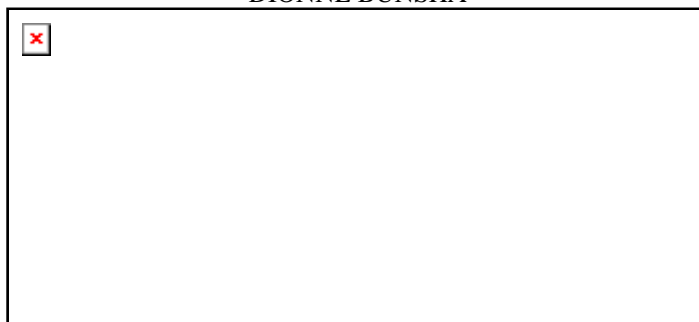


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DIONNE BUNSHA
in Pune

DIONNE BUNSHA



At the Preeti Mandir adoption home in Pune.

NINA CAPTAIN (name changed) thought that adopting a child would be dream come true. She and her husband never bargained for the nightmare it was.

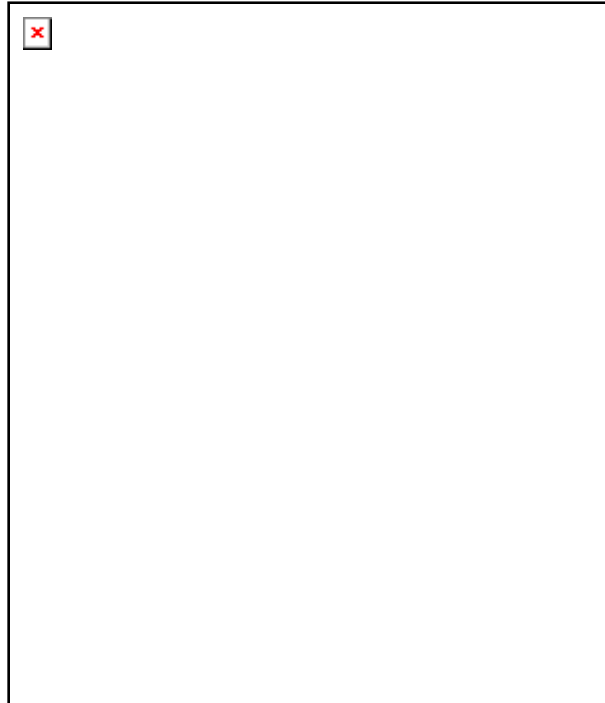
Though the adoption papers had not come through, Nina flew in early from her home in Singapore to Pune, where the adoption home Preet Mandir is located, to look after her child as a foster parent. When she was first given six-month-old Lara (name changed) to look after, she was shocked at the little one's pathetic condition. "Lara was literally covered in scabies from head to foot. She was so malnourished that there was no flesh on her bones and her hair was not growing. At six months, she was just 4.45 kg," said Nina. Lara had been hospitalised thrice for infections and given six courses of antibiotics. Her development was stunted - she could not even lift her head or roll over.

What put off the Captains even more was that from day one the head of Preet Mandir asked them how much they were going to `donate'. When they said all they could afford was \$2,000, his face fell. "That isn't enough," he said. "Does that mean we can't have the child, if we don't pay more?" Nina asked. He replied that it would be better for the children if they were more generous. The Captains left promising to donate more when they could afford it.

At the adoption centre, Nina met a 45-year-old woman who was adopting a baby. Government rules say that the age difference between the adoptive parent and child should be no more than 40 years. The older woman answered that the \$10,000 she paid may have done the trick.

J. Bhasin, head of Preet Mandir, denied the allegations. "The President of India visited us recently and congratulated us on our work. The babies come malnourished. We have ICU and warmers of international standards. Our nannies are trained by people from abroad. Our death rate has reduced to 5 per cent." When asked about the high charges, he said: "The government stipulates Rs.24,000 for Indian and \$700-900 for foreign adoptions. This is not adequate to run such a large institute. We run only on grants and donations. If parents cannot afford, we don't ask them for donations, but if they can, they give as much as they can. We don't demand it."

Preet Mandir, which executes 7 per cent of all adoptions in India, has been blacklisted by some adoption agencies in Sweden and the U.S. because the children are not looked after properly and the fees are exorbitant. Several complaints have been filed against it by parents and foreign agencies. But the government does not seem to have looked into them.



According to Maharashtra government rules, the State has Adoption Co-ordinating Agencies (ACA; similar to Voluntary Coordinating Agencies elsewhere in India) that co-ordinate between different agencies to find Indian parents for as many babies as possible. The ACA can match children to parents listed with other agencies, if the agency where the baby is cannot find one. "The priority should be Indian adoptions because children adapt better in their own cultural environment. Agencies like ours have a long list of Indian parents waiting for children. Yet, how are so many foreign adoptions being cleared?" asks Kaumudi Telang from the Mumbai-based Indian Association for the Promotion of Adoption.

Certain agencies put off Indian parents who come to them. "Most agencies make the excuse that Indian parents are very fussy and that's why there are so many foreign adoptions. But it is the duty of the adoption agency to counsel them and make them accept new ideas. The input of the professional social worker is sorely lacking," says Telang. However, she points out that for certain special needs children, foreign adoption may be a better option because of better facilities for their care.

"Some agencies are exploiting the poverty of mothers," says Telang. "Why don't they find ways to help the mother keep the child, rather than give it up?" A few adoption agencies have set up short-stay homes for expecting mothers, who are referred to these institutions by local doctors. Here, mothers are provided the bare minimum facilities until they deliver the baby. Social workers go on 'outreach' programmes in the nearby districts to ask the local police, government officials and doctors to refer mothers who may require their services.

"How come certain adoption agencies have an endless inflow of babies while others have very few? Aren't the police supposed to be in touch with all agencies while referring abandoned babies?" asks an ACA member. Certain agencies have links with government officials all along the chain, which makes their work easier, whether it is having babies referred or getting

the reams of paperwork done.

Some private clinics are also involved in shady deals. "Doctors are not supposed to place children in adoption. Only licensed and recognised agencies can do adoptions. Yet we have been informed that there are doctors who have even given the child's birth certificate with the name of the adoptive parents," says Telang. Now, agencies are not only sourcing babies from government homes in far-off districts but are also allowed to run them. For instance, Preet Mandir in Pune runs two such homes.

Government rules allow agencies to charge a maximum of Rs.100 a day for foster care for foreign adoptions and Rs.50 for Indian adoptions. Yet, they manage to extract more through 'donations'. "I know of one agency which refuses to register any family with an income less than Rs.80,000 a month. Does that mean that adoption is only for the rich? The law allows anyone with an income of Rs.5,000 a month. and above to adopt," says an adoption insider. "One agency in Pune charges nothing less than \$6,000 for foreign adoptions. There's a lot of money involved."

According to a highly-placed source, on the basis of complaints made by foreign and Indian adopters about Preet Mandir, an inspection was conducted by the Government of India in May 2004. However, the report has not been disclosed until now, even to CARA, nor has any action been taken.