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SOCIAL ISSUES

Long wait



INDIA has one of the largest populations of abandoned, homeless and destitute children. It also has a long and growing queue of prospective parents, within the country and abroad, waiting to adopt children. Yet, the adoption programme, run largely by organisations in the non-governmental sector but tightly controlled by the Central government, has not been as successful as it could have been in bringing together these two groups that are so in need of each other.

Two facts illustrate this. The total number of adoptions, domestic and foreign, in India in 2006 was 3,261, according to the website of the Central Adoption Resource Centre (CARA), an autonomous body under the Ministry of Women and Child Development. This is just a tiny percentage of the total number of children who are institutionalised in homes and orphanages and are in principle candidates for adoption.

Second, the adoption trend is declining, as the table shows. Over six years, the numbers have fallen by nearly 600, of which almost 450 are inter-country adoptions.

“I think that there is an overall lack of dynamism in the adoption programme,” said Nomita Chandy, director of Ashraya, a child welfare organisation that has been placing children, especially special needs children, in adoption over the past 20 years. “It is over-centralised by the government and it lacks motivation. There are thousands of institutions in the country that have mushroomed under the Societies Registration Act in which children are languishing. In Karnataka alone, there are around 225 families in the waiting line for children. And it can often be a two-year wait.”

Pushing social barriers

This “lack of dynamism” is evidently not a reflection of any growing public apathy towards adoption. If anything, adoption as an alternative route to family building is gaining acceptance. Middle-class Indians increasingly look to adoption as the way to go if they are childless or if they are driven by the need to parent an orphan or abandoned child. In fact, the adoption programme is pushing social barriers in many ways.

“More South Indian families want girl children. Everybody is reporting this trend,” said Nomita Chandy. Indian families are now willing to take older children and even children who are physically challenged. Nevertheless, the channel that should connect the thousands of institutionalised children with eagerly waiting parents remains blocked.

Periodic scams that get highlighted in the media, of children being sold by touts in cahoots with unscrupulous agencies who in turn “sell” babies to gullible foreigners, have also contributed to a weakening of the adoption programme.

Most of these scams are true, but instead of surgically removing the ulcer so that the health of the rest of the programme is not affected, the government does just the opposite. It clamps down on the whole programme, coming down particularly hard on the inter-country adoption component, cutting hundreds of adoptions midstream. This happened in Andhra Pradesh in 2005 when the uncovering of an adoption scam led to an official ban on adoptions, a blow that the adoption programme has not recovered from in that State.

The inter-country adoption programme is particularly vulnerable to pressures and yet, if properly monitored and encouraged, could yield rich societal dividends. It has hardened and outspoken detractors who offer a gamut of arguments against it.

At one end of the spectrum is the argument that the foreign adoption programme is a cover for an elaborate international child-trafficking racket. At the other is the more sophisticated argument that an Indian child will always be a cultural misfit in a foreign family.

That these are misconceptions is clear from the record. Agencies that place children in adoptions abroad have to keep records of the child for several years after the adoption. For every adoption “mistake”, there are hundreds of happy families created.

Special needs children

The special needs category – defined as children above the age of six, sibling groups and physically challenged children – is a truly special component of the adoption programme. Most special needs children are adopted by foreigners although even here the domestic picture is changing for the better.

Amongst foreign adoptees, both normal and special needs, there is a trickle of children who return to seek their birth families. This, too, is often cited as evidence of the failure of the foreign adoption programme. Children yearn for their birth families, runs this argument, and once they find them, they become emotional wrecks with torn loyalties and confused identities.

The stories that Divya Gandhi narrates in this issue of *Frontline* suggest that this is far from so. Some foreign adoptees do return in search of their roots – some to “find a missing piece of the puzzle” as Nomita Chandy says, others to find closure. But for all of them, their first family is the one that nurtured them and brought them up.

All the four young women who returned and found their birth parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, returned home to resume their old lives, infinitely enriched and enlarged by the

familial reconnections they established in India.

Parvathi Menon in Bangalore

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