mandatory in intercountry adoptions. In domestic adoption, pre-adoption counselling is suggested but not made mandatory.

Kavita:[20:35] First and foremost believe that even before a person is allowed to adopt- a psychological evaluation has to be done- massive psychological investigation on that couple and if any behavioural imbalances are noticed that couple should be not be given a child and if any couple is given a child and that child is abused then they should be in jail because you cannot you have any other right but to love another person's child. You cannot hit them, you cannot hurt them, you cannot hate them if you can't love them please give them back.

I don't want this on any other child and if anyone is adopting. Inter country adoption should never happen because the colour of the skin does matter abroad. Trust me, it does, I don't care who says what. . I mean look at the case of that kid Sherin Mathews in US, it's not justified. Not justified at all.

Priya:[21:39] Kavita is searching for her birth parents but all she has to support her search is one birth certificate which points to an ashram in another city in Maharashtra. People who were in the know of her adoption have told her that she was brought from another state before she was in the ashram. For Kavita, her birth story is something that has become all-consuming and she is scared that her biological parents might be dead. So far she has had no support from CARA for this root search.

Kavita:[22:07] I would love to meet at least one of them and just get their answer to one question that is really bothering me is was I robbed from them or did they give me up..if I was snatched away from my mother and she didn't really know and she was really worried about me then I think I take whatever happened to me as something that was supposed to happen, I won't say destiny or fate.. But yea if they made a decision to give me up for a better life then they need to know how good my life because they had no right to do that..."

Rakesh:[23:04] We would like to thank Eshita and Kavita for sharing their stories with us. Adoption is complex. We agree that psychological evaluation must be made mandatory not just with inter-country adoptions but even within India. But, we are also aware of the lack of skilled manpower to carry out such an evaluation in India. So comes the dilemma- do we, as parents and those seeking better lives for children, ask for better systems in place-which may increase the wait time or do we think about getting children out of institutional care and into families, sometimes families who may not even be right for them? We don't have an answer to this question and we only hope, that through this podcast, we initiate a discussion around it.

Priya:[23:51] These two stories are very stark. In Eshita's story, she was informed about her adoption in an age appropriate manner, giving her time to process and understand what it meant for her. In Kavita's case, the truth about her adoption was revealed to her by others other than her own parents. She was lied to repeatedly about her story and worse, abused, leaving her hurt and confused which had a long lasting impact on her life. Despite their different experiences, both Eshita and Kavita had only one thing to say about disclosure- don't hide it from your children. In our next episode, we will be talking about why and how to disclose to your child about adoption.

Priya:[24:34] 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 are partnering with The Logical Indian to raise awareness about adoption. If you would like to contribute please let us know! You can reach out to Suno India via 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.

Rakesh:[25:02] We welcome you to subscribe for free on our website www.sunoindia.in. Subscribers will receive the episodes as soon as they are released and will also have access to bonus tracks in coming days! You can also find us on Apple Podcasts, Soundcloud and any other podcasting app of your choice.

Priya:[25:22] 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:[25:43] Amma Nanna Pari