



Media Texts and Child Adoption in India- Trends and Patterns of Coverage

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Abstract

This paper aims to understand the vocabulary and coverage of child adoption in print media. The paper looks at Indian journalistic pieces, popular women's magazines, films and advertisements which specifically are built around the ideas of motherhood, family, parenting and child adoption. It also tries to understand how child adoption is depicted in media and ways in which such depictions influence the understanding of adoption in Indian society. Frames assigned by media to adoption and its consequent representation helps in identifying those issues that contribute to public perceptions and policy frameworks around the issue. (Shelton, 2019)

The study undertaken has selected a sample size of 140 urban, educated, people aged between 18 and 55. The approach to the study used the methods of content analysis, survey, interviews and a study of existing literature.

Keywords: adoption, bias, media frames, motherhood, social constructs

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Media texts play a hugely influential role in shaping, constructing and restructuring public opinion. The broadcast, narrowcast and print industries, the cinematic medium and new media platforms offer to their watching-reading public a host of opinions and ways of viewing the world. Cultural, ideological, sociological, and political opinions often come about when various media take over and burst out heavily opinionated arguments and make stigma-causing statements. Denis McQuail, the social scientist, and British foundational theorist in mass communication discussed media as a centralizing unifying force in creating and shaping public opinion.

When one looks at the concept of adoption - its policies, legalities, conversation positions and representations in texts of various sorts, the part that media plays in the reception of this mode of creating a family, is of massive significance. Adoption practitioners and researchers have studied the part that media plays in shaping the opinion that the public form on adoption issues (Reitz, 1999) and discuss at length about unfavourable portrayals of adoption (Creedy, 2008).

It has, over repeated observational studies and content analysis, been observed that 'adoption' is often accompanied in media language, with words like 'abandoned', 'displaced', 'charity', 'anxiety', 'increasing returns', 'trauma', 'noble' and 'rescue'. The



immediate assumption that accompanies adoption is that it is an act out of the ordinary, hence news worthy and most definitely charitable in its attempt. A quick Google search of adopted families brings up articles that deal with counselling, resettlement trauma and reads that discuss displacement and root search. The language of the media and the slant of adoption stories covered, propagate a stigma and rarely, if ever, make a mention of seamless adjustment. Popular films imagine that every adopted child would necessarily suffer from feelings of neglect and isolation and adoption plots ignore the universal fact that all growing children, as a natural process of grappling with growth, encounter feelings of deep sadness, isolation and of being misfits. Adoption becomes a convenient peg to place an adoptee's developmental distress on.

Unthinking statements and vocabulary pertaining to adoptive families present issues that concern not just the adoptee, but also adoptive motherhood. Adoptive motherhood (note- not parenthood as much) takes on two forms. One is that of a sad substitute for the more superior form of motherhood that emanates from having put the woman's body to good productive use. The second is of womanhood that is all-embracing, noble and capable of an expanse of love- even for a child that is not biologically hers.

Barth and Miller, through extensive empirical studies have found that adoptions generally tend to be successful and stable (Richard P. Barth, 2004). Stigma however, tends to get associated with adoption because of the cultural understanding of normal families which cultural and media texts construct as meaning- heteronormative and biological.

Journalism and the vocabulary of adoption

Journalistic reports carry a certain vocabulary of adoption which reinforces an all-encompassing idea of society's perception of adoption in general. This vocabulary reinforcement can be found around the

reports covering adoption stories of common people as well as that of celebrities.

A news piece on adoption in *The Better India*, an Indian digital media platform, in May 2018, talks about the preference of Indian parents to adopt girls over boys. While the piece by itself is factual and non-controversial, the choice of words and phrases like 'ray of hope', 'easier to control girls' (Patel, 2018) etc. brings in the connotation of adoption as a 'task' of adoptive parents who work hard in their roles as 'saviours'. Another article in the same platform, written in the same month as the previously quoted one, refers to an adoptive mother, who "quit her full-time job last year to dedicate her life to the cause of adoption." (Aranha, 2018) The dismissal of career as secondary to the call of the primary maternal instinct of a woman, has had feminists rise up in anger ever since the second wave of feminism. However, this particular line, highlighted in blue in the article, reinforces a sense of selflessness and sacrifice not only because of the ideas of womanhood and motherhood and the implicit assumptions that come with occupying those roles, but also because of the adoption angle. This not only makes the woman 'noble' but also twice a celebrated woman because she chooses to take up the 'cause' of adoption, thus also making the story more news-worthy than one about a biological mother who chooses to follow the same route.

Does news media give a realistic report of what adoption is and what it means to people? Kalpana Purushothaman, Senior Professional Counsellor at Centre for Child & the Law, National Law School of India University, (Purushothaman, 2017)¹ is not very positive about this. "In 2016, there was this single guy in Pune, a software engineer, who used to volunteer with an organisation where he met a child with mental disability, and slowly he got really attached to the child. He fought a huge legal battle and won. It made for a wonderful story, single man falls in love with this child and so on. Many newspapers carried headlines like 'Daddy's little boy: Meet the youngest single man to adopt a child', 'Aditya Tiwari Sets an Example by Becoming the Youngest Bachelor to Adopt a Special Child!', etc. On the other side, is it the best thing for the child, is he even equipped? It is not about the gender here – whether it is a woman or a man, is she or he equipped is the question? While these might have been the concerns the agency faced, the media just chose to glorify him for his actions," says Purushottaman.

Mr. Anand C (C, 2017)², Director of Shishu Mandir, Bangalore, also opines that the Indian news media is not very accurate in talking about adoption. "Adoption in the papers comes only when there is some scandal. Some scandals come, then everybody talks about it. And then it dies out. Otherwise people usually do not promote adoption. The reason is the supply [of children for adoption] is much, much lower than the demand. So, as long as the demand is much higher than the supply, there is no talk about it. I think our media is not so much of an educating media. Our media is a sensationalising media; Something people will only look at, when there is sensational information," he says.

¹Purushothaman, K. (2017, July 13). Senior Professional Counsellor. (M. J. Aishwarya Joshi, Interviewer)

²C, A. (2017, August 7). Director of Shishu Mandir. (M. J. Aishwarya Joshi, Interviewer)

A fact to be considered is also that celebrity adoptions are the focus areas of most adoption news covered by the media. A survey conducted among a group of 140 respondents across India³ revealed that 54.5% of them have read/seen/encountered stories of adoption through celebrity news coverage. 44.3% said that these reports have a positive influence on how adoption is perceived.

When celebrities opt to take on the role of adoptive parents, the press coverage is not just more intrusive, but also more cliched in their narrative styles and vocabulary. When actress Sakshi Talwar adopted a baby girl, the press declared that she 'set an example by adopting a baby girl.' (TV news, 2020)⁴

A lot of journalistic coverage of adoption sounds the way it does, because of the ignorance among the journalistic community regarding adoption laws. When television couple MahhiVij and actor Jay Bhanushali became 'proud parents after they adopted two kids- a boy and a girl of their househelp', the couple was much celebrated. It was also declared that the couple is taking care of the children's education and other basic needs and that the children continue to stay with their 'official parents' (TV news, 2020). The adoption laws in India clearly state that the process of adoption can be done only through CARA (Central Adoption Resource Authority), which is a statutory body of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India and/or under personal laws that apply to peculiar situations. An 'adoption' of the sort that the actors, MahhiVij and Jay Bhanushali refer to is unrecognised and illegal and can at the most be referred to as a 'charitable act' and nothing else.

The same article discusses popular telly couple Gurmeet Choudhary and Debina Bonnerjee who adopted two girls Pooja and Latha from Gurmeet's hometown, Jarampur, Bihar. It

³Joshi, Aishwarya; Jacob, Meghna; Satyajit, Soumya "Survey on Media and Society" Questionnaire, 15th September 2017

declares that the couple fell in love with the 'orphans' at a family wedding and 'fell in love with them instantly'. An article of this sort is problematic at various levels. It is insensitive in the choice of language and the journalist makes the narrative of adoption fall back into the self-defeating loop of sympathy of the underprivileged child adopted by affluent, privileged couples. It is also misleading to the general public who may believe that being moved enough to adopt an orphan guarantees the process of adoption being activated. What is not referred to here, is the bringing into action a judicial process or even customary law that the couple would have had to employ in order to formalise the adoption.

On 31st August 2017, yourstory.com, that by its own definition is 'India's biggest and definitive platform' ran a story which was titled, 'MithunChakraborty's Untold Story of Adopting a Child from a Garbage Bin' (Social Story, 2017). The arrangement of the words in the headline are not only problematic but also voyeuristic.

When movie star Sunny Leone and her husband Daniel Weber adopted a child, the press went berserk. In one of the news articles (Tulsiani, 2017), a CARA official was quoted as saying that the adopted child had been rejected 11 times before Leone and Weber accepted her. When questioned on her views on this, Dr. Aloma Lobo, Ex-Chairperson of CARA, says, "It is highly unlikely that a CARA official said this. It must have been made up by the media. Because the system does not allow for this to happen. Once the child has been rejected 3 times from Indian parents, he/she is then moved to inter-country adoption. I don't think the article is true at all. So, one needs to be careful about what they believe in the news."

Popular women's and parenting magazines – the body as determiner of motherhood

Media constructs images for adoption which reinforce biases existing towards adoption. These biases, structured around ideas of the normative process of child-birth and gender-based division of labor in a family are

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reinforced through the common portrayal of ideal family and motherhood depicted in news and popular magazines.

A quick content analysis of four popular Indian magazines over the period of two years (2018-2020) –*Grihalakshmi*, *Grihashobha*, *Meri Saheli* and *Femina* reveal certain common codes. The content outline of these magazines mainly revolve around beauty products, health products, kitchen products, healthcare for women and pregnancy care. The ideal reader is imagined to be a middle class housewife within a heteronormative fold. Within the boundaries of these articles that whisper intimately to the reader, there is little or no space for any discussion that does not dole out the stereotype- adoptive families and adoptive mothers are a far away, almost non-existent reality.

After an investigative hunt for magazines that included adoptions in their writings, the arena of parenting magazines was entered into. Parenting magazines in India have no visible categorization for adoptive households.

Adoption is absent in parenting conversations in what Google claims are the *11 Best Parenting Magazines in India You Must Read* (Kalpana M, 2022). The normalised category of parent is that of heterosexual parents conceiving a child biologically and therefore dealing with a child's emotional, physiological, psychological, educational and material needs until the child reaches a certain age. The reinforcements of such parenting magazines are also around presenting a specific idea of parenting and family to its ideal reader and creating a concept of modern family which is perfect, or which becomes perfect and complete when it biologically conceives a 'healthy' baby. There is no space for physical or mental issues that could arise in a biological child and adoption is not even an idea with any scope for discussion or building a vocabulary around. Magazines like *Child* and *Mother and Baby* explicitly state their coverage around child care for children conceived biologically. *Mother and Baby* comes with a special edition on pregnancy and lifestyle during pregnancy,

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glorifying a certain idea of motherhood. Other magazines like *Parent and Child* and *Parent Circle*, although do not overtly mention that the child-care tips are only for biological parents, seem to function on the assumption that there is only one type of parent- the biological one.

The lack of a space generated for adoption in these magazines and little to no engagement with the stakeholders involved in the entire process of child adoption in the country, is at the crux of problematic depictions, if covered, of child adoption, in popular women's magazines. Even though most of these articles do not necessarily point at the parents being biological, the pictures that accompany the articles are of cherubic full term pregnant mothers. The non-inclusivity of any other type of mother is present in its absence. Including stakeholders involved in the process of child adoption – parents, children and social workers will help in bridging the gap of communication between the magazine and its subscription base of readers.

Popular women magazines not only lack in their coverage of talking about the specific psycho-social aspects of adoption, they don't give it the kind of space and discussion which a topic like adoption would require and the sensitivity needed to address it. Articles like "5-mistakes which parents make with their children" and "How to Motivate you Child for studies?"(Gupta U.) present themselves like roadmaps to effective parenting, emphasising on the psychosocial aspects of the parent-child relationship while also capitalising on the dominant anxieties around the parent-child dynamic for a biologically conceived child. The general overall assumptions here work out in a way that doesn't leave room for anything around adoption and the communication is reached out to an ideal reader who belongs to a category of biological parents. Biological parenting hence is reinforced as a norm, and adoption, an exception.

Dwivedy et al., (2009) examined the role portrayals of men and women that appeared in India's most popular men's, women's and
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general interest magazines (October 2006 to April 2007). It involved the content analysis of advertisements across popular magazines and he found out that both men and women were depicted in typical conformative roles. (Shyama Kumari, 2013) Women represented were mostly North Indian and there was also an emphasis on the "supermom category" of women who handled a career while also serving the household. The woman was expected to be the anchor of the house and biological mothers were the only category of mothers depicted in women's magazines in India. All "natural instincts" of motherhood have been awarded to the biological mother and these magazines make no effort in including or even considering the makings of a mother non-biologically. The only form of endorsed 'good mother' is the one who becomes one biologically as a direct result of a monogamous relationship with a husband who has been single handedly responsible for un-virgining her and thus moving her successfully from pleasure-giver to breast-feeder.

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Film and Advertisements – stereotype carriers

"Of course you aren't in the family plan. You are adopted." says Anushka Sharma on a Reliance Networkcommercial aired on TV in April 2011. This is one such example of a joke that is really common in various forms of media and even more so at homes.

In a survey conducted with a sample of 140⁵ people ranging from 18-55+ of age, 43.4% people said that they found such jokes funny as they're not said in bad taste.

"For a common man, this may not be a problem, it may be a joke even. But for many of us, it is our reality," says Sharmila Gupta⁶, an adoptive parent. "The joke implies that being adopted is something to be ashamed of, something bad. And that isn't funny."

⁵ Joshi, Aishwarya; Jacob, Meghna; Satyajit, Soumya "Survey on Media and Society, Survey. 15th September 2017

⁶ Gupta, Sharmila. Personal Interview, 28th August 2017



Adoption plot lines in films and serials, carry the promise of drama and tension that is guaranteed to pull in big audiences. In *Ishqbaaz*, a primetime Hindi serial with a high TRP rating on Star Plus, the truth of the male lead's adoption is used as a threat. The mother-in-law, in her fight against the female lead, blackmails her that if she doesn't leave her son she will tell him that he is adopted and the female lead complies to her blackmail.

The adopted child as represented in Indian movies, function along two basic types- a damaged villain or a martyr, facing the storms of life, carrying the burden of gratitude with admirable stoicism. For example, *Baghban*, an Indian Hindi drama film that released in 2003, showed the differences between biological children and adopted children; while the biological children separated their parents and mistreated them, the adopted son treated them as his Gods. The implied ideas are many- the biological children will still be associated with the family, simply because of a birth-privilege. The adopted son on the other hand, must smile more, tolerate taunts and be a return- rescuer of parents who would have, previously, done him that favour by taking him in as a child. Now his call to look after his parents is not just viewed as a repeat of goodness, but is also poised as somehow more noble. Salman Khan's deliberate dopey expression drills this in further to a gullible audience.

Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham, the 2001, Karan Johar directed , box office hit, carries these sentiments of gratitude and obligation to an excessive melo-dramatic level. The plot rests heavily on the central character being adopted and yet much favoured.

A 1999 Hindi film directed by an adoptive parent, *Dil Kya Kare*, received mixed responses, notes Bhargava in her book, "There were people who said that the way adoption was depicted in the film would serve to put off anyone wanting to adopt. The confrontation of the adoptive mother with the biological mother, something Indian adoptive parents do not ever wish to encounter, was portrayed.

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In the survey, 58.6% confirmed that the media is a positive influence in shaping people's opinions on adoption. When the same sample population was asked to name some movies or TV shows that they can think of which deal with or mention adoption, they mentioned *Lion*, *KannathilMutthamithal*, *FRIENDS*, *The Blind Side*, *Despicable Me*, *Modern Family*, *Juno*, *Baghban*, and so on. Most of these do talk positively about adoption which seems to be helping the general perception.

The narrative vocabulary of adoption, in journalistic pieces, magazines and film texts in India, work on the dominant anxieties associated with adoption in the country. From the survey conducted one notes that the frames used to cover adoption stories in news pieces can be put under the following categories:

- a. The ideal heteronormative family taking adoption as an alternative route for parents who are not able to conceive a child through the biological process.
- b. Adoption is an act of charity and is not an essential family planning endeavour.
- c. The saviour complex of abled parents from privileged background extending their good deeds on an adopted child from an underprivileged background- often used to evoke pity more than empathy (lack of sensitive usage of words).
- d. Using the trope of religion - taking examples of mythology to legitimize the idea of adoption thereby making it more acceptable.
- e. Biological conception of child as superior to the process of conceiving child through adoption.
- f. Adoption as a complicated process which is more of a "task" than something which comes naturally to somebody.

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Online negotiations and the way forward

Online support groups for adoptive parents have been replete with messages about insensitive media vocabulary and the possible emotional stress on adoptive families as a result. The groups have worked as watch-dogs



of the media during several occasions and have successfully demanded that companies take down their advertisements which carried a language of unapologetic non-inclusivity . One such success story is as recent as August 3rd, 2020, (TNN, 2020) when an online giant like Amazon was asked to remove 'offensive' rakhi products from their online catalogue. Condemning the advertising gimmick that made light of adoption, on the 2nd of August, 2020, a statement was issued by the director of the state government's Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS). This was triggered by a group of adoptive parents, and Families of Joy, a Civil Society Organisation, based in Delhi writing a letter to CARA (Central Adoption Resource Authority) to recall merchandise like mugs, t-shirts, cushion covers, that targeted adoption and dismissed the concept as a joke.(Pandit, 2020)

Where are India's Children, a Child Welfare and Action Foundation in July 2020, through change.org has created an online petition(Gupta S. , 2020) crying out for sensitive and informed reporting when it comes to cases of babies/children who have been abandoned. The campaign ask to print information about adoption agencies and helplines when reporting child abandonment, instead of merely capitalizing on the voyeuristic and sensational aspects of current reports. Perhaps the inclusion of crucial information in news reports about child abandonment could be the beginning of sensitive journalist and narrative creation around adoption.

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