

Dear Pari Season 2

Episode 1: A for Adoption

Rakesh: We are back with Season 2 of Dear Pari! Last September, when we started Dear Pari, our podcast on adoption, we had started it with the intention of creating awareness and breaking myths around adoption. We are so honoured to have received so much love from all of you. This show crossed the 10,000 listener mark a while back and we are beyond thrilled. Not just that, we are incredibly touched to hear feedback on how the show touched them! So once again before we start THANK YOU!

Padma: In Season 2 of Dear Pari, we will bring to you insights into NRI adoption, adoption trauma, sibling adoption, adopting children with different needs among other topics! A quick disclaimer- some of these interviews were recorded in November-December but are still very much relevant today.

Hi I am Priya and I am Rakesh. We are the hosts of Dear Pari, India's first narrative podcast on child adoption. This podcast is being brought to you by Suno India, a multilingual podcast platform for issues that matter.

Rakesh: Dear pari, I cant believe you are now almost 4! You know that Dear PARI is a podcast! it's a different thing you don't know what Dear Pari is or what a podcast is. The first day of your school was very emotional for me. I couldn't put you down but had to. I know you will learn a lot of new things and enjoy them but as a parent I constantly fear how you will deal with other students if you will get hurt by someone's insensitivity. how someone might crack an adoption joke and hurt you unknowingly. I know you are a strong girl and will learn to deal with them but i can't help but try and educate and fight with society if needed to make it better for you.

As anxious parents, one of the questions that comes to our minds is do we tell her school that she is adopted. Does that matter to them? Or do we just keep it under wraps and talk about it when required. We reached out to Sangitha Krishnamurthy who is a teacher and founder of The Teachers Collective Bangalore, a conglomeration of teachers who want to reach beyond their classrooms, work with children and make learning the fun experience it can be. She has trained teachers in inclusion, setting up trauma-sensitive classrooms and consults with many schools. She also teaches special educators courses.

Padma: In this episode of Dear Pari, we discuss the role of teachers and schools in helping children who have been adopted navigate through the many questions they are asked. Sangita also talks about the importance of honest and open communication with school authorities and teachers alike.

Sangitha - My name is Sangitha. I live in Bangalore with my husband and two kids. we have a daughter who shares some genetics stuff with us and a son who came to us through adoption. and puppy of course also adopted so i am an accountant turned special educator because I actually found as i was getting into reading about adoption and dealing with some of the difficulties we found we were dealing with reading technical books, accounting books would put me to sleep in a few seconds and this i actually got through books on special education so i went back and qualified to become a special educator and work with children who have autism, difficulties and i end up doing a lot talking about adoption to teachers I mean pretty much anywhere it is required in addition to the parenting adoption parts that we end up doing.

Padma - so one of the things I read a lot and also my child will be going to a regular school from next year and one of the major concerns is do we tell the teacher? you know about the fact that she has been adopted and i think this is like a common thread I have seen among young parents who are just adopting is do we tell? do we not tell? so yeah i just wanted to get your sense on that like your viewpoint. Do we tell? and how far do we tell the teacher?

Sangitha - Alright So i will tell you honestly i have actually gone back and forth so i am going to give you two sides to it and a suggestion that is pretty much to anyone to figure out what they want to do. So i started out completely open we told our kids, everyone around us knew, we didn't do anything to be ashamed of so there is no secret to this right? so we went with that whole thing and my daughter was already in school when my son came home so the school anyway knew and my daughter was speaking about it but since then i have realised that it completely depends on the kind of school and the kind of teacher so even if it is a school where you know it is an alternative type setup where most people are okay you never know the extent of the stigma that people carry and i will tell you most teachers are very well intentioned, you cannot be a teacher without you know really like going beyond and over so i would never doubt teachers it is just that our society does a very good job of misinforming everyone on adoption. We have movies made that are completely you know talking about how it is so charitable and how this child is lucky and those things end up sticking in people's minds so what i think suppose you are going to get a good teacher one year and then you get a teacher who doesn't think adoption is so great or who has their own twists to how these things happen or they because of this filter looking at a person through that Oh this must be because of adoption or that must be because of adoption and normally good things don't get linked up to adoption it is always the stuff that they are not able to explain or what they consider not so good or slightly negative so i right now we went whole tell everyone way and after a certain point it is not even your choice because my kid is going to be quite open with it. He is actually done workshops for kids and other adults on adoption when he was i think 6th standard 7th standard equivalent so for us and i remember in 4th standard one time this was a new school he said listen amma in a circle time i just wanted to close it so i told them listen i am adopted and i am fine and that was it and it seemed to work for him so I would suggest that you talk to the principal and tell them at some point so might want to wait a little maybe get to know the child who she is or he is and then talk to the principal just to make sure if there is any stigma they know the kid before there are times when there are assignments but is it possible for us to inform the principal and see if the teachers in the school if they are willing and interested in to get someone external to come and talk to them on how you know just like a regular professional training and have them look at adoption in that frame versus connected to your kid. So what i would suggest now again is that you talk to the principal and tell them maybe after 4-5months the child has joined the school and of course in the meantime if your child is going to go and speak and they are going to say hey is she adopted? obviously there is nothing here to hide but somewhere I feel like a little discretion might be the better part of valour

Padma - so say like the child gets bullied because he or she has said oh hey i am adopted and you know children basically learn from what they hear what they see and it is not the greatest of examples anyway there are a lot of times setting up when they talk about adoption. So in such a scenario say in a class someone says something derogatory or no no not really derogatory but something negative about adoption, how should the teacher react or cope? and is there something that we as parents can also then sort of equip the teacher with on how to deal with it?

Sangitha - Absolutely! So see one of the things that is critical is for teachers to understand and know adoption reasonably well so to have someone say from a trainer or some sort if we can get to school and actually go through and have just every teacher because it is not only our kid was adopted there are different families, these are things that can impact many different i mean now we have step mothers and step fathers and we have guardians and we have people traveling and single parents because of it or single parents by choice so different kind of families are definitely something that is more than just adoption. so to have someone come and speak about adoption and inform teachers and empower them is absolutely required. so i think as long as we work with skills and empathy on both ends and not look at it just as an adoption related thing but with our kids definitely work to say this is it, these are the facts yes you are adopted, what is the big deal? you have two hands two legs just like everyone else and kind of help them understand the way they joined the family is not the be all and end all and that is not who they are going to be who they are going to be is very much their potential and how they take advantage of opportunities that are in front of them and what they are able to do.

Sangitha - so a lot of people don't know one i think the importance like how the small words make a huge difference is not something people are very aware of so to tell them what is positive adoption language to say that i am a natural mother, the child is not unnatural. the child is very much real and normal to say oh is it your own child? these are all the things I don't know maybe sometimes it comes to the cultural context and we might be translating directly from you know our native languages that could be where it comes from but for us to kind of you know as a part of this trainer coming and talking to a bunch of teachers make sure that they say listen if i would have called you, you are not my own or you are unreal or you are unnatural or you are abnormal you are not going to like it so when you are saying is it your real mother who is your natural mother you are actually saying that the other side or there is something unnatural or unreal about it so do tell them. Also words like abandoned, gave up can be focused on the positive bits well the child was found, they were placed in adoption there was a plan people cared enough to make sure that this child was taken care of and can we focus on that because that really is also the truth of it and judging someone for not being able to stay and raise a child is really you know none of our business i think we could all imagine what level of distress it must have taken for any person to have put this child over themselves and to do something that is so much better for them for the child even though that parent is not going to be in the picture. so i think to be very careful about being positive not only about the child but also the birth, the first mother and the first father is really important. The other thing is for just people to look at it from a slightly more wider lens to say do we have to call someone a step father? why is it so important? would i ever say is that your cesarean born biological child? I am not gonna say that because what difference does it make? why should i go around saying well you know it is an adopted child well what is the relevance? look into and try to break their own thinking but many people they are not doing it because they are actively trying to be mal-intentioned it is just something that naturally do and we poke them a little and say can you reflect on it and many people will probably come around and say well i did not realise i was doing it, ya you are right.

Padma - Right! How do you think because you are a special educator in that sense so how do you think syllabus need to be changed to become inclusive or do you think that is really not that shouldn't really be the focus in that sense? so you have these projects family tree, bring your baby pictures and not everybody might have it , right? so I am just trying to get a sense from that angle like do you think the syllabus in that sense is inclusive

Sangitha - so there is this movement in education called universal design for learning which looks at the curriculum having the disability and the curriculum needs to be changed in such a way that that umbrella fits as many people underneath it as possible so it is not possible be 100% inclusive all the time but for us to try to be at least 90% most of the time so one of the things then that we can do for inclusiveness is to look at it from the perspective of someone you know for grandparents day what if grandparents don't live then can we have an option and say you know someone who stands in the place of a grandparent just like that can we have instead of so there are a few things that people could really look at, things like make a timeline of your life. see the good thing is school systems and curriculum are going away from very conventional ways of saying okay there's a father, there's a mother, mother cooks, father works and you know so we are broadening but as a part of that broadening when people get creative sometimes it gets into these areas where they may not think through too much so for us to say okay make a timeline of your life could also include instead of saying this where i came here or bring in adoption to the picture could we have things about skills well you know when i was one year old i could step in front, i learnt to cycle this is when i learnt to tie my shoe laces could very well be also timeline related stuff instead of asking for a you know tree could we have a bush with a lot more space because think about what will happen if there's been a divorce in the family and then there are two sets of parents and then what is that make it 4 sets of grandparents? assuming you know the maximum numbers so we would like for children to have the space, the picture, the younger photograph can we say bring a younger picture of yourself instead of saying a baby picture? or say you know what can you just draw it either paste a picture or draw and you know what when it comes to drawing the kid draws themselves as a baby which is true they were a baby at some point we just don't always have documentation of exactly how they looked. There are also things like you know as they grow older they talk about blood grouping, get into genetics these are all things for people to really kind of consider you know go and bring your father's blood group and mother's blood group and then watch your blood group, it may not technically work out. So for teachers to be sensitive to say alright this is it and maybe even help that kid to say okay this is your blood group so your parents blood groups were likely to be this and this and use that an additional way of giving some identity related information to this kid who honestly most of the time has no idea about their first mother and father.

Padma -from your experience how open are schools nowadays to talk about you know adoption or any other whether it is special needs adoption, autism, anything. How open do you think schools are becoming

Sangitha - you know i wish i had something i could tell you that only this school does it best or doesn't. I honestly don't think any school really has it because we are talking about adults and people on the other end so you can do some training you can do enough for them to know alright if i come up to this situation this is the person i go and ask and you can have people you know who can help them case by case but for everyone to know everything enough to do everything great is it will be ideal it will be Utopian and i hope my country gets there sometime or every country gets there sometime. we are talking about special needs we also have to bring up something that many parents may not like to hear one of which is that the impact of early childhood difficulties can show up later in life as some kind of difficulty, it could be diagnosed level or on a different levels or it could be social or could be how you know there are the core issues related to adoption that can keep coming up. I would like to think that if there are enough open parents who had gone ahead of you that you can talk to and figure out they might be able to give you this will end up being very you know reference based comparison and then the one thing i had tried to do constantly is to you know if it is not about talking to a specific teacher or

we have always spoken all our teachers for they have known and they have come to us and then i have been able to give them some help when it came to other kids but then can we put information out and if there is some adoption related thing or can we share it with the principal? so that they can find and see and inform themselves can we then be the people who walk ahead? For example if your child is going to be two and a half can you find parents who have walked this path and then they can maybe come and help instead of you going and having to completely open because after sometime your child may not want you coming and bringing that up in school so we are going to have start co-opting them as well right? and it is okay if they are two and a half, three and we are doing this but when they are six and seven or even later and you know what saying you know amma i will handle it, i don't want to deal with this then sometimes all we can do is support the ecosystem and then definitely actively support our kid and then take things as they come.

Padma - because you brought up and i know we had discussed this before and can you perhaps expand a bit on the early trauma that children suffer from and something that i agree there is not a lot of literature or even conversations happening around it but perhaps can you just take our listeners through it?

Sangitha - Yeah so the one thing i would like to make very clear that parent get very defensive when we say adopted children have problems it is not the adoption that is the problem, adoption is the solution and that is going to be how we are going to get care to a child who needs it but the fact that we were not there for pretty much the entire pregnancy and we got into the life of this child at varying degrees sometimes you know under 1 year sometimes afterwards means that there is stuff that has happened that we do not know and that is going to impact this child through their life so we are talking about early childhood development related stuff which is not our fault, it is not the kid's fault it is just how it ended up be so not trying to link adoption to difficulties but to understand that when a child has had an early developmental phase that could have had hindrances we know that when there is a hindrance at those delicate times development does get hindered so the only thing we can do is to make sure that we provide the love and the care and all of that and see as they go along if they need help we provide that help. we know now that some of it gets biologically coded we know that epigenetically what happens to us changes the genes they have scientific proof about this, core issues related to adoption are also well documented so for a child who is adopted things like transitions are difficult definitely when they are going from they like to something they don't like but change handling surprises not easy when structure is there, routines are there they feel safer it helps so if it is going to be a household where anything goes at all times then that is not something that many children who need this kind of safety feel comfortable with so i think adoption inform ourselves about these issues, to make choices that means i have to let something go, to give away stuff all this is not easy for children we also have places where in order to make ourselves look at them the way they want you know in a positive way, children will lie and tell us what they think we want to hear so these are things that we have to take in our stride and say we have committed to parent this kid we will take things as they come and i would seriously suggest that adoptive parents read up a lot about core issues, there is this lovely book called 'The Family of Adoption' by joyce maguire pavao. she herself is an adopted person and a professional and has worked with people you know families for several years and she has written this lovely slim book that talks about the triad which is the fact that the birth mother and father are there with us even when they are physically not there. Children are not thinking about them and again the fact that they are thinking about them is not that they want a different set of parents but they want to know where they come from? their roots? their identity? it takes a secure parent to say hey listen I am doing my best and this child

and I will be the only parent this child has but they do have a mother and a father and they have come from these things so we will handle that as we go along and do not be threatened by the fact that the child is asking questions well we want them to ask questions we want for as much stuff to get sorted out we want for things to be open because there is no secret we have not committed a crime right? it is also not charity and we don't need to be put up on a pedestal it is just everyday parenting with all the difficulties that come with it if we had a biological child who had a health difficulty we would deal with it so this is pretty much on the same level but I would suggest that we do a lot more of the stuff for example i wish i had known a lot more about deficiencies I had looked into and made sure to find a pediatrician who understood not just prosperous middle class babies but also had a sense of you know how development can look and might have wanted to continue the supplement beyond what others pediatricians stop at one and a half or two i might have wanted to supplement for a little longer i definitely would have made sure that initially my disciplining was very positive time outs are something to think about i know for our culture we have gone from spanking to time outs and it is a better thing but for a child who has been rejected that is one more rejection and i have felt at many times my son in his time has gone back to a place that was not related to whatever little thing that he did. so this is for us to inform ourselves in order to understand this is not something for us to feel about ourselves i don't know a parent who is not doing their very best. So acknowledging and reading up about this doesn't in any way diminish the work that we are doing it just informs us and makes us better parents.

Thank you for listening to our first episode of Dear Pari season 2. We also want to take a minute before we end the episode, to talk about an upcoming podcast “The Lost Child” on state of childcare institutions- and child protection measures available for these children. During the course of Dear Pari production, we were left with many questions than answers. Questions on why children come into adoption; why there are more parents waiting to adopt than adoptable children; why there is an invisibilisation of these children living in these institutions and why we seem to hear about them only when there is a scandal. These questions need answers and “The Lost Child” will strive to get us these answers and more. Do subscribe to our newsletter Suno India on our website www.sunoindia.in to know as and when the show is launched!

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