

## Episode 8: Closing the triad

Date: 23 December 2018

**Rakesh:[0:00]** Dear Pari, we love that you love books and listening to stories. One day, few years down the line, you will hear this podcast and have more questions and we hope by then we will have more answers.

**Rakesh:[1:02]** In this episode we talk to Suganda, who is a prospective single mother who gives us an insight into the unique challenges faced by single parents.

And we will end this episode by speaking to an important part of the adoption triad-the birth parent. We spoke with a birth mother whom we have chosen not to name, will tell the listeners why she gave her children for adoption. It was a very difficult decision for us to record this part of the episode. We request our listeners not to judge her just based on this interview because her life is more than just this issue. And as parents who have adopted, while we are thankful for our children, let us acknowledge that adoption is also trauma. For the child and for the birth parent.

Firstly let us talk to Suganda and understand why does she want to adopt?

**Sugandha:[1:54]** I always wanted to adopt I cannot even remember when this idea came, earliest I can think at least when I was 13 years old I decided that I wanted to adopt whether I marry whether I do not marry, I will have one child at least which I will bring home through adoption. it was in fact suggested to me as I said very strong minded family, they were in fact open to the idea that I stay single and I go for an IVF but then I decided to stay with adoption, I don't think my DNA or my genes have something great that I would rather overlook a child who is waiting for a parent and then procreate so all this contributed to my decision to register as a single PAP.

**Priya:[2:43]** Do you think that is doubly difficult being a single mother in the society even if you have the support of your near and dear?

**Sugandha:[2:51]** Yes being a single mom is it comes with its own challenges, you know you can have all the support in the world but at the end of the day it is you raising a child so one of the doubts that I have festered for very long was if I bring a child in my life am I doing something good for myself and the child or am I depriving the child the love of a father? when she hits teenage or her hormones are raging will she turn back and say why did you adopt me? these are some of the major things that I wanted to decide who will be the main influencers in my child's life, who are the people whom I want her to look up to as these are healthy relationships, this is how things should work you know people who treat you equally, people who do not discriminate on the basis of gender then there are practical concerns these were some things which definitely came from family and peers, who will you raise a child on single income, As in work wise physical responsibility wise when I am out working, who will take care of my kid? if my kid is ill is there someone to take care of her? or do I have to be there 24x7 and that is not a very ideal situation in the long term. How do I split my time versus time with my baby because when you have two parents you can coordinate better on that. There are always social presumptions about single parents, the doctor who gave me a medical certificate, medical fitness certificate for CARA registration told me that she knows 4 single parents who have already applied but not got the child, CARA does not give children to single parents and I tried convincing her that it is not the case but then these are people who are educated and you know maybe stakeholders in the system,. I am part of a group with it is a support group for single aps and paps, somebody we were just discussing the challenges, single mom's face and somebody mentioned that a 5 year old told her 5 year old girl that your mom is not married so she has picked you up from garbage because you cannot have kids outside marriage, that is not what the child was speaking that is what the child heard from adults so as single parents and definitely more so for single moms because in India having a child more than being

questionable becomes a sign of your character, this kind of things can hurt the child and parent both so this is one of the major things I would like people to change that you know be aware and be a bit more sensitive We bring the child in our life, the child is also bringing us in equal amount in his or her life so I believe that single parents have to manage lot more physically, emotionally, financially than couples

**Rakesh:[5:59]** So do you think society has become more accepting of single parents no?

**Sugandha:[6:03]** I will say I have seen both sides, I know schools which have been very helpful to single parents and I know of schools which are absolutely uncooperative again this is from the discussion we were having on a single parents group, a very reputed school in Delhi NCR forced the mother to write a name for father's name column in the child school admission so she said I am a single mother, this child does not have a father, so they said that is fine you fill anything, what is anything? Your parents are the first identity you relate to how can a school expect you to write anything and then solutions are being provided so a lot of people said that they wrote their own name in both the columns but see our courts are progressing they have said that passports don't need father's name or birth certificate at times I think one of the high court's said it doesn't need father's name but schools are where you are moulding the next generation and if you are not open to introducing new ideas I don't know what you are doing but I still think there is a lot that society needs to change, I way I referred to the child who said your mother must have picked you from garbage, it is our responsibility to make the kids aware. We don't have to tell them family is mummy papa bhai behen, we need to tell them family is whoever stands with you and whoever cares the world for you, family can be a single mom, family can be a single dad, family can be aunts and uncles, family can be people who are not related to you by blood, there are friends who will stand by you more than your family will and with the whole LGBT issue being brought to like now I think we should be more open like the way if you are seeing in the US and the other countries you see people introducing their kids to all kinds of families, families which can have 2 mothers or 2 fathers also so somewhere I feel that we need to make our kids aware of the changes in the world and if we don't we are actually putting them up for a set back because as when they grow up they will be in for a shock that the world has changed around them and they are not able to adapt.

Single woman with a child, people will always look with suspicion that is not the case that single dads has to face at least, no questions have quick to come are you divorced? is this an unwed mother? people tend to look down upon you. 2017 amendment which officially introduced adoption leaves, it provides for adoption leaves only for adoptive mothers and not for adoptive fathers, so in case of a single father he is getting not even leaves. because they don't get any leaves so I know single fathers who have taken annual leaves and then took maybe one month of work from home but they had parents to support them, not everybody has that. So yes I don't think authorities as well as society is treating single parents equally.

**Priya:[9:16]** In terms of a single mother or a single father, you raised a very important point of on how if it's a single mother then the questions are very quick to come umm but maybe it's not the same case in terms of single fathers and do you think that is because of obviously how the society is shaped

**Sugandha:[9:29]** I do believe, we still look at a man sharing household work as well as helping out the wife, we don't see it as two adults sharing household work, it is always help. To be very frank I know a lot of people, educated working in corporates who say that they don't expect their husbands to help and whatever help they get from their husbands is great. People still think that raising a child is primarily a woman's role, if a man loves kids too much, he is not macho enough he is feminine, he is too emotional, estrogen high and you will start labelling them and then yes as I said if a single man decides to adopt is it seen as something great, but yes it is seen as something almost divine that he is doing for the child.

**Priya:[10:33]** We asked Suganda what changes are required in the society to make the lives of single parents easier.

**Sugandha:[10:40]** So I will start with the basic foundation. Adoption is not charity and adoption is not the last resort to have a family, it is an active choice which individuals are making may they be couples, may they be single parents and it should be seen as that only. I cannot tell you how many people actually congratulate me with Oh my god you are doing such a good deed for the kid and I have to tell them no I am doing it for myself I want the love of a child, I want to bring up a child I am not doing any charity, there are easier ways of doing a charity. So change in social perceptions would be on top of my list. So one of the changes I would like to see is an equal parental leave irrespective of the gender of the adoptive parent, irrespective of their marital status, irrespective of the age of the child and whoever is bringing the child home needs time to bond with the child, the child needs time to bond with the parent.

CARA has decided to give a bump of 6 months on date of registration to single mothers who are above 40 years of age. I don't really understand the logic behind it. Are we still working on the perception that the single mother over 40 years is lonely and needs a child sooner than a single mother or a single father who is not 40 years and is not covered under this bump? why is this not given to all single parents? why is this not given to men in general? so again you know our policy makers are trying to bring in good things but I don't think they are very inclusive.

**Priya:[12:43]** In India a lot of couples who adopt choose to not disclose to their child that they have adopted. Do you think that luxury is there in the case of say a single parent?

**Sugandha:[12:56]** I strongly disagree about the point of hiding a child's identity from them be it with couples, be it with single parents it should not be done. Yes it gets difficult for single parents if they wish to hide the fact of adoption for reasons best known to them because they will have to lie a lot they will have to come up with creative ideas about how they brought the baby into their life, were they divorced? were they married? did the other parent die? did they find the baby somewhere? how did the baby come to their life? Make it an active choice that I wanted you and I brought you into my life with all the will power and all the happiness that I could .

**Priya:[13:52]** Birth parents. This part of our adoption triad is hated and loved equally by adoptive parents. They are a source of great pain and mystery to many many adoptees and with India following a closed adoption system, often are also the ones whose voices are not heard and are thought to be important. With power of reproduction glorified so much, one wonders why a woman would give up a child whom she carried for 9 months? The quintessential filmy dialogue 'maine tumhe 9 mahine paala hain'. And then what about the father? Why does he allow his children to be given up? Or does the man force the woman to give up the child- as is the popular narrative? Is it poverty or patriarchy or mixture of both? When we set out to do this podcast, we were keen to have this perspective -that of a birth parent. We weren't sure if we would get this voice. I mean where are we supposed to go and look for this voice? But we understood post the interview was that- no one story is the same. And most importantly, who are we to judge birth parents? Why should we even judge considering most of them live with the truth of giving up a child day in and day out. While this birth mother was ok with us using her real name, we took an editorial call not to. As we don't want her to be judged and even attacked on social media. For the purpose of this interview, we will call her Sita. Parts of this episode will be beeped out to protect identities of Sita's family.

**Sita:[15:38]** I was seventeen and my mom decided that I have to get married, it was actually influenced from my grandmother, she was seventy two I think, she was quite frail and I had grown up with her a lot of my years for many reasons and she was like oh I have to see XXXXXX wedding before I go to dies that was this emotional blackmail kind of a thing but I tried to postpone it, I tried to study but it did not work out, it was an arranged marriage. We were married in 1989 and obviously I had just finished 11<sup>th</sup> it was actually I had not even crossed 18 so technically it

is not legally allowed marriage and since it is arranged nobody questions the legality of a marriage and we just treated it as a sacred relationship you know so I have been married and my first child I had in 1991, 4 years after my wedding and my second child was in 2000 in Singapore. We were in Bangalore at that time I remember after our wedding we were like 4 years 89-94 in Bangalore and XXXXX desperately wanted to leave the country and wanted to go somewhere like Singapore, Hong Kong or something. I had continued my education via distance education, and the only thing I asked him was I am doing my 12<sup>th</sup> I have inclination towards studies so I wanna study after my wedding and he was like okay after marriage I don't think it is recommended to go to college so I would recommend you continue your education, you continue it via distance education and not go to college as such. we were in Singapore for 10 years from 1996 to 2006 so that is when I had two kids who I gave away two kids in adoption, I don't I think that is very rare for a parent to really plan and be get pregnant and I think the reason was because I come from this chettiyar family and somehow it is a very big thing to have a son and you know my first child was a girl baby and I was fine I mean to me any child is the same, but you know XXXXX is the only son and his mother so when I was pregnant like 4-5 months she used to in the 5 month start getting clothes for the child and she would get clothes for a boy baby and I was like what would you do if it is a girl baby and she said no no no I am sure it is going to be a boy and I am like then I had to tell her it is not a boy, it is a girl. It was quite tough and the same thing happened in 2000,so about 2000-1999 we were a little at a better place he had a job and I had a job and so and so that is when my second daughter XXXXX she is now 18 she has turned 18 and my first daughter was born in 1993 she is now 25. Both of them know about the about two kids that I have given away for adoption

**Rakesh:[18:28]** Sita tells us that it was important for her mother in law that she gave birth to a baby boy. She also told us that the community she hails from was doubly particular, like many across India, about the need for a son to take the family name forward. In her own family, her parents had given birth to her brother when Sita was 17 years old-the same time she got engaged. She also told us that her own father had been adopted within the family as her grandparents had no sons.

**Sita:[19:01]** I don't know this thing about having a son is like it is been going on and on and I think it is still prevails a lot so that is one of the reasons, that is the main reason I really wanna try to have another child hoping that I have a son. But in my case I don't know I think maybe I could not afford, so I had my 3rd child in 2004 and my and that was a girl baby and I knew it after 5 months and when I got pregnant, it was a very planned pregnancy so I was like if it is a boy I am gonna have it and if it is a girl I am gonna find a parent who was not able to have a child for whatever reason and who desperately wants to have a child and I would give away this child to a family with the thought that they would take good care of her so that was my what to say strategy or justification whatever it is and the family we found in 2004 for my third daughter I still have names so the third daughter we had named her Madhu. so the family we found was from Holand they were actually obviously I had heard of a lot of Americans, Europeans who adopt children and really take good care of them so that is one of the thoughts I was okay with them. I actually tried reaching out so many of my friends who had 2 sons who wanted to have a daughter, before the decision and before I got pregnant it seemed a doable thing but I think it is the few months before and few months after the delivery is really very traumatic emotionally it is very emotionally draining for you know I think for any mother, the moment I gave away the third child, my life actually overturned in terms of the amount of stressful situations I had to face in life, my husband actually he lost his job It is probably the decision that I took that might have triggered all of this that me giving away a child is like giving away the wealth in your life and you know god decides to balance it out by really taking away something from your life

**Priya:[21:20]** In 2006, Sita and her husband were falling apart emotionally. Sita believed having a son would save her marriage. She told us that her community looks down upon divorces and so that forced her to keep trying to salvage a relationship that had almost fallen apart.

**Sita:[21:40]** i come from a family where we don't want to break a marriage until it is really no I mean we just don't wanna break a marriage no matter what, you just make it work so that is the kind of mentality we have brought up and that is where I decided okay maybe I wanna give a last try maybe if I have a son that might give me the hope to keep this marriage alive so it was a very very stupid decision after I got pregnant I remember our arguments went quite bad and we started living separately november I knew she was a baby girl again and this time the family was a local singapore family so again I had to just go through the process and that time I was like how stupid I could have been to go through this a second time when I knew it was so tough and you know see basically I am having a child and I live in a society and I don't want to tell the society at that time that I am going to give the child for adoption so that is a very tough decision At that time I was not ready to tell everyone I could not tell them that I wanna give away for adoption because you see I am educated I am working in a good company I earn well and I go and tell I am gonna give away adoption because the girl is a baby girl, it is really so stupid. I mean I tell myself that the justification is that I probably not wanted to have a mediocre life I think if the child who is with me if I could not afford any of the thing and if I could only afford 3 meals a day she would be fine, do you think? I don't know. I suppose previous 20-30 years back they would have just,, even now just as I that these couple of families who have had kids, they just manage, maybe I should have just managed I should just have them with me no matter what .. I won't say that the thoughts have faded away or I have forgotten, I think I think of them almost like every day or you know every instance I am sure they are gonna question me why did you give me away that is one question that I dread and I think that you know something tells me that one day I might meet them I will meet them but I don't know

**Rakesh:[23:57]** Sita tells us that while there was no direct coercion of sorts to have a son but the indirect pressure to have a son was felt and lived. She also said that back then she was made to believe that a perfect family was one where there was a son.

**Sita:[24:16]** I felt like it was a drawback in me that I could not have a son also I somehow felt a balanced family is the one that has a boy and a girl maybe it was even my psychological, there is an expectation in the family and the boy will have you know a certain not to say the word respect but at least a certain sense of achievement or happiness in having a son in the family. Generally I felt I just needed to have a complete family and somehow I felt a family is complete with a son, maybe I still haven't got over it. life has not been easy after the adoption that is for sure

**Priya:[24:51]** We asked her if ever her children came looking for her and her husband- if they had an answer for it?

**Sita:[25:02]** Do you think so? I don't have an answer because all of these answers that I have are lame reasons no yea I don't think there is now I think back I probably I should have just done what it takes to there are two scenarios one is I could have the children with me and they could question me as to why did you have me if you cannot afford to have me that is one type of a question the other question is okay I decide my situation I know I cannot afford you so I give away to a family, hopefully they can afford you and give you the life they deserve and then the question is why did you have me if you wanted to give me away? The truth of the situation is even if the kids were with me or they were without me they would always have questions to ask.

**Rakesh:[25:57]** In the past few years, we have seen some adoptive parents and families discuss about birth parents with a lot of anger. And angst. These discussions often veers towards how terrible birth parents are for giving up their children. We asked Sita what she thinks about it.

**Sita:[26:05]** Yeah! the only thing I would like to say is that this is a very emotional thing it is completely emotional on both sides, the parents who take the child and give so much of love and grow the child and on the giving side as well you know to have the child for 9 months and to decide to give away a child so on both of the sides there is so much of emotions and you know it does not end the day the child is given away, a birth stays with the mother for life so and obviously

that does not underestimate in any way the amount of love the adoptive parent gives to the child after adopting the child right so everything has a lot of value so what I just request is the parent who has adopted children is to just be open minded. you can't really assume what type of a birth parent you are gonna expect and what you are gonna see unless you really know them in person so not really you know boxing or saying this is what to expect you really don't know. I think the birth parents themselves have too many questions you know and they are constantly dying of guilt for sure so try not to have too much of anger whatever the situation might be.

**Priya:[27:28]** When we started the series, we knew at the root of adoption were socio-economic factors such as poverty. But little did we know that we would see how devastating patriarchy has been. Sita's story is not an unusual one. We are conditioned to believe that adoption happens because of poverty and gender. It is surprising for me that we don't seem to want to go deep down and reflect on why and how there are so many girls up for adoption. We almost seem to believe that we can't change it. Sita's story is that of patriarchy at its worst. She was conditioned to believe that the only way she can prove her worth is by giving birth to a son. And it will be her and her alone who will be blamed by society for the decision to give away her daughters. Not her mother, her mother-in-law and definitely not the husband. This is a society that shames unwed mothers and those who give up for adoption. It is also the same society that glorifies those of us who chose to adopt. The law helps single parents, women and men, to adopt but does the law help an unwed mother or a married woman who wants to keep her child? These are questions for which we don't have answers. How is it that at one side we say Beti Bachao Beti Padao and at another end our own government promotes cradle scheme so that parents can abandon their girl children? Why is it alright for women to be forced to have child after child for that magical boy-child?

Remember how we said that adoption shouldn't be the last resort for a parent? Adoption should also be the last resort for the child. More needs to be done to keep families together. Am sure we agree about this. Let's also question those policies that aren't inclusive and not really keeping the welfare of child at the heart of the discussion. Let us open up the discussion around child welfare and not snub voices we are not comfortable. Let's demand that the government does more in child welfare. Why year after year despite trafficking and shelter home scandals, not much is not done to improve state of child welfare in this country? Ever wondered why this is not an election issue? Because rights of children isn't a mainstream discussion and we demand that it should be.

The last three months have been pretty intense for us conducting interviews, carrying out research and producing these episodes. We have some more bonus tracks lined up for you and we hope you will become a Patron to listen to them. These episodes will bring to you perspectives linked to adoption trauma, talking to teachers about adoption, NRI adoption among others.

**Rakesh:[30:17]** During the course of making of this podcast, we have received immense support and love from many many people. Levin Mendes of Laxmi Bomb, a band from Mumbai reached out to us when we were featured in The Hindu and offered us a beautiful song titled Pari to be used as part of the series. We love this song so much that we kept it till the end! This is written & sung by Sonia Hyam.

**Priya:[30:50]** We would like to thank Abhay Adhikari and Ben Holt, advisors to Suno India All the speakers on our show, bloggers who have generously written for us. Participants and jury of the flash fiction contest.

**Rakesh:[31:08]** Special thanks to Nikhil Rao for the amazing music, Priyanka kumar for the illustrations, Kunika Balhotra for support with research and transcription. Tarun Nirwan for all things digital.

Anurag Rao, Divyanka and Rajesh Kamal for the invaluable advice on how to take this to more people.

Special thanks to Bharath from Logical Indian.

Eshwari, Nalini and Sumitra for editing support and valuable feedback.

All our Patrons who believe in us and are supporting us.

**Priya:[31:38]** In our next podcast we will be talking about voter awareness in which we are partnering with a data journalism website called factly. Do check out their website [Factly.in](http://Factly.in) for some amazing stats and analysis. Don't forget to subscribe on [sunoindia.in](http://sunoindia.in) for more updates

**Pari:[37:52]** Amma, Nanna, Pari

DEAR

PARI