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# An Autoethnographic Journey of Intercountry Adoption

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## An Autoethnographic Journey of Intercountry Adoption

### **Abstract**

In this autoethnographic essay, the author explores her struggles and desires to learn about her life prior to adoption. She portrays her journey to search for her beginning pieces of her adoption narrative by an assessment of “narrative inheritance” (Goodall, 2006), attempts to reframe her adoption narrative, and reflects on how her adoption narrative changed over a period of time. The author highlights major events of her search and provides meaning and understanding to her experience. The author concludes by providing her reflections of her search and attempts to redefine her adoption journey and what it means to be an adoptee.

### **Keywords**

Autoethnography, Intercountry Adoption, Adoption, Narrative Inheritance, Birth Search

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## An Autoethnographic Journey of Intercountry Adoption

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*In this autoethnographic essay, the author explores her struggles and desires to learn about her life prior to adoption. She portrays her journey to search for her beginning pieces of her adoption narrative by an assessment of “narrative inheritance” (Goodall, 2006), attempts to reframe her adoption narrative, and reflects on how her adoption narrative changed over a period of time. The author highlights major events of her search and provides meaning and understanding to her experience. The author concludes by providing her reflections of her search and attempts to redefine her adoption journey and what it means to be an adoptee. Keywords: Autoethnography, Intercountry Adoption, Adoption, Narrative Inheritance, Birth Search*

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### An Autoethnographic Journey of Intercountry Adoption

I was born on October 31, 1987 in Mumbai, India. My natural mother relinquished me into the care of my adoption agency two days after my birth. I know that after my birth, I transferred first to a children’s hospital. I then entered the care of Taanusiya, my foster mom, and Bhakti, my foster dad. Taanusiya and Bhakti took care of me for four months until the time of my adoption. In April 1988, my adoption became final and I entered my Indian adoptive family. I then came to the United States in June (1988). My adoptive parents have two biological sons older than me.

When my adoptive dad proposed to my adoptive mom, she stated that she wanted to adopt a child. My adoptive dad agreed and said that he wanted a girl—there were only males on his side of the family, for the past three generations.

My adoptive mom often told me that I “came from her heart” instead of her stomach. My adoption was *not* a secret to my immediate and extended family. Everyone knew my adoptive parents expressed a desire to adopt a baby girl from India. According to my adoptive dad, his side of the family was supportive of my parents adopting a girl. However, there was a fear in the beginning that I would eventually return to my natural family.

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The purpose of this project is to better understand my adoption journey using “narrative inheritance,” (Goodall, 2005) and to investigate my natural family’s “unfinished business” (p. 497) of intercountry adoption by analyzing my adoption journey at different moments in my life. My thoughts and reflections about my adoption “journey” (Penny, Borders, & Portnoy, 2007) reflect my current views of my adoption, although my views change as time passes and as new information becomes available.

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My adoptive mom’s side of the family was not supportive of the idea to adopt a girl, because my adoptive maternal grandmother already had five daughters—having another female in the family was not wise because of the Indian cultural and socioeconomic pressures; daughters are often perceived to be a “social and economic burden” (Ahmad, 2010, p. 13). Further, the Indian cultural aspect of the dowry system, “a form of marriage payment in

Indian society” (Prasad, 1994, p. 73) which can include “a significant transfer of wealth from the family of the bride to the bride, the groom, or the groom’s family” (Shenk, 2007, p. 243) was another reason why my adoptive mom’s side of the family was not supportive of adopting a girl. However, my adoptive parents were not traditional: They married outside of their Indian community (my adoptive mom is Sindhi and my adoptive dad is Punjabi) and the dowry system did not affect them. When I arrived into my family, my extended family accepted me.

My adoptive parents decided to name me “Prema” and not keep my given name of “Suma.” The change of name was because of a promise made to my adoptive paternal grandma to be named after my grandpa. According to my adoptive mom, within the Indian culture, having a middle name was uncommon during the time I was adopted. Therefore, Suma is not part of my legal name.

On the flight to pick me up, my brother told everyone on the plane that he assisted my adoptive mom in picking up his baby sister. He probably said “baby sitter” since he was quite young. According to my adoptive mom, my brother stayed with family in another city in India while she went to Mumbai to finalize my adoption. My adoptive mom went to the nursery where I was kept, which was my foster parent’s home and spent time with me and bottle-fed me. The caretakers in the nursery told my adoptive mom that I was “always smiling, you [Prema] were always happy, and you were always such a good laughing baby.” On that day (March 1988), my adoptive mom signed the necessary papers and I entered her care. I was legally adopted through the Indian government in April 1988.

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According to Pavao (2007), “adoption can be a very positive way to create or expand a family” (p. 283). However, the repercussions of adoption may not be as positive, especially since “adoption is a multigenerational and ongoing process that permanently affects the lives of all involved” (Henderson, 2007, p. 406). As an adoptee, coping with the grief and loss resulting from the separation of my natural mother, the desire to search for my origins, and integrating what being an adoptee means to me has been pivotal in making sense of my life.

Adoption can stir a deep sense of grief and loss for the adoptee, particularly the grief and loss about his or her genetic identity, extended birth family, and birth culture, especially if the adoptee was adopted internationally. As Verrier (1993) observes, “loss itself is not very well understood in our [United States] society” (p. 69) and the grief and loss felt by the adoptee often remains unacknowledged (see Porch, 20007). The trauma of “being separated from his or her blood kin under some kind of legal arrangement” (Lifton, 2007, p. 419) becomes evident in the experience of many adoptive children regardless of culture or location.

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I realized my “adoptive status” (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Lash Esau, 2007, p. 219; see also Baden & Steward, 2007) in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. This became the moment in which the search for the meaning and understanding of what my adoption meant. From the perspective of a third grader, I did not comprehend the concept of what it means to be adopted besides knowing that I came from another set of parents. My difficulty of reconciling my adoptive and natural family became a struggle, and my core beliefs of what it means to be adopted has shifted throughout my lifetime. I had a “wish to obtain answers” (Sass & Henderson, 2007, p. 314) about why my natural mother relinquished me. Further, my “lack of well-formed identity” (Henderson, Sass, & Carlson, 2007, p. 388) became a driving force behind the adoptive search process; I felt that the stories about my past were incomplete.

Although I approached my root search, otherwise known as a birth search, in order to locate my natural mother, I felt that searching became necessary for my identity development and my “narrative inheritance” (Goodall, 2005). I felt many emotions during my search of anger, sadness, and confusion. I couldn’t explain to other people why I was feeling these ways. However, now I have come to an understanding that my reactions were getting in touch with formerly repressed grief and anger. This is because adoptees who search not only go forward to unite with the lost birth mother but also regress back to the past, to the moment of separation. They are both the adult trying to recover the past and the baby trying to recover from the trauma and separation. (Lifton, 2007, p. 421)

My ability to integrate my adoption journey remains a critical part of my understanding of my adoption narrative through an Indian lens. Like Goodall (2005), I wanted to investigate the meaning of my origins and to establish a more “coherent sense of self” (Lifton, 2007, p. 421). Through my adoption journey, I have been able to re-frame my adoption narrative, understand my origins, make sense of what it means to be adopted, and illustrated how my identity has evolved over time.

### **Methodology**

I turned to autoethnography to describe and investigate my adoption journey. I utilize autoethnography because I was drawn to view adoption from diverse viewpoints. Furthermore, I had a desire to understand how the Indian culture contributes to adoption regardless of intercountry or domestic placement. Autoethnographers describe and analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. Autoethnography combines multiple characteristics of autobiography and ethnography. When a person writes his or her autobiography, information is gathered by using his or her own reflections (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The autobiographer works to write about epiphanies, moments that have significantly shaped the course of a person’s life (Denzin, 1989). When a person does ethnography, the person studies a culture’s values, practices, and experiences of both the insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers). An ethnographer might interview members of the culture, examine and investigate the cultural member’s place or space, and analyze artifacts such as books or photographs (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Throughout this project, I have been able to reflect and write about moments and Indian cultural values and practices that have significantly shaped my experience as an international adoptee—epiphanies that have significantly changed my thought process of what it means to be adopted and feelings about being an insider and an outsider to families and particular nations, in my situation in India.

I started my personal journey to understand my life prior to adoption when I first visited my adoption agency in India in 2004. Data for this project was gathered through my memories and notes taken from my visits back to India in 2004, 2006, and 2011. I also gathered data from my journal entries from 2008 to 2012 and notes taken through the duration of my root search (November 2010 to December 2011). I conducted informal interviews with members of the Indian culture who have direct experience with adoption such Sahila, my adoption counselor, and Minati, my adoption agency director. Furthermore, I interviewed both my adoptive mom and dad to gather their insights to my adoption narrative. I have spent the past two years researching intercountry adoption with a specific focus on the relationship of root searches and the country of India

In order to maintain confidentiality, I changed the names of the individuals in this project. If I included someone’s actual name in this project, I asked the person’s permission to do so. Most of the individuals in this project have read and/or have been provided with an emailed copy of this project, and most of these people have confirmed the stories I tell. For

confidentiality purposes, I do not provide the specific details of the suburb within Mumbai or the name of my adoption agency. I use a chronological sequence to describe my adoption journey and hope that my stories will be “transformative in nature” (polanco, 2011, p. 44). I also decided to “show and tell” (Adams, 2006) particular aspects of my adoption journey. I tell certain events of my adoption journey because “I remember them occurring but remain emotionally detached from the actual experiences” (p. 717). I show parts of my adoption journey through dialogue to provide vivid imagery and are written “meaningfully and evocatively” (polanco, 2011, p. 44). I used dialogue to evoke “sensory and emotional experiences” (p. 44) towards my adoption journey.

This project models off of the works of Goodall (2005), and Ellis and Bochner (2000). I also turned to Rivera (2013) and Cho and Kim (2005) for guidance. Although there are parts of my adoption journey that seem incomplete (questions that can only be answered on basis of speculation), I have developed plausible explanations of the context of my adoption situation.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) helped me to write this essay in a way that reflects how my feelings relating to my adoption journey in the context of understanding Indian culture have changed over a period of time. For example, my initial reaction towards being adopted was that I am unloved. I came to the realization that I *was* loved as a baby and that my natural mother made the decision to relinquish me out of love and *not* because she did not love me. I have been able to make sense of my experience as an adoptee, by seeing people and visiting places that helped me to retrace my life prior to adoption. And like Rivera (2013), I have been able to gain insights into the deeper meaning behind my adoption journey that has assisted me in the continual process of self-discovery. I learned to not become “victims of negative patterns” (p. 92) towards my behavior and responses to my natural family’s history, and to examine my natural family’s history “in order to gain insight into who I am” (p. 94).

Throughout, I will be using the term “natural mother” to describe the mother who has lost her child to adoption, the term “natural father” to describe the father who helped create me, the terms “adoptive mom,” “adoptive dad,” and/or “adoptive parents” as those who have been considering adoption or have already adopted, and “adoptee” as the term used to refer to the individual who lost her or his natural mother through adoption and who now is raised by adoptive parents. The term “natural family” will reflect the family whom I was born into and the term “adoptive family” will reflect the family who raised me. It should be noted that the term “birth mother” and “natural mother” may be used interchangeably as well as the term “root search” and “birth search.”

### **“My Adoption Journey”**

**1997**

My earliest memory of learning about my adoption: I sit in my third grade classroom and receive an assignment to construct a family tree after my teacher in class shows us how to design one. I ask my adoptive dad for assistance to tell me about my ancestry. I wonder about my birth history, but I do not proceed to ask questions because I am fearful of the response I might receive. If I ask my questions, I fear that I will be sent back into the care of my adoption agency. I wonder if my birth mother loved me, because if she loved me she would have kept me. After I complete a tree for my adoptive family, I take out another sheet of paper to construct one for my natural family—my birth mother, birth father, and me. I know I came from another set of parents, so I want to include them separately although I do not know anything about them. At this moment, honoring my natural family also became important to me.

The next day, I have to present my family tree to the class. I almost submit the family tree of my natural family, but I do not want to explain to the class that I came from another mommy and daddy, because I do not fully understand the concept of adoption enough to be able to explain what it means to the class. I do not know anyone who is adopted so I feel as though I am “different.” I do not want to be viewed as “different” or hear hurtful comments from others, such as my birth mother lost me to adoption because “something was wrong with me.” I put the family tree of my birth mother and father in my backpack. I try to keep it a secret and not tell any of my friends that I have two mommies and two daddies—one mommy and daddy who I know and a mommy and daddy who I have never met.

### **India 2004**

My adoptive parents and I were traveling to India for my cousin’s wedding and they thought that this would be a good opportunity to take me to see my adoption agency and to learn about my roots. During the preparation of my trip to India, my adoptive parents told me about what they knew about my birth history for the first time.

My adoptive parents told me that my given name at birth was Suma, the name of my adoption agency, and that I was from Mumbai, India. Additionally, my adoptive parents told me the information they knew from when my adoptive mom picked me up. I was relinquished, my natural mother was the daughter of a truck business man, my natural father was also a truck driver and she was not very well educated. My natural mother was engaged to get married, but because my natural father left, my natural mother and her parents made a conscious and informed decision to give me a better life so my natural mother could start her life again.

During this trip to India, I did not actively seek information about my roots, but some information was voluntarily provided by Minati, the director of my adoption agency. I found out my natural mother’s age, grade level of completed education, and religious background. I did not know anything about my natural father other than he had something to do with trucks. During this trip I also met with Sahila, the social worker who helped with my adoption placement in India. They welcomed me with hugs, gifts, and a beautiful handmade card.

At that time, my adoptive mom and I traveled from New Delhi to Mumbai. I document my emotions in my journal:

Tomorrow I go to Bombay [Mumbai]. I am scared because I don’t know what to expect. I want to stay calm and absorb as much as I can. On Monday I am going to my adoption agency. I know I have to be strong, but it is so hard. I want to gain as much knowledge about my birthplace. Remember what Vidhya said: “Pray and everything will work out. Have faith and you have the strength.” (December 10, 2004)

During my visit, I met Dr. Deva, the person who took care of me before I transferred to a children’s hospital. At this point, my series of placements prior to adoption becomes complicated as I did not know about my foster parents until the time of my 2011 visit. The information about my foster care placement came from my medical records.

### **India 2006**

My adoptive mom and I traveled with a group of adoptees and adoptive parents to visit the orphanages where we, the adoptees, lived prior to adoption. My adoptive mom and I decided to go a few weeks early and I spent a few days visiting with my adoption agency as a

secondary component to the trip. I met again with Minati and Sahila. However, I did not proceed to ask for further information about my roots because I knew that India had a “confidential record system whereby there is no access to the relinquishment document” (Mehta, 1992, p. 39).

I entered the adoption agency with a smile. I had my backpack with some things I wanted to share with Minati. I mostly wanted to share my writings, but just being with her again felt comfortable and exciting. I enjoyed my time with Minati because it signified the closest I could get to my life prior to adoption. Minati and Sahila gave me their email addresses to use if I wanted to stay in contact. I did not email them until 2010.

### **The Search for My Roots**

In November 2010, my adoptive mom asked if I wanted to search for my natural mother. If I did not take this opportunity, I did not know if I would have an opportunity to do so in the future if the laws and/or guidelines on root searches changed. I wrote a letter to the director of my adoption agency. Thankfully, Minati was still the director, and she remembered me from my visits in 2004 and 2006. The request for my root search was granted and the process to locate my natural mother started just a few days after I sent my signed letter requesting the search.

Restless nights consumed me. I could not sleep properly and I could not stop wondering about whether my natural mother would refuse to see me. What happens if she abandons me again? What happens if I do not meet her expectations? What happens if she is found but denies that she had me out of fear or shock? I tried to be strong, but some days I tried to block out my feelings. Other days I could not stop crying. I still had faith that something would make sense from this journey. I did not know if my natural mother would want to meet me should she be found or if my adoption agency would even be able to locate her. I recorded these moments in my journal:

It makes me uneasy about the thought of trying to find my birth parents. I know that finding them has a heavy chance of not happening because you never know what people say or even if the information is true. I do not want to cause more pain to myself and what would hurt me the most would be bringing pain to my birth mom. But I want to continue because I do wonder about my birth mom. (November 27 - December 4, 2010)

Even though my emotions were difficult, I decided to continue the search.

I remember the day when I saw the email that Minati wrote to me that said my natural mother could not be found despite the diligent efforts of Urmi, a social worker. I began to cry as I felt tremendous pain and sadness. Yet, during the months that passed so many things had happened: Urmi left my adoption agency and a few months later Minati took over the search herself along with Varsha, the new social worker. I did not want to know if Minati located my natural mother until my journey back to India in December 2011.

I ran into several dead ends to my search. Dr. Deva’s nursing home had shut down and the building had now turned into a bank; the Gurudwara – the Sikh place of worship - in the area my natural mother lived kept no records of their devotees; the devotee who went to the Gurudwara during the time of my birth could not assist without knowing my family name (that is, my natural father’s last name or my maternal grandfather’s name) as the family name was not on record; the census report in the area where my natural mother lived did not have any relevant information; and the only information provided was my natural mother’s name followed by Kaur, the name given to all Sikh women, and a general area of her residence at

the time of my birth. Even though the possibility of locating my natural mother was small, I still had an undeniable desire to learn my circumstances prior to and during the adoption. I wanted to know about my circumstances because I still had a sense of emptiness.

I made monthly phone calls, sometimes twice a month, to Minati to check the progress on the search. I remember that I had so much to say to Minati and many questions and feelings to express. I tried to understand the process of what she was doing to try to help me locate my natural mother. She told me that she would be with me throughout the entire process. In January 2011 I found out my natural mother's name. I was determined to travel back to India and visit with Minati. My adoptive parents and I booked tickets to Mumbai.

I am happy that I am traveling again to India. I am hoping to call my adoption agency and speak with Minati today to let her know my dates when I will be there. Today is also Mother's Day. I said a small prayer for my birth mom this morning. (Journal Entry, May 8, 2011)

At this point, it did not matter if I saw my file of records. Minati mentioned that I could see my file when I visited and that she would sit with me and explain the circumstances of my adoption, but for me there was a deeper meaning behind the travel.

## **India 2011**

On December 20, 2011, I arrived again to India. Twenty-four years ago, my adoptive mom and brother travelled to India to take me home, and now I travel back once again to see the place of my Indian home, my adoption agency. I felt so tired after waiting for over a year to travel back to my homeland. A week prior to my trip Minati expressed excitement about my visit, and I felt nervous about meeting with Sahila, my adoption counselor.

Minati helped retrace my placements from the information provided in my medical records. Prior to this trip, Minati did not have the medical records as all of the medical information about the adopted child is given to the adoptive parents at the time of adoption. The medical records only came into my possession in December 2010. During this visit, I learned that I was born in Dr. Deva's nursing home, that she had met my natural mother, and that she witnessed the signing of my Document of Surrender, a legal document that is "signed by the relinquishing legal guardians of the child" (Mehta, 1992, p. 30). Because of multiple placements prior to adoption (being born in Dr. Deva's nursing home, being transferred to a children's hospital, and then being transferred to my foster parents), I did not know if, or how, I could find my natural mother.

I remember looking at my adoption records. Initially I was so jetlagged that nothing made much sense. I just held the ledger book and saw the two pages that had the information about my roots. A few days later, Minati explained my circumstances of why my natural mother lost me to adoption.

"Minati, Thank you for showing me the file," I say.

"Please look through it," Minati replies.

"Nimrata Kaur," I say, flipping immediately to the Document of Surrender.

"That is your natural mother's name," she explains.

"What is this name where it says 'signature/thumb impression of natural mother's mother'?" I ask reading the Document of Surrender and unable to read the handwriting.

"Simran Kaur," she replies.

I sit in silence as I see the signature of my natural mother in cursive and my maternal grandmother's name written in Hindi. It was at this moment where I realized that "what's done is done, and I have to live with it" (Freeman, 2010, p. 190), to see the document that separated my natural mother from me.

There are many Indian cultural influences that contribute to why a natural mother may decide to relinquish her child. Many children in India are lost to adoption because the natural mother is unwed and young. There is also stigma attached to those born out-of-wedlock where the natural mother may "like to leave the past behind her, get married and settle into a new life" (Mehta, 1992, p. 39). Many unwed women come from conservative backgrounds and sometimes they get involved in relationships that result in an unwanted pregnancy; as Mehta (1992) notes, "the pregnancy gets advanced either due to ignorance about available options or the hopes that the putative father will marry her" (p. 29). Other reasons that natural mothers place their child for adoption could include the desertion or death of a spouse and socioeconomic pressures.

Here is what I have been told about my natural mother and father: My natural mother was 19 years old, studied up the 10th standard (grade), and followed the religion of Sikhism. She was the eldest in her family and had two sisters and a brother. After the completion of her studies, she remained at home while her siblings continued their education. Her father drove a truck, and my natural father was in a truck business. My natural mother and father were engaged to get married and had known each other for two years. My natural father was unaware that my natural mother conceived a child and he went away without telling her about his location. Unable to locate my natural father, my natural mother made the decision to relinquish me. According to the records "the natural mother is also bitter about the [natural] father." Although unable to trace my natural father's location, my natural mother's family prepared to settle her marriage to another man. My natural mother then relinquished me to my adoption agency. According to Aabha, the relinquishment social worker, my natural mother was firm about her decision to relinquish me—she wanted to restart her life.

While in India I met Taanusiya and Bhakti, my foster parents, and they welcomed me into their home. Minati also surprised me—I did not expect her to be there when I visited with Taanusiya and Bhakti. I spoke with Taanusiya alone in the kitchen and within the first few moments, I made sure to give her the biggest hug I possibly could. I remember her holding me tightly; I felt a sense of love. Through this interaction with Taanusiya, I realized that she still cared and loved me even though so many years had passed. Hugging her had helped me to "feel the presence of what we missed together" (Freeman, 2010, p. 53).

I remember the specific morning outside in the hallway of my adoption agency crying in Varsha's arms. I knew that I would finally visit the area where my natural mother lived—the closest I knew I could ever be to the woman who gave me life. We sat in the car and the driver took us to the area. I remember the commute being close to about an hour and a half drive away. I never questioned the distance between the two suburbs, particularly why my natural mother went so far away to birth me. I remember holding Varsha's hand as we sat in the backseat. Our first stop was the local Gurudwara—the Sikh place of worship—and I felt calm. I walked up to the Gurudwara and Varsha and I sat down. I processed my surroundings while my adoptive mom went into the Gurudwara.

We then approached the area where my natural mother lived. There was a group of buildings, then a walkway connecting to another set of buildings. The buildings were so tall. This could have been my life if I had not been adopted. I watched people walking in the area, and the area seemed to be quiet and peaceful. I remember standing in the area with a tall building behind me. I saw a woman carrying groceries with a child following behind her. I looked at the woman, trying not to be completely obvious, but hoping she could resemble my natural mother or maternal grandmother. It was here where I realized that my adoption

journey began. With this realization, I asked Varsha to take a picture of me with the tall building behind me so I can remember this moment.



Finally the day arrived when I would meet Sahila, my adoption counselor. I remember sitting on the church steps until about 11:00 AM. As I entered the adoption agency's office, I saw Sahila stood up to greet me. I smiled and held her hand. It was at that moment when I felt like all of my nervousness went away. I was happy to see her again.

"Hello, Suma [my given name]," She says.

"Hello," I reply. "I have a question for you. What do I do when people disagree with me about adoption, like when they seemed to be unable to understand my journey?"

"Suma, what side of the hand do you see?" She asks as she holds her hand out in front of me.

"The palm of your hand," I say.

"What side of the hand do I see?" she asks.

"The back," I reply.

"You see the palm of my hand but I see the back. So who is correct?"

"We are both correct based on our perspective."

In this moment, I learned that right and wrong are fluid and tied to perspective. I also realized that others may have different ideas about my adoption journey and I could not change the circumstance of my natural mother.

Sahila validated the sense of loss I had been feeling for my natural mother. She told me about trying to view things positively. She told me to try to go forward in life. She told me to continue to pray and that the answers to what I sought were within me. She told me that misunderstandings happen because often things are not put into perspective. She confirmed that I was not abandoned or left on the street, but that I was relinquished. And she told me that it is now my decision how I wish to lead my life and that my views of adoption were ever-changing.

Before we said good-bye, I wanted to do one last thing. Minati and I went to the church steps and I read the letter I left for my natural mother should she decide to come back to my adoption agency. I remember telling Minati how hard it was for me to write the letter for my natural mother, especially since I did not know how to address her. I wrote:

You allowed me to have a life.... my wish for you is to not feel sad you placed me for adoption and that you made the best decision you could at that moment in time. I may or may not ever be able to find you, but please know my love for you never ends.... A child never forgets her mother... love, your daughter...

I felt sad to leave Minati, Sahila, and Varsha. I told everyone how much I loved them. This could be the last time I might see them and the last time they might see me.

### **Reflections**

My new understanding I achieved from my experience is that family does not only consist of the people we are born to or the people who raise us. Family can be the people you come across throughout life. Minati has helped me to realize my strength, my courage, and helped me to develop a deeper sense of faith. Varsha has assisted me in her presence during all of the places I visited that related to my life prior to adoption, Taanusiya and Bhakti cared for me prior to adoption, and Sahila has helped me form an understanding of my adoption. I might not have met my natural mother, but I left India feeling loved, and I consider all of these people part of my family. Through the process of adoption many lives are affected. The natural mother loses her child to adoption, adoptees try to find the missing link in their lives, adoptive parents strive to do their best, and many others who are affected by the process. Throughout, I have strived to understand these complex perspectives.

Another understanding I achieved as a result of this experience is realizing that life is precious and valuable and we all have meaning in this world. Although for many adoptees their beginning parts of life remain unknown, I realized that what a person is searching for might be something that can be found from deep within oneself. However, traveling to Mumbai allowed me to have an understanding of my life by seeing my records, meeting with Minati, seeing my foster parents, Taanusiya and Bhakti, and understanding my adoption from my adoption counselor, Sahila. I could criticize myself for circumstances beyond my control, but I would rather take the option to share my journey with others through my writing.

After traveling to India in December 2011, I am able to further understand how adoption is viewed through the Indian lens with respect to the culture, and why natural mothers may not be able to care for a child. I often wondered why my natural mother gave me birth in a different suburb than where she resided. I understand that my natural mother might have shifted to a different location in order to maintain her secrecy. Maybe there were no good hospitals in the area or that my natural mother wanted to move closer to her friends and family who could provide her the support she needed. These are all just possible explanations and speculations. Although I did not meet my natural mother, I feel "satisfied with the process of searching itself" (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992, p. 142). As Asha Miro (2006) observes,

It is worth it to find the street where you have always been told you were discovered in a cardboard box, or basket. To go to the door of the post office, or a pharmacy, or to sit on the steps of that hospital where you have been told you were left in plain sight so that you would be found right away... It is worth

going to the gate of the orphanage where you spent the first months or years of your life and trying to get in to speak to those who work there... (pp. 260-261)

Somehow being around many people who cared for me as a child, walking around to the area where my natural mother lived and having a deep connection with Minati gave me a sense of understanding.

My ability to reframe my narrative (Kiesinger, 2002) aided me by being able to think differently about my adoption journey. I learned that I can allow myself to have multiple narratives of my circumstances of relinquishment and be able to reframe my adoption journey to “empower rather than victimize” (p. 107), and knowing that the “process and challenge of healing...is ongoing and never quite ends” (p.110; see also Adams, 2012). I have been able to reflect on the life that my natural mother had by understanding her circumstances of relinquishment and understanding the cultural struggles that pertain to why natural mothers lose their child to adoption. I have been able to evaluate “the story I was telling, performing, and living” about my feelings as an adoptee (p. 107). Kiesinger further explains that “the quality of the stories we are telling and actively reinvent our accounts in ways that permit us to live more fulfilling lives” (p. 107).

Do I have closure about my adoption? I feel that I have a working and comforting understanding of *why* things happened, but the grief of not being able to locate my natural mother continues, a grief over a woman who gave me life, one whom I never met but with whom I still have a connection. I remember someone once asked how I could grieve over a woman who I never met, but I am not sure grief ever needs to be justified. Some adoptees feel so much misunderstanding, harshness, negativity, and hatred towards being adopted. I strive to live my life with understanding, compassion, positivity, and love.

So was my search really to locate my natural mother, or was I looking for something else? I am not sure what I was looking for from my root search besides knowing that I was loved prior to adoption. Would I ever try to search again to locate my natural mother? Not at this time, but I do wonder if my natural mother thinks about me. Twenty-four years have passed; many times I wonder why did *she* not try to search for *me*. Perhaps she did not because she might be married to a new husband who may not know that she conceived a child. Maybe she has tried to already search for me in the only way she knows and was unsuccessful. Maybe she might not know how to search if she wanted to. Again, these could be just a few of many possible explanations I may never know the answers to such questions. To leave as much information as my natural mother did, I feel that she wanted me to come to an understanding of her circumstances. I seek the forgiveness from her that I could not locate her despite the many efforts in attempting to do so.

When I look back at my life from my family tree homework assignment in 1997, I no longer keep the secret that I have two mommies and two daddies (my natural mother and father, and my adoptive mom and dad). I also have my foster parents whom I also consider as mommy and daddy. I have no shame to write or speak about my adoption journey, nor do I keep it a secret. Additionally, I have been able to reframe my adoption narrative to know that I am loved contrary to my beliefs I had during that time. It does not matter what I find out about my natural mother and her circumstances for those things I cannot change. My journey has helped me understand my life with having a deeper understanding of my Indian culture and how the Indian cultural and societal aspects affect natural mothers and why she may decide to lose her child to adoption. But, this doesn't mean that I do not feel sad—the collective grief and loss of my adoption remains. I look ahead and come to an understanding of my situation. I realize how much I was loved as a baby prior to adoption, and I felt more grounded in knowing that my search for meaning and understanding regarding my adoption journey will continue. My intention in this project was to better understand and analyze my

adoption journey at different moments in my life. I hope that my adoption journey experience can help other Indian adoptees learn more about the Indian cultural and societal perspectives surrounding adoption. Most importantly, I realized that regardless of my situation of having been adopted, it is who I have become now, and who I strive to become in the future.

And with Cho and Kim (2005), I realized that although there are gaps of things that I may not know about my history, the gaps may not necessarily need to be filled and that that “I have only pieces of a story” (p. 453). Lastly, “maybe there’s no need to tell me anything to fill in the gaps. Maybe it’s a story better left in pieces” (p. 456).

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