

Waiting to Belong:
Experiences of Adoptive Parents (APs) and
Prospective Adoptive Parents (PAPs) navigating
child adoption in India

Submitted by
Kabir Piyush Varkey

Under the mentorship of
Edward Premdas Pinto

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INDEX

Background	2
Context	2
Literature Review	2
Research Gap	8
Research Question	9
Objectives	9
Nature of the project	9
Approach of the study	9
Field site	9
Process of selection of participants	9
Methods of sourcing information	10
Description of Participants	11
Participant profile	11
Waiting stage	12
Facilitating organization	12
Rationale behind child adoption	13
Factors enabling child adoption	13
Navigating the waiting stage	14
Limits and challenges	15
Learning and reflections	17
Conclusion	17
References	19
Annexure	20

List of abbreviations

PAP - Prospective Adoptive Parents

AP - Adoptive Parents

CARA - Central Adoption Resource Authority

SAA - Specialised Adoptive Agencies

HSR - Home Study Report

HAMA - Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Waiting is an element in the journey of child adoption that is often overlooked due to a lack of understanding of it. It can range anywhere from 2 to 4 years, depending on the preference, adoptive agency, and seniority. To understand its complexity, one can view adoption as a layered institution that evolves in response to historical, cultural, and developmental needs. A surface-level understanding of child adoption is common across all legal structures, however, a focus on the sheer experiences during the waiting stage for potential parents or Prospective Adoptive Parents (PAPs), as they are categorised legally, is scarce, offering nuance and understanding of why it differs from other waiting stages. A major element of “waiting” stands out because of the uniqueness of its nature. It goes beyond control, decision-making and influence and is more a surrender to the system and protocols in place, which have a direct impact on the anticipating (potential) parents.

Hence, to understand this, I opted for a qualitative approach to answer the question: what are the “waiting” stage experiences of Prospective and Adoptive Parents? With emphasis on what factors affect adoption, and how couples and individuals navigate the waiting stage? The study is a pan-India study, comprising 13 in-depth interviews primarily conducted with the urban population who hold steady, full-time jobs. Recruitment of participants was facilitated by the head of an NGO based in Bengaluru, offering counselling sessions to PAPs and APs.

Findings show that adoption is enabled by cooperative workplaces offering flexibility and recognition of the situation’s uniqueness, routines that help manage long-term waiting by serving as a distraction, choosing a supportive Specialized Adoptive Agency (SAA) that consults and responds to queries, and connecting with adoptive parents for reflexivity and practical guidance. Ultimately, familial support and friend circles provide comfort and reassurance that help individuals and couples endure the waiting period.

Keywords: *waiting stage, experience, pan-India study, Prospective Adoptive Parents (PAPs), Specialized Adoptive Agency (SAA), cooperative workplaces, familial support, reassurance.*

INTRODUCTION

Background

In India, adoption is regulated by the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) under the Ministry of Women and Child Development, and governed by the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015. Adoptions across the country are facilitated by CARA-approved orphanages or child care centres, which are called "Specialised Adoptive Agencies" that act as the point of contact and placement of a child to a home.

Scholars have already documented the low adoption rates in India despite millions of orphaned or abandoned children, and point out the reason to be bound to "the meagre number of adoptions" coupled with bureaucratic complexity and parental eligibility requirements (Singh, 2018). There is another side that emphasises the rules around religion, caste, age, and marital status, which makes adoption exclusionary (Sharma, 1990).

Context

Waiting during the adoption process has never been understood through the lens of law, bureaucracy, and policy reforms. Still, very little attention has been paid to the "experiences" of couples in the waiting stage, i.e., the period post-registration but before the court order to finalise the adoption. This stage is particularly critical as it represents both hope and frustration, hope of becoming parents and frustration due to long, uncertain delays. But across all this, what remains underexplored is how PAPs themselves experience these rules and delays and how they make sense of the endless waiting, negotiate stigmas set by society, cope with their emotions, and yet hold onto their parental aspirations.

Literature Review

Child adoption as kinship beyond bloodlines

Adoption has been conceptualised over time, and instead of focusing on lineages and property, it has been transformed to the welfare of the child. Adoption, which is an affiliation process through which the relation of the parentage between individuals who are apart in nature is legally and permanently established, has come to be the best substitute for the natural family in its absence (Sharma, 1990). This indicates the shift in the adoption not always to address the lack of parental stock but more so as a developmental protection to children who are abandoned, unattended or orphans.

Developmentally, adoption can be best described as a means of ensuring that children have their right to grow, be stable and belong. The literature also points out that adoption is a lifelong process of linking and fitting where the adoptee learns a sense of self vis-à-vis both the adoptive and birth families (Baden et al., 2012). This implies that adoption is not a one-act process but is rather a continuous process of creating identity, kinship and belonging. In this perspective, adoption cannot be rendered to legal documents; it is essentially concerned with making sure that the child will have his physical, emotional, spiritual and educational growth (Duffy, 1980).

The concept of adoption as developmental protection, based on this understanding, also brings interesting questions related to the meaning of family and the meaning of kinship. Viewing the family

through the prism of kinship studies, the family is not only a biological formation, but it is equally a social one, which is formed and reproduced by agencies of care, obligation, and recognition (*Krutzinna, 2021*). The concept of adoption thus extends the concept of kinship beyond the bloodlines, showing that one can form belonging through purpose, nurture, and daily parenting routines. The Indian society, where caste and lineage frequently define the validity of kinship, puts adoption into question with the assertive fact that the family is made as much as it is inherited.

Meanwhile, the study of kinship helps us to remember that the status of being a member of a family is not given to adopted children, but it has to be developed. The establishment of adoptive families is a depiction of the so-called social construction of relatedness (*Krutzinna, 2021*), in which rituals, stories, and practices incorporate a child into the network of kinship. It is an intensely individual and sociological process: it changes the definition of what family is, and it makes society open its eyes to the idea that the relationship of a parent and a child is not necessarily based on blood but on care.

Taken in this light, adoption is not merely a matter of saving the kids who have been abandoned but an acknowledgement of kinship as being flexible, lived and relational. It is in this reframing that adoption leads to development: it makes sure that children who would have been denied a normal kinship setup are integrated into the sphere of family, identity and community.

But the social and cultural contexts in which adoption is practised are reflected in adoption as well. As an example, in India, the practices of adoption are entrenched in the socio-cultural realm, and caste, infertility, and legitimacy stigma and secrecy tend to dominate family dynamics (*Chowdhury, 2019*). Likewise, structural inequalities are revealed through preferences towards some children: the majority of adoptive parents had strong preferences towards the female infants, older children and children of the minority race were less favoured (*Choy, 1993*). The conceptualisation of adoption, therefore, is in the nexus of law, identity, and society. It is not merely regarding the formation of families but also the inequalities, bargaining over belonging, and assisting the development of children.

The religious divide in adoption

According to one research, religion is not just a question of who can adopt, but also a question of who can be adopted as well (*Sharma, 1990*). Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists have the option of adopting a child under the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956), according to which a fully adopted child assumes the same status as a natural son or daughter. But the Muslims, Christians, Parsis and Jews have to depend on the Guardians and Wards Act of 1890 that offers temporary guardianship. The child does not become a lawful heir of the guardian, and the guardianship is over once the child reaches the age of 18 (*Sharma, 1990*). This makes an unequal structure of inequality, consisting of some children being given permanent legal belonging, and some children being left in a vulnerable situation.

Religious pluralism of the Indian legal system frequently supersedes the principle of welfare as well. Although in the context of the development of the child, the law is very careful to differentiate guardianship and adoption, as Sharma notes, guardianship and adoption play the same role. This separation, in terms of developmental orientation, does not pass the child because it puts more emphasis on religiousness at the expense of the universal need to have security and a sense of

belonging. The Shastric Hindu Law was more of a sacramental than a non-religious act of adoption. Other judges believe that the goal of the adoption is two-fold: 1) to have his/her funeral rituals guaranteed and 2) to have his/her lineage continued (*Meena, n.d.*).

This is a religious schism that has serious developmental effects. One scholar observes that the law has a distinct differentiation between the concept of guardianship and adoption, even though, regarding the growth of a child, they are both used to the same end (*Sharma, 1990*). According to the child welfare system, the lack of uniformity deprives most children of the security and sense of belonging that they need to grow. Opposition to a standard civil law for the reason of safeguarding religious liberty is really a matter of forfeiting the children left behind and those deprived of parental care and affection. This echoes the fact that the culture and religion priorities tend to override the rights and developmental needs of children.

Social stigma and community perception are also other ways through which religion affects adoption. Mismatch in caste or religion is a matter of concern among families, which causes secrecy and resistance. Secretive adoption, as revealed in one of the studies, is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural fabric, especially when it concerns adoption issues that threaten the caste, religion, or infertility stigma (*Chowbey and Appasamy, 2021*). This demonstrates that religion is not purely a subject of formal legal regimes, but it is also an experienced social demarcation, which has influenced the way adoptive families contend over belonging and identity.

Religion in adoption is, therefore, law and culture: it decides who has the right to adopt, the permanency of family relationships and the social acceptance in the community. These differences, although intended to uphold religious independence, bring about inequalities in children, which negate the development objective of adoption. Reform needs to go to a deeper level of focusing the adoption process on child welfare and not on religious custom, where all children should have equal access to family life.

There is also opposition to reform to make things even more difficult. There is opposition to uniformity in adoption law based on the argument of religious freedom, but at the expense of children who are abandoned and their orphans (*Sharma, 1990*). This underscores the conflict of the developmental trade-off of upholding the religious personal laws at the expense of the rights of children. In fact, the likelihood of any child integrating into a permanent family depends not on their welfare, but on the religion of the family in which they have been adopted. Religion, then, influences not only the concept of adoption as a legal term, but also as a form of developmental obstacle, thereby limiting equal opportunities to family life.

Social perspective on adoption of children

Incorporating the meaning of kinship is one of the main sociological lessons that adoption alters. According to one of the studies, it forms families in which kinship is no longer defined by blood and more by care and intention (*Raghavan & Bano, 2019*). This redefining contradicts the classical concepts of descent and inheritance, particularly in a society in which caste and blood were the main factors of belonging. However, such a change is not regularly welcomed in society since stigma and secrecy are still prevalent. Families often hide adoption because society judges, and it indicates that adoption has become integrated into the socio-cultural fabric, and secrecy is one of the methods to

overcome caste, infertility, and legitimacy (*Raghavan and Bano, 2019*).

Adoption in India is not merely a legal or developmental issue, but a very sociological one since it is an expression of the way kinship, identity and social structure are arranged. Sociologically, adoption emphasises the way in which families are created outside the bloodline, as well as revealing the disparities that determine those who are adoptable and those who are not. Social hierarchies are reproduced and reflected by adoption. It has been documented that secrecy of adoption is still rampant, as families hide the truth as they are fearful of the caste impurity or infertility stigma (*Ranganathan and Henry, 2020*). Such a secret may damage the identity and the feeling of belonging to the children. In addition, parental preferences also lead to biases that affect some children to their disadvantage. According to one study, the majority of adoptive parents had great preferences towards infants of the female gender, older children, sibling groups and children with special needs were not often adopted (*Lee, 2010*).

Adoption also sociologically shows identity struggles by the adoptees. Adoption does not just happen to be a family issue because children have to find out how to live a dual existence between an adoptive and a birth heritage (*Grotevant et al., 2017*). This duality is more acute in the circumstances that are determined by caste, race, or religion. Studies indicate that an adopted child is usually under two pressures to fully adapt into the new adoptive family and, at the same time, to work out the meaning of their racial or cultural identity (*Docan-Morgan, 2011*). India is a country where caste and community identity are the key attributes of belonging, and adoption is one more tier of negotiation between the interests of an individual and the social categories.

This bias during adoption also depicts the sociological aspect. The matching process that takes place tends to be perpetuated by prejudices towards the gender and race of the adoptive children, as *Choy (1993)* notes. The same biases are present in India and include caste, age, and disability, and many of their children are not adopted even though the law permits it. Those trends reflect bigger social disparities, in which children who lack the desired traits are disadvantaged. Thus, the sociology of adoption in India reveals that it is not just legal arrangements but also about how society defines kinship, belonging, and worth.

Economic implications of child adoption

The economic dimension of adoption in India reveals how poverty, class, and resource distribution shape both the supply of adoptable children and the demand from families. Many children enter adoption systems because of “poverty, social insecurity, and lack of support to natural parents” (*Duffy, 1996*). Families who cannot provide for their children often surrender them to institutions, reflecting how structural inequalities directly create conditions of abandonment. Adoption, in this sense, becomes a response to economic deprivation as much as a legal or social institution.

At the same time, economic privilege influences who adopts. Inter-country adoptions, for example, were initially welcomed because “foreign adoptive parents were generally well-off and could provide better opportunities for the child” (*Sharma, 1996*). This logic positions wealth as a developmental guarantee, though it also raises concerns about commodification and inequality. Moreover, bureaucratic hurdles within India mean that “the meagre number of adoptions” domestically is partly due to the

economic incapacity of families to navigate costly and time-consuming processes (*Singh, 2018*).

Adoption in India

Adoption is a complex institution evolving from being an ancient religious responsibility to a developmental and welfare mechanism in the contemporary world. Traditionally, it is not perceived to be an instrument of child welfare, but as a religious and social need. Adoption in the Hindu tradition, also called more of a sacramental dharma rather than a secular practice (*Garg, 2023*), was aimed at securing continuity of the lineage, succession, and fulfilment of ancestral rites. According to classical Hindu law, only sons were allowed to be adopted because family systems are patriarchal and property-oriented (*Sharma, 2021*). It took a turn in 1956 with the introduction of the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act (HAMA), which gave daughters legal status and provided women with limited adoption rights, but only to Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists (*Singh, 2018*). Indians can legally adopt a child, and individuals of other religions who are desirous to adopt a child can only adopt the child under the guardianship of the Guardians and Wards Act, 1890 (*Meena, n.d.*).

The idea of child adoption in India stands at the crossroads of history, culture, law, and development and indicates the opportunities as well as limitations. In contrast to most Western countries, where adoption became a means to safeguard children, in India, it traditionally developed as a creation of religious and patriarchal organisations. According to one of the studies, under Hindu law, adoption was viewed as a method to maintain the continuation of lineage and conduct of religious funeral practices, but not a need to benefit the child directly (*Singh, 2018*). The legal and other social attitudes based on this historical foundation persist even though contemporary legal provisions define adoption as an issue of child rights.

The modern system can be seen as a reflection of a patchwork of laws determined by religion. The Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act 1956 gives Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs the right to adopt, with children being accorded full status as a son or daughter. Nonetheless, the Muslims, Christians, Parsis, and Jews are not allowed to adopt a child under their own laws, instead, they are only entitled to become guardians under the Guardians and Wards Act, 1890 (*Sharma, 1990*). This establishes unequal classes of children, who can have permanent relationships with their families and those who are kept under temporary custody till they reach the age of eighteen years. Researchers believe that this legal pluralism does not consider the best interest of the child and makes families less equal (*Kumari, 2019*).

This fragmented law system has continued to characterise adoption in India. Hindus can enjoy full adoption, but the Muslims, Christians and Parsis can be limited to guardianship under the Guardians and Wards Act, 1890, under which the child cannot take up permanent rights of inheritance and kinship (*Sharma, 1990*). In line with the amendments in the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000, a secular route of adoption was introduced, making the process more accessible to communities, single or divorced individuals. However, even this system is burdened with processes that are cumbersome and limiting, and lead to a paltry number of adoptions of millions of orphaned or abandoned children (*Garg, 2023*). Through bureaucratic procedures and unnecessary formalities, one can see the conflict between protecting children against trafficking and placing them in families that can nurture them promptly (*Kumari, 2019*).

Another dimension that defines Indian adoption is bureaucracy. *Laxmikant Pandey v. The Supreme Court. Union of India (1984)* put in place protection against trafficking, which required several levels of control. Although these actions were supposed to act as protection, they have caused the adoption process to take longer. According to Sharma, all the abandoned children are to be taken to the police within 24 hours, but the investigation usually takes months or even years (*Sharma, 1984*). The resultant effect is that children in institutions will be stunted in their development since such a child is not able to wait (*Sharma, 1984*).

Finally, child adoption in India is a hugely contextualised process, and it is influenced by religious law, bureaucracy, social stigma, and economic disparities. The contradictions that surround it are quite notable: although adoption is touted as the best option in the event of a lack of the natural family (*Sharma, 1984*), it is in practice a failure because of its delays, secrecy and discriminatory leanings. By placing adoption within this multidimensional context, adoption is not only depicted as a legal act but also as an echo of the contemporary challenge of modernity, equality, and child rights that Indian society is grappling with. In their combination, adoption in India is one of the points of the interplay of history, law, society and development. It is simultaneously a fix to desertion, a reaction to sterility, a perpetuation of the bloodline, and an instrument of good. But it is a contradictory field as well: between protection and delay, secrecy and belonging, rights and traditions. A broader frame of adoption enables us to view adoption not only as a family issue but also as a reflection of the problems in India with modernity, inequality, and child rights. Adoption, it is therefore better said to be an institution of transition, an institution that reflects the tensions of a society that is bargaining over its heritage and the future of its children as being more inclusive.

Legal review of child adoption in India

In India, adoption is regulated by the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 and controlled by the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA). Nevertheless, even with an apparently elaborate legal procedure, the process is still complicated, cumbersome, and tends to demoralise potential adoptive parents. According to one scholar, the process of child adoption in India is complicated and multidimensional and includes legal, social, cultural, and economic aspects (*Raj, 2022*). The eligibility requirement of the adoptive parents and the delay in the procedure throws light on the loopholes and irregularities that minimize the rates of adoptions throughout this country.

Adoption was traditionally allowed by Hindu law based on lineage and property, but it was then codified to give child welfare its priority. The adoption laws in modern times are expected to protect the rights of children, but loopholes exist. *Ananya (2021)* claims that adoption is highly fruitful and effective in the Indian child welfare program, yet a highly controlled area both in law and in procedures. This is over-regulation, which, although intended to protect children, puts challenges on parents, especially when coupled with religious regulations that reduce the legal adoption rights of non-Hindu populations. As an example, the Muslims, Christians, Parsis, and many others can usually obtain guardianship under the Guardians and Wards Act, depriving children of complete inheritance and family rights (*Raj, 2022*).

The 2022 Adoption Regulations clarified many definitions, including what constitutes a “child legally free for adoption” and outlined strict eligibility for adoptive parents. Regulations state that “a single female can adopt a child of any gender, but a single male shall not be eligible to adopt a girl child” (*Adoption Regulations, 2022*). While intended to protect children, such restrictions also reduce the pool of willing parents. Furthermore, couples with two or more children may only adopt “special needs” or “hard to place” children (*Adoption Regulations, 2022*), which limits choices and creates long waiting periods.

Another loophole lies in the shortage of adoptable children. According to CARA data, “for every 10 new parents in India, only a single child is available” (*Ananya, 2021*). This discrepancy arises not because there are too few abandoned or orphaned children, but because many are never declared “legally free for adoption.” The process of inquiries, police reports, and certification by the Child Welfare Committee often takes months or years (*Adoption Regulations, 2022*). During this time, children remain institutionalised, losing precious developmental years.

The irregularities are further compounded by corruption and misuse. Past scandals in states like Andhra Pradesh revealed “sale and purchase of babies with falsification of records” (*Ananya, 2021*). Such cases reinforce the need for safeguards but also deepen bureaucratic rigidity. As *Raj (2022)* highlights, invalid adoptions may occur through “lack of proper consent, violation of eligibility criteria, or non-compliance with adoption laws”. These risks make the process daunting for prospective parents, who must navigate legal uncertainty while trying to build families.

The result of these combined challenges is India’s persistently low adoption rate. While thousands of children remain in institutions, prospective parents face delays, exclusions, and procedural hurdles. Adoption law in India, therefore, stands at a difficult crossroads: balancing child protection with efficiency, but too often prioritising bureaucracy over the child’s right to a family.

Research Gap

By exploring the voices of Prospective Adoptive Parents (PAPs) and Adoptive Parents (APs), this study contributes to something missing: a ground-level, qualitative picture of how adoption is lived in India today. It shows how social dimensions, family structures and the system are only part of the process, but the experience that they go through is not abstract, but daily realities that PAPs and APs navigate while trying to build a family. In doing so, it re-centres child adoption research from being a critique of its policies and being more experience-centred. To conclude, the study is worth exploring because it captures the human side of waiting, which is essential to understanding whether we can reframe child adoption as not just legally possible but emotionally sustainable.

METHODOLOGY

Research Question

What are the experiences of Prospective Adoptive Parents (PAPs) and Adoptive Parents (APs), and how do they navigate the waiting stage of the child adoption process in India?

Objectives

This can be explored further by breaking down into objectives like:

- To explore the rationale regarding child adoption
- To analyse the factors that enable child adoption
- To understand how couples and individuals navigate the waiting stage
- To understand experiences with the Specialized Adoptive Agency

Nature of the project

Qualitative research on the experiences of Prospective and Adoptive Parents, via semi-structured in-depth interviews across different states in India.

Approach to the project

Implemented a qualitative, interpretive approach, designed to capture the experiences of APs who have already adopted a child and PAPs who are waiting to adopt a child and are on the waitlist. These interviews give an insight into the narratives, meanings, and emotions attached to the adoption process rather than the outcomes of what they expect or have expected from child adoption. Their insights and perspectives are the main drivers of this study. These perspectives have shaped the understanding of the adoption community to make sense of the waiting stages, with reference to challenges, coping mechanisms, and impact on their identities as parents.

Field site

The interviews were conducted online via Zoom

Process of selection of participants

Participants were selected using *purposive* and *convenience* sampling to identify suitable participants and then moved to *snowball* sampling, where existing participants refer others within their adoption networks.

The process of identifying these participants was facilitated by Ms Radha Nagesh, a qualified counsellor with extensive knowledge of child adoption in India. She herself is an adoptive parent, lending considerable personal and professional credibility to her role within the community through Joy of Adoption, a community group primarily based in Bengaluru, that maintains a WhatsApp community of over 650 adoptive and prospective adoptive parents across India. This community aims to serve as a significant resource for information and peer support relating to child adoption. It was because of Ms Nagesh and the vast network that she had built that enabled reaching out to more participants. She agreed to disseminate information about the study to the group and across relevant social platforms. This proved to be a highly effective recruitment strategy as a post shared within the community

prompted considerable engagement and generated several enquiries from APs and PAPs who expressed willingness to participate in the study, having been briefed by Ms Nagesh on its purpose and nature.

Methods of sourcing information

A. In-depth semi-structured interviews

Who/where: Registered couples through CARA-approved adoption agencies are in the waiting stage of adoption.

What information: They brought narratives of adoption by the participants, their rationale, emotional and psychological feelings, coping mechanisms, frustrations, interactions with the agency, constraints, and family and societal influence.

Logistics: Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, which were conducted both in-person and online. Interviews were only audio recorded with consent (for transcription purposes) and accompanied by field notes.

Tools: Semi-structured interview guide (*refer to Annexure A*), which entails a combination of pre-determined questions with flexibility to ask follow-up or spontaneous questions based on the responses of participants. Majorly relied on improvisation with the ascent of the interview when requiring more clarity. This way, it provided a balance between a focused question framework and flexibility to build rapport and explore topics in depth.

B. Document review (content analysis)

What information: Official government reports provided the legal framework within which experiences are shaped. It served as a basis to identify whether there were any contradictions between policy intent and lived experience.

Logistics: Documents were accessed through CARA's official website, government archives, NGO repositories, and online legal databases (Manupatra, JSTOR, etc.). The focus was to identify themes of eligibility criteria, bureaucratic delays, protection vs. restriction, and the adoption matching process.

Tools: RTI, internet search, legal websites, Ministry website, legal judgements. By combining these tools, the document review ensures a multi-layered perspective of official intent (laws/regulations), judicial interpretation (case law), and public critique (NGO/media reports). This triangulation helped identify where the adoption system succeeds, where it lacks, and how they experience these gaps.

FINDINGS

Description of Participants

In total there were 13 participants, who were accompanied by their spouse or participated by themselves. Participants range from Karnataka, Maharashtra, Punjab, Orissa, Tamil Nadu and Telangana), covering urban and semi-urban cities where the largest number of registered PAPs and APs reside as per the CARA website data. The participants can then be broken down into two categories,

- (i) Prospective Adoptive Parents (PAPs) - who are registered and yet to be placed with a child.
- (ii) Adoptive Parents (APs) - who are already placed with a child.

In the child adoption landscape, eligibility to enter the system is based on either being married (at least for 2 years as per CARA guidelines) or an individual opting for single-parent adoption. These profiles are from a distinctive faction of society - the working-class, well-to-do (financially) and educated class of people that opt for adoption. All participants come from an upper or upper-middle-class socioeconomic status residing in Tier-1 and Tier-2 cities.

Participant Profile

The 13 participants can be further broken down into three profiles based on marital status, occupation, and Age group:

Based on Occupation

Private sector	10
Self-employed	2
Retired	1

Based on Age Group

Between the ages of 30 and 35	3
Between the ages of 35 and 40	6
Between the ages of 40 and 45	4

Based on Marital Status

Married	10
Single	2

Waiting stage

In India, the waiting period for adoption typically ranges from 2 to 4 years, depending on the prospective adoptive parent's preferences regarding the child's age and gender, which are the only selection criteria available on the CARA portal. The duration of the wait is determined by the applicant's seniority number; the position in the adoption queue assigned upon registration as a Prospective Adoptive Parent (PAP). This seniority number establishes the sequence in which child referrals are made to applicants.

What is unique about this “waiting” is, unlike other forms of waiting, the adoption waiting has elements of bureaucracy, procedural opacity, and limited agency for PAPs, who have little to no influence over timelines or outcomes. But what stands out is the importance of how the adoption community feel and cope during this time, what emotions they go through and how they make sense of this waiting time. Here they are waiting to be parents, it is about emotional investment and preparation, given in a time where adoption is still seen as a stigma and a very lonely experience.

Facilitating organisation: Specialised Adoptive Agencies (SAA)

The adoptive agencies act as a bridge to facilitate the process of matching children in childcare institutions and PAPs that are waiting as per their seniority number. An SAA functions both as children's homes and as licensed adoption agencies and the extended responsibilities also include the protection, nourishment, and overall wellbeing of the children in their care. However, compliance and quality of care provided as a service can vary considerably across agencies, not all SAAs adhere consistently to government guidelines, and the standards set by the CARA guidelines in terms of nourishment, medical care, education, and overall wellbeing of children, it differs from agency to agency. Notably, adoptions governed under the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (HAMA), 1956 fall outside the purview of CARA and the SAA framework entirely.

There are over 1100+ SAAs across India, monitored by CARA are the only legal entities allowed to facilitate adoption. All paperwork is submitted to these agencies and a social worker is assigned at the district level to conduct a Home Study Report (HSR). An HSR is done twice - once within 3 months of registration and once again after 3 years, this is to update any change in address or details and basic maintenance of records on which SAA is to be linked to the PAPs.

While all SAA are accredited by CARA and comply with the same regulatory framework, they vary considerably in their ethos and institutional character, some examples are -

Government established SAAs: established directly by the State Government CARA, and several state governments across India run their own child care and adoption institutions. These tend to be more bureaucratically structured and directly accountable to state welfare departments.

NGOs and voluntary organisations: which comprise the majority, and hence by nature reaffirm the stance of non-political, secular, and not-for-profit under the Societies Registration Act. They are most in common and operate across urban centres throughout India.

Charitable trusts: they are accredited Foreign Contribution Regulatory Act, allowing them to receive international donations.

Religiously affiliated SAAs: there are a considerable number of SAAs with religious affiliations, particularly Christian and Catholic as they have deep historical roots in child welfare in India. These types of agencies have played a major role in the journey of adoption of the participants I interviewed us to conduct because they may come in direct conflict in the historical values or ideologies they want to preach but also in conflict with the government's secular regulatory framework.

Narratives of the couple's "readiness" and suitability are sometimes questioned, and in some extreme cases even the decision of adoption itself does not mean "natural progression of family". When matched with a religiously affiliated SAA may (in very few cases) potentially disadvantage couples whose lifestyle, beliefs, or family structure do not align with the agency's values, not from a procedural but add to more of the uncertainties and stresses of the waiting stage.

Rationale for child adoption

Some prospective parents adopt because either partners are either incapable of bearing a child or have a medical reason connected to infertility. Whilst there is the route of IVF or medical treatments, these costs are extremely high. Most women are against the idea of the physical implications of pre and postpartum, and make an autonomous choice to adopt, this connects to 2 experiences of participants where they faced traumatic pregnancies with their first child and just cannot do it again. Some couples take a conscious decision of the larger narrative of overpopulation, resource war, and climate change into consideration and want to bring new life to the existing type of society.

Factors enabling child adoption

Adopting a child comes with its own and unique challenges, there is little room to influence the waiting time, yet there are certain aspects that do enable the adoption process with comparative ease -

Access to peer networks of Adoptive Parents: Hearing from people who have been there and done that is incredibly reassuring. When a PAP can speak to someone who has navigated the same journey, it makes the journey feel less isolating and more manageable. The example of Joy of Adoption does this by normalizing the experience and filling in the gaps that official channels often leave empty.

Reassurance from family and friends: In India adoption is still viewed from stigma and scepticism , blaming not only the older generations but even the younger and progressive society of ours. When a PAP has a support system around them, family members treat the process as a celebrated path to parenthood which contributes to their mental resilience during the waiting stage.

Financial stability: A very important and often overlooked factor due to higher temperaments of emotion driven choices and desire to start a family. The adoption process needs preparation as there are travel costs when they have to pick up the child, appointments to be made to pediatricians and doctors to verify the health status of the child is in correspondence with that given by the SAA, making visits to the agencies (if they are in a different state). Beyond procedural talks it boils down to the confidence that they can provide for a child and financial security removes one layer of anxiety from what is

already a demanding process.

Responsive and supportive SAA: The SAA a PAP is assigned can make or break their experience. When an agency is communicative, transparent, and genuinely invested in the journey, the process feels guided rather than chaotic. Proactiveness to help out, reaching out for help, and making the process feel more personal than a bureaucratic hurdle can relieve a lot of turmoil.

Flexible or remote working arrangements: Having a cooperative and understanding workplace gives PAPs more space to navigate and schedule interviews, home visits, document submissions, and at times, at short notice.

Having a job that allows flexibility means PAPs do not have to choose between their career and their adoption journey, reducing stress considerably.

Navigating the waiting stage

Coming to how they navigate this waiting stage, which is central to my research, these aren't activities or strategies as such but rather systems and elements that help them navigate the waiting stage better -

Counselling and therapy

There are means of counselling and therapy that they can go for to make more sense of this waiting, provide structured support, process their emotions and maintain stability. This is a way that gives them insights into managing expectations of a time that they have little to no control over. This is also a great learning for them to understand the trauma-informed care they need to treat the child with. Because fundamentally all participants agree that child adoption is child-centred, many children enter the system through childcare institutions because of abandonment or experiences of neglect.

Volunteering and workshops

Volunteering at an orphanage or attending workshops gives them an insight into the element of parental preparedness, being closer to the subject and may give a closer understanding of what goes on behind these institutional care settings, the needs of children and reduce romanticised expectations and produce a more grounded understanding of adoption.

Waiting time is used as a time to reflect on choices.

Whilst most Prospective and adoptive parents dread the waiting time, in terms of sheer length, 6 participants spoke differently about how they get these years to really reflect on the choices, have sooo much time to prepare, get all their family (extended) on board or not and basically use this time to really think about the readiness to become parents, or even solidify whether they want to go through with the adoption and commit to it. This plays an important role as it becomes an evaluation of choices and they get to outweigh the odds and finally make a decision when they exhaust all permutation and combination of options.

Support rooted in companionship

This is where the element of companionship plays a really important role, because it is not just the presence but the reciprocation of uncertainty, emotions and anticipation while waiting; these bonds of

resilience draw them even closer to each other. Yes, this experience is limited to participants who were married. But it extends to single adoptive parents too, as they rely on friends and family as their companions, and is not limited to only a partner-oriented experience.

Consulting with Adoptive Parents for advice

When talking about isolation, when consulting with adoptive parents, it validates their feelings and makes them feel less lonely. Because we need to realise that adoption still comes with a lot of stigma, in most cases from their own parents. Hence, it makes them feel reassured because they know someone has gone through this and also made it all the way through. The sheer interaction, exchange and insights they give reflectively tend to the uncertainty and give knowledge driven from experience and build a sense of solidarity among this community.

It's fascinating when we dive deeper into how these online communities become more of resource networks than just being members of this community. The members of these communities are pediatricians, lawyers, teachers themselves and help out in ways that they use this network capital in times of say when a medical report has to be looked at and give an opinion on what it infers, how they can navigate any legal outstanding in terms of documentation of procedural lags when the adoption papers do not come in order or advising which school is best in their area. They are one call or message away when in need of help.

Having routines

Another less common take is having routines in place, like yoga, gardening, and journaling. etc, these not just help organise time and prevent the waiting period from feeling completely undefined because it adds a sense of control and very much distracts them at the core from the uncertainty over which they have no control.

Limits and challenges

A constant part of my study is how appreciative the PAPs are of the study and give high praise for taking such a step, because I feel it gives them a platform or opportunity to speak, and more to be heard, quite frankly. Their insights are what can shape the process further and induce some form of systemic change to smooth the process. They are all very cooperative and welcoming into their world, let it be struggles, wins, emotional aspects, and all of them maintain a tone of normality rather than look at child adoption as a "noble cause" or "charity".

This was a big learning for me too in terms of conduct and attitude that I should maintain, keeping the academic integrity along with it. PAPs are not hard to identify; the larger issue is reaching them, as I struggled to find PAPs, even through past participants' recommendations, as they have certain apprehensions about the study and are worried about their details being leaked out, or people getting to know that they are considering adoption, which is a very rational feeling to have.

The only roadblock that I face is the recruitment of participants for the study and getting to them. While the purpose of a snowball sampling that I have chosen is primarily associated with timing and waiting, it does get frustrating and creates uncertainty from a completion point of view. The only tweaking I have done is to make small write-ups, 1-page posters/flyers that are easily accessible and readable for

the phone screen, so that when circulated, they draw attention to it.

I realized only 3 weeks into the study that this problem arises from the nature of these participants that I want to interview and not a methodical problem - most of these PAPs are working with 9-5 jobs, have a busy social life, or are just not very privy to the idea of taking part in a study like this, and hence circulating the flyer and small write-ups has helped in more PAPs showing interest in the study.

LEARNINGS and REFLECTIONS

Personal journey

A constant part of my study is how appreciative the PAPs and APs are of the study and give high praise for taking such a step, I feel it gives them a platform or opportunity to speak, and more to be heard, quite frankly. Their insights are what can shape the process further and induce some form of systemic change. They are all very cooperative and welcoming into their journey, let it be struggles, wins, emotional aspects. All of them maintain a tone of normality rather than look at child adoption as a “noble cause” or “charity”. This was a big learning for me too in terms of conduct and attitude that I should maintain, keeping the professional and emotional integrity along with it.

There is definitely a lot of unlearning on my end, looking at what really constitutes “family” and what it means to have people around you, it changed my definition and has extended beyond kinship and bloodline. I was always curious about child adoption as a concept, and I am very glad I pursued it from an academic perspective by talking to the community itself and understanding firsthand what it means to be an adoptive parent.

Insights

Child adoption goes way beyond just nobility; it is more about giving a home to children who were not accepted by homes and families because a majority of reasons revolve around abandonment, parental poverty, or disability. For most PAPs, child adoption comes more from wanting to have a sense of home or complete a family, rather than doing charity for society or an emotional decision. They don’t like to be recognised or looked at from a sympathetic angle, but rather they admit that it is for selfish reasons (which is not wrong), of deliberately wanting a family through this route and having a family.

Child adoption cannot be compared or understood on the same lines as adopting a pet, as a metric for parenting, because child adoption has to come from a role of “rehoming a child” and acknowledge the traumas that they might have faced, rather than keep it under wraps.

Most PAPs have frustrations with the process, right from registration to submission of required documents, that arise from the lack of uniformity or consistency and are done more by the SAA. The way the SAA operates is fully their own responsibility, and there is no role for CARA to interfere, except providing guidance, frameworks, and operational guidelines. How it is to be executed falls under the responsibility of the SAA, and with each state having its own politics and bureaucracy, there is an inconsistency in how they operate.

Conclusion

In a traditional sense, family is meant to be a holding structure comprising a male patriarch (or provider) and a female counterpart as a part of a heterosexual marriage arrangement, succeeded by biological offspring. This definition has held on and passed on from generation to generation. In the case of adoptive parents, the journey introduces a fundamental rethinking of what “family” means and how it has shifted from being rooted only in biology or bloodlines, towards a more care-based, centric approach with a shift toward understanding family as an emotional and intentional relationship. PAPs

speak about unlearning deeply ingrained social norms, often preached by their own parents and even close family, that see parenthood as genetic continuity. This unlearning instils in their lives way before the waiting stage even begins, and they question dominant ideas around lineage, inheritance, and resemblance. This gives a great enlightenment for them to challenge assumptions held not only by society but also by themselves through self-reflection, particularly around notions of “own child” versus “adopted child.” What matters at the end of the day is “care” and wanting a family that makes sense to them; the remaining actors are only in the foreground.

A major issue that can be looked at is the training provided to social workers and employees of the SAA. There is a greater need for social workers in numbers and especially trained ones, which will bring sensitisation and awareness that has to be given on how their conduct should be with PAPs. They also need to realise that it is a tough time for them, emotions are overwhelming, and they are very lost in the process. They want to be guided. In my interviews, I have encountered 2-3 where the SAA did a great job in guiding them, but the rest had a very different thing to say. This inconsistency can be smoothed by making these training sessions not just mandatory but also effective. There is already a policy in place, so not much of a structural change is expected, but more to do with training and facilitation by CARA.

There is definitely scope for improvement, both on the institutional level for the SAAs and the PAP community, to reshape their views to treat child adoption not as an alternate option or “last resort” but as a choice. This comes from more counseling to reshape their parenting towards the child rather than to fill a gap in their incompleteness. Whilst this view is polarising, it is certainly something to consider at least.

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ANNEXURE

A. GUIDE FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Approach: Semi-structured in-depth interviews with open-ended questions

Duration: 60–90 minutes per participant

Participant type: Prospective Adoptive Parents (PAPs) registered with CARA and currently in the “waiting” stage

Analysis: Thematic coding using inductive and deductive analysis (linking themes to objectives: rationale, emotion, bureaucracy, coping, family, stigma)

BROAD THEMES

- Rationale and motivations for adoption
- Analyse experiences with institutional bodies
- Understand coping mechanisms and social support networks
- Understanding the role of family and friends

RATIONALE AND MOTIVATIONS

Q. How did adoption first become something you considered?

Probes:

Was there any event, conversation, or influence that led you to this decision? How long have you been thinking about adoption?

Q. What does the idea of adopting a child mean to you and your family?

Probes:

What does becoming a parent through adoption represent for you? How do you think it might shape your family life or identity?

PREFERENCES

Q. When you thought about adoption, did you have any particular preferences regarding the child (for example, age, gender, or background)?

Probes:

What influenced those preferences?

Have these preferences changed over time?

Q. How did you and your partner arrive at decisions or discussions related to these preferences?

Probes:

Were there any differences in opinion? What helped you agree on your decisions?

Q. What, in your view, makes a child ‘a good match’ for a family?

Probes:

What kinds of connections or qualities do you think make a good fit?

Do you think the system understands this idea of a ‘match’ the same way you do?

ROLE OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Q. How have your friends, relatives, or colleagues responded to your decision to adopt?

Probes:

Have their reactions affected how you feel about the process? Are there any responses that surprised you?

Q. How do you usually talk about your adoption plans with people around you?

Probes:

Do you find it easy or difficult to talk about it?

Are there situations where you choose to keep it private?

Q. Have you ever faced any comments or assumptions about adoption from others?

Probes:

What kind of assumptions or opinions do people express? How do you usually respond in those situations?

EMOTIONAL JOURNEY

Q. How has this waiting period felt for you personally?

Probes:

Can you describe the emotions you’ve experienced during this time?

Has the waiting affected your daily life or routine?

Q. How do you and your partner manage this waiting period together?

Probes:

Are there particular ways you support each other emotionally? How do you handle moments of disagreement or stress?

Q. Can you share an experience during this waiting period that stands out for you — either challenging or hopeful?

Probes:

What made that moment stand out?

How did it change your perspective on adoption?

COPING MECHANISMS

Q. What helps you stay patient and hopeful during the waiting period?

Probes:

Are there activities or routines that help you cope?

Do you find support from particular people or communities?

Q. Have you been part of any support groups, forums, or communities for adoptive parents?

Probes:

How have those interactions helped you?

Do you think such groups are necessary during the waiting stage?

Q. If you could share one piece of advice or insight with another couple beginning this journey, what would it be?

Probes:

What do you wish someone had told you before you started?

How has your understanding of adoption changed since you began?

Q. When you think about finally welcoming your child, what do you imagine that experience will be like?

Probes:

What feelings or expectations come to mind?

How do you think the waiting has shaped your readiness for parenthood?

B. INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR EXPERTS (lawyers, founders of NGOs, counsellors, etc.)

Briefing/introduction: I'll start with an introduction of myself, I am Kabir, I m born and raised in Hyderabad and currently im in the last semester of my master's in Development studies from Azim Premji University in Bangalore, and thank you for taking out the time from your schedule and thank you for allowing me to hear your adoption journey so far. My research will be centred around the "waiting stage" and talk about how you make sense of the waiting time, how you cope with this time and what role your family and friends play in your journey. What I would like to know from you is the institutional side of this whole process. Have there been any changes in the child adoption landscape, and ultimately, what are the factors from the institution side that directly or indirectly affect adoption in India?