

Dear Pari Season 2 - Children in waiting

Rakesh: Children with disabilities and special needs seldom find home in India. Within India, only 47 such children were adopted in 2017-18. It a very small number for such a big country, where we have around 25,000 parents waiting for more than 2 years to adopt a child under 2 years of age. Even children with rectifiable disabilities like cleft lip and vision/hearing disabilities are often ignored in the system.

Kalpana Jayashanker and her husband had adopted their daughter when she was 3 years old. Soon after adopting her, they realised that she was vision impaired. We spoke to Kalpana to understand how she navigated through the adoption and special needs landscape.

Kalpana: I'm Kalpana Jayashankar. I am based in Canberra, Australia. I am a mum to an 11-year-old girl, who we adopted from Pune about 7.5 years ago. Professionally, I started off as a chartered accountant. After this whole parenting journey started, I was really curious about the 'nurture versus nature' side of things. I took a big break from my work, just to focus on my parenting and caring duties and then I went back to university. Now I have retrained as a teacher, and I'm currently teaching in primary schools. That's my background.

Priya: Can you tell us about your adoption journey. You said that you had adopted from Pune 7 years ago. How was your daughter? How old was she?

Kalpana: As we're based overseas, we had to go through a very rigorous inter-country adoption process. From the time we applied to the time we got placed, it took us about 6-7 years. It was so long that we even forgot about it. We didn't pursue it, nor were we feverish about it. We had just put it up and were waiting. The home visits and assessments happened. At one point in time, Australia had stopped this program due to some legal issues. They had gone cold on inter-country adoptions from India. However, on one fine day, we got a call saying that we have been placed. After they sent us pictures of our daughter Muni, we were asked whether we wanted to go ahead. My husband and I decided, yes. At that time, she was about 3-3.5 years old. By the time she came home, she would have been 4.5 years old. It took us a good 6 months from placement till the time we could bring her home. She was the first case in the country who came through the new legislation, and things were more complicated. We had to wait for the court orders and her naturalisation and compliance with the Australian side of things. The few legislative changes that had taken place delayed the process. I went to India to pick her up from Pune, and we were in India for around 8 weeks until we got her passport and visa sorted. Then she arrived in Australia as an Australian citizen. Hers was the first case, to be fully naturalized before entering the country. It worked out well for her.

Priya: When we spoke briefly on Facebook, you had said that she has a condition.

Kalpana: Yes. She has a genetic condition where she is vision impaired. She can't see when the sun comes out, but she can see pretty well at night. She is a low vision child, and she's legally blind. I 'm guessing that she has had this condition from birth.

Priya: Did you opt to choose a child with special needs, or did you find that she had this condition of being blind only when you got the referral?

Kalpana: When we went through the process, and the age matching was done, we were told that we'd be placed with an older child. We were ok with that. When we were asked if we would be ok with a child between 1.5-5 years, we said we are. But, we did not have an inkling about the fact that she had a vision condition, during the process. As soon as we saw her, we knew that she was struggling with. During the process, we got clear chits from those who did the medical assessment in India and the

adoption agency, saying that, she had no health issues. We got to know about that only after we met her, and we had to make a quick decision on how we felt about it. I thought if I had a natural child who was born with a certain condition, what would I do? The answer was very clear, I would just go ahead. That's how we decided. Going through the process was quite confronting. Seeing how things have panned out since then, we had a lot of support in this part of the world, to help us in guiding through the whole adoption journey (especially the post-adoption journey) and dealing with a whole range of issues including vision impairment, grief, loss, trauma and so on and so forth.

Priya: Thank you for sharing so candidly. One of the things that stop a lot of Indian parents from considering children with special needs is that there aren't many facilities available. You had mentioned that you had a lot of support in Australia. What were some of these support systems you had? What do you think will help Indian parents to make such a decision?

Kalpana: According to me, adoption is not meant for the fainthearted (especially if you're adopting an older child or a child with additional needs). You should be ready to face up to the challenges that will come up. That is something that all parents wishing to adopt should be aware of. Just as any birth mother with a child with additional needs would say, it's a challenge you deal with. You get the assessments done, see what help they need to help them get started into school and to make them feel included. They are part of the inclusive setup. Many parents have biological children. They have figured out that their child might be visually impaired or have down syndrome or be hearing impaired. When the challenge comes, the solution is also part of it, embedded in it. As long as you're open to seeking help and receiving help, you're doing the best. I'm sure a path will carve itself out. You don't have to know everything upfront. You just have to be ready to support this child and give them a fair go in life. That's what we had in mind. We wanted to make sure that she gets the best opportunities and a fair chance at excelling and blossoming into the best person she can be. We were very committed to that. As soon as we came, we got in touch with a few agencies that work with low vision children. They put us on to their early childhood experts, who explained what it would be from a child's perspective to us. We went through a whole range of training to acquaint ourselves on how the world would be from her vision. Her vision was very limited then. We got all the help that she needed. She needed help with occupational therapy and just getting about. We got a mobility orientation person for that. We thought she might need Braille, but she's doing pretty well with regular printed textbooks. But, we needed a whole lot of adaptive technology where she could enlarge texts to read. We had to get certain software installed on the computer for her to read better and for more tactile learning. That's why I was interested in teaching and learning. I retrained as a teacher. I was also a part of an intercountry adoptive parents network, and those parenting workshops really helped. As you can well imagine, you are literally pulling a child out from one environment and bringing them to another. Coming to a foreign land is so foreign to them. New parents, new smells, new country and a new language. Everything is new. It must have been quite overwhelming for her. She did fantastically well by adapting herself to her new environment. It's quite traumatic for all the parties involved. In the early stages of adoption, having access to other parenting groups who have gone through a similar journey or who were going through a similar journey helped me deal with some of the day-to-day challenges.

Priya: There is a stigma when it comes to adoption. We had discussed quite a bit in our earlier season of this podcast about it. When it comes to adopting a child with special needs, it's a different layer of the conversation altogether. In terms of the reactions you got, how was it when you adopted a child with special needs? When we adopted, one of the most common reactions that we got/ continue to get even today is that "You did such a noble deed". Did you face any of those conversations or remarks? How did you deal with tackling/ explaining to people about adoption? Having adopted a child with special needs, did you face pity or glorification?

Kalpna: We still continue to get that. "She's so lucky to have you as parents and you've done such a great thing." That's how people perceive. They're free to have their opinions, we're not here to judge them or reverse their opinion. All we say is, "It's been very enriching for us and we are lucky to have her because she is such an exceptionally courageous, compassionate and intelligent girl." We feel our lives have been enriched by her. So, it's the other way around. We flip it around when someone makes such a comment. We continue to get that because we've always been very open about how our family came together. We even posted on Facebook. All my friends, our school and parents know on both sides. We've been very open. Now, she's growing older. So, I take permission before I share her story. Even before this conversation, I asked her whether I can talk about this. As she's growing into a more sensitive period of teenage years, I think it's important. But, from day one, we normalised having conversations about adoption and exploring a whole range of emotions that we were going through as a family. It's okay for her to talk about anything she wants at any point of time. The first thing was normalising it at home. Secondly, we had a very supportive network of family and friends. That made a huge difference. We have a whole community welcoming us, and welcoming her, and celebrating her every achievement along with us. All that positive support definitely helped us to take on the challenge. People say what they want to, especially when you have a child with special needs. Once in Shankar Nethralaya, Chennai, we were waiting for a very crucial eye test. One lady randomly walked up to me and asked why my daughter was squinting, and why she was seeing like this. She said it's all because of me and I hadn't taken care of her properly during pregnancy. When I'm travelling by bus or train, some random person might come and ask why my daughter's eyes are closed, or why she has her book close to her nose, or why she has her I-Pad so close to her. I tell them to back off and tell them she's a child and to be careful about what they say. Some education is required. We also have to build strength and capacity in her. Previously, when people would say things like that in front of her, she'd get quite upset. But now, I tell her that people are just curious and they don't know.

Priya: It's fantastic that you've been open with her from the beginning, and I truly respect that you have told her about this interview beforehand. I think you're right. It's such a sensitive age. At 11, you start having so many questions. How do you deal with questions that come from your daughter about her adoption? What's the kind of questions you get?

Kalpna: She had many questions about her birth parents and how she got here. She has thought about how she ended up in an adoption agency in the first place, and how she came here. When she was 4, her perspective and questions were different. When she was 8, as she was growing up, the questions were different. Now she's 11. Now the questions are more like, which part of India we are from, and which part of India she's from. She's from Maharashtra. She's very curious about anybody she meets from Maharashtra or Pune. She's intrigued by that part of the world. We are from south India, and we speak Tamil at home. When she came, she knew only Marathi. I didn't know Marathi, and she didn't know any of the languages we spoke. And suddenly, I don't know from where she started speaking a lot of Hindi. That saw us through for the first six months because we knew Hindi and she knew Hindi. That's how it started. During the first month, we had no idea what she was saying, and she had no idea what we were saying. It was really interesting. The questions are very age-dependent, based on the developmental cycle they're at. As she goes through the teenage years, and as she's exploring her past and identity, questions will change. We are very honest with her. We acknowledge the question and also the fact that we don't have many answers. We've shared whatever we've known with her, and we'll continue doing that. I've also let her know that if at some point of time she wants to go back and search for her roots, she's always open to that.

Priya: In India, even in international adoption agencies, you can choose a child with special needs. In 2017-18, only 47 children were adopted within India. It's a tremendously small number in such a big country, where we have around 25,000 parents waiting to adopt. If someone who's listening to this

podcast wants to adopt a child with mild-moderate or severe special needs, is there anything you'd like to tell them?

Kalpana: It's a mixed bag. You have to be open to any challenges that might come up. Even if the adoption agency discloses that the child has this particular need, there might be other needs which haven't been covered or are lying unmasked at that stage. There can be multiple needs. Parents have to be very clear why they're going into this. If they're going with the intention of doing something for yourself, where they feel a gap in the lives or they feel the need to parent, the whole adoption is in response to their needs. They may run into trouble. If they're going with an open mind and saying "I'm bringing this child to be the best version of who they can be", the focus is on the child. Even if problems come, solutions will also come if you have an open mind. You should have some faith that solutions will also come. In my case, I had to take off. In Australia, there was a rule that when you bring a child home, you should not work for one year. For me, that ended up being 5-6 years. I needed to be there to form those relationships and give all the intervention and support for her to do well in a mainstream classroom with minimal support and minimal special assistance. She is fully integrated. To come to that point, we had to go through a journey. That happened only because I dedicated myself to the cause. Parents should be willing to make that investment of time and energy and go with open eyes. They should know that this is a lifelong commitment, just as you commit to any other relationship in your life. A child is coming to you. You have a duty of care and the trust that you have to earn from the child. You have to keep all that in mind as you go down the learning, and not feel scared because there are so many talents with them. I don't think that having a disability closes all doors or options. Every soul comes into the planet with their own song to sing, has their own purpose to live out and has their own message to give. And as long as parents are committed to discovering those inherent strengths, we should be fine and on the right track. As I said, it's not for the faint-hearted. You should be ready for any problems that come up and be ready to solve it. As long as we have that firm commitment and mindset, it should work out perfectly fine for all those who are looking at adopting children from India with special needs.