



Indian families adopting Indian children: Adoptive parents' perceptions of the adoption process and post-placement services

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Abstract

This article summarizes qualitative and quantitative data from a study of Indian families adopting Indian children. Using a random sample, mailed survey data were collected from 230 families and interview data from 113 families. The response rate was 56% for the mailed questionnaire and 82% for the face-to-face survey. Overall, while excellent progress is being made with regard to domestic adoption in India, several post-placement services could be improved or developed to better meet the needs of adoptive families.

Key words: adoption, adoptive parents, India

Overview

Little is known about the experiences of Indian families who have adopted, including their experiences with the adoption process, how they deal with birth family issues, or the services they use after placement. Much of the information currently in use relies on practice wisdom and anecdotes, with few publications in peer-reviewed journals that use social science research methods. This project, designed as a program evaluation, was a collaborative research project between an Indian Nongovernmental Agency (NGO) placing children for adoption and an adoption researcher from the United States. This article builds from an article that described the program (Stiles, Dhamaraksa, dela Rosa, Goldner & Kalyanvala, 2001).

Background

Children form almost one third of the population of India. About 4% are estimated to be orphaned (over 1,200,000 children) and over 100,000 are in institutions (Bharat, 2002). According to Raju (1999), the number of destitute children is growing due to poverty. In addition to poverty, a large percent of children are abandoned or relinquished because of being

born to a single mother. There are strong social mores and values against unwed mothers that result in abandonment (Baig & Gopinath, 1976; Narang, 1982). In India, adoption is as old as Hindu law (Chowdry, 1980). It is part of Indian mythology (Stiles, et al., 2001) and the histories of kings (Baig & Gopinath, 1976). Traditionally, Hindus adopted male children when they had no heir. The adopted son was usually a relative and a similar caste (Baig & Gopinath, 1976). Children abandoned were not adoptable because nothing was known of their family and background. Since the 1980s, adoption in India has changed from this historical pattern. Adoption of non-relatives and children from whom little or no background information is known is new in India and the numbers of these types of adoptions have been increasing since 1995 (CARA, 2000). The Indian government did not play a monitoring or regulating role in adoption until 1984 (Apparao, 1997). Consequently, there are few published studies on Indian domestic adoptions.

One of the first studies (Narang, 1982) examined case records of 116 adoptions from 1971 to 1980. Only 76 records (66%) had complete information. The purpose was to describe adoptions and adoption procedures. At the time of adoption, adoptive fathers averaged 38.7 years old and adoptive mothers averaged 34.3 years. Most adoptive parents were highly educated (83% of adoptive fathers and 87% of adoptive mothers). Most adoptive fathers were working in professions (95%); similar data were not reported on adoptive mothers. Most adoptive families were Hindus (90%). The major reason families adopted was to have a male heir, followed by infertility. Over one-fourth of the adoptive families wanted to keep the adoption a secret. Adopted children were available for adoption mostly due to being born out of wedlock (75%); only 4 were abandoned with no background information known. The majority (69%) was placed within the first three weeks after birth. About 60 of the adoptees were male. The placement of females took longer than that of males. Since the study was an analysis of case records, there was no report of post placement functioning of children. Families were encouraged to return to the hospital if they had any medical concerns about the child. Narang concluded that families would benefit from counseling and guidance long after adoption.

Apparao (1997) offers an analysis of the developments in adoptions in India. While predominantly focusing on international adoptions, she offers an analysis of overall trends. In particular, she reports there is an inverse relationship between domestic and international adoptions. As international adoptions increase, domestic adoptions decrease and vice versa. She reports that adoptions progress were the most developed in Maharashtra State (Bombay and Pune Counties). Boys were favored for domestic adoptions and girls were favored for international adoption. She concludes by suggesting that a uniform adoption law would strengthen services to children available for adoption and the best interests of the child.

Two recent studies examined attitudes about adoption. Raju (1999) studied community attitudes towards adoption. She found class differences in views towards adoption. In particular, upper income families express a preference for female children while lower income families prefer males. She suggests that lower income families may be more traditional in the way they approach adoption.

Banyal (1999) examined the attitudes of 25 couples at an out-patient obstetric and gynecological clinic. She found that slightly over half (56%) favored adoption. Support for adoption was mostly likely found in couples with a higher education and income, and those with primary infertility (as opposed to secondary infertility), especially if it was the wife that was infertile. However, the study did not actually follow these couples to determine who adopted. Also, while 100 of the couples knew about adoption, only 20 knew of an adoption agency.

With so few published studies on Indian domestic adoptions, research and practice writing from other countries offer cues about issues to consider in Indian adoptions. One factor is the ecological context after adoption (Hartman, 1984). All families live and interact with their environment. The ecological perspective examines the way that families affect and respond to their environment as well as how the environment affects families. Understanding the social environment of adoptive families, particularly as it relates to the service system, is a critical component in understanding the overall functioning of the family as a complex social system

