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Illuminating Adoptive Family Practices in India: A narrative analysis of policy and lived experience

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been, nor will be, submitted in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree.

Signature.....

To my feminist parents, Manjulata and Khageswar Puhān,
who have challenged the social norms
and wholeheartedly supported everything I have done.

Summary

This study is concerned with the ways that adoptive family lives are practiced in contemporary India from a social work perspective. It was written in a time of urgent and contentious policy change which emphasised radical new ways of thinking about the practice of adoptive family life as a legitimate version of kinship. Since 2000, adoption policy and practice in this multicultural, multilingual, and multi-religious country, has undergone considerable change. Governed by multiple laws – both religious and secular – the adoption trend has been re-modelled through the introduction of secular policy, with a focus on advancing in-country adoption. This study demonstrates how adoption policy and lived experience narratives intersect as adoption becomes consolidated as a legitimate form of family. It focuses on the day-to-day family practices that emerge in adoptive families, and the ways these are shaped by adoption discourse.

Drawing on theories of family and kinship, the thesis illuminates everyday practices of adoptive family lives in an environment where changing legal narratives contradict practice narrative. The thesis is distinctive in its use of in-depth accounts provided by young adult adopted people, adoptive parents, and social work practitioners experienced in adoption as practised in India in changing times.

This study is original. It is the first to provide insight into the secularisation process of child welfare law from a social work perspective, and how it intersects with the ways in which adoptive family lives are practiced in India. It is also the only study to draw on young adult adopted people's experiences and in-depth accounts from adoptive parents and social work practitioners alike, in the changing socio-legal environment of India. Finally, in its utilisation of an analytic method, the study enables the 'practice' of adoptive family lives as narrated within the specific local social and cultural context to be illuminated in ways helpful to practice development on the ground.

This thesis makes four analytical claims: Firstly, diversity is analysed and documented within adoptive family practices and displays in India. This diversity arises in response to the challenges that adoptive families face in their everyday lives whilst creating a legitimate version of kinship. Secondly, that 'doing' adoptive family in India is 'hard work' – mentally and emotionally taxing, and procedurally exhausting - and cannot be successfully achieved through following a structured template. Although 'doing' family is a dynamic process, this research has identified that there is continuous and particular pressures on adoptive families to 'perform family' in order to gain acceptance. Thirdly, the processes involved in doing adoptive family require negotiating and renegotiating the hard work in which they must decide to demonstrate or not to demonstrate the familial relationships.

Ultimately, this research suggests that - in the context of changing social, political and cultural times and competing and contrasting narratives - policy plays a strategic function to author adoptive family lives. Adopted people, adoptive parents, and adoption practitioners are expected to do – or facilitate the ‘doing’ of - adoptive family through a blended approach directed by the policy narrative as well as dialogic engagement, and not always in the ways they would necessarily want.

This study aims to illustrate the value of attending to the subjective meaning of adoptive family lives, and to understand how policy related to domestic adoption in India can best ensure the systems and support necessary for diverse families over time.

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Finally: my strength - my family. You have been the worst sufferers of my prolonged physical absence, yet the proudest of my achievements. I would not have achieved what I have without your love, support and encouragement. I am blessed beyond measure!

Glossary of Participants (all pseudonyms)

Young adult adopted person

Nisha – An adopted young professional woman in her mid twenties

Seema – An adopted young woman approx. 19 years old

Shikha – An adopted young woman approx. 19 years old

Adoptive parents

Malini: An adoptive mother of two girls. Also a professional counsellor and an adoption activist.

Pooja: An adoptive mother. Also a professional and a counsellor.

Kavita: An unmarried single adoptive mother and entrepreneur

Maya: An adoptive mother with one adopted and one biological child. Also an adoption counsellor

Hema: A professional woman and an adoptive mother in her early fifties

Amita: Originally adopted herself and now mother to a biological and an adopted child. Works with social workers and adoption centres.

Julie: Originally adopted herself and now mother to a biological and an adopted child. A professional and an Entrepreneur.

Rita and Rajiv: Adoptive parents and professionals in their fifties

Roshni: An adoptive mother with one biological and one adopted child.

Social Workers

Leela: A senior social worker with more than 30 years' experience in Adoption (policy and practice?)

Ajay : A male social worker with 10+ years' experience

Priya: A female social worker with 4 years' experience

Sheela: A female social worker with 6 years' experience

Researcher

Sangita: Researcher, social worker, and thesis author

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Chapter 1: Setting the Scene

1.1 Introduction

This thesis concerns how adoptive family lives are practiced in India. The research was conducted from a social work perspective and written in a time of urgent and contentious policy changes emphasising radical new ways of thinking and practicing adoptive family to create a legitimate version of kinship. Adoption in India is governed by multiple laws - a unique combination of religious and secular legislations - to deal with domestic and international adoptions. It carries formal legal status and is subject to active policy intervention under the secular law, the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, which is moving centre-stage at the time of writing the thesis.

In India, the term 'adoption' is defined in legal terms as 'the process of permanent legal transfer of parental responsibility from the biological parents to adoptive parents' (JJ Act, 2015). It is further described in the literature as the 'establishment of a parent-child relationship through legal and social process other than the birth process. It is a process by which a child of one set of parents becomes the child of another set of parents or parent' (ICCW, 2001, p.11). In this context, the term adoption generally refers to 'closed' adoption (Bhargava, 2005). This does not mean that adoptive parents must keep their adoption a secret. Rather it points to the fact that the information regarding the birth parents is kept secret from the adopted child and adoptive parents - and vice-versa (CARA, 2017).

In this thesis, I illustrate how adoption is a unique way of practicing family that is achieved through active and intense work by all actors involved in it. It does not fit into a template of 'family' as defined by the legal mechanisms. Rather, it is a continuous process beyond the legal transfer of parental responsibility which unfolds within the milieus established and determined by the state, its institutional

procedures and everyday tasks accompanying and supporting the maintenance of kin relations. The thesis assumes that the work involved in practicing adoptive family is emotive and influenced by the historical, political, social, and cultural context within which it takes place.

The thesis is distinctive from previous works on adoption research in India insofar as it is the first research undertaken since revised legislation was implemented in 2015. It gives insight into how the secularisation of child welfare law in recent times - in support of policies of deinstitutionalisation of state care and indigenisation of child placement - are changing the ways in which adoptive family lives are practised in India. It is also the only study to date that draws on young adult adopted people's experiences, alongside in-depth accounts of adoptive parents and social work practitioners working within the 'closed model' of adoption in a changing socio-legal environment. The study uses an analytic method, which enables the 'practice' of adoptive family lives as narrated within the local social and cultural context to be illuminated in ways helpful to practice development on the ground.

1.2 The conceptual understanding of 'family' in India

In this section, I outline the key features of family within India's socio-cultural context to illustrate why certain cultural phenomena are significant for understanding adoption in the Indian family context. For example, while adoption definitions and discourses have been associated with stigma and illegitimacy, the new policy attempts to reframe the process within a 'happy family' narrative, evident in promotional visuals which encourage people to 'adopt happiness, not fear'; 'bring the innocent faces in the frame of life and make the picture beautiful' – highlighting perhaps the contradictions between policy and practice. In order to comprehend the activities and discourses which constitute family life and how similar or different the adoptive family is, it is important to consider and incorporate the historical and contextual dimension of their construction. Research

simply cannot be imported to construct adoptive family practice from European and American perspectives, or from anywhere else.

Indian society is characterised by complexities, such as caste, class, religion, sex ratio, gender relation, marital practices, and authority structure within the family. Indeed, it is hard to offer a generalised view of the Indian family (Singh, 2005). However, what is largely known and written about Indian families by sociologists and anthropologists is that family occupies a pivotal space in the reality and imagination of societies and individuals in India (Bhandari and Titzmann, 2017). Historically, sociologists have emphasised the idea of the family as a unifying system of India. It is seen in the traditional joint family system that follows the principles of collectivism, where two, three generations often live together under one roof (Medora, 2007). The 'collectivistic' nature of the family in Indian society promotes interdependence, family togetherness, joint decision making, and, most importantly, putting the family views, needs, and priorities above individual needs (Medora, 2007). Social norms are defined and prescribed by cultural and familial needs. Collectivisms manifest in the practices and beliefs that reflect the individual's embeddedness in their family and all aspects of life, including marriage, choice of occupation, mate selection, and place of residence (Medora, 2003; Verma, 1989).

However, there is a shift in the practices from collectivism towards individuation, influenced by urbanisation and the rapid growth of industrialisation - particularly in middle-class families. It could be seen in the increased female workforce in organised sectors, flexibility in partner selection, the growing number of heterosexual nuclear families comprising parents and children over the traditional version of joint family and financial independence (Bhandari and Titzmann, 2017). Besides, in shifting values and changing times, there are high marital disruption rates, remarriage of both men and women, same-sex relationship, and a new system of live-in arrangements between pairs - particularly in the upper middle stratum of society. It suggests a steadily emerging form of a new kind of family lives in India (Singh, 2005). However, despite the significant cultural, economic and social transformation reflected in growing individualism and mobility in contemporary

India, the family continues to be a crucial institution that operates within the extended family network (Chadda and Deb, 2013).

1.2.1 The Caste System

One of Indian society's distinctive phenomena is the caste system, which has religious elements and is interwoven into the Hindu faith and livelihood (Katti and Saroja, 1989). The family and kinship system in Indian society cannot be understood without addressing the caste system, as family characteristics are correlated with caste. The family network primarily includes biological relations, as well as non-biological related members characterised as extended family. The extended family and kinship network includes kin who are neither biologically related nor related through marriage, but are related by caste. In social structures, the caste system is considered a system of graded relationships that institutionalises inequality (Laungani, 2005). It places people in different social strata known as *Brahmin*: the priestly class; *Kshatriyas* – the warriors and farmers; the *Vaishya* - the merchants, traders, and the *Shudras* – the servants, workers, and labourers, who are considered the lowest caste (Medora, 2007). Below the *Shudras* are those considered to be the 'untouchables', regarded as impure because they have to adopt menial jobs to ensure their livelihood (Seymour, 1999; Singh, 2005). Untouchables encounter significant prejudices and discrimination in everyday life (Singh, 2005; Medora, 2007).

A key aspect of the caste system is that caste is ascribed to an individual at birth and cannot be altered. Although the caste system was officially abolished by the Indian government in 1950, it continues to play a crucial role in family identification and social status. Laungani (2005) writes, 'it is clear that one's caste origins are so strongly ingrained in the Hindu psyche that it is difficult for most to renounce such appalling practices' (p.93). The caste system bonds people of the same caste together; simultaneously, the caste system splits society into sub-groups in which people socialise, work, live and marry within their caste (Medora, 2007). Though modernity has allowed the expansion of people's choices - particularly

transgressions of physical boundaries - caste, class, religion, and region remain important elements for formation of family (Kaur and Dhanda, 2014).

1.2.2 Gender

The Indian context puts gender ideology into sharp relief. The structure and culture of patriarchy in the Indian family system are deeply entrenched, which has a pronounced preference for sons over daughters (Clark, 2000; Arnold, 2001). Sons are preferred to daughters because, through male children, inheritance, succession, and lineage continue. The differences between the two sexes are also reflected in traditional beliefs and religious practices (Mukherjee, 2002). It does not mean that girls are not valued, but it is highly desired that at least one child in the family is a boy (Unnithan, 2019). Even though family life is changing, the institutional importance of motherhood cannot be overestimated. Riessman's (2000) research on childless women in southern India suggests the normative biography for an Indian woman mandates childbearing. Married women who fail to become mothers, due to infertility or by choice, experience stigma both within the family and outside. Despite the societal stigma of childlessness, people prefer not to bring a child home through adoption, but rather involve themselves in mothering other children – those belong to kin, colleagues and friends (Riessman, 2000).

In conclusion, it could be said that India's diverse and traditional society has undergone significant changes over the past few decades due to urbanisation, globalisation, and mobility. Within modern space and time, the idea of family exists in multiple forms. However, the importance of family values, cultural norms, and social prejudices are retained as critical figures of morality and unity, despite an evolving social process.

1.3 Understanding adoption in the Indian context

Adoption in India has a long and rich history. To understand the contemporary practice and how it has been shaped, historical and legal developments relevant to adoption are crucial to consider. The following sections illustrate how adoption as a family practice has been shaped over time by cultural values and conflicts, social trends and problems, and by public policy and legislations

1.3.1 History of Adoption in India – A socio-cultural perspective

Adoption in India has been shaped over many years by religious and social elements. The concept of adoption - of raising someone else's child - has long existed and is widely mentioned in Hindu mythology (Bhargava, 2005; Bajpai, 2017). Lord Krishna, for example, is an adopted son, and Sita - the wife of Lord Rama of the Ramayan epic - was adopted by a King (Baig and Gopinath, 1976). The story of Lord Krishna - often quoted to promote acceptance of the notion that an adoptive mother can love and care for non-biological offspring - established the reciprocation of the child (Bhargava, 2005, p.24). Mythology also refers to the adoption of girl children by sages who would raise them and then arrange for their marriages to princes and kings - like Sakuntala and Andal who were both considered goddess Earth's gift to their respective parents and are therefore examples of female adoptions and illustrate the child-centeredness of the practice (Bhargava 2005; Bajpai 2017).

Later, Hindus attached special religious significance to the male child under emerging social stratification and hierarchisation and influenced by the caste system (Bagley, 1993). It was considered necessary that certain last rites of parents should be performed by a son to attain spiritual salvation (Baig and Gopinath, 1976). Traditionally, this custom motivated Hindus to adopt male children when there were no sons within the family nor heirs within the extended family. This was identified as kinship adoption and always took place within the same caste as the family (Bagley, 1993; Mahtani, 1994; Bhargava, 2005). The hierarchical caste

system restricted children's adoption from one caste to another (Baig and Gopinath, 1976). Hence, the adoption of a child outside the extended family was less common, and abandoned children were rendered non-adoptable because of their unknown family background (Bhargava, 2005; Groza et al., 2003). In addition, the three highest castes in the caste system practiced adoption, and the lowest - untouchables - were not allowed to adopt (Bagley, 1979). Eventually from 1956 family creation through adoption became practiced through a legal process under religious affiliated law. Those who formed adoptive families had to maintain confidentiality in order to integrate the adopted child into the family; disclosing its adoption status would make a child vulnerable and the family correspondingly apprehensive (Bhargava, 2005).

In summary, the history of adoption in India – from mythology to ancient times – has seen the practice evolve from a well-accepted, gender-neutral family practice, to an adult-centric, firmly rooted, patriarchal system. It has been practiced as a device to sustain approved family lineages, and arranged in a narrow social perimeter - as was permitted to some privileged sections of the society. The practice of adoption has also carried considerable moral weight for family formation. Adoption has been seen as a need-based solution for adults, motivated by economic, religious, social, and emotional desires and demands. As such, adoptive family lives in India have only been able to be practiced within specific socio-cultural elements. Hence, current adoption practices may be understood in the light of several socio-economic and political developments that have taken place over more recent years.

1.3.2 Evolution of adoption policy and practice in India – a socio-legal perspective

India does not have a uniform law for adoption. At present, the Indian adoption system is governed by a unique combination of multiple laws, religious dictates and welfare models. Religion plays a dominant role in India and is the basis of various personal rights - including adoption (Bajpai, 2017). Since Indians belong to different

religions and faiths, matters related to their marriage, divorce, and succession are necessarily governed by the scriptures and customs of the various religious communities. Religious laws, known as 'Personal Laws,' are different for different religions and govern matters related to marriage, divorce, and succession (Bhargava, 2005; Bajpai, 2017). This means that laws governing the personal concerns of those of the Hindu religion will differ to those governing Muslims or Christians. Adoption has always been a matter of personal concern – like marriage, divorce, and succession – and hence is done by following private family procedures.

Traditionally, adoption has not been a practice in every faith. Therefore, not all religions' Personal Laws acknowledge it. As a result, people of certain religions – like Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, and Jain – are permitted to practice adoption under the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act 1956 (HAMA) as it is recognised under their Personal Laws. But no Personal Laws exist enabling Parsis, Christians or Muslims to adopt. As such, people following these religions could only take a child through guardianship through the Guardians and Wards Act of 1890 (GWA). This Act conferred guardianship status on the person taking the child - a status which would lapse once the child reached the age of majority at 21 years (Bajpai, 2017). The positioning of adoption within Personal Laws suggests that adoption, rather than being seen as a public policy concern for child welfare – was instead viewed as a private family matter. This narrative of adoption as 'personal', reinforces its affiliation to family lineage rather individual child rights or child welfare.

The dominance of HAMA and GWA significantly discouraged several attempts to formulate general secular law on adoption. The National Adoption Bill was tabled twice between 1976 to 1984 strongly opposed by Muslims and Parsis whose Personal Laws did not recognise adoption. They found 'it is against the spirit of secularism that particular religious belief is imposed upon others who do not subscribe to it' (Bagley, 1979, p.45). These tensions speak of a wider potential impact of adoption legislation, indicating that a secular adoption law could, perhaps, have disturbed the country's religious and social fabric. Besides, the Bill lacked the idea of child welfare meaning that the new child-centred adoption narrative

struggled to command political assent. The absence of a uniform law on adoption - especially with respect to domestic adoption - provided scope for adoption agencies to form their own policies and standards to promote international adoption, which generated considerable controversy in the 1970s and early 1980s (Apparao, 1997). The growing trend of intercountry adoption at this time not only decreased the rate of domestic adoptions, but raised public concern about international adoption becoming a platform for 'baby selling' (Apparao, 1997). Concerns about increased intercountry adoption reached a peak in 1982 following the death of an Indian child in transit to its new adoptive home overseas (Bhargava, 2005).

Amidst these concerns, the Supreme Court of India gave a landmark judgement in 1984. The judgement not only regularised intercountry adoptions, but systematised domestic adoptions by privileging adoption of Indian orphans by Indian parents (Bharadwaj, 2003). Post the 1984 Supreme Court Judgement, the State was given the power to intervene and regulate adoptions (Ministry of Women and Child Development, Annual Report, 2012). 'Open' adoption became 'closed' and links between the adoptive and birth families were severed preventing any identifying information from being shared (Apparao, 1997). In 1990, the Central Adoption Resource Agency was established under the Ministry of Welfare, which was re-christened as the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) and is now an autonomous body under the Ministry of Women and Child Development (AIR 1992, SC, 118).

1.3.3 The secular face of adoption in India

With CARA's establishment, the Indian Government made its first attempt to monitor domestic adoption and regulate intercountry adoption. Setting up CARA - along with the ongoing dialogue for secular law and obligation to adhere to the universal norms of children's rights of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989 and The Hague Convention for Protection of Children which India ratified in 1993 - compelled the Government to introduce the secular law Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000 (Assembly 1989;

HCCH, 1993). Known as the JJ Act 2000, this Act carved out a legal and structural space for the establishment of an adoption system which, for the first time, meant that everyone - irrespective of religion, caste, and gender - was able to adopt a child legally and become the legal parent of that child. The Act could also be seen as an attempt by the Government to control adoption practices through a carefully carved narrative of child welfare; as the primary responsibility of the law being to ensure the provision of care and protection to children. The practice of adoption was reframed under this law as rehabilitation and social integration of orphaned, abandoned or surrendered children, irrespective of religion, by placing them within a family structure wherever and however possible.

The nature of adoption - and the adoption policy narrative of HAMA and GWA which was solely based on religious affinity - was challenged by the JJ Act 2000 which emphasised child welfare. That development reflected the state's accommodation of the changing beliefs about children, parents, and families (Goodwach, 2003). In other words, the JJ Act 2000, became a stepping-stone towards bringing a secular code into practice against the local religious and cultural traditions to enforce a particular image and practice. However, secular law does not supersede existing religious laws, but functions in parallel beside them.

The move towards child welfare needs can be seen from multiple perspectives. Firstly, the family, childcare, and protection narratives imply that children in the adoption pool are evidence of failed family life; orphaned, abandoned or surrendered. However, the state's failure is not part of this narrative, even though the Government had no policy or programme for social protection or family support services to ensure the restoration of children within families or their communities. It illustrates a reductionist approach whereby the state defines children who need to be cared for and protected, implying a conceptualisation of vulnerable children with parents not capable of raising them (Roose et al., 2012, p.451). The state could have worked in partnership with families where the primary responsibility to secure the child's welfare would have lain with the parents, and the corresponding obligation of the state ensure that parents fulfil their responsibilities to protect their

child (Roose et al., 2010). However, by introducing the JJ Act 2000 with its inherent welfare and protection narrative, the state contributed to the weakening of personal and familial responsibility, core to the Indian family structure (Bjornberg and Latta, 2007). In the name of children's welfare, the problem of poverty, and the structural inequalities that put the children in the adoption pool, the state made an effort to translate adoption as a problem situated not within social policy and society, but within the family (Roose et al., 2012).

Secondly, the family, childcare, and protection narratives seem to intend to displace antecedent adoption narratives with personal and religious connotations and carrying patriarchal values, family heritage, and hierarchal structure, which is evident in the domain of kinship (Bhargava, 2005). Thirdly, in framing adoption as a rehabilitation intervention, the state attempted to bring India more into alignment with the dominant neo-liberal/Anglo-Saxon welfare model of adoption as an intervention for child welfare (Devine and Cockburn, 2018). The Anglo-Saxon welfare model reinforces a more individualistic approach to children's welfare, undercutting traditional safety nets of support and the emotional, economic and social interdependence across the generations valued by the Indian family system (Medora, 2007; Devine and Luttrell, 2013). Fourthly, the legislative narrative emphasises the child's developmental needs that constitute the welfare interest, a significant shift from the religiously inclined laws. The importance of nurture - physical and emotional bonding between the child and an adult in a family environment - appeared to be emphasised in the JJ Act through a permanent adoption solution. It could also be an interpretation of the child's rights to family within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the principle of the best interests now central to all legislations surrounding children and reflected within the adoption discourse. However, there is always scope for interpretation about what course of action is in the child's best interests - for courts and child protection staff to determine (Pösö et al., 2021). Literature suggests that, in fact, the rights of the child often come second to parental rights and, in this context, the principle of best interest is ideologically contested (Pösö et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, adoption is not universally seen as a solution because of the emphasis on biological connections in understanding the child's right to family.

Through the JJ Act, the Indian Government displayed a welfare reform narrative that aimed to restore dignity and, ultimately, the worth of three specific categories of children: orphan, abandoned and surrendered (Shenoy, 2007). It was also a narrative of worth restored through rescue and rehabilitation and in that way differed from the family heritage narrative. As adoption is secularised, the basis of a child's worth changes and developmental considerations start to displace the religious inflection of primary legislation. The secular Act seemed to be a well thought-out strategy constituting a legitimate culture for children in institutional care: as the literature suggests, many were born out of wedlock (Bharadwaj, 2003; Bhargava, 2005). Bharat's study (1993) illustrated that, of 4526 children given up for adoption, 74 per cent were abandoned by their biological mothers as they were born of pre-marital or extra-marital relationships and observed that these children were invariably looked upon as products of illicit sexual union (p.55). There is a conservative attitude towards non-marital sexuality, and a child born out of wedlock is itself considered to be immoral (Bharadwaj, 2003; Subaiya, 2008).

However, this conservatism is to some extent contingent on class, money, and education. A shift occurs in culture, politics, and economy from the 1990s towards a market-led development which increased the visibility of sexual intimacy of young people outside the bounds of caste-endogamous marriage (Krishnan, 2020). To a large extent, the shift could be attributed to increased urbanisation, a burgeoning financial independence among young women through employment, and an increasing marriage age – all of which shaped youth's attitudes to pre-marital sexuality (Subaiya, 2008; Belliappa, 2013). The shift in culture towards pre-marital sex - still relatively low (3%) among women aged 15-24, according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS, 2015-16) - has not influenced the number of children born out of wedlock, which is still viewed through a moral lens. Therefore, adoption under the JJ Act could be seen as a measure of protection more for women than for babies at this time. It also supports the integration of children into the legitimate

community as a route to a safer and more socially responsible solution and an answer to the perceived societal problem of illegitimacy as children are generally abandoned without any identifying information. On the other hand, it could also constitute an act of protection of the child as the mother failed to assume any parental responsibility (Pösö et al., 2021).

The JJ Act's legislative emphasis on exploring in-country options to place a child before moving intercountry, also increased the number of domestic adoptions. It was evident that, from 1988 to 2001, the number of intercountry adoptions was greater than that of domestic adoptions; from 2002, the reverse was true. In 1988, the total number of in-country adoption was a mere 398. In 2010 it was 5,693 against an intercountry adoption total of 628. However, in-country adoption has declined again over the last ten years. Latest statistics show that the number of domestic adoptions in 2018 was 3,374, while the intercountry trend remained stable at 653.

Year	Children adopted (in-country)	Children adopted (intercountry)	Adoption disruption/ dissolution/ withdrawal (in-country)		
			Total	Male	Female
2010	5693	628	data not available		
2011	5964	629			
2012	4694	308			
2013	3924	430			
2014	3988	374	387	157	230
2015	3011	666	236	90	146
2016	3210	578	195	69	126
2017	3276	651	153	58	95
2018	3374	653	133	66	67
2019	3351	394	data not yet generated		

Source: Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA)

The steady decline in adoption rates is often attributed to procedural delay. However, rapid globalising technologies for infertility treatment and alternative

solutions – such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and commercial surrogacy - are often cited as other reasons for the declining trend (Scherman et al., 2016).

According to a leading newspaper, there are more than 20,000 Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) clinics and over 3000 surrogacy clinics in India, and this is a growing market (Darnovsky and Beeson, 2014). These alternative options ensure full or part biological connection to the offspring and retention of family heritage (Scherman et al., 2016). On the contrary, according to a report published by the Ministry of Women & Child Development, Government of India, in 2018, more than 300,000 children were in institutional care - of which 56,198 children fall under the 'adoptable' category, i.e., orphan, abandoned or surrendered. Ironically, only 5,931 of these children were aged 0-6 years, with 50,267 aged 7-18 years. The large number of orphaned, abandoned and surrendered children in institutional care indicates that children of lower age groups are the preferred choice of Indian adoptive parents. Further, it raises questions about the adoption system's effectiveness which pushes a large number of children into a non-preferred group.

Analysis shows that India's adoption practices have continuously transformed - and reflect the value-system of its changing social, legal, political, economic and moral contexts (Bhargava, 2005). These factors are powerful determinants of adoption levels, trends and adoptive family practices.

1.3.4 The evolving narratives and statistics of adoption in India

Adoption drew the attention of the newly elected government in 2014 as one of the protection measures for children out of parental care. This Government (2014 - current) implemented the revised Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, with a clear emphasis on increasing adoption rates. One of a range of child protection programmes, the concerned Minister of Women and Child Development pushed adoption in particular as a solution towards the protection of children out of parental care. She identified poor practice and problems with the

country's adoption agencies, and promoted the acceleration of the adoption process, whilst simultaneously ensuring transparency and accountability. These measures led to the introduction of the revised JJ Act 2015, which reflected a significant number of procedural changes for India's centralised adoption system that subsequently changed the country's narratives around adoption.

At this time, the language and narratives of mainstream national and international media coverage also shifted *from* headlines reflected such as: 'The Adoption Market' (Frontline – The Hindu, 2005), 'Indian children stolen for adoption' (The National, 2010), 'Oversees adoption racket' (First post, 2013), 'Fresh cases of illegal child adoption from India surface' (DNA India, 2014) *to* 'India moves to speed up adoption' (The Guardian, 2015), 'No pick and choose for couples' (Indian Express, 2017), 'More single women coming forward to adopt children in India' (Hindustan Times, 2017), 'Say yes to child adoption' (Indian Today, 2018) '1991 kids; 20,000 prospective parents: adoption scene in India' (The Economics Times, 2018). As such, media became a significant influencer towards the permanent placement of children in public care.

Each year, around 3500 children are adopted in India by Indian parents - two-parent and single parent heterosexual families - under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015. Additionally, an unknown number of children are adopted under the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956), applicable to a certain section of the religious population as explained previously. With the implementation of the revised policy, India witnessed a sharp rise in the number of in-country prospective adoptive parents; almost ten times the number of available adoptable children. By April 2020, while more than 29,000 prospective Indian adoptive parents registered with the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA), only 2,317 children are available for adoption. The procedural changes seem to modernise the traditional in-country adoption and sped up the affiliated court processes. The latest amendment of the policy approved by the cabinet on 17 February 2021 ensured the speedy disposal of pending child adoption cases (The

Hindu, 2021). In summary, adoption comes to the limelight with significant procedural changes in the newly elected government's tenure in 2014.

The rapidly changing legal narratives and instruments to promote adoption contradicted the child-centric and rights-based approach practiced within a closed model. Most adoptive families do not disclose their adoptive status to the child and the social networks they are part of, such as their schools and neighbourhoods (Bhargava, 2005). This secrecy indicates that, while the legislation sanctions equal status to adopted and biological children, building an adoptive family in everyday practice in accordance with state discourse and the law does not solidify the meaning of 'equal'. In such a unique cultural context and rapidly changing socio-legal environment, the questions remain about how adoptive families are practicing adoption in day-to-day transactions, and what makes it work. This research attempts to explore some possible answers.

1.3.5 The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015

The definition of adoption in the JJ Act 2015 reads as follows:

'adoption' means the process through which the adopted child is permanently separated from his biological parents and becomes the lawful child of his adoptive parents with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities that are attached to a biological child. (JJ Act, 2015, Section 2 (2))

A careful examination of the definition illustrates the Government's efforts to frame a narrative that positively influences adoption. Though the Act's pronouncement of biological parents does not assume marital status, the fact cannot be denied that the primary source of children into the adoption pool is unwed mothers, as evidenced by Bharat's (1993) study. Therefore, the narrative of adoption introduced through

the revised Act sounds like a solution to social issues - such as unwed pregnancy, illegitimate infants, and infertile married couples. The available limited research suggests that many adoptions that took place in early 2000 were mostly by childless couples, which substantiates this claim to a degree. Infertility is seen to disrupt the 'local moral worlds' of couples and families as reflected in the Riessman's (2000) work on childless women in South India (Groza et al., 2003; Bhargava, 2005; Palmer and O'Brien, 2018).

Similarly, the issue of unwed motherhood reflects how parenthood is defined in Indian society, based on marriage and heteronormative ideals (Unnithan, 2019). Motherhood outside of marriage is not an accepted or recognised social norm in Indian society, and therefore not considered to be the right of an individual Indian woman (Kassam, 2017). However, the legal model does allow an unmarried woman to attain motherhood through adoption. It indicates that the attributes defining parenthood have changed over the period, and are no longer restricted to marital status. But the process to attain parenthood is still selective and adoption is seen as the solution to a birth mothers' moral transgression, allowing them to get on with their lives through marriage (Palmer and O'Brien, 2018).

The introduction of the JJ Act has not encountered any resistance to the subordination of the importance of blood ties. However, its implementation and modalities at the operational level have been changed over the period. One of the reasons for this might be that the attributes - like unknown caste, class, illegitimacy - attached to the child are replaced by an approved version of the 'family' narrative through rehabilitation. So, it is a process of abolishing the status of illegitimacy through legislative intervention (Palmer and O'Brien, 2018). It appears that the revised policy placed adoption at centre stage as a route for the three specific categories of children seeking permanent substitute families through the secular Act. It is, perhaps, an effort to make a conceptual and practical leap to breaking the blood ties and create a new legal bond. Under this legislation, the practice goes beyond individual circumstances, taking place in particular religions to include all the communities and families irrespective of religion. The secular Act sets its

priority on domestic adoption, emphasising that Indian children are for Indian parents with international adoption considered as a last resort. The emphasis on in-country adoption is also one of the salient features of the Hague Convention. The term 'Indian' includes everyone irrespective of religion, which is synchronous with the adoption narrative of JJ Act 2015 that does not have any particular religious affiliation. So, the secular policy seems to challenge the family's traditional structure, based on the married heterosexual couple raising their own biological children.

It could be said that the JJ Act 2015 paves the way for significant change in respect to adoption within the Indian family system. This legislative reform repositions adoption from a basis in the private domain, as a personal matter, to more of an adjunct to the care system found in the public domain - which contradicts the societal narrative that membership in an Indian family is decided by birth (Medora, 2007; O'Brien and Palmer, 2016). The gradual changes in the entire process of adoption through the JJ Act could be attributed to India's ratification of the international legal instruments, and echoes a universalising narrative which emphasises children's rights and issues related to child welfare (Schweppe, 2002).

However, the functioning of secular legislation in parallel to the religious ones - HAMA and GWA - clearly suggests socio-cultural influence on the Indian family system, which simply cannot be replaced by the legal instruments. The changing trend illustrates the unresolved problems of adoption in India, displaced first into child exportation practices through international adoption in a context where the welfare of children in the institutional care was not provisioned in legislation. When this exportation was exposed as harmful and negatively affected the country's image internationally, the national government aligned with secular international codes to force local change, utilising the narrative of the 'best interest of the child.'

1.3.6 Summary of Policy narratives

The gradual changes and policy shift can be understood as providing a 'macro' political narrative' which frames the practice of adoptive family lives in modern times (Andrews, 2014). It also shows how the narratives of adoption policies and practices have a history which has shifted over time. Against this framing of the legislative macro narrative, my research examines the micro-political narrative of adoptive family practice. The people I spoke to about their adoptive family practices have different narratives that also change with the context. For example, how they narrate adoption to themselves and others in day-to-day life, how they relay their experiences to a researcher, and how they have been personally affected by the opportunities and constraints of policy, law, and procedures. Hence, why my informants' shifting narratives of adoptive family practices need to be understood as situated in a changing policy context, where the policy itself is an emerging narrative account of what is possible and permitted. Employing a historical lens to examine the evolution of adoption policies is useful because an awareness of the beginnings of adoption as practiced in India is necessary to understand the present context. Analysis of the macro policy narrative of adoption allows me to relate to the informants' narratives and understand how people are practicing adoptive family lives. I explore how practitioners enable people to do that in subsequent chapters.

1.4 Rationale - My personal interest in adoption

This research stems from my rootedness in social development experience as a children's rights and social work practitioner over nine years. I am particularly interested in its intersection with my intent, knowledge, and desire to learn how adoptive family lives are practiced in an environment where the changing legal rigidity contradicts the socio-cultural norms of family practice. My understanding of adoption and the adoptive family in India has been shaped through my limited exposure to local practices and professional experiences over a period of time. The local world comprises casual conversation around adoptive family - predominantly informed by the fictional narratives portrayed in movies and television and

occasionally related to real life experience. My preliminary learning was that the adoptive family in India is not only different in the way it is formed, but also the way it is functioned. For example, the general understanding within Indian society is that a child's adoption status is not disclosed to them – if ever – because of the social stigma attached to it (Bhargava, 2005). In fact, I have witnessed infertility treatment and other alternatives of family creation – like surrogacy, IVF and donor conception – be widely discussed and advertised, from the auto-rickshaw to the multiplex cinema. However, a small poster that is not easily traceable might sometimes hang outside an adoption agency. These are my subjective impressions and cannot be verified in the absence of any systematic representation, but nevertheless frame my expectations.

My professional experiences have contributed to my understandings of other aspects of adoption, primarily as a legal programme to protect children out of parental care. Within the brief tenure of professional engagement in adoption, many factors have contributed to advancing my understanding of adoption. Firstly, I see it as a standardised and mechanical programme to protect children in institutional care without parental responsibilities by placing them in a suitable family. I observed limited interaction and communication between adoptive parents and the adoption agency in the absence of post-adoption services where I could not ascertain whether there was a lack of requirement for support from the adoptive parents, or the services were simply not available. As a practitioner and an individual, it puzzled me to witness a sharp increase in numbers of prospective adoptive parents alongside an increasing unavailability of adoptable children. In contrast, childcare institutions were overflowing with potentially adoptable children waiting to be legally freed. Though adoption is the chief among alternative care measures, nothing much is known or discussed after adoption. The shifting policy narrative and increased domestic adoption demands contradict my first-hand experience of institutional irregularities in procedures and the confidentiality around adoptive family practice.

As a practitioner, I am interested to understand adoption as a family practice in contemporary Indian society more than just as a programme for the protection of children out of parental responsibility in institutional care. In my understanding, a family practice viewpoint recognises adoption to be something produced by those involved in the family process rather than prescribed. This curiosity drives me, as a researcher, to learn how adoption is perceived as a means of forming a family in the evolving socio-cultural environment that witnesses increased domestic adoption as well as changing family dynamics. I began to develop this research in 2016, immediately after India enforced the new legislation, policy, and procedural changes related to adoption. While exploring the Indian context literature, I found a very few and scattered research papers and literature on this subject. I observed that outcomes of adoption programmes beyond statistics are never subject to the scrutiny of researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and media. In particular, an initial review of the literature gave me a real sense of the vacuum of perspectives and personal accounts of adopted people themselves - one of the reasons being, perhaps, that adoption is contained within a child protection discourse in India. Child protection perspectives seem to place adoption at the end of a changing statutory process of protecting children.

This research is structured as a challenge to how I was positioned to think about adoption as a consequence of my practice role, and the local adoption mindset that shaped my foundational understandings. I am committed to using this opportunity to study, to disrupt, and to develop my understanding of adoptive family practice, and to taking new thinking back to practice, as well as to contributing to the conventional adoption scholarship.

Chapter 2: Researching adoption in India: Findings and theorisations

2.1 Literature review

In this chapter, I examine what is already known about adoption in the Indian context. This literature review is guided by two overarching questions: *What is written about the ideology of adoption and adoptive family practices in India? Why and how are people in contemporary India doing/ practicing adoptive family lives?* In the previous chapter, I reviewed the literature related to the development of adoption policies in India, whilst drawing a critical analysis on the revised legislation of the JJ Act, 2015. In this chapter, I focus on empirical studies available in the public domain from disciplines such as social work, sociology, anthropology and psychology. In so doing, I aim to establish local, contextual understanding, as well as meaning-making regarding adoption practice in India. I engage with the empirical studies in order to critically examine and report findings, as well as their technical validity and theoretical assumptions. For both the above-mentioned questions, I use an analytical thematic approach to overview the literature on adoptive family, family practice, doing family, family display, adoption stigma and the themes that emerge (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I subsequently explore the literature concerning adopted people and adoptive parents' experiences on stigma and how they practice adoptive family lives. As the literature relating to family practices in the adoptive family is sparse, I have included literature on family practices of other alternative family forms.

Since there is limited research on adoption in India, I applied a narrative synthetic review approach (Popay et al., 2006; Snilstveit et al., 2012). I critically review the available empirical studies on adoption in India, presenting an analytical account and critiquing the approaches that have emerged and how these have been interpreted. For the second question, I draw on adoption theories of Europe and Anglosphere nations, who are influential within adoption research, policy and

practice. Indian adoption law has been heavily influenced by the dominance of a universalising narrative emphasised by children's rights and the secularisation of adoption practice. However, it seems to overlook the socio-cultural norms that shape adoption practice leaving an absence of findings and theorisation on Indian adoption under the new policies and law. Therefore, I have chosen to review conventional Anglo literature to identify core concepts. I also outline key concepts from the sociology of the family and anthropological studies of kinship that offer potential insights into adoptive family lives. Having outlined key ideas within conventional adoption research, family, and kinship studies, I go on to provide a rationale for the particular approach that I apply to address the question 'How are people practicing adoptive family lives?' In conclusion, I highlight the gaps in current knowledge, and provide a rationale for the empirical research I have conducted.

My literature review covers journal articles, books, grey literature, policy documents, evaluation reports identified through keyword searches of academic database, and hand-searching a range of interdisciplinary resources - such as those in the areas of social work, sociology, social psychology and anthropology. I also include relevant publications focused on the research questions identified through the reference list of articles accessed through database searches. Throughout the thesis, I also engage with other literature besides that which is included in the literature review in order to illuminate my analysis. Within this chapter, however, I have consciously kept the focus narrow and concentrated specifically on literature related to practicing adoptive family as a new concept in social work and adoption literature. My aim is to establish this conceptualisation within the literature review, and also to provide a foundation for its development throughout the thesis.

2.2 What is written about adoption in India

Adoption as a welfare service in India began post-independence with the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956. During the 1980s, adoption became more systematised, and articles began to appear in print and audio-visual media

(Narayan, 2008). Although there were discussions around the development of policy and practice in the context of the changing socio-legal domain, a systematic review of published literature on child adoption in India reveals a virtual absence of comprehensive, empirical-based research - in comparison to research on child development - such as health, education and early childhood development - which has been reasonably well researched. But the field of child welfare services, like foster care and adoption, are primarily under-researched (Bharat, 1993).

2.2.1 Empirical findings

Much of the existing literature on adoption process and adoption practice that I have attempted to map is fragmentary and sketchy with only a handful of rigorous research studies conducted on Indian adoptive parents. For example, in 1993 Bharat conducted longitudinal research in the state of Maharashtra in western India, with data carefully collected from the files of 16 adoption agencies over a ten year period from 1977 to 1986 (Bharat, 1993). Her analysis included adopted children's characteristics, those of biological mothers who abandoned or relinquished their children, and profiles, and preferences of adoptive parents. It was a mixed-methods study revealing mostly quantitative information aggregated from the records of 4526 cases. It was supplemented by qualitative interviews with a small sample of experienced staff working at adoption agencies.

Interestingly, the two data sets are not always in agreement; however, the study does shed empirical light on adoption. Bharat convincingly showed that adoption in India was mired in social attitudes and apprehensions around the unknown parentage of the adopted child. It clearly identified obstacles created by religious-affiliated law (Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956), the only law applicable to parts of the Indian population until 2000. Her research broadly showed that the majority of Indian child adoptions were to foreign families (67%), as opposed to Indian families (33%). Although the percentage of domestic adoption increased over the ten year period of the study - with the corresponding figure of intercountry adoption declining slightly – given that many children would never have been

adopted if not for those European adopters, surely the benefit here is to the Indian adoptees. Bharat's research also identified a worrying gender inequity. Indian parents living in India adopted 66% male children versus 34% female children, reflecting a clear preference for the male child that exists in Hindu religious and secular practice. However, this figure was reversed for Indian parents living abroad who adopted more girls than boys. Foreign adoptive parents were least likely to express a gender preference with nearly 70% adopting girls. Given the limitation of data in this area, Bharat's study emerges as an invaluable empirical contribution to understanding contemporary India's adoption practices and trends.

Bhargava (2005), a researcher and an adoptive mother, conducted extensive research within a quasi-ethnographic research framework surveying adoptees and adoptive parents in Delhi, India's capital city. The data comprised 53 families and the 63 adopted children (45 female and 18 male) from these families. Her research sample shows a significant shift in gender preference among adoptive families in India over approximately 15 years (the time frame of data collection is unclear). At the macro level, Bhargava examines the historical and socio-political milieu that affected how adoption in India operated and developed over time by reviewing the policies and legislation related to domestic and intercountry adoption. At the micro-level, the study examined the pre, during, and post-adoption experiences of adoptive parents. Bhargava interacted with 49 adoptees aged 7-18 years to examine their perceptions of self and family using the Harter scale. Most of them were unaware of their adoptive status. The research highlights some startling examples of illegal adoption, where some adoptive parents admitted taking their adopted child from nursing homes with fabricated birth certificates. The desperation of prospective adoptive parents for a 'healthy, pretty, young baby' at any cost, shows that policy and legislation can facilitate adoption but cannot change people's mindsets and attitudes (Bhargava, 2005, p.50). Bhargava's research also highlights adoptive parents' preference for younger children; all the children in her study were adopted before the age of two. Bhargava's research offers a comprehensive picture of India's adoption policy and practices and is, therefore, a useful foundation for my own work.

Bhargava's work gives an overview of the macro delineation of child adoption in India, as well as the micro concerns of adoptive parents in the Indian context. It sheds light on the socio-cultural imagery created by myths, folklore and the media through which potential adoptive parents come forward to adopt a child. Bhargava's application of culturally appropriate methods to access research participants to generate information that is personal and sensitive, has advantaged my work and enabled me to take an informed approach. Her research has also given important insights into the issue of non-disclosure of adoptive status by adoptive parents to the adopted child as a result of social sanctions against adoptive families and the fear of victimisation – of the child and the family as a unit. It is to be noted that Bhargava employed both her personal and professional experiences in the study. Being an Indian adoptive mother and scholar, she is knowledgeable about adoptive family lives and the challenges faced by adoptive parents, belongs to the same cultural and ethnic background as her research participants, has an awareness of the relevant cultural values, beliefs and attitudes, and an understanding of the relevant languages. Her background, identity, gender, nationality and personal experiences all underpin the creation of knowledge. In the absence of scholarly literature on adoption policy and practice, Bhargava's work offers a comprehensive scholarship on Indian adoptive families primarily from the perspective of adoptive parents.

The American researcher, Victor Groza, carried out three empirical quantitative studies over the period 2000-2012 in collaboration with an adoption agency in Pune, a cosmopolitan city in the state Maharashtra. Groza's work has mostly been published as evaluation reports focused on Indian parents adopting Indian children, intercountry adoption, and adult adoptees in India. His first study relied on a sample of 138 adoptive families and focused on programme processes - activities and services related to adoption and post-adoption. Through his study, Groza identified problems faced by families related to adoption, and offered suggestions for how to assess immediate and long-term results. A significant finding was the dilemma around the disclosure of adoption status to the child and the search for

biological connections, eventually by the child. Groza reported that 38% of adoptive families dismissed the difference between birth and adoptive families and believed that their families were similar to other families in wider society - and had no plans to disclose the adoptive status of their child/children. 57% of adoptive families felt that birth parents should not have a right to know where their children ended up, and 48% would discourage their adopted children from looking into their heredity. Although the study has a narrow focus on deficits, rather than identifying strength and resilience in adoptive families, the findings strongly evidence a high cultural value of biological family over adoptive family relationships. It also illustrates a clear social stigma around adoption in India, an ongoing struggle for adoptive families. Further, it highlights legal barriers to adoption whereby adoptive parents must put money in an adopted child's trust to satisfy court requirements. In so doing, the adoption process undermines the adoptive parents' integrity and motivation to adopt.

Groza's second study conducted in 2012, examined the early adulthood of 46 adult adoptees (63% female and 37% male). The average age of the participants was 24.5 years and all were adopted domestically through one particular adoption agency. It is not clear, however, whether the participants of the second study are the same as those from Groza's previous study. It is claimed to be the first study with adult adoptees in India, and focuses mainly on three factors: i) adoptees' self-esteem, ii) adoptees' experience of adoption, and iii) adoptees' feelings about their birth family. The study employed a combination of survey and interview methods to gather data. The findings showed that adoptees were physically healthy, were well adjusted, and had done well academically.

More than 50% of adoptees in Groza's study had thought about and questioned their heredity. Nevertheless, most were not happy about their birth mothers giving them up for adoption but they had accepted it. They were pleased to have been raised by their adoptive families. The study highlighted adoptees' mental health as a potential area of concern. However, it also underscored that determining exact causes and effects was beyond the scope of the research and could only be

ascertained through longitudinal study. The adoptees' interest in the circumstances leading to their adoption was another crucial finding. However, the author mentions that some participants were reluctant to express a desire to find out more about their birth parents, worrying that it might hurt their adoptive parents, perhaps adoptive parents lack empathy and understanding of an adoptee's natural curiosity regarding their lineage.

Although Groza's study was designed to explore adoptees' experience of adoption, it concluded by mapping out their physical and mental health by employing a psychopathological model that did not take into account the socio-cultural factors which will inevitably shape adoptees' self-esteem. The author acknowledges that some of the standardised measures were used for the first time in India, and that modifications to fit the situation could result in measurement error. For example, the measures were translated from English into the local dialect of Marathi, but could not back translated for accuracy in errors. The software used for the data analysis showed that the quality of data was poor, but how this poor rating was obtained is unclear to the researcher. Hence, a weak methodological approach is a significant drawback of the study that led to contradictory findings. While mental health is raised as an area of concern, the author reports overall positive results. Perhaps the study intended to present that anything less than clinical depression was not considered a negative outcome of adoption. But it does not qualify the factors that contribute to positive or negative mental health outcomes in this research. Groza highlights the unmet needs of adult adoptees - such as the post-adoption support of adoptees in respect of their feelings about their birth mothers. He also indicates negative implications related to disclosure of adoptive status - although not from the perspective of the adoptees. These findings suggest limited space in which adoptees are able to share their feelings and seek support - a potential reason for mental health concern and one which requires further exploration.

Overall, Groza's work draws on a typical child welfare research model focusing on risk and vulnerability. The validity of a scientific methodology, developed and used

in America, seems not well suited to the Indian socio-cultural context, as acknowledged by the researcher. The psychopathological knowledge developed in the quantitative study is epistemologically different from my research, which takes a qualitative narrative approach to illuminate different ways of thinking and practicing adoptive family lives within the socio-cultural, socio-legal spheres. Nevertheless, this research's contribution to providing the first empirical evidence of adult adoptees' experience in India is creditable.

Another multi-sited research project by Bharadwaj (2002) examines the experiences of infertility and assisted conception in India with a sample size of 43 individuals and couples undertaking infertility treatment in Delhi, Jaipur, and Mumbai. This research suggests that adoption is not a viable solution in India because of the culturally conceptualised family and kinship boundaries created by an immutable biosocial relationship. Bharadwaj identifies adoption as 'visible violence to the cultural norms', which cannot be reabsorbed within a family and community to which it belongs without stigmatising individuals caught in the public gaze. It goes on to state that an adopted child carries 'a high risk of being condemned to carry the burden of its unknown parentage'. Bharadwaj's research reports the socio-cultural factors that influence the prospective parents' decision, who do not see adoption as an option to form a family. He argues that, when a couple fail to reproduce, they more readily resort to secretly accepting donated sperm than consider adoption because adoption evokes 'widespread fears of making infertility permanently 'visible'' (Bharadwaj, 2002, p.1879).

Bharadwaj's findings are not surprising given his study involved a group of people who never intended to adopt and considered biological ties essential for bonding and love. In fact, they viewed adoptive parents' status as discrediting key social attributes for family. It could be argued that Bharadwaj's approach is more pathologising as it conceptualises adoption from the perspectives of people who rejected it outright as a possibility. However, given the limited research into adoption in the Indian context, Bharadwaj's study emerges as a valuable empirical

contribution to understanding the cultural roots of the complex issues around infertility and adoption.

Mohanty and colleagues' (2014) quantitative research is one of very few studies in India that examined adoptive parents' disclosure of adoption to the child. The analysis indicates that among the 86 adoptive parents who participated in the research, only 12.8% told the child about their adoption. 31.4% planned to disclose at a future date, and the majority - 54.7% - had declined to disclose the child's adopted status to them. However, 95.3% disclosed the fact of their planned adoption to family members, with 88.4% sharing the information to a neighbour or other acquaintances. The unfortunate conclusion being, as Bhargava (2005) states in her study, that in most cases everyone in a family and community would be aware of a child's adopted status except the child himself. Although cannot be assumed or expected that an adopted child wouldn't learn of their adoptive status eventually through others, the common perception within – and desire of – most families is that adopted children should not learn of their adoptive status.

Mohanty and team's research sheds light on the communicative openness within the adoptive family and highlights the gap in adoption talk between the parents and the child. It reveals that the sharing of their adopted status to the child is not a priority for most adoptive parents. It also reports that Indian adoptive parents simulate biological parenthood's feelings by rejecting the differences between the adoptive family and the birth family. This, and a desire to protect the child's emotional and mental wellbeing, are used to justify non-disclosure. The fact that the details of adoption are shared, however, with family and close acquaintances is simply because it is a difficult thing to hide; most families, 77 out of 86, adopt because of childlessness.

The authors infer that adoption disclosure might relate to the value of individualism - as in western cultures where individual rights are promoted. But in a collectivist culture such as India, familial relationships, goals and dignity are given more emphasis than individual member's rights and autonomy (Mohanty et al., 2014). It

also hints at understandings of the child's rights in the context of adoptive family practices in India, where the child is a passive receiver and unable to participate in family practice. Such practice contradicts the notion of child-centrism, that entails direct participation of the child, constructing a child perspective (Krutzinna, 2021). It could also be interpreted that, because Indian families live within tight knit communities, it is difficult to hide childlessness, and therefore the arrival of a new child into a family is particularly visible.

Though non-disclosure could be seen to indicate a stigmatising perception of adoption and infertility, Mohanty et al.'s (2014) study does not spell out the socio-cultural factors influencing adoption disclosure and non-disclosure. They highlight the reasons of disclosure and non-disclosure of adoptive status, but do not suggest changes which might be made at policy level, community level, or with adoption agencies themselves. The authors do, however, acknowledge challenges with direct access to participants, which was solved with the intervention of the adoption agencies. It indicates that participants were morally obligated to act as research subjects. Research suggests that when participation occurs under moral obligation, the 'burden of proof shifts': Instead of individuals needing a good reason to come forward, participation occurs by all that do not have a good reasons not to (Rennie, 2011).

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to understandings of adoption disclosure experiences among Indian domestic adoptive parents in recent years. It would be absurd to accept that most adoptive parents in India believe that their adopted children remain forever unaware of their adoptive status when it is known by so many, including extended family members and those living in the neighbourhood. It would be useful to understand those adoptive family's perspectives who disclosed the child's adoptive status to them - and how they practice adoptive family lives. This is what my study aims to illuminate.

Another empirical study, doctoral research conducted by Mitra (2016) on adoptive parenthood, aims to understand the experiences of those who chose adoption

because of infertility. This qualitative research study is focused primarily on the psychological perspectives of seven urban couples' experiences of different phases of their adoption journey – pre, during and post - and emphasises the support given to childless couples seeking this path to parenthood. By employing phenomenological methodology, Mitra's study analyses each couple's decision to adopt, revealing that adoption is never the first choice to form a family with most only considering it after 8-12 years of unsuccessful infertility treatments. Mitra claims that adoption in India operates within a paradigm of double paradox, where conventional childless couples opt for a non-traditional family form, albeit one that is within the domain of 'traditional adopters' - who prefer to adopt an infant rather than an older or disabled child (Johnston, 1992). It could be argued that the preference for an infant might be a reason for better integration and bonding of the parent-child relationship. However, Mitra also highlights the couple's dilemma concerning disclosure of the adoptive status of the child. Although Mitra's study is exclusively focused on couples who experienced infertility or loss and as a result completed their families through adoption, it also reflects the characteristics of adopters in India as revealed by Bharat (1993) and Bhargava (2005). It presents adoption as an alternative measure, but one that is always at least a second-best option - which may not always be the case. However, Mitra's study is a valuable contribution to India's adoption literature from a psychological perspective.

2.2.2 Summary of empirical evidence

This literature review reveals that there is evidence that adoption is practiced in India as an alternative method for forming a family. The research it refers to has also added to our knowledge of the factors which appear to present the macro delineation of child adoption in India and micro concerns of adoptive parenting. There is a growing body of evidence that adoption disclosure is a challenge, and that the majority of adoptive parents prefer not to disclose the child's adoptive status to them. There is also evidence to suggest that adoptive parents simulate biological parent's feelings by rejecting the differences between the adoptive family and birth family. However, these studies have not put forward suggestions or ideas for the

changes that could be made to improve the perception of adoption at policy and practice level. Mental health concerns of adopted people was one the key findings of Groza's (2012) study, which was concluded without exploring the reasons behind them. Most of the researchers have concluded the predominance of stigma among communities while interacting with adoptive families where approval for adoption can be viewed as an act of consolation rather than one of support (Bharat, 1993; Bharadwaj, 2002; Bhargava, 2005; Groza, 2012; Mohanty, 2014). The societal stigma attached to adoption is yet another dimension that has hitherto remained more or less unexamined, and there is only hearsay evidence available on the implications of societal disapproval of the practice. Some accounts have provided insights into adoptive parenting experiences of adoption. Practice issues which have emerged as key include gender inequity in domestic adoption, adoptive parents' preference for healthy infants, communication gaps within adoptive families concerning their adoption, and the unavailability of pre and post adoption support.

While these studies have added knowledge and given a comprehensive understanding of adoptive family practice in India, they provide only a partial evidence base which is primarily from adoptive parents' perspectives. It does not answer how adoptive families in contemporary India practice their family lives in an essentially unwelcoming environment by challenging the biological version of kinship to create a legitimate one. My research aims to explore this and help close the gap in the available scholarship. I reflect on the themes of doing and displaying adoptive family lives in the socio-cultural milieu of India through the perspectives of adopted people whose voices are absent in the current available evidence. My study also illuminates the lived experiences of the participants who chose to share their stories voluntarily and without obligation.

In other words, my research is an effort to add to the broad knowledge that exists about adoption and adoptive family practices in India by illustrating important insights, adding to the dearth of literature in the different aspects of adoption, and generating a comprehensive framework for future research studies and areas of intervention in relation to adoption.

2.3 Key theoretical developments in the field of adoption

To answer the question '*How and why are people in contemporary India doing/practicing adoptive family lives?*', in this section I review the development of critical concepts of family; primarily around kinship and the stigmatisation in sociological, anthropological and social work literature.

2.3.1 Theories of 'family' and 'kinship'

The disciplines of anthropology and sociology have primarily engaged in the study of 'kinship' and 'family' by developing theories to explain these phenomena. Both disciplines have taken different approaches to discovery, so the concepts are not wholly synonymous. However, the cumulative knowledge developed offers potential insights into our understandings of adoptive family lives. While a few anthropological studies have applied theories of kinship to analyse adoptive relationships, adoption is mostly a neglected area in sociology (Carsten 2000; Howell 2003; Fisher 2003; Leinaweaver and Wichelen 2015). To nevertheless explore its potential, this section gives a brief overview of key developments in the anthropological study of kinship and the sociological analysis of family relevant to the study of adoptive families.

Family and kinship have often been defined in relation to other organising social concepts, such as community and friendship. White and Klein (2008) described how the prominent features of family differs from other social groups as the following:

1. Families last for a considerably longer period than most other social groups.
2. Families are intergenerational.
3. Families contain both biological and affinal (e.g., legal, common law) relationship between members.
4. The biological (and affinal) aspect of families links them to a larger kinship organisation (White and Klein, 2008, p.17 and 18).

Anthropological studies have also defined kinship as culturally recognised ties between members of a family formed through blood connections (consanguineal) and relationships created through marriage (affinal). Families can also include 'chosen kin,' who have neither blood nor marriage ties, but nevertheless consider themselves to be family (Gilliland, 2020). From the 1970s onwards, there was a shift within the sociology of the family and the anthropological study of kinship from an emphasis on structure to social process, from function to meaning, from public aspects of kinship to the family's private world (Jones, 2009).

The sociological literature defines family as 'an ideology of relations that explains who should live together and perform common tasks' (Wilson and Tonner, 2020). Morgan (1996) describes family as characterised by fluidity, diversity and multi-facetedness, such that it becomes an aspect of social life rather than a taken-for-granted social institution. Family as an institution, therefore, is no longer seen as an appropriate unit of analysis. Which is pertinent in the case of adoptive families as the cultural emphasis on the importance of biological connection has little relevance. Hence, prominence is placed on the study of actors' everyday family practices' - of 'doing' family rather than simply having or being a family - and conveying those practices to relevant others 'displaying' family (Morgan 2006; Finch, 2007). These shifts led to new insights and perspectives of family. In particular, the voices of children, women, and minority families were increasingly heard and a critical analysis of family emerged (Weston 1991; Neale and Smart 2001; Almack 2008; Seymour and Walsh 2013). These resulted in the displacement of the sharp line drawn between biological and social kinship, and paid greater attention to everyday practices and performances in the building of family, in addition to emphasis on human agency in the making and remaking of kinship.

The emergence of agency within kinship literature led to the developing of the concept of 'chosen' family as separate from the 'given' family. Weeks et al. (2004) and others, such as Weston (1991), documented the emerging narratives of 'families of choice' and emphasised the role of choice in validating kinship arrangements. These might include relationships based on blood ties, but notably

also those based on friendship - which become 'family-like' in terms of levels of commitment and support (Almack, 2008). Widmer et al. (2008) critiqued the concept of 'family practices' and 'chosen families' as not sufficiently conveying familial relationships because of complexities embedded in their social structure. They argue that the resource required for relationships is emotional. Individuals cannot decide financial, educational, and domestic aspects and its allocation in a social vacuum where only their self-interest or some culturally predefined 'lifestyle' rule. According to the authors, 'family should not be defined by institutional criteria. Instead, we need to focus our attention on actualised relationship' (Widmer et al., 2008, p.6).

Critiquing the authors' assertion that the most robust kinship relationships exist in the presence of biological connection, Morgan (2011) argues that a focus on family practices, in some aspects, does seem to emphasise agency at the expense of structure - particularly about 'doing' family. He says that the allocation of resource is not something that can be determined by one family member. That resources are part of family inheritance - its social, cultural and economic capital - and therefore available to family members through their engagement in employment, education and other spheres of life. However, carrying out family practices does not necessarily mean that people are consciously choosing to do so; rather, these become routine activities. By referring to mutual engagement within the family, Morgan conceptualises family as a set of practices requiring active participation regularly and routinely by way of everyday actions - or 'doing family'. His idea of family practices emphasise doing, rather than being, family, where there's a sense of responsibilities and obligations - the moral dimension of family practices. Whereas, in habitual practices, practices are not necessarily chosen because they may be assumed and done without thought, as they are seen as routine and 'established procedures' (Morgan, 2011, p.25).

Contemporary sociological debates claim that family practices are influenced by the individualisation thesis that connects wider social changes to the 'staging of everyday life' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Almack, 2008). Individualisation

could be understood as a structural transition from a traditional constraint to the family practices where individuals are more able to pursue their own choices. This leads to the question of the degree to which these family practices are incompatible with the stability of family life, where the cultural importance is attached to the primacy of biological connectedness and the conventional framework of family.

A more radical departure is suggested by Almack (2008) in her study on lesbian couples' family lives who negotiate recognition as a lesbian parent family with their family of origin. Almack argues that lesbian couples' relationships with their parents and networks disrupt and renegotiate to varying degrees at the juncture of becoming a lesbian parent family. The rationale for Almack's work is reflected in Goodfellow's (2015) research on the families of gay men. The author argues that kin relationships are not fixed or defined by biology, sexuality and law, and that maintenance of kin relations is accompanied by everyday tasks which unfold within the milieus determined by social and legal institutions. In this way they are seen to unsettle and challenge established norms. The idea behind the challenge is achieving societal sanction and legal backing for one's kin relations to solidify the meaning of relation. Similarly, Heaphy's (2018) study on ordinary and non-normative families of sex-same relationships claims that family forms and practices can be simultaneously conceived as conventional and non-conventional and incorporated into the social institutions of marriage and family. The author suggests non-conventional does not merely co-exist with the conventional, but incorporates it in ways of living and doing family-like things.

These researchers' studies demonstrate how kinship is selectively maintained, representing a choice made by same-sex couples and their families and relatives. For example, Almack (2008) suggests that having a child is demanding for lesbian couples, as it needs them to work out new kin relationships between their child and their families of origin in which these relationships are recognised and validated. She argues that having a child in lesbian parent families is not a simple question of 'adding' a new family member (Almack, 2008, p.1196). Rather, it highlights the

evolving nature of family forms that do not fit the conventional family framework and, therefore, lack institutional recognition.

Similarly, Gabb et al. (2019) in their work on LGBTQ+ young people explore how individuals manage the precarity and complexity of everyday life in order to sustain and survive family relationships. By employing the concept of 'paradoxical family practices', they demonstrate those which foster good relationships - such as open and honest communication, spending quality family time, and caring family practices that respect the life choices of LGBTQ+ young people. It is these practices that, when manifested in everyday family life, support family relationships and wellbeing. They also highlight the positive contribution of habituated practices in sustaining family relationships. It seems that these habituated practices have shifted over time, in accordance with and shaping social attitudes. Likewise, Finch and Mason (2007) argue that kinship should not be seen as a structure or system but 'constituted in relational practices' in the way that it deals with day-to-day issues. 'Kinship is very much about doing, reasoning and working it out in your relationships' (p.164-5).

These studies reflect family practices moving away from the 'thing-like' concept of 'the family' to recognise diversity, activeness, fluidity, multi-facetedness, habits and performativity as a form of 'doing family' which owns the fluidity of everyday activities and incorporates the contextual dimensions of their construction. David Morgan's concept of family practices portrays 'family life as a set of activities' (Morgan, 2011, p.6). He argues that it is through engaging in activities that 'a sense of family is itself reconstituted' (p.10) and emphasises family as a process of '*doing*' rather than simply having or being (Morgan, 2011). He further stresses that 'family practices are not simply practices that are done by family members in relation to other family members, but they are also constitutive of that family membership' at the same time' (Morgan, 2011, p.32). In other words, family practices entail recognition that do not simply exist as things or facts, but are actively produced by the actors involved. Morgan's concept of family practice represents an important step away from a sociological focus on family as something

you 'are' towards family as something you 'do' (Nordqvist, 2017). The term '*doing*' family highlights the flux of family lives, and recognises the importance of family emphasising that our understandings of family might not confirm to social norms (Roberts et al., 2017). By doing, people construct and reconstruct a sense of family and convey its meaning (Morgan, 2019).

Morgan's study resonates with Finch's (2007) work which introduced the concept of 'displaying family' and emphasised the importance of explicit acknowledgment of family practices to obtain family recognition and social legitimacy. 'Displaying' captures the elements of 'doing' and 'being seen to do' to convey the meaning of family, suggesting that family needs to be 'done' and 'displayed' simultaneously. Finch considered that the idea of family practices required expansion to incorporate display activities. The process of displaying activity could be useful to understand 'what might be going on below the surface of family lives' (Almack, 2008, p.1195), and seems more relevant when the quality of family relationships deviates from a conventional understanding of family connected biologically.

But do these theories have any relevance for adoptive family lives? Adoption has traditionally been categorised as 'fictive' kinship within anthropological studies. While the term 'fictive' recognises the possibility of social kinship - a relationship separate from blood ties or legal family - it also seems to privilege biological relatedness (Howell, 2003; Nelson, 2013). While critiques of previous theories and approaches have transformed the study of family and kinship, they have had little impact on theorising adoptive family life or adoptive kinship. Within sociology, adoption has received little attention, and it is the most neglected family relationship in the sociology of family (Fisher, 2003; Ruggiero, 2021). Within policy and media, attention is often paid to the serious difficulties faced by adoptive families (Lambert, 2019). In other disciplines, such as psychology, the subject is approached from individualistic terms, without consideration of the social and cultural factors and processes that affect families' adoption experiences (Wegar, 1997). As a discipline, social work has significantly contributed to adoption policy and practice, evident from the increasing number of permanent placements of

children in public care and the improvements that have been made to adoption services. Its impact can be seen in the modernisation of adoption in contemporary western society, which has transformed from the 'closed' model of adoption to a more 'open' approach, accommodating ongoing involvement from members of the child's birth family (O'Halloran, 2015). Hence, adoption research has remained firmly in the realms of psychology and social work disciplines.

The sporadic presence of adoption within sociological and anthropological texts may signify that adoptive family mirrors the conventional family and is, therefore, of little interest. It is possible, however, that contemporary theoretical developments in both sociology and anthropology - including gay kinship theories - have the potential not only to challenge conventional notions of 'doing family', but also the fictive nature of adoption. The changes have certainly developed new and challenging family critiques and opened up new lines of questioning for the study of adoptive family lives.

2.3.2 Stigmatisation as a key factor

In contemporary western societies, adoption continues to become ever more commonplace as a means of building family, 'encompassing shifting societal notions of what constitutes a family' (Garber and Grotevant, 2015, p.2). Globally, however, adoption has a complicated history due to the cultural value of bionormativity which privileges biological ties over social connections in creating and maintaining kin relations.

Historically, the stigma of adoption has referred to the biased, judgemental attitudes towards adoption and adoption related concerns (Baden, 2016). One theoretical perspective that gives salience to the adoption experience is social stigmatisation. A significant volume of scholarship has recognised the discrimination and stigmatisation faced by adoptees and adoptive parents (Wegar, 2000; Goldberg et al., 2011; Graber and Grotevant, 2015; Weistra and Luke, 2017). Stigmatised narratives of adoption include the morally impoverished birth mother having a

child out of wedlock, adoptive parents forced to consider adoption as a result of infertility, and adopted children who are seen to have more behavioural, developmental and psychiatric problems than their biological counterparts (Miall, 1987; Kressierer and Bryant, 1996; Wegar, 1997; Brodzinsky et al., 1998; Wegar, 2000; Bharadwaj, 2003).

The high cultural value of biological family ties over adoptive relationships is evident in many social clichés, such as 'blood is thicker than water' (Caballo et al., 2001). By lacking a blood relationship, adopted family members may be seen as lacking the same bond or familial closeness as other family members (Miall, 1996; Wegar, 2000). Adoptive parents may be similarly stigmatised by being seen as lacking the biological ties necessary for bonding and parenting and are therefore not true parents (Miall, 1987). This presumption can create a social distinction between biological children and adopted children, with the latter being less valued. Kressierer and Bryant (1996) argue that the 'stigma of the adoptive relationship is largely based on the social norm that couples would, and should, rather parent their biological offspring than someone else's child' (p.404). March (1995), Garber and Grotevant (2015) provide many illuminating examples of adoptees recounting negative stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes they have faced in their everyday lives. Individuals questioning the circumstances around their birth and eventual adoption, negative comments about their birth parents, and constant reminders that they are 'different' and 'unequal' are common complaints, along with more unpleasant references to being an orphan or a 'crack baby'. These problems are more acute for adoptees whose physical appearance is noticeably different to that of their adoptive parents and has subsequently led to adoption agencies matching children and parents based on their physical appearance. But doing so simply emphasises the importance of biological background by trying to give the appearance of shared genes (Wegar, 2000; Herman, 2002). Adoptees can, however, be surprisingly resilient and cope with the questioning and negative attitudes by subtly conveying their perceived superiority of adoptive family forms over biological kinship (Caballo et al., 2001).

In addition to the social stigma surrounding adoptive family ties, many adoptive parents in European and American countries struggle to seek social legitimacy for their parental roles in the late twentieth century. The idea that adoptive parenthood is 'second-best' to biological parenthood influences their willingness to share their experiences for fear of being judged as 'failures' for not being able to biologically conceive (Wegar, 2000; Baden, 2016; Miall, 1987; Morgan, 2011). In Weistra and Luke's (2017) study of 43 adoptive parents 93% agreed with the view that adoption is not viewed as equal to 'real' biological parenthood, which can be reflected in friends' and family's dilemmas of how to react to news of adoption (Weistra and Luke, 2017). Similarly, Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell (2003) interviewed infertile couples who adopted. They found that most of them had encountered comments that revealed others' belief that adoptive parenthood was second-rate, or implied that they had a weaker connection to their child because they were adopted. In addition to worrying about negative societal views, these couples were fearful of stigmatisation from family members who might not perceive the adopted child as a legitimate family member. By applying the construct of microaggressions, Baden (2016) highlights the prevalence of unconscious attitudes towards adoption, through communication – verbal and non-verbal – judgements and behaviours manifested within the stigma of adoption.

Literature also illustrates how adoptees are expected – and indeed forced – to be grateful towards their adoptive parents for being cared for by them, exposing the adoptee to a variety of challenges to their self-esteem and reinforcing the messages of inadequacy (Smit, 2002; Lindblad and Signell, 2008; Baden, 2016). Adoptive parents are similarly viewed as altruistic rescuers of (unwanted) children and subjects of less-permanent and authentic family (Zhang and Lee, 2010). Such indications question the authenticity of familial relationships formed through adoption, viewing adoptive relationships as inferior and biological relationships as primary (Garber and Grotevant, 2015; Baden, 2016). Scholars suggest that these stigmatised beliefs may cause adoptive family members to feel socially marginalised and devalued (Wegar, 2000; Kline et al., 2006; Baden, 2016). Goldberg et al. (2011) define it as 'stigma internalisation' where adoptive parents believe that other's

negative beliefs apply to their child and family, further challenging their parental role's legitimacy and authenticity.

There is evidence that the intensity of stigma varies according to certain factors, such as sexual orientation and gender. Almack (2007) has written extensively about the social stigma faced by lesbian parents in their everyday family lives, and how they struggle to gain social recognition of their parenthood. Goldberg and colleagues (2011) provide evidence that same-sex couples who adopt perceive stigmas because of their same-sex status. And women are shown to be more aware of stigmas, regardless of sexual orientation. It could be said that nonconventional families - such as adoptive families, single-parent families, and same-sex families - encounter social stigmatisation by being considered deviant from the social norm (Caballo et al., 2001).

Adoption researchers in America and Europe acknowledge that the media, a powerful source of information, plays a vital role in shaping public attitudes around adoption, sometimes perpetuating stigma and misconceptions (Wegar, 2000; Garber and Grotevant, 2015; Weistra and Luke, 2017). It can present adoption, adoptive individuals, and families in an unfavourable light via film, books, television shows and news programmes which misinterpret adoption (Garber and Grotevant, 2015). According to Wegar (1997), adoption does not feature very often in the media, but when it does, popular culture continues to fuel latent stigmas. However, some scholars acknowledge a shift in thinking about family form and acceptance of adoption, which has been reflected in positive news and media coverage (Goldberg et al., 2011).

Weistra and Luke (2017) write that the media has played a role in portraying adoptive parents as both 'heroes' and 'desperate,' shaping people's understandings of adoption correspondingly. However, they argue that negative behaviour and attitudes indicate a lack of public education, and suggest adoption experience could be better normalised when family or friends experience it. Weistra and Luke's elucidation resonates with Kline and colleagues' (2006) claim that adoptive parents

were mostly shown in a positive light in broadcast news, whereas adoptees were often depicted as having behavioural and emotional problems, specifically conflict and health issues. Similarly, while analysing descriptions of adoption in sociology textbooks, Fisher (2003) concluded that several texts 'portrayed it as a difficult process fraught with hazards' (p.155). Scholars illustrate the far-reaching range of adoption stigma. In summary, adoption as a practice is generally viewed as secondary to biological relationships and, although adoptive parents are, at times, seen as heroes, adoptees generally remain stigmatised.

2.3.3 Stigmatisation – A South-Asian perspective

It should be acknowledged that there is limited exploration and research on adoption in the south Asian context (Bhargava, 2005; Bharadwaj, 2003; Culley and Hudson, 2009). In the absence of scholarships on adoption, I explore literatures in the context of infertility to understand how ethnicity and culture shape the perception of adoption among south Asian communities. In addition to societal attitudes and perceptions discussed in earlier section, cultural histories are also influential in relation to adoption. The phrase 'cultural history' could be defined as the way social actors give meaning to their practices and discourse (Chartier, 2015). According to Edwards et al. (2008), cultural histories and values alter an adoptive family relationship's saliency and experience. They argue that it is likely that the challenges associated with transnational and transracial adoptive families are different from each other and families adopting within race and nation. It resonates with Nahar and Geest's (2014) empirical findings on childless women in Bangladesh which illustrates that adoption is a rare strategy to combat the stigma of childlessness in Bangladesh - both in rural and urban areas. The reason being that Islamic law emphasises blood-bond kinship, and the cultural beliefs are that children available for adoption are generally illegitimate and therefore against God's wishes. In Mumtaz et al.'s (2013) imperial study on infertility amongst men and women in Pakistan, a strong resistance to adoption is illustrated by both women and men because of the patriarchal kinship system where a family's lineage

is through men. If a family does decide to adopt, the child is preferred from the husband's family.

Similarly, Riessman's (2000) study of childless women in southern India establishes that motherhood's cultural stereotypes are an integral part of womanhood and therefore stigmatise women who cannot bear a child. Riessman's study also illustrates how childless women often 'mother' other children belonging to kin or servants in their households or of friends, preferring to remain childless rather than consider adoption. Drawing on the experiences of individuals seeking assisted conception in India, Bharadwaj (2003) demonstrates how adoption is an undesirable option for most infertile couples as it is seen as a 'visible violence' to the norms of kinship, which cannot be absorbed in the family and community without stigmatising individuals. Exploring infertility and adoption in British south Asian communities, Culley and Hudson (2009) suggest biological paternity is culturally viewed as important to continue the family line. Adoption is seen as risky, and a threat to patrilineal descent. They describe that in a pro-natalist social context, 'infertility is highly stigmatised and at the same time formal adoption is regarded as socially problematic' (p.115).

2.4 Adoption discomfort

As described above, a body of literature exists that attests to the prevalence of adoption-related stigma, indicating that messages implied through reactions and responses can cause discomfort in others. Although the concept of discomfort has not yet been extended to and explored in adoption, it nevertheless serves as a manifestation of adoption-related stigma. Hence, it is important to note the relationship between stigma and discomfort. Goffman's (1963) work on social stigma describes stigma as a process of social discrimination based on deviation from societal norms. Stigma usually refers to a mark of disgrace brought about by certain circumstances (Stigma, 2010). However, the reaction and response people convey through their attitudes and behaviour may not necessarily be thought of as stigma which usually connotes disgrace or inferior status and yet have the potential

to prompt discomfort and unease. Discomfort is related to negative perception, emotion or feeling (Jackson, 2020). Wilson (2016), however, argues that discomfort is being taken out of one's comfort zone, to bring to the fore issues that cause a lack-of comfort in discussion. While stigma categorises individuals and identities as 'out of place' (Cresswell, 1996) and associated with social and spatial isolation, discomfort is understood as sense, feeling and emotion (Jackson, 2020). Both terms operate in distinct ways. Whilst stigmatising behaviours lead to spatial distancing, discomforting narratives result in emotional distancing (Jackson, 2020). Discomfort can arise when there is internal conflict between desires to do and not do. Based on the larger adoption stigma literature, a critical engagement with the concept of adoption discomfort would be useful to identify and delineate related notions reported by participants, while grounding them within a sociocultural context of adoption. Analysis in my subsequent chapters provides scope for thinking through the concept of 'adoption discomfort' in adoptive family practices.

2.5 Focus of the research - 'Practicing adoptive family'

Concern with 'practicing adoptive family' has developed from emerging interest around contemporary family research (Morgan, 1996; Chambers, 2012; Nordqvist, 2017; Roberts et al., 2017), which acknowledges diversity in current family forms and focuses on *processes* of intimacy, rather than only on familial structures. In the context of lesbian adoptive parents, Almack (2008) highlights how having a child required active negotiation to demonstrate familial relationship. The adoptive family falls under the non-conventional category and is therefore different in its composition and the process through which it is formed. So, practicing family lives tend not to be taken-for-granted by them; all parties involved must work and rework to establish their relationship as a family. Even though the adoptive families' parental rights and legitimacy are confirmed in the eyes of the law, in reality the understandings of the family are harder to destabilise (Gabb, 2011). The approach to conceptualising 'practicing adoptive family' that I adopt in this thesis goes beyond the family unit. Drawing on Finch's (2007) concept of family display, it recognises the external audience who contribute to the process of practice. A flurry

of activities is carried out by professionals which substantially contributes to the process of how adoptive families function. Hence, moving beyond the family and bringing in professional practices and family practices, this research illuminates how and why adoptive family lives are practiced within a socio-cultural context to garner social legitimation.

It is apparent from the review of the current literature that there has been no emphasis on the day to day 'doing' of adoptive family lives in India, and very little otherwise. Considering the evolving policy and laws of adoption, the increasing trend of adoption in India, and the socio-cultural diversity, my thesis attempts to answer the question 'how and why are people in contemporary India practicing adoptive family lives? The question reflects a sympathy with the 'how' object, as the analysis of the current evidence presented suggests bias and prejudice towards the practice – hence my desire to focus on the actions and activities done by people to live their adoptive family lives. Further, with the 'why' agenda, I hope to illuminate the reasons that influence actions. The emphasis of this thesis is on 'practicing adoptive family' through which I intend to develop a more nuanced interpretation of how adoptive families are done in India, giving primacy to the needs and interests of families in the research evidence. But saying so does not ignore the needs of policy-makers and practitioners. Rather, I include the key stakeholders who I recognise as having a crucial role in influencing adoptive family lives positively.

Considering the social and cultural diversity in India, the limited knowledge base developed in the European and American context might not be especially relevant. Drawing on David Morgan's concept of 'family practices', my thesis emphasises 'doing family' including the key, but more subjective, elements of the social construction of adoptive family life. It shows the value of attending to the subjective meaning of adoptive family lives and how significant this is in understanding how policy on domestic adoption in India can best ensure the systems and support necessary for diverse families. Without an understanding of the subjective meanings of these family practices, I argue that promoting adoption as a policy

agenda would be unfitting, and potentially even pose a danger to adoptive family practice. The second part of the question explores the factors which influence the processes of adoptive family practices which, as a whole, contains an implicit interest in subjective definitions of what 'practices' or 'doing' means in the context of adoptive family. Additionally, the research moves away from the parent/child dynamic, the deficit model, and the psychological theories as explanations of adoption towards a more social work and sociological interest in family practices, family diversity and performative aspects of family. By doing so, it intends to illuminate family practices within the wider context of history, culture and society.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Design of the empirical research

In this study, I recognise that adoption is a legal reality which is both culturally influenced and socially constructed. My research attends to meaning making in which individuals engage in practicing adoptive family lives and the impact of the broader socio-cultural context on these meanings.

As a researcher and a practitioner with some experience of adoption practice in India, my research is intended to illuminate the dynamics of an emerging social and family practice which is shaped by changes to the statutory and procedural regime in late 2015 for child adoption in India. I am especially interested in understanding how adoptive family life is narrated by those involved in establishing and sustaining family life in a changing socio-legal context. I find the narrative inquiry method useful for its capacity to reveal the complexity of human experience and the insight that brings to help us understand how people make sense of their lives within social, cultural and historical contexts (Sharp et al., 2019). Everyone has a story to share, and the narrative method provides a framework within which to construct knowledge through ordinary communicative action in everyday lives (Riessman and Quinney; 2005). I adopted the methodological and related conceptual approaches to address the following overarching research question and sub-questions.

RQ1. How are adoptive families in contemporary India practicing family lives?

- What familial and social factors and processes contribute to the way people practice their adoptive family lives?
- What are the implications of shifting adoption policy narratives for the practice of adoptive family lives?

The study aims to illuminate subjective experiences of doing adoptive family lives for young adult adopted people and adoptive parents, taking account of the evolving socio-legal context to develop an interpretation of first person accounts. The data are generated from an array of semi-structured narrative interviews with the participants. Polkinghorne (1988) explains that narrative inquiry helps us to understand human experience which is meaningful, and how human actions are informed by this meaningfulness, projected in stories and narratives. However, the stories do not merely convey special fantasies or the representation of unusual feelings or experiences, but also provide a fundamental intra and interpersonal process through which people make sense of themselves in the world (Greene and Hogan, 2012). My narrative inquiry relies on a holistic analysis of data, providing insights into the trajectories of making and re-making adoptive kinship where the data is explored in greater depth.

In the section below, I describe the methods used in more detail starting with my use of a specific epistemological and methodological approach to narrative inquiry. I subsequently pay particular attention to the validity and trustworthiness of data, reflexivity and ethical considerations in order to address specific issues relating to the strength of the research. In the following chapters, I present the results of the analysis.

3.2 A narrative approach

I use narrative inquiry to gain insights into young adult adopted people and adoptive parents' experiences and perceptions of adoptive family lives. In this section, I provide an overview of narrative research and then outline the specific approach used and its appropriateness to study adoptive family life.

3.2.1 What is a narrative inquiry?

Narrative inquiry recognises the importance of stories in our lives. Polkinghorne (1988) describes narratives as ubiquitous. He says:

'Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with stories that we tell and hear told, with the stories that we dream or imagine or would like to tell. All these stories are reworked in that story of our own lives, which we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semiconscious, virtually uninterrupted monologue. We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meanings of our past actions, anticipating the outcomes of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed.' (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.160)

Over the last few decades, narrative research has received increased interest among social sciences researchers, analysing individuals and groups' narratives or stories (Goodson and Gill, 2011). The approach provides a unique means to see the world through the eyes of others, and get deeper insights into the complexity of practice contexts (Riley and Hawe, 2005). Bruner (1991) says narratives are a version of reality: 'Unlike the construction generated by logical and scientific procedures that can be weeded out by falsification, narratives can only achieve 'verisimilitude'' (p.4). Chase describes it as 'a field in the making' as it continues to evolve in diverse forms, influenced by a variety of epistemological positions taken by researchers adopting the approach and generating new knowledge (Chase, 2005, p.669). This 'diverse and developing field' has particular value for my research by drawing attention to 'sense-making' and as a means to display people's everyday lives to understand how narratives are embedded in social contexts and geographical locations (Thomson et al., 2002). While narrative researchers understand 'narrative' in different ways, my approach aligns with my aims of understanding how adoptive families make meaning of their family practices in a particular socio-cultural context that practices 'closed adoption'. Therefore, the narrative inquiry method gives me a specificity of insight into the participants' constructions of their adoptive family experiences.

While narrative inquiry is a diverse field, it differs from other forms of qualitative research in a number of key ways, such as its focus on stories as data, the processes whereby people engage in storytelling, and its particular methods of data analysis. Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992) suggest that narrative analysis disrupts the traditional social scientific analysis, which has realist assumptions and a focus on information collection. Instead, the focus shifts to look at the very construction of narratives. The narrative analysis approach, with its focus on the social construction of the story, means that uncovering the 'truth' no longer becomes the object of analysis; there has been a move away from the 'what' to the 'how' (Earthy and Cronin, 2008). The analysis of qualitative data typically involves fragmenting text to identify themes and offer interpretations and generalisations in relation to those themes. However, narrative analysts have described the unsatisfactory results of this endeavour when faced with transcriptions of long narrative responses from research participants. They believe that important elements of the story - such as the sequence in which events are told, the significance given to those events, and the structure of the narrative - are lost when employing thematic analysis. Instead, they see potential for deeper understanding through the analysis of the story as a whole (Riessman, 1993).

It is worth saying that a narrative approach entails the utilising of methods that allow people space to speak, in addition to a particular approach towards analysis. However, the focus of narrative analysis illustrates how lived experiences transform into language, and constructing a story about it is not straightforward. For instance, it raises the question 'what counts as story?' Riessman and Quinney (2005) make the point that the term 'narrative' has been popularised and as a result the term has lost some specificity. The term is sometimes used loosely by social scientists to mean 'any extended prose' (Elliott, 2005). Riessman (1993) suggests many forms of talk and text - such as chronicles, reports, question and answer exchanges and news reports - do not qualify as narrative. Riessman and Quinney (2005) differentiate these from narratives, which they suggest relay not only sequence but also consequence. Therefore, story needs to be understood as a whole, rather than as fragmented parts (Riessman, 2008). However, some reports might be understood as

narratives, like Tamboukou's (2013) work on letters. Rather than focusing on the meaning of stories assembled through the letters, she was interested in exploring their connections and interaction in the production of knowledge.

3.3 The approach to narrative inquiry used in this study

In this section, I outline the particular approach to narrative inquiry I employed for this study, and the rationale for this approach.

3.3.1 A life story approach

Adoption is not simply a one-off event whereby a child is adopted into a family. It is instead a lifelong journey (Freeark, et al., 2005). Life story as a research method can provide an opportunity to gain insight into what can often be an 'unspoken' and therefore 'unknown' aspect of an individual's life because these are part of how we assume the world to be - hard to see, but vital for analysing why some stories are told and not others (Wong and Breheny, 2018). It can provide rich description of an individual's life, and offer explanations of that life. Life story methodology tends to focus on individuals' stories of particular aspects of lived experience against the backdrop of a whole life (Etherington, 2009). By employing a life story approach, this study provides a space for adopted people and adoptive parents to share their stories and experiences. The telling of stories gives us a subjective perspective of a person's life as it has unfolded, while at the same time allowing a glimpse into the ongoing role of how those stories continue to live for and within the teller (Atkinson, 2012). I have chosen this method as it fits well with the study's aim of gaining insight into accounts of lived experiences over time for young adult adopted people and adoptive parents. It allows detailed exploration of each individual's lived experience, thereby enabling understanding of a unique perspective of adoptive lives.

By 'life story', I refer exclusively to dealing with a person's subjective, retrospective report of past experiences and their meaning to that person. The life story interview

provides a practical and holistic methodological approach to accommodate a sensitive collection of personal narratives that reveal biographical twists and turns, and in so doing enable participants to give retrospective accounts spanning a number of years. It allows them to tell their life stories in ways that are meaningful to them through the lens of their present identity and in interaction with me as researcher (Riessman, 2008). Etherington (2009) explains how narrative knowledge gained through a life story approach is created and co-constructed through the stories people tell, and the meanings they give to those told stories, might change over time and develop as their stories unfold. Life stories allow us to bring together many layers of understanding about a person's life, their culture and about how they have created change in their lives. It also offers a way, perhaps more than any other, for another to step inside the personal world of the storyteller and discover larger worlds (Atkinson, 2012). This emphasis on meaning creation and evaluation of events also fits well with narrative theory and the aims of this research.

3.4 The approach to narrative analysis adopted in the study

In this study, I use an interpretive narrative approach in which I attempt to move beyond descriptions of people's experiences and towards a deeper understanding of the meanings participants attach to adoptive family lives and the ways in which these meanings influence their practices. Greene and Hogan (2012) explain that a good narrative analysis involves two levels of analysis: one to gather text in the form of a story or conversation, and another being the process through which the text is created. I have, therefore, considered not only the content of the story as being of interest, but paid specific attention to how each story is constructed. I have also included the discourses evident within the stories, and the consequences of these constructions. This process provides insights into the social function of the narratives and allows exploration of the connections between participants' lives and the wider context. As my research is venturing into a relatively under-researched area of social and family life in India, it is imperative to use an inductive

exploratory research strategy. Narrative inquiry is particularly well suited to that purpose.

While there is some debate about the appropriateness of treating the terms 'narrative' and 'story' as synonymous, there are convincing arguments that it is acceptable to do so, particularly when your interest is in the analysis of the socio-cultural aspects of narrative, rather than the socio-linguistic aspects (Polkinghorne, 1998; Earchy and Cronin, 2008; Riessman, 2008). I have used both terms in my thesis, referring to 'narrative' more frequently. According to Riessman and Quinney (2005), the term 'story' speaks for itself with little need for interpretation. However, narrative has a robust life beyond the 'self'. However, Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) argue that stories capture a gamut of narrative dimensions - such as teller, tell-ability and linearity - which characterise how a story comes with a whole range of possibilities in realisation different stories. The construction of self is dialogical and relational, fashioned in local interactive practices. It means that 'doing self' is not all that tellers do. They also do rhetorical work through their story-telling. The content develops through the process of relational activities where the individuals construct who they are and how they want to be known. In this thesis, I have referred to the participants' extended accounts of their experiences of adoptive family lives as 'narrative'. I use the term 'story' to describe shorter segments of experiences told about specific significant events in the participants' adoptive family lives.

3.5 Sampling of interviews

A total of 14 interviews were conducted. These were a combination of individual and joint interviews comprising three young adult adoptees, 10 adoptive parents, and four social workers. In this section, I outline the considerations taken into account when sampling the accounts from these participants.

My sampling strategy and process followed should be understood within the context. I selected the particular research and methodology specifically to

illuminate the dynamics of emerging social and family practices enabled by changes to the statutory and procedural regime of child adoption in India. My sampling strategy was consistent with my aim to illuminate the experiences of those at the forefront of new policy discourse and legal regimen for adoption in India.

Profile of participants	No. of participants / Sex	Medium of interview
Young adult adoptee	3 (F)	Individual - 3
Adoptive parents	10 (9 - F, 1 - M)	Skype - 4 Individual - 4 Joint (in-person) - 1
Adoption professionals	4 (3 - F, 1 - M)	Joint (in-person) - 2
Total	17	14

Figure 1: Research sample details

I used a combination of an inductive and a snowball sampling strategy to recruit participants. Considering the exploratory nature of the study and the potential challenges of recruiting the sample, an inductive sampling approach allowed me the flexibility to include participants who were not originally specified in the study design (Guest et al., 2017). For example, my original sampling design included only young adult adopted people. However, during fieldwork it became apparent that accessing adopted people directly would be very difficult without the consent of the adoptive parents. Such issues not only illuminated the context of domestic adoption in India, but they necessitated a review of my sampling strategy. As a result, I took the decision to incorporate adoptive parents and adopted professionals in my inductive sampling plan. In order to do so, I used my social networks and was also supported by existing participants to recruit additional interviewees. This approach to sampling is outlined in more detail below.

3.6 The fieldwork context

Fieldwork was undertaken in India between mid October 2017 and mid June 2018. I was based in Bhubaneswar, the capital city of the state Odisha in eastern India. I initially planned to concentrate my sampling in Odisha which, as my home state, I hoped to benefit from my professional and personal connections. The period was broadly divided into two parts. The first was a 'scoping' visit to refine the research focus, contact personal and professional networks, and meet adoption professionals to understand the feasibility of accessing adopted people, adoptive parents and adoption agencies (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005). From preliminary meetings with practitioners and policy-makers, I realised that issues of confidentiality surrounding adoption practice in the state would likely create difficulties in my gaining access to adoptive parents and adopted people. Access via social workers seemed to be the solution.

To commence the sampling process, I started contacting adoption agencies. From 26 adoption agencies in Odisha, I shortlisted 10 which had been operating for more than five years and covered both rural and urban areas. As adoption policy in India changed significantly in 2015, my research sought to draw on the experience of social workers who had worked through both the new and old systems – another deciding factor behind my selection criteria for adoption agencies. I initially introduced myself by email to each agency, detailing the objective of my research and proffering an invitation to participate. I followed up with telephone calls and subsequent emails. Over a seven month period, I was able to negotiate participation from two adoption agencies and from four social workers working within them who brought a range of experience of working with old and new adoption systems within urban and rural environment.

I was less successful with adopted young adults and adoptive parents from whom I received no response from my attempts via the social media advertisement. As a result, I expanded the geographical coverage of my research area to include participants from further afield, whilst still prioritising Maharashtra state which has

the highest rates of adoption in India. With its active adoptive parents' groups and an adoption counselling organisation, Maharashtra offered good potential for sample recruitment.

I primarily used databases available within the public domain to contact adoption agencies and recruit social workers. To recruit adopted people and adoptive parents, I placed advertisements on social media platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Social media having become an increasingly established and effective recruitment tool for researchers – particularly those seeking participants from populations who might otherwise be difficult to engage as it allows the maintaining of physical separation and a degree of anonymity (Gelinas et al., 2018). Additionally, traditional methods - such as print media advertising, posters and flyers - would have been costly and therefore didn't represent cost efficiency with my aim to recruit participation from potentially remote communities (Fenner et al., 2012). To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the response window within the public domain was blocked meaning that interested individuals had to contact me privately. Both contact processes were conducted simultaneously to avoid delays, and progressed once I received confirmation from participants.

3.7 Negotiating access and consent

Significant challenges were faced in the process of securing consent for participation in the study - unexpected given the increasing public prominence regarding adoption in India which I have indicated in my policy review. Careful attention had to be given throughout the participant recruitment process, and also into the data collection procedure, in regard, to the ethical demands - as well as the practical challenges - of identifying and confirming my interview sample.

3.7.1 Adoptive parents

When defining the parameters of my study, I had a very limited idea of the adoptive family lives and relations that would become the subject of my research. I was

neither unfamiliar with, nor naïve about, the intricacies of adoptive kinship. However, due to the growing trend of adoption practice, I had a sense that something was new and emergent. Looking back, I realise that I took it for granted that in India, adoptive families are challenging many of the established socio-cultural norms informing the dynamics of family and kin relations. I had assumed that I would be able to rely on my personal and professional networks to gain access to adoptive families. But my preconceptions were quickly reassessed in light of my inability to recruit participants in my first three months of fieldwork, after which I realised that I would need to incorporate different tools in my recruitment strategy.

Soon after circulation of the advertisement, I received inquiries from potential participants. Initially, they seemed interested, but ultimately dropped out - either after finding out the purpose of the study, or when they realised that they knew me in a personal or professional capacity. For example, a potential adoptive parent participant withdrew after learning that we knew each other, giving me an insight into the challenges I would face more generally in regard to recruitment. (Refer Appendix E – 11.5.1)

My first potential participant - an adoptive parent - ceased to respond after exchanging only a couple of emails. Another adoptive parent who connected with me via a friend was initially quite enthusiastic, giving their verbal consent to take part. However, after emailing them an invitation which included the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of participation, I never heard from them again - despite a number of follow-up texts and phone calls. I was initially puzzled and couldn't understand the reasons behind the withdrawals, but I came to realise that the sharing of adoption experience was challenging and emotional for many involved in it. I experienced similar strategic retraction throughout the duration of my fieldwork, especially from adoptive parents and adoption professionals. Potential participants who connected through my contacts, either failed to respond after preliminary communication, or after reading the information sheet and learning more details. Those who contacted me directly were more keen to learn

about the research. Those who met the eligibility criteria from this group made up the bulk of participants in the study.

I wondered whether the reason for not ultimately consenting to participate in the research might be down to the issue of confidentiality. That, or discomfort in sharing adoption experiences with someone known to them – or someone who was an outsider. The silent withdrawal of potential participants indicated that initial contact may have been made out of a sense of obligation due to our prior professional or personal connection. Direct refusal to respond in the first instance may have been due to a similar cause. Literatures suggest that studies conducted in settings involving participation of people within a researcher's everyday environment, can raise questions related to risk to the participant - particularly in relation to the consequences of refusal to participate (Orentlicher, 2005). In such instances, participants may feel pressure to participate out of a sense of duty (Holloway and Wheeler, 1995). Significantly, fellow researchers have reported similar caution to participate in adoption research in India. For example, Mohanty et al. (2014) described significant challenges in accessing adoptive families during their fieldwork. They reported unsuccessful attempts using direct methods of engagement. Participants were accessed subsequently through adoption agencies.

However, former researchers have not spoken of prior affiliation with potential participants, so this aspect would seem to be unique to my research context. No adoptive parents who volunteered to take part in the research withdrew once the interviews commenced – and none of the adoptive parents who took part were known to me prior to the study. Most participants stated that they wanted to share their experiences to break the silence around the topic.

3.7.2 Adoption practitioners

Interestingly, reluctance to participate in the study was also demonstrated by adoption practitioners. Initial responses to emails sent to heads of adoption agencies were positive and suggested enthusiasm to participate. However, I was

frustrated by subsequent attempts to negotiate a mutually convenient date for a research interview. Ten adoption organisations were contacted in total based on their practitioners' experience in the field - a minimum of five years working in adoption specifically. Of the ten agencies I targeted, eight lingered in their response following initial expressions of interest. I engaged in a series of communications by email, telephone and text message with one agency over a period of two and half months before they, too, ceased communication. A sample of this communication is attached in Appendix (refer Appendix E – 11.5.2). Unavailability due to workloads was often cited as a reason for lack of timely response or, ultimately, for non-participation.

The fact that none of the agencies declined to participate initially, and yet failed to commit ultimately may indicate a problem with the research method. Had I made my approach through the concerned government department responsible for adoption programme in the state, the result may have been different. Failure to commit might also genuinely have been due to lack of time and capacity within adoption agencies. There might also have been anxiety around service quality and/or of being judged by an outsider. These speculations cannot be tested, but should nevertheless not be discounted. In the end, two agencies took part in the research who were cooperative from the beginning, responding promptly to communications, showing genuine interest in the study and its outcome, and suggesting possible dates for interview (although the interview dates ended up having to be changed several times to accommodate their availability).

3.7.3 Young adult adopted people

Regarding participation of the young adult adoptees, I received not one single inquiry directly. Parents were the gatekeepers for two of the three participants I initially contacted, with the other connected through an adoptive parent participant. Again, I was forced to reflect on my choice - and the autonomy - of these young adult adoptees in terms of the way they would share their adoption experiences with me. The social media advertisement proved effective in accessing

the adoptive parent participants. Only two were already linked to me through prior social contacts. However, I was surprised to make no direct connection with adoptees, despite their ready access to social media platforms. This suggested that either adoptees feel they have limited autonomy to talk about their adoptive life without parental approval, or they prefer to safeguard their adoptive identity. The first of these musings proved accurate in two of the cases. The second was never substantiated. The difference between exercising their freedom of expression and making their own decisions was reflected in all three cases: while one participant took the lead in selecting the venue and scheduling the interview, the other two adoptee participants had to obtain consent through their parents. As I had no direct access to these participants, I accepted parents' consent on behalf of their children. I saw this as two-stage process: allowing participants to withdraw at interview if they were not comfortable with the consent given for them, and conducting the interviews at their homes with and without their parents' presence. In the analysis chapters, I reflect on how parental presence influenced the shaping of the narratives by one of the participants.

Throughout the duration of fieldwork, I became aware of the complexities around talking about adoption. For example, communication with the participants before and after interview varied significantly. Conversely, engagement with adoptive parents was smooth and straightforward with most being proactive about checking in with me regarding the interview date and process. One adoptee, now an adoptive mother, was instrumental in connecting me to other potential participants and their eagerness to share their experiences visible. Four parents were engaged in adoption related activities, such as counselling, offering therapeutic help to children in adoption centres, and engaging in adoption-related discussions on social media. However, there was an undeniable sense of discomfort during the interviews when talking about birth parents, experiences of judgment and criticism about their adoptive family, or adopted child which I reflect on in the analysis chapters. Unlike the adoptive parents, I needed to communicate regularly with the social workers I wished to recruit until an interview had been scheduled. Although I experienced no refusal to participate from them, neither were they proactive.

Gaining initial access had proved challenging with adopted people, relating perhaps to the socio-cultural and political context, trust, knowing and being known (Eide and Allen, 2005). Since adoption is a confidential practice, adopted people are not usually encouraged to talk about it openly. As previously mentioned, communication with only one of the three adopted participants was direct, with the other two only contactable through their parents. Although the latter gave their consent to be contacted for any further information or clarification, they provided no direct contact channel. The message was subtle yet clear that contact must remain only through their parents. This diversity of expression and independence among the three young adult participants could be related to their age, their personal and/or professional position, or their family and social environment. Had the research topic been something other than adoption, they may well have exercised more autonomy in order to share their experience. To support this theory, I refer to available qualitative studies with young people in India. One such study by Iyer (2015) on gender and sexuality with young people aged 16-18 years required obtaining consent from participants and carrying out of interviews and Focus Group Discussions. The researcher proffered that young people's sexuality is constructed as a 'taboo' in India, and yet she successfully recruited participants through schools by obtaining informed consent from the school authority. This suggests that parental approval for young people's participation in research of sensitive topics is not a general norm in India. However, consent regarding the subject of adoption specifically may be a particular - and very different - issue requiring further investigation.

My fieldwork process evolved and shifted as I a) realised my mistake in relying on personal and professional contacts, and b) realised I had assumed too much by expecting it to be easier to access participants in the improving local context for domestic adoption. My presumptions had, in fact, made it more difficult to determine what was emergent and changing. I felt it wise to prepare myself for any outcome in the recruitment process.

3.8 Demographic profile of the research participants

My research sample is largely taken from urban areas and comprises seven heterosexual married couple families, one unmarried mother family, three young adult adoptees and four social workers. In total, 14 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out. While the adopted people were interviewed individually, I conducted two shared interviews with my four social workers. Of the 10 adoptive parents - nine mothers and one father - joint interview involving both parents were conducted in one case. Of the nine adoptive mothers - two being adopted themselves - one was local while other was an international adoptee. The parents of all three young adult adoptees participated in the research. All the adoptions had been arranged through voluntary adoption agencies - either via the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, or the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act. The time since adoption ranged from three to 24 years.

There is little consensus or guidance in research literature about the optimum number of cases which should be sampled in qualitative research. However, samples tend to be small in order to support the depth of case-oriented analysis that is fundamental to this mode of inquiry (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Mason (2002) suggests that there is no inherent reason why the sample size for qualitative research should be small, and yet advises against large data sets which make detailed and focused analysis difficult. Sample size in qualitative research has been the subject of enduring discussion. Considering the intricacies of qualitative research, sample size determination and assessment depends on a range of factors, including the research question, methodological approach, epistemological pluralism and diversity within the contexts or population being studied (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

My decision to sample 17 individuals in this study was based on two criteria. Firstly, sampling of adoptive parents ceased when I felt that the breadth of the sample adequately reflected the changing experiences of adopters and changing adoption practices between two and 24 years since adopting their child. Secondly, the sample

of adopted people and social workers was determined by the time and resource available for PhD research, i.e. sufficient to ensure a detailed narrative analysis without compromising the quality of research.

3.9 Methods of generating stories

Adapting a sociological approach, I attempt to understand talking, doing and displaying adoptive family lives within a corresponding socio-cultural environment (what constitutes an adoptive family and how does it function). Following a narrative inquiry process, I seek to illuminate the lived experiences of people who do and experience adoption using methods of data collection that enable me to explore the complex, multi-layered, nuanced understanding of doing adoptive family lives in an evolving socio-legal context (Clandinin, 2007; Riessman, 2008). There are various approaches to narrative research (Riessman and Quinney, 2005). With the nature of my study and research questions, I required a holistic methodological approach which would enable sensitive collection of personal narratives to bring forth the voices that would reveal how adoptive family lives are constructed and reconstructed within the relationship between individual experience and cultural context (Atkinson, 2012). The narrative approach also provided me scope to use two methods for data collection: semi-structured interview and reflective field notes for the systematic gathering of stories as told by the participants and the recording of observations throughout the period. There was to be one initial interview with each participant, which was the case for all but the first participant - an adoptive mother - whom I interviewed twice. Second interviews were ostensibly for clarifications and additional information where needed.

Generating stories through a narrative approach is viewed as a 'negotiated interaction' - a co-construction between researcher and participant (Taylor, 2008; Sfard and Prusak, 2005). McAlpine (2016) tells us that stories can be expected to emerge within a collaborative process, where accounts of participants' lives are already 'edited' as they emerge - that is, they are reduced by location, time, format

and interlocutor. The recruitment process for my study is consistent with this, suggesting that editing would pre-empt publicity of the account itself. I used semi-structured interviews designed to enable participant narratives to emerge in ways which were not restrictively 'edited' by the experience of the recruitment process. However, there was variation in the depth of reflection and reporting involved in telling the individual life stories. It could be said that my interview template was applied differently in different settings, which complements Atkinson's (2012) view which states that:

'Life story interview can be approached scientifically, but is best carried out as an art. Though there may be a structure (a set of questions) that can be used, just as there are good and better artists, there are good and better interviewers. The execution of the interview, whether structured or not, will vary from one interview to another. (p. 13)'

I applied Atkinson's three step approach: *planning* (pre-interview) – preparing for the interview, *doing the interview* (interviewing) – guiding the participant through the telling of their stories while recording the audio, and *transcribing the interview* (post-interview). The interviews enabled participants to tell their stories of adoptive family life, starting with an open-ended question which encouraged the participants to construct who they are and how they want to be known (Riessman and Quinney, 2005). The interviews also enabled interaction and face-to-face contact between participants and myself without being unduly intrusive, conducted as they were in person, as well as via Skype. Unsurprisingly, participants living a flight distance away opted to have their interviews conducted by Skype – even though they were given the option to have an in-person interview if preferred. Other researchers who have experimented with remote platforms for interviewing have found that it produced comparable results to face-to-face interviewing (Holt, 2010; Vogl, 2013; Oltmann, 2016). Some scholars, however, have noted that technology can also undermine quality when substituted for the face-to-face

interview and therefore should only be used when absolutely necessary (Novick, 2008). Holt (2010) argued that the idea of using technology may be as useful - or perhaps more appropriate - for the production of narrative data that has been left unexplored. This view resonates with Lechuga's (2012) claim that the characteristics which define successful qualitative interviews do not require the interviewer and respondent to be in view of each other. My own observations regarding remote versus face-to-face interviews align with Holt (2010) and Lechunga's (2012) views as I did not detect any notable change in content quality from either - except in terms of the interview context/set up.

The interviews of the young adult adopted participants were conducted in person. As mentioned, there was no notable difference between the interviews of adoptive parents conducted over Skype or in person, nor any difference related to setting. In my interviews with the adoptees, however, there was clear contrast between those conducted at their own homes and those conducted elsewhere. The interviews conducted at interviewees' homes allowed me to observe interactions with their adoptive parents, whilst also posing the challenge of confidentiality and privacy. Although I specifically asked that adoptive parents set appointment times and create a space for the interviews with a view to maximum privacy, in practice this was not always possible. Similarly, interviews with social workers at their office were occasionally interrupted by colleagues entering the room and phone calls.

During one interview with an adoptive parent, our conversation had to pause for a domestic worker who required help from my subject. I was surprised when, in an interview with a young adult adoptee, her father came in and sat next to her. And then later her mother joined. When I asked for privacy in order to continue, I was told that I should simply continue with them there. That they would not interfere, but help and support as required. Such ethical challenges were investigated by MacDonald and Greggans (2008) who reflected on the challenges of doing research in natural settings. In allowing the parents to be present in these interviews, I suspected I was breaking rules around ethical boundaries (Keikelame, 2017). However, I also needed to consider 'rules' of politeness and cultural sensitivity.

Ryan (2015) says it is often difficult for a researcher to predict how participants will place them during interview encounters. She refers to the 'power dance' which may be evident during interview set up and that may pose challenges for both the interviewer and the interviewee. In these interviews, I learnt the importance of ceding power and listening to what my participant wanted me to do. In so doing, I gained rich information, whilst still struggling with the issues of ethics and participants' rights. The process highlights the need for adoptive family stories to be viewed and understood within the wider socio-cultural context.

Much has been written about the diversity of storytelling. Riessman and Quinney (2005) write about the 'persuasive function of narrative'. According to them, 'some participants narrate their experience in ways that engage and convince, while other tellings can leave the audience sceptical, inviting counter-narratives' (Riessman and Quinney, 2005, p.395). Riessman (1993) also suggested that the impulse to narrate is so strong that even apparently closed questions can elicit stories, particularly when questions relate to powerful human experiences. However, some academics have discussed the problems associated with eliciting stories in the interview situation. Greene and Hogan (2012) suggest that stories that are elicited need to be analysed within the context of how they were elicited and recorded, and the researcher needs to be acutely aware of the ways in which their methods shape their findings. It has also been suggested that there is a tendency amongst researchers using structured interviews to suppress storytelling, and to instead seek concise answers to questions that can be easily coded (Jones, 2009). This tendency is not unique to structured interviews and can also be prevalent in qualitative interviewing and analysis (Riessman and Quinney, 2005). Holloway and Jefferson (2000) argue that the best narrative questions invite people to talk about specific times and situations in their life, not their whole life across a long period of time.

In order to consider and address these concerns, I used a combination of techniques to elicit stories, including use of an interview topic guide to aid consistency whilst allowing participants flexibility to pursue avenues of discussion specific to them

(refer Appendix D). Whilst acting as a mechanism to steer discussion, the topic guide also provided a tentative structure for my interviews without being overly prescriptive. My first full-fledged interview became the pilot from which I subsequently oriented myself in terms of process and content.

Open questions encouraged my participants to start their stories from the point at which they learned about or associated with adoption. At times, I probed for further elaboration of specific experiences. However, I was careful to limit interruptions during interviews as I wanted to listen and capture the stories told in participants' own words without imposing my words through questioning. It is, of course, good practice for a researcher's involvement during interviewing to be minimal so that the interviewee's narrative can flow (Earthy and Cronin, 2008). As you might expect, the 'narrative flow' was different for each participant – or pair of participants. One adoptive parent was particularly restrained. I didn't feel that she was reserved, but calculating about what she was prepared to share. Unlike most other participants, she would first wait for me to ask her a question before offering any information. The interviews were conducted predominantly in English, with a few in Odia and Hindi - languages in which I have proficiency.

During interview, I emphasised the consent process which dictated that I would listen to and record whatever stories they chose to tell, but would provide no particular service. If desired, however, I offered to provide contact details of relevant support services. Most adoptive parents were well informed about latest adoption-related developments in their geographical location. A vacuum in adoption-related information, services and support became apparent in the case of adopted people.

3.10 Recording and transcription of interviews

All the interviews were recorded using two digital audio recorders. I used two devices to compensate for any potential technical glitches. Each recording was transferred to a laptop immediately post-interview, after which they were fully

transcribed. Although the interview transcripts were a valuable record of the participants' verbal contributions, the whole story was supported by facial expressions, body language, and other forms of non-verbal contribution (Earthy and Cronin, 2008). I captured and quantified these via notes taken immediately after the interview and also during the process of transcription. Researchers before me have highlighted the complex issues involved in transforming talk into text for the purposes of qualitative analysis (Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 1993). Riessman's (1993) influential monograph narrative analysis offers a model for understanding the way that a primary experience can be transformed and represented differently - not only through the process of transcription, but also through the telling of the story, the analysis of the story, and the reading of this analysis. Elliott (2005) suggests three broad approaches to transcription: cleaned up transcription which prioritises accessibility, rhythm and content of speech; detailed transcription which uses a precise notation system for the purpose of conversational analysis; and transcription using units of discourse which attempts to maintain the rhythm and structure of speech without the use of complex notations which interrupt the text.

My approach to transcription was closest to the first type described by Elliot (2005), whilst also taking account of the issues of representation raised by Riessman (1993). Typical conventions of punctuation were used, such as [.] to indicate a clausal boundary or short pause, and [...] to indicate a pause. I also included notations in the text. For example, I inserted parentheses to capture descriptions of behaviour or expressions of emotion which were I felt were relevant – or indeed pertinent – but kept these to a minimum. Whilst I recognise that this approach reduces the precision with which talk is transformed into text and limits the nature of the analysis that can be undertaken, I felt I was able to retain the rhythm of speech and ensure that the speaker's words were accessible to the reader. This was particularly important in protecting and reflecting the private nature of the internal lives of these adopted people and adoptive parents. Although the final transcripts were far from polished, authenticity was retained in the inclusion of repetition and non-lexical utterances. Transcription convention acknowledges the importance of the interviewee's role in the co-construction of the

interview discussion, and the interviewer's utterances are considered an important element of the analysis. I also, therefore, transcribed my questions and interventions.

3.11 Exploration with the interview data to derive an appropriate analytical framework

My approach to analysing the narratives which were entangled with varied forms of communication in different set-ups was exploratory in nature and generated an overwhelming volume of data. Moreover, I learned that data based on people's own experiences carry meaning at different levels of analysis. Accounts can be analysed and interpreted differently by exploring certain aspects of data in more depth, or by asking different research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2013). I have neither applied a deductive approach to the data collection or data analysis to fit a pre-existing theoretical framework, nor did I conceptualise the research to test a specific theory. Rather, I sought to employ an inductive analytical stance for theory generation in such a novel field of enquiry. In particular, I approached data collection and analysis as an ongoing iterative process, embodying constant interplay informed by the notion of abduction – by which I mean an approach that enables researcher engagement in a back and forth movement between theory and data in a bid to develop new or modify existing theory (Awuzie and McDermott, 2017). In consideration of the exploratory nature of my research, the ongoing analysis process was kept open for interpretation of the 'told' stories narrated in a context (Riessman, 2005). By employing a qualitative interpretive approach with a non-representative sample, and by using an iterative, abductive way of thinking, through my analysis I aimed to provide deeper insight and understanding into the lived experiences - and meaning - of the adoptive family lives described.

The interviews generated rich, dense texts, some of which were in story form and some not. The data were analysed both narratively and thematically (Riessman 1993; Mason, 2002; Allen, 2017). As usual with qualitative research, the analysis of data began early in the research process with a preliminary analysis of emerging

issues undertaken after each interview, drawing on interview notes and observations.

While thinking about the forms of analysis that would be most useful for this research, I pondered which questions to extract from the information I had collected and how best to utilise it. Since I applied a semi-structured, in-depth narrative interview technique to collect the data, my initial preference was for narrative analysis. Before deciding on which particular framework to use, I went through each of the analytical forms: thematic, structural, dialogic/performance and visual to study structure, characteristics, function and interpretation, eventually finding the narrative thematic approach most suitable for utilising data analysis in this research (Riessman, 2008). I understood that, although each form of analysis focussed on different elements, the boundaries between all four forms can sometimes be blurred (Riessman, 2008). The goal of narrative analysis is to understand individual's experiences and how she/he interprets them in relation to the doing of adoptive family in the evolving socio-cultural environment. As in other qualitative approaches, my guiding principle was analysis-in-context to acknowledge the larger circumstances in which each narrative was constructed (Juzwik, 2006).

I started the analysis by carefully reading through each narrative and considering the content of the transcript as a whole and as a life story. By reading and re-reading each participant's narrative, I was able to create a comprehensive, low-inference narrative that preserved the individual's voice (Coulter and Smith, 2009). In this way, I developed a reduced form of the participants' experiences, whilst retaining key elements of the narrative – connection between the experiences, the passage of time and individual intention (McAlpine, 2016). Through this process, my intention was to preserve the individual's story without inserting my own interpretation and enabling the building of familiarity with each individual case. I noted the major milestones of each life story separately for adoptive parents and adopted people. I subsequently drew out commonalities and differences by mapping patterns across participants' accounts to examine the content in more

depth. Whilst this exercise provided a useful indication of adoptive family life experiences, it didn't reveal the significance of the narrated episodes. So I began to identify shorter narrative excerpts relating to specific events or experiences, considering the meaning conveyed through these and the relationship between them. By examining the language used by the participants, I was able to see how it reflected or contradicted Indian ideologies of family and kinship.

I also paid attention to the emotional content of the narratives to achieve understanding beyond that which the verbal narrative alone provided. With a fuller understanding I could better understand what mattered most to the participants by the way in which they shared their experiences. I scrutinised the stories in relation to the social and cultural context of adoption, as well as the circumstances of their production. In so doing, I developed an interpretation of the stories for further comparison across the interviews. This process helped me to understand the narratives as stories about the making of a unique version of kinship and practicing adoptive family lives between adoptive parents, adoptees and related others.

My process of data analysis was not linear. Rather, I adopted an iterative approach, moving back and forth as necessary. Reading through transcriptions several times, I noted potential codes and themes linked to the research questions from which I developed code summaries which I organised schematically into themes. I collated data segments applicable to each theme, and moved back and forth between them and the transcripts to ensure that the themes adequately reflected the data. As the analysis developed, some themes were revised and new themes emerged from which I developed thematic maps to move between the abstract constructs and the concrete data. Through the continual, iterative and reiterative process of writing and reflecting on the data, the final analysis was produced.

3.12 Ethical principles and challenges

The research received ethical approval from the University of Sussex's Social Science and Arts Cross-School Research Ethics Committee (SSA C-REC) on 29 September 2017. When seeking ethical approval, I presented two significant aspects of my study for consideration. The first was the need for understanding any element of risk to the participants in relation to the sharing of their stories about the specific subject of 'adoption'. The second related to the conducting of the research in a socio-culturally and religiously diverse society. Even though all the participants were 18 years and above, I did seek parental consent before approaching the young adult adoptees who were still living with their families - to ensure appropriate ethical practice in relation to the parents, as well as to recognise the cultural sensitivities around parental control in Indian family relationships (Morrow, 2008; Boddy, 2013). It was at the recruitment stage of my study that I discovered that adoptive family lives were most heavily policed by parents and, as a researcher, I had to go with the grain. However, the constraints on accessing adopted people's accounts of the adoptive family lives was striking. Through parental consent I had smooth access to young adult participants, but I nevertheless took pains to gain individual consent from participants before interview. Once received, I provided participants with the consent form to sign at least one week before the interview. Following guidance in the ESRC's *Research Ethics Guidebook* (2011), I ensured that each individual was participating voluntarily and did not feel in any way obliged to do so by emphasising their 'rights to withdrawal' during or after the research process up to end June 2018. I reiterated their rights to withdrawal and the importance I placed on confidentiality, and anonymity throughout my engagement with all participants, and made sure to allow space for questions and clarifications before each encounter.

Despite the informed consent, research participants sometimes feel discomfort and risks (Montalvo and Larson, 2014). Hence the importance of confidentiality to protect participants' identities and that of the information they provide. To protect participants' anonymity and ensure data protection, I removed identifying

information (e.g. names of participants, organisations and locations) from all transcripts and used pseudonyms for all in the transcripts and this thesis. At the start of each interview, participants were asked how they wished to be referred to in the research, and whether they wanted to choose their own pseudonym. All but two asked for their name to be changed, with those two consenting to the use of their first name only. However, I decided to use pseudonyms for all participants and stored the transcripts, recordings and consent forms on a password-protected computer and a locked cupboard as relevant.

While ensuring adherence to the formal procedures, there were deviations during the process. Participants seemed to consider verbal consent more binding – or at least sufficient on its own - than written. Once verbal consent was given, no participant followed up by providing their signed consent form - until I politely insisted. Even then, some treated providing of their written signature as merely complying to a requirement. I nevertheless ensured that each participant had read the consent form thoroughly and understood it's meaning before signing. With all the details of the study clearly presented in the information sheets I provided, it seemed that the participants did not feel the need to pay much attention to the consent form itself. The lone exception was an adoptee and her adoptive parent within one family, each of whom signed a consent form. In another where both parents and a young adult adoptee participated, only the mother signed the consent form on behalf of her family. In yet another, the adoptive mother gave written consent for herself and verbal consent for her daughter who was a potential participant. Despite my best efforts at polite persuasion, it proved impossible to obtain signatures on consent forms for all participants. I wondered initially whether participants didn't fully understand and appreciate the security provided to them by formal consent.

Culturally, family members respect decisions taken by an elder member in India; usually the father. In one of my participant families, I interacted with father – who actively participating in the research. However, it was the mothers who made the decisions on participation and gave written consent on behalf of her family. Parents

consenting on behalf of their young adult children might indicate a culturally located understanding of research whereby children are seldom seen as separate persons, but always connected to parents or carers despite having legal majority (Morrow, 2009). Because mothers were generally my first contact point, I believed this the reason for them taking control of the written consent.. Such dynamics should be understood within a cultural practice that places little emphasis on individual rights and relatively greater emphasis on kin and community (Boddy, 2013). Besides being a culturally congruent practice, the assignment of parental authority in each case was confirmed by the lead taken in the interview itself. In my last two cases, the mothers were more vocal, authoritative and influential than in my first.

To ensure the voluntary nature of participation of all participants whose written consent could not be obtained - particularly the young adult adoptees - I spoke to them at a length during my introduction, explaining the research strategy, discussing our mutual expectations, and the process of research data collection, analysis and reporting, and acquiring verbal agreement for each before commencing the formal interview process. Throughout our interactions, I emphasised the 'right to withdrawal' to ensure that participants' continued engagement was willing and free from obligation or coercion throughout. Ultimately, no one who confirmed their consent to participate withdrew.

In addition to formal procedures, it was important to consider the ethical implications of my research positionality in shaping research interaction. For example, the uniqueness of a local research study aiming to capture the lived experiences of adoptive family lives, might have encouraged participants to speak candidly feeling that someone was interested enough in their situation to listen to their life story which would otherwise not be discussed openly. Also their contributions perhaps would have a reaching impact mainly to future others rather than for themselves. Indeed, all participants confirmed that this was the first opportunity ever provided to them to speak in detail and extensively about adoptive family lives. I noted a sense of comfort and confidence developing in the

telling of their stories which I put down to a number of factors. Firstly, the time I spent in regular contact with them - by email, telephone and in face-to-face meetings. Secondly, the space I created for them to reflect on, and account for, their individual distinctive family lives through time and a sympathetic ear. Finally, the participants' eagerness to mobilise the research as a means of sharing their version of the adoption narrative and in so doing inform a generally poorly-informed and potentially influential audience.

I acknowledged my participants' openness and contribution to the research, and took seriously my responsibility to act with integrity. As such, I was keen to establish a process of reciprocal exchange which I felt was important to develop and maintain the relationship. At the end of each interview, I asked participants if they had any questions for me, and assured them they were free to ask me anything. This led to questions about how many participants I had spoken to and about experiences reported to date. I tried to be honest in my responses and shared the number of people I had interviewed and their general family profiles – but always making the point that each was a unique and rich account and of course never revealing identities. Some participants asked for my opinion on the subjects we discussed, about my professional experience, my education, my family and such like. I always tried to answer as openly as I could; I was asking so much about their experience, I felt a sense of responsibility to offer something of myself. My intentions regarding reciprocity in this research did not extend simply to this sharing of self and informing of research findings - which almost all participants expressed an interest to know (Morrow, 2009). I was also keen to obtain my participants' thoughts about the research and how they felt it could be useful.

3.13 Validity and reliability of the research

It is recognised that the concept of validity - trustworthiness in the quality of the research - not as straightforward in social science as it is in the natural sciences. Within social science, quality assessment of qualitative research is not the same as in quantitative research where a different kind of research question is asked and

many standardised procedures are available to produce answers with that mode of thinking (Baxter, 2009). However, many procedures have developed within the wider social sciences to establish the robustness of qualitative research in addressing questions relevant to diverse knowledge domains. I discuss two such concepts to demonstrate the quality of my content and rigor regarding the process, validity and reliability of my research.

Validity in qualitative research refers to the 'appropriateness' of the tools, processes, and data and how the results are created (Elo et al., 2014; Leung, 2015). The approach taken to establish validity in narrative research depends to a great extent on the epistemological standpoint taken in the research and the degree to which the researcher identifies with different philosophical standpoints. Some researchers claim that narrative accounts are more valid than responses gathered through structured interviews as they allow participants to set the research agenda and control the way they tell their story and avoid experiences becoming fragmented (Cox 2003). However, validity judgments in narrative research do not yield simple acceptance or non-acceptance responses. Rather, they present the likelihood or probability of the claim, meaning that a claim is valid when there is sufficient evidence and/or reasons to reasonably believe it is so (Polkinghorne, 2007). Validity is therefore measured through the researchers' ability to reveal meaning making (Plummer, 2004). This research views adopted people and adoptive parents' narratives of doing adoptive family lives as socially constitutive and realities as multiple. The validity of the research, therefore, relies on facilitating unhindered story-telling and the careful unfolding of diverse meanings of adoptive family lives and elucidation of the socio-cultural context in which these stories exist through an appropriate method of analysis.

The concept of reliability is controversial in the field of qualitative research, where there is much scepticism about the value of the use of standardised research tools and the ability for these to be neutrally and universally applied (Mason, 2002). Reliability is especially important when using inductive content analysis, as categories are created from the raw data without a theory-based categorisation

matrix (Elo et al., 2014). Within narrative research, the concept of reliability is problematic as it contradicts the basic tenet of narrative research that stories are fluid and socially produced at particular times, in particular contexts, for particular audiences (Jones, 2009). Mason (2002), however, suggests that the difficulties of applying quantitative concepts - such as reliability - to qualitative research, does not mean that qualitative researchers do not have to pay attention to the accuracy of their methods. Instead, reliability needs to be addressed in distinctly qualitative terms. In order to address issues concerning accuracy of methods, decisions about study design, approaches used to illuminate adopted people and adoptive parents' stories, and the process of analysis, are described in detail in this chapter. Additionally, the display of data in later chapters provides evidence of sources of my interpretation, allowing readers to develop complementary or alternative analysis.

One of the key aspects of qualitative research is that it can never generate objective or value-free knowledge, which many qualitative researchers reject (Polkinghorne, 2007). The expectation, therefore, is that the researcher will constantly engage in and document a process of self-reflection in order to bring epistemological and methodological challenges to the forefront (Corlett and Mavin, 2018). This is a means of recognising how the research has been shaped to produce the knowledge reported, and to justify the claims made for it. In the next section, I develop a detailed account of this 'self-reflection' - or reflexivity - demanded by this approach.

3.14 The reflexive researcher

Reflexivity is considered an integral aspect of qualitative research (Corlett and Mavin, 2018). Elaborating its importance in qualitative research, McHugh (2014) states that reflexivity is a process through which new knowledge and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon that is being studied can be gained through critical self scrutiny of the researcher's emotion, subjectivity, lived experiences and world views. Pels (2000) states that the process of reflexivity involves being reflexive about our role and relationships with the research context, research participants, research data and the resulting reports we produce. I was aware of a

number of aspects of my own biography which might influence my final thesis, including my roles as an individual and also as a woman of Indian heritage who has lived in the country for most of her life and therefore has had exposure to the socio-cultural dynamics of the country. I am also a child rights practitioner and a researcher – one with a specific disciplinary link to social work. Unravelling the various potential influences of these roles on the research process is by no means straightforward. However, throughout my study journey, I was acutely aware of the issue and was careful to practice sensitivity in relation to the research topic, self-monitoring as to the impact of my assumptions in the creation of knowledge, and consciously maintained a balance between the personal and universal (Berger, 2013).

My experience as a social work practitioner was instrumental in how I conceptualised the research project. As a professional with close to nine years of experience in child rights and child protection, I have learned about the paucity of information and literature on adoptive family practices. Considering the increasing trend of domestic adoption practice, and the evolving statutory and procedural regime for the child adoption socio-political process, I was interested in understanding how adoptive family lives are narrated by those involved in creating and sustaining such a family life. An inductive research stance was consistent with this particular interest. In light of my professional experience and personal background, my assumptions and expectations, it is reasonable to anticipate that my positionalities as a researcher could influence the research process. I was aware, for example, that participants might respond differently to me than they might have to another due to my prior professional position and experience, and/or my role as a research scholar at an international university.

As I experienced difficulties in accessing participants and subsequently discomfort in talking about their experiences, it became increasingly important for me to establish trust between my participants and me. With due consideration to ethical and methodological appropriateness, I revealed my status as a social work practitioner to the interviewees, as well as elements of my biography when asked.

As mentioned, participants were often keen to know of my personal interest in the study subject and, through my responses to these questions, I tried to maintain a balance between reciprocity and maintaining a focus on their stories. My reflexivity improved with each successive encounter (Dodgson, 2019). As the data collection progressed, I tended to share more of my personal status at the beginning of the interview - which has no connection with adoption.

I reflected upon my positionality while conceptualising the research and was cognizant of it throughout. A question I constantly asked myself, who am I in the context of researching a subject that is not publicly discussed in Indian family and society? Throughout the process of research - from formulation of the research questions to the conducting of the interviews - my positionality as an Indian female researcher studying the lived experience of adoptive family lives in a diverse socio-cultural context, remained at the forefront of my mind and could be termed as reflexivity. For example, I was careful not to attempt to speak for the research participants by using my professional experience to extend any support, or make any suggestions while engaging with them. During my first interaction with the participants, I purposefully highlighted my professional experience in India which had a very brief involvement with adoption. I took pains to present myself as a learner rather than a scholar, giving participants the knowledge advantage and the ability to feel comfortable and un-judged in their story-telling.

There were assumptions I made as a researcher regarding access to participants and my positionality that related to the concept of insider/outsider (Chereni, 2014). Elaborating on the insider issue, Chereni (2014) states that a researcher who is an insider is perceived as one who shares a range of cultural markers, including language, idiomatic expression, cultural beliefs and attitudes. As my research was conducted in India, my Indian identity, familiarity with the regional and socio-cultural practices, proficiency in different regional languages, and knowledge of legal and professional practice, made me feel like an 'insider' with my participants. I drew on this insider status during the interviews, and was aware of its potential impact with regard my familiarity with the legal and professional practices that

follow initiation of adoption procedures particularly. I was also knowledgeable of the legal language to which adoptive parents are exposed during the adoption process. At the same time, my assumed familiarity came with potential dangers that I was also mindful of. For example, my professional experience did not necessarily equate to an understanding of adoption and related procedures. Similarly, my Indian identity did not the socio-cultural dynamics of family relationships, caste and religious differences. I recognised that this assumed shared understanding created potential for stories to go untold or for their meaning to remain unelaborated. Therefore, I was careful to ensure and recheck my interpretation of meanings, and to consider the interviews as opportunities to explore the diversity of understandings of adoptive family lives.

The issue of my positionality was active throughout the data collection process. The participants were appreciative of the fact of the study and all expressed how this was the first time they had been aware of such research being carried out in India. Most participants were interested in whether I had any personal experience of adoption - either as an adoptee or an adoptive parent. Some were curious to know why I had chosen this particular subject to study. I continuously updated and improvised my introductory information package as a result, not only to share what felt like the right amount of professional experience and research interest, but also of my personal life. As an 'insider' with my participants, I shared a level of commonalities. However, as a research scholar from a foreign university and an individual with no personal experience of adoption and family, I knew that I remained an 'outsider'.

Grove (2017) states that there is always a need for reflection on power, as power differentials are always inherent within the researcher and participant relationship. Dodgson (2019) critics that the researcher is an expert who determines the results of a study, whilst asking the participant to do something that involves the giving of him or herself - often without any control over the outcome. However, Finlay (2002) says that the power differentials can be minimised through a critically oriented reflexivity and creating space for mutual collaboration. While I cannot

claim my research to be emancipatory, I actively sought various approaches to enhance the collaborative element of my study in an attempt to address the power dynamics within the research relationship. For example, I was mindful of the power of the researcher's authoritative voice, and attempted to minimise its directive power by presenting myself as a learner rather than as a scholar of the subject. I also conducted relatively unstructured interviews which would enable space for participants to weave their stories in their own words. The aim of the collaborative element was not an attempt to merge the roles of participant and researcher. Whilst I acknowledged the value of the participants' contributions to the reflective process, I did not assign them any epistemological privilege over my own voice.

3.15 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described and justified the social scientific methodology I adopted in the undertaking of this research, and provided a rationale for the particular approach to narrative research that I utilised. I have addressed the principles and parameters of the methods employed at each stage of the research process. The challenges I faced at each point of the research process of this significantly under-researched field have been reported. Procedural decisions taken at each stage of the research process have been explained and justified - from the point of initial engagement with the field of study, through to the challenges of data collection, data storage to meet data protection rules, and confirmation of methods of narrative interpretation. In the next three chapters I present the analysis of the lived experiences and told stories of adoptive family lives generated through the narrative interviews.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter illustrates a detailed report and analysis of learning from the data collection *process*. In this chapter, I report on the analysis of the *content* of the accounts collected through that process. Both *process* and *content* are counted as data, but I have chosen to deal with them sequentially as the research process and the learnings from it proceeded. I also explore the research participants' told stories collected through narrative interviews, to understand the dynamics that adopted people and adoptive parents deal with in their everyday lives in order to establish new family – or kinship territory. The participants shared personal accounts of their adoptive family lives with a researcher, highlighting powerful parties within - as well as outside of - the family. These 'powerful parties' are those who share family affiliation through biological ties, achieved through conventional, conjugal, and heterosexual arrangements, and regarded as privileged over social ties. The accounts generally reflect what is good and right about family life in India from the perspective of those practising and narrating such lives, and also how adoption is disruptive and therefore problematic to these social norms (Morgan, 1996).

The analysis asserts that the core challenges to finding a new way of *being* family demands that adopted people and their adoptive parents create a new way of *doing* family (Hart and Luckock, 2004; Morgan 2011). It is imperative to understand the nature of doing family at different levels. Firstly, adoptive families must find a way of doing family with its own members. Secondly, they must do – and be recognised as - family within the wider community. It is notable that many of the experiences shared by the adopted people and parents in this research were focussed specifically around the process of learning how to think, talk about, practice, and display adoptive family lives in a changing socio-cultural context. In that sense, these are perhaps pioneer accounts of contemporary adoption practice in modern India, produced by the process of sharing them with a researcher

sympathetic to - and with an understanding of - adoptive family lives in the Indian context. The accounts are illuminating in their acknowledgement of the adoptive family's compromised social status in various respects. They also demonstrate an active commitment to the adoption process and a strong desire to talk about it.

To develop my analysis, I have explored the ways in which the narratives reflect judgments, comments, attitudes, behaviours and prejudices experienced by the research participants in subtle, overt, and sometimes even aggressive, ways. Not exceptionally, but in their everyday lives. I also incorporate, wherever possible, the expressions, tones, and gestures relayed in the narrating of the accounts in an effort to maintain their authenticity and coherence. The analysis covers a range of narratives, spontaneous and approved, constructed by the participants in different contexts. Some participants shared free-flowing stories requiring minimal prompting and encouragement, whilst others were more reserved and selective in what and how they chose to share, confining their accounts to specified contexts only. Emphasising the context is also essential as the interviews were conducted at the participants' arrangement or that of their parents, which inevitably influenced the shaping of the narratives.

Through this analysis, I hope to facilitate comprehension of different perspectives of the 'adoption journey', as well as the geography of adoptive family practice formation (Lifton, 2002, p.207; Hanna et al., 2011). A common feature of the life stories shared were detailed descriptions of the work undertaken by each adoptive family to legitimise its status in the eyes of others. In the creation of a new adoptive family, the intricacies of Indian culture and notions of biological relationships are clearly challenged - in terms of caste, class and religion which are all central to the very fabric of Indian society, and which determine who counts - and is recognised - as family. The analysis enabled me to illustrate how the participants construct their own narratives of adoptive family lives, and how their experiences are shaped through the intersection of adoption biographies with everyday lives, and across family and social landscapes within which the adoptive relationship unfolds.

4.2 Marking out adoptive kinship under watchful eyes

Given the mandate of blood ties in Indian society and their basis in caste, class, religion and gender, *doing* an adoptive family challenges the hegemonic definition of a biological family. It is therefore particularly demanding for Indian adopted individuals, adoptive parents, and virtually everyone else I interviewed connected with these families and the adoption process in India. These sentiments were demonstrated in particular by the adoptive parents I interviewed about and towards their adopted children. However, they varied within and outside the family and changed over time. All participants experienced discomfort associated with adoption in India through others' words, attitudes and behaviours.

It was a pleasant evening in spring when I spoke to 24-year-old Nisha in a rooftop restaurant where she is a frequent visitor. We sat in a quiet corner of what seemed a popular venue, and Nisha spoke easily and freely. Her account of her experiences was expressive, coherent and unrestricted. She was adopted as a newborn in Maharashtra, a state in Western India, and is the only child of her adoptive parents who adopted after a series of miscarriages. Soon after Nisha's adoption, her adoptive parents moved to America for a few years where Nisha spent her early childhood, before the family returned to India when she was 4-5 years old. Recalling her childhood once back in India, Nisha recounted a couple of instances in which she was upset by other's comments.

"Nisha: I had a very smooth childhood, but there were a couple of things that happened. That is also because I don't look like my parents. My grandfather and grandmother always adore me, always. But I was a troublemaker. I used to break things. Once my grandfather called me *Shudra*. Like he was talking to my grandmom in kitchen and then I overheard them. [...] I went to my Mom and asked what is *Shudra*? She didn't know that I heard it somewhere. So she explained it to me [...] then I was upset. I said, my grandfather does not like me. That stayed in my mind that my grandfather does not like me and that time I did not know I was adopted or anything"

Nisha described this experience barely six minutes into our interview, so I was keen to understand the full extent of its impact and importance to her. She went on to speak for close to two hours describing many other episodes in her life. Her account contained several stories told with varying degrees of emotion, but she kept returning to this particular experience and the obvious emotional anxiety connected with the term '*Shudra*'. '*Shudra*' is defined in Hindu scriptures and literature as the lowest of four categories of Hindu social order. Those belonging to this class are said to be the darkest skinned and are traditionally shoemakers or other leather workers (Mishra, 2015). Considered 'untouchable', Shudras are generally badly treated (Prasad and Gaijan, 2007). Nisha didn't explain the term's meaning to me, perhaps assuming I knew it and therefore the emotional significance of such a term for a young child.

The use of the term '*Shudra*' is, in fact, not only derogatory, but culturally insensitive and blatantly offensive. To make its use by her grandfather more bearable in its context, Nisha cushioned its impact by initially emphasising her grandparents' adoration of her (*'always adore me, always'*).. However, Nisha's account indicates that she felt emotionally unprotected within her family, even though she was unaware of her adoptive status at the time. Her narrative suggests that she was expected to behave according to certain unwritten family norms and her inability to adhere to these made her position precarious within the family. Nisha's story also touches on her discomfort at not physically resembling her adoptive parents. More than once she referred to this specifically: *'I don't look like my parents'*. Perhaps the difference in appearance between Nisha and her adoptive parents, coupled with her occasional bad behaviour and adoptive status, was troubling for her grandparents. As a result, they penalised her in the effect of the differences and labelled her '*Shudra*', which indicates intentionality. It also indicates how Nisha's adoptive relationship with her extended family was somewhat discredited, operating at odds with the norm - the dominant ideology of family connected biologically. It might be that, however, the need to expunge the pre-adoptive and contaminating origins of their adopted child including from Nisha herself. Furthermore, the phrase '*overheard*' suggests that Nisha's adoptive family is practiced at privacy and

containing what might be felt or viewed as the 'tainted' heritage of Nisha's adoptive status. Such perceptions are deeply embedded within India's social class and caste society, and influence the way those occupying the upper castes - those with cultural power - think about and talk to others.

As Nisha herself clearly felt, the experience to which she kept returning, illustrated how her grandfather held an undeniable - albeit perhaps unwitting or unacknowledged - negative perception of his adopted grand-daughter, whilst nevertheless managing to portray - and perhaps feel - love and affection for her. It suggests how adoption, a private way of *doing*, can become a public matter. On the public stage, a grandparents' adoration of their grandchild can be exhibited. Behind the scenes, however, the personal and social integrity of that child might be devalued by its adoptive status. Despite of this, Nisha attempted to describe a happy and fulfilling adoptive life. She did, however, acknowledge her position as an outsider - being part of her family and yet not equal within it.

Despite Nisha's claim that her grandparents '*adore*' her, the account illustrates how she is aware that they act differently in her presence than they do in her absence. Although she never explained her own understanding of the term '*Shudra*', the expression in her voice signified its impact on her. There was anxiety around 'not being loved' by her grandfather, whose position within her adoptive family may have had particular significance. However, Nisha's mother's response indicates her obliviousness of family members' negative perceptions towards Nisha. Many years after Nisha's adoption, she fails to gain complete - albeit informal - approval from her grandparents for the construction of adoptive kinship.

Reflecting on Nisha's account, there appears to be two different versions of family narratives working in parallel within her adoptive family. A private narrative appears to encompass uncertainty and latent voices that stir up conflict around adoption and its inherent personal and social roles. The adopted child is not part of this private narrative, which reflects the unknown origin of the child that is expected to be kept hidden and not spoken of. This supposition, however, appears

to be refuted by another of Nisha's experiences, one she encountered as an adult and described as '*disturbing*'.

"Nisha: Once my grandmom told me that I was from Silver Park and my mom is very upset about it. My grandmom told me, suddenly, *aise* [just like that]. My grandmom is really old and I am very fond of her. She is very fond of me. She was talking to me and just happened to tell me that the hospital you are from *na*, you are adopted from [.] is only for the women who [.] who knocked up. She used the term knocked up [...] my grandmother. That just hit me in my face. I was like WHAT?? Even though it doesn't matter, I don't care honestly. It's sad that men just leave women like that. But it hit me very [.] *ekdum munh pe* [say it to my face]. This was just a few months back, around six-seven months back"

Nisha described this experience as one of the few unpleasant incidents in her life and one that had taken place just a few months before we met. Whilst relaying the incident, there was audible distress in Nisha's voice. The phrase '*knocked up*' was obviously hugely disturbing for her - and her mother - and was expressed with real emotion and anguish. As with the comment made by her adoptive grandfather, Nisha cushioned the impact of the comment by emphasising her grandmother's age and their shared affection – an obvious defence mechanism against my judging her grandmother too harshly. The sense of disillusionment in her verbal and facial expressions suggested several potential reasons for why Nisha found the comment so startling. Even as a young child, she seemed to have a sense of inadequacy. Her grandmother's reference to Nisha's unknown biological background, indexed to different religions and conditions of relinquishment, likely intensified Nisha's sense of dismay. Her grandmother's assumption about the circumstances of Nisha's birth - and the likely conditions that led the birth mother to relinquish her child - seems to question Nisha's legitimacy. The absence of blood ties within a family is more than just biological. It encompasses issues around social caste, class, and religion, which makes adoptees vulnerable within their adoptive families and categorise them as 'Others', as they are not included in the dominant social group of shared family blood-ties (Gaynor, 2014, p.348). Nisha is undoubtedly a loved member of her

adoptive family, as she claims. But she is simultaneously not fully one of them. For Nisha, being worthy of her grandparents' adoration gives her legitimacy within the family. At the same time, her lack of blood ties questions that legitimacy. So the emotional challenge for Nisha is being both legitimate and illegitimate within the family at the same time.

During our conversation, I learned that Silver Park, referred to by Nisha, is an area for destitute and homeless women. Her grandmother's comment, which included identifiable information, labelled Nisha's position as culturally deviant too. Scholarships on community attitudes towards adoption illustrate that, due to their unknown genetic past, adopted children are viewed as second rate and experience stigma manifested in judgments, attitudes, behaviours and prejudices (Miall, 1986; March, 1995; Weegar, 2000). The genetic past, as defined in stigma literature, is predominately limited to adoption studies undertaken in North America and Europe. It suggests that it is not just a biological construct, but that illegitimacy includes unwed motherhood and prostitution (Terpstra, 2012; Muurling et al., 2021). This would seem to apply to the Indian context, although different societies ostracise differences in different ways. Certainly in India, caste signifies other disgrace too, including unwed motherhood and prostitution and their contaminating potential.

Clearly, both comments described above - overheard by Nisha as a child and told to her directly as an adult - were difficult to hear. Her distress indicates the shocking nature of the behind-the-scenes narrative and how out of step it is with her view of her emotional relationship with her grandparents. It also perhaps signals a shift in that relationship evoking a new sense of uncertainty – an inherent fragility in adoptive family lives rendering the adoptee always at risk of mishandling and the subsequent damaging consequences. Nisha's comments on these two experiences combined are interwoven with the prejudices of caste and class; however, they are primarily allied with her legitimacy status triggering negative emotions like sadness and distress.

Nisha interpreted these episodes of her adoptive life as '*not smooth*', suggesting that, irrespective of the emotional turmoil they produced in her, she tried to maintain a good relationship with her grandparents which she often referred to during our conversation. Even though her sense of disillusionment was clear through her repeated expression '*hit me in my face*', she attempted to lessen its impact by re-focussing on men's disgraceful behaviour towards women. Nisha's response '*does not matter*' reflects a contradictory emotional account, and perhaps an internal struggle in her attempt to portray a more positive picture of her adoptive life. It suggests that, over time, Nisha perceived discomfort by way of her adoptive status due to the norms structuring family and kin relations being, in general, not the same for an adoptive family. This discomfort of illegitimacy also signals an underlying negative attitude and perception towards the birth mother, who falls into the category of morally and culturally deviant. Nisha's story gives the impression that her adoptive life's '*not smooth*' experiences are informed by a societal understanding of adoption reinforced by narratives which includes a culturally and morally impoverished birth mother and illegitimacy linked to caste, class and religion. Additionally, her reference to '*just a few months back*' indicates that the adoption narrative unfolds over time - indeed throughout life - and that the sense made of it unfolds gradually. It seems it is always a work in progress whose connotations might crop up at any time, by accident or design.

Consistent with Nisha's experiences, adoptive parents' narratives also reflected a sense of discomfort in their relationships with kin, albeit expressed more subtly. Responding to a questions about post-adoption relationships with family members, friends, and others, Malini, an adoptive mother, felt a sense of scepticism from her kin towards her adopted children.

"Sangita: Was there any special effort you had to make to build or maintain the relationship with friends, family, colleagues, and people around?

Malini: people around me [...] umm [...] so I guess [...] how would I put it? I would say, the reaction of people around me, whether they are friends or relatives [...] so actually [...] pretty good. It was a very positive reaction. Our relatives came and they brought gifts every time

since we adopted our daughters. So [...] I think in terms of building relationship [...] how do I do that [...] may be it was more of this. I was very careful about how people treated my children”

Malini is a IT professional and mother to two young adopted girls. She undertook her higher education in the USA, and worked there for some years before returning to India to adopt. She is also an adoption counsellor, an activist with strong pro-adoption views, promotes the adoption of children in childcare institutions, and is active on social media. As expected, Malini was very articulate when sharing her own adoption journey, which included a supportive family environment and a close bond with her daughters. The excerpt above, however, suggests that she struggled to comprehend my question and tried to present her view through a positive lens. The fragmentation in her communication suggests an effort to restrain from sharing any negative behaviours or attitudes. Congruently, the expression in her voice indicated a tension between what she felt and what she attempted to portray. Malini's response of '*pretty good*' suggests that she was less than satisfied with other's behaviour towards her children – and perhaps that she expected better. Encountering difference in behaviours which were disappointing to her expectations, made her vigilant about the way her children were treated. Being an adoption activist, Malini was careful to portray a balanced picture by managing her discomfort and perhaps wanting to give a positive impression about adoptive family practice. Her account suggests that she puts her children first unequivocally, as a mother but perhaps also as an activist as the child may otherwise get lost in the other socio-cultural considerations displayed above.

Malini's reference to gift-giving appears as she refers to gifting by relatives is an example of positive behaviour, which she equates to an act of social acceptance. This led me to explore existing works on gifting which describes gift-giving as a positive social process that shapes and reflects social integration, and strengthens and affirms social ties (Sherry, 1983; Shanka and Handley, 2011). In that light, gift-giving might well be viewed as an act of social connection between relatives and adopted children build towards adoptive kinship. However, viewed in the context of

Malini's fragmented communication and the uneasiness inherent in that, gifting might be seen as a tool through which she attempts to communicate and validate positive reaction. Although her reference to gifting is designed to convey an image of adoptive kinship building, Malini's account as an adoptive parent suggests the challenges she has experienced in maintaining relationships with extended family members. The insecurity suggested by Malini's fragmented account perhaps illustrates that, when families are formed by alternative means such as adoption, acceptance of adopted children requires a higher salience than does approval of adoptive parenthood.

To substantiate my supposition, I traced the implications of Malini's comment about being careful of how people treated her children, to explore the importance she placed on people's behaviour to establish a connection in terms of adoptive family relationships. As I sought a more profound meaning from her narrative, the burden of determining the difference in the behaviour she was careful to relate to adoptive kinship, became prominent. For example, when I enquired about specific experiences that might have made her feel that her children were treated differently to others, she explained:

"Malini: I would say, nobody was negative. Ahhh [...] the only gap I saw [...] I think there are some family members and some of my relatives, who are nice, right? They didn't say anything. They didn't do anything [...] but because I have known them for 30 years, I know when they are holding back.

Sangita: okay. Like?

Malini- ummm [...] when my younger daughter came home, I could see some of my relatives are holding back a little. You know [...] not being as warm as they might have been, if I had a biological child, for example."

Malini's narrative demonstrates a repressive attitude exhibited in a climate which seems to threaten the relationship. It is quite apparent in the analysis that Malini shared an 'approved' narrative as she continuously tried to portray an image which

contrasted with what she felt. The unease in her voice reflects the experience of everyday adoptive family life in the maintenance of kin relations. Later in the same conversation, I felt able to probe a little further about Malini's experience to achieve a more precise understanding of the context referred to. She seemed to avoid sharing any particular experience unless specifically probed. Her expression signalled elusion and evasion, albeit presented courteously so as to diminish any displeasure on my part.

Malini seemed particularly concerned about the '*holding back*' reaction, indicating an action under a moral influence – a framing likely to discriminate against adopted children. Her narrative reflected a lack of warmth and half-hearted feelings that was non-verbal and perhaps characterised her adopted daughters as 'others', i.e. unequal, thereby affirming the moral values that underpin the dominant notion of biological kinship reflected in Malini's comment '*if I had a biological child*'. A critical re-reading of the story gives an impression that the conscious act of '*holding back*' appears as an unspoken discomfort operating as a power to silence and constrain. The withdrawing attitude suggests how the adoptive family is denied full family status in what amounts to a denial of the total membership of adopted children.

A sense of discrimination and inequality is reinforced in the idea that kin relations of adoptive family are perhaps not open to accepting anyone outside the blood relationship as kin. The '*holding back*' signifies perhaps more than just the action, which Mailini failed to express explicitly. The potentially unfavourable behaviour directed towards her children hints that adoption triggers other discriminations, rather than being a target of discrimination in and of itself. It is also likely to prompt moral judgment towards her daughters - perhaps because of their origin and lack of biological kinship - and is reflected in the reduction of empathy and warmth in behaviours.

Malini's uneasiness encouraged me to explore the literature on the concept of discomfort, which suggests that it is not simply an individual psychologised emotion, but rather a social and political affect (Zembylas, 2018). Given the context, adoptive kinship appears to be shaped in a climate of inequality, with the inherent

discomforts functioning as a form of power where the biological notion of being related makes others more powerful. Malini might be aware of these dominant attitudes towards her children and be disquieted and angered by them. It is not clear in this case, however, what peculiarity in her daughters conceived such feelings.

I further unpacked this account to understand from where discomfort is produced, how it is used, and for what purpose. The origin of Malini's adopted daughters appears to be a source of discomfort among her kin relations, and this apparent negativity implies the view that her children are not as equal as a biological child. This prejudice indicates that an adopted child is viewed as different and belonging to a different social class because it is not related by blood. This belief operates in silence and yet most adoptive parents seem to be aware of it. The lukewarm feelings shown by kin to adopted children might also be an act of disregarding the entitlement of Malini's motherhood which has not been attained biologically, which has institutional importance and values (Miall 1986; Riessman 2000). Malini also shared, however, how those within her network look up to and draw inspiration from her. Recalling a family member's comment, she stated:

"Malini: One of my family members said, you are doing this great thing. Everybody in the family is so proud of you"

Malini was visibly elated by sharing this comment. Although she had made a conscious decision to form a family through adoption, her narrative reflects that she is viewed by others as an altruistic rescuer. This suggests that her family is considered an exception where people's perception towards the adoptive parent is positive. Nevertheless, the disapproval and sense of discomfort tends to be attached to the adopted children rather than the adoptive parents. Biological ties appear to be the fundamental premise behind social sanction, thereby affecting the adopted children rather than the adoptive parents.

Both Nisha and Malini's narratives indicate that adoptive family lives are infused with the power of class and caste and, as such, put adopted children at risk of marginalisation through their lack of biological ties within the family. In this context, the matter of concern appears to be the adoptive kin's attitude and perception of the children's adoptive status, repudiating their full family membership and creating discomfort which becomes embedded within the adoptive family narrative. Nisha's story shows us a scene behind the scene of overt care and intimacy from her adoptive grandparents, suggesting that the process of doing the adoptive family is neither self-explanatory nor transparent and seems to be always in continuous flux.

4.3. Choice of adoption and family dynamics – a paradoxical situation

A sense of uncertainty in terms of the naturalisation of adoptive family life was also evident in adoptive parents' accounts. However, its nature is subtle. Close attention to adoptive parents' narratives indicates uncertainty surfacing at particular times - generally starting around the time they made their decision to adopt and continuing after the formation of the adoptive family. This uncertainty could be related to the gaining of acceptance by kin of the adoption decision, crucial for adoptive parents. Pooja was in her early 40s when she became an adoptive mother. She recounted her experience with family and in-laws when she and her husband decided to adopt after sequential miscarriages.

“Pooja: Me and my husband decided that what we want to do. But obviously we care a lot about what our parents think and feel. And we are very attached to our parents. I am very attached to my parents and he is very attached to his mother [...] and Mummy [Mother-in-law] had been staying with us for many years. Since we got married, she was with us. So it mattered to us a lot, how she will take it.”

Pooja's narrative illustrates that their decision to create a family through adoption was a variation on the common cultural and natural practice of forming a biological family and that, as such, they needed their parents' approval before proceeding. This is important because the result is bringing a child home and into the family whose heritage is unknown - or perhaps known pejoratively. Even though they are adults with their own agency to decide, the institutional importance of family and parental approval on matters related to the formation of a non-biogenetic notion of kinship appears to be obligatory for a number of reasons. As such, adoptive family lives in India need to be understood within a three-generational frame of reference, if not more inter-generationally. A child brought into a family through adoption is not just a new addition as with having a biological child. Rather, it disrupts the constitution of the family, which is not merely a set of transitory social arrangements, but the ideas, beliefs, and values it is arranged and sustained through (Beteille, 1992). The normative structure of family created through marriage and reproduction seems to be considered right, proper and desirable. Forming a family through adoption undermines that normative base.

Significantly, Pooja and her husband belong to two different religions: she is a Hindu and her husband is Christian. Their family reflects the ongoing influence of social change, giving way to cultural and religious integration, diminishing the significance of religion and caste. However, the intergenerational family as an institution sustaining the public narrative of socio-cultural identity and status remains strong, and can still be damaged by contaminating associations through child adoption. Pooja's narrative signals a sense of interdependency within the family. Despite the influence of social change reflected in women's education, employability, and inter-faith marriage, a cultural and social expectation of interdependence in Indian society extending across generations is visible here - alongside indications of potential for normalising adoptive family life, too.

Pooja's reference to her mother-in-law's presence in the family since her marriage, illustrates the notion of a 'joint family' (where several generations live together and there is a strong obligation to consult elder members on important decisions (Singh,

2005). Literature suggests that for a collectivistic nation like India, where social norms and duty are defined by cultural and familial needs, it is essential to put family views, needs, goals, and priorities above individual needs (Medora, 2007). One of the reasons for consulting family elders on a matter such as adoption, could be that adoption could be seen as a means of breaking generational family life practice, and it is also likely to differ the intergenerational norms. From the moment they make the decision to adopt, Indian adoptive parents appear to have to deal with multiple challenges, including intergenerational power relations, and anxiety, wariness and the fear of unpredictability. Hence, the forming of an adoptive family would appear to be a hard to do exercise as the norms of relatedness are quite different from the natural biological process.

Pooja's account partially resonates with Kavita's, an entrepreneur and unmarried single mother, whose choice to adopt was seriously questioned by family members – although she had the additional complexities of her marital status and gender. Explaining her personal circumstance, Kavita explained that the idea of adopting a child culminated in her late teens as a noble act which she went on to realise in her early 30s. Being an only child, Kavita is the primary wage earner in her family and has sole responsibility for her parents' care with whom she has lived throughout her life. But by being an unmarried, independent woman, Kavita was subjected to a lack of cooperation and treated with suspicion by adoption agencies for her decision, in addition to the less than supportive attitudes within her family and kin relations. She claimed in her account that her decision to adopt was independent. Nevertheless, she also admitted her need to share her decision with her parents - not to seek their permission, but to obtain their approval as people who would be closely involved in the raising of her child. However, as her narrative unfolded, an emerging layer of contextual details contradicts her claim.

"Kavita: Adoption was the state subject then. So I went to the agency in Chennai and met a lady there. The law says a single woman can adopt but the law is different to what is happening in reality. The lady in the agency said [...] not sure. Why don't you go and register with the home directly? I then spoke to her for long time but she was not convinced. To be

fair, she wanted me to wait. She said, you are only 32, you could have married. I don't know why do you want to adopt now? But I was very keen. I am the wage earner of the house and I know I can't afford to take a break. So I spoke to my parents. Not for getting permission from them [...] but I thought it was important to get them on board before I proceed. Because it would be good if they are involved in raising the child. Not leaving her with nanny and maids. So [...] [in low voice] my parents were hesitant. Because they come from another era not this. They probably didn't know whether [...] it would work."

Kavita attempts to paint an image of an independent woman capable of making her own decisions. However, her need for her parents' approval illustrates an interdependent nature within the family relationship. Although she was legally eligible to adopt, as an unmarried woman she was subjected to non-cooperation and repeated questioning by the adoption agency. Kavita required the approval of her parents because, although she wanted to become a parent, she was not able to invest the required time to raise the child alone. Her parents' involvement is likely to demonstrate that she has a family to raise the child, which would perhaps dilute her single status and ease the apprehension of the adoption agency. Though Kavita claimed that her decision was independent, in fact it was more of a joint arrangement whereby her parents' involvement was equally important. An ambivalence is visible in the process: a pull towards personal freedom and the ability to make decisions as an independent adult woman, and a pulling back to establish intergenerational norms and authority over what is proper in married family life.

Kavita seems to position herself outside of accepted social norms – firstly as an unmarried woman, and secondly as a prospective single adoptive mother - a socially challenging concept for her parents, the agency and even in her own mind. A persistent uncertainty about adoptive family identity and ambiguous expectations around it is apparent in Kavita's account (Luckock and Hart, 2004). It also indicates that the agency too promoted traditional family views in suggesting what kind of family life prospective parents should construct, which is contradictory to their professional role.

In the light of the dominant social and legal definition of family given to the marital and two-parent heterosexual family, a single-parent family constituting an unmarried woman is likely to create discomfort among Indian people. Kavita had dual challenges for her choice, each with their own socio-cultural implications. She was forging new ways of parenting and being family which has positive implications, whilst simultaneously being risky in terms of perceived 'contamination'.

Kavita's reference to her parents being '*from another era*' indicates the generation gap and the difference in understandings of family formation related to marriage and biology. An unmarried woman's decision to parent a child of unknown parentage could be expected to be a surprising and worrying one for her parents, hence Kavita's apprehension. By portraying herself as an educated, professional, and financially independent woman with broader socio-cultural dimension, however, suggests that there are changes afoot in India in relation to gender norms - particularly among urban middle-class women. This might be seen as an encouraging deviation from long held social expectations of early marriage. Added to burgeoning opportunities for education and employability, single women's aspirations in India have increased significantly in recent years in how they might craft new ways of belonging by pushing beyond social perceptions, something Kavita was not only taking advantage of, but pushing forward, with her choice to adopt (Radhakrishnan 2011; Lamb 2018).

By emphasising her parents' uncertainty about the sustainability of a single-parent adoptive family, Kavita was highlighting their scepticism of the structure and functioning of a single parent family headed by an unmarried, single woman. This fatherless set-up might be considered deviant in relation to the traditional patriarchal family. Although Kavita fits the legal norms of a single parent as a single mother, she had to face structural inequalities in her decision to adopt. The change in adoption law does not simply lead to new family practices where socio-cultural norms are sedimented in ways of thinking resistant to the contaminations enabled

by child transfers across class, caste, religion and culture practice. Comprehensively, a single-parent adoptive family involving an unmarried woman would appear to be discredited, with the prospective parent potentially victimised along with the child. In her need to justify her decision to involve her parents and kin relations in the adoption process, Kavita illustrates that she understood how doing adoptive family as a single unmarried woman in India would likely be socially precarious. It would also likely not get full social acceptance and hence perpetuate inequality.

“Kavita : It is important to get people on board that the child is accepted. So I took the pain of meeting my uncle, my cousin, informing them. Lot of them were concerned. Because they all are much older. They were not sure. I went and met each one of them. I spoke to them about this. They had questions. Why? Why don't you get married? Are you sure? What will happen if you find somebody and get married after that? Lots of questions. So [...] I handled. I mean subsequently for everybody in the family it was an eye opener.”

Kavita expected that her adoption experience as a single unmarried woman in India would not be a smooth process as she sought to actualise new ethical imaginaries of valued personhood beyond marriage whilst challenging parenthood and marriage assumptions. Even though she was a well-established professional career woman and entrepreneur with an income sufficiently high to provide generous financial support to her child, her decision to become a single adoptive mother would seem like an inappropriate personal choice. Through this decision alone, she created a complex set of social and cultural deviations. In the Indian context, marriage is imperative for women, and motherhood without marriage is unthinkable. However, it is not just because of her unmarried status that Kavita placed so much importance on her family and kin relations. The complexities of parenting an adopted child of what could be expected to be of a lower class and caste also deviated from the dominant process of family formation, and perhaps it is which Kavita was conscious of and worried about.

Unlike heterosexual adoptive couples, Kavita required support from her parents and extended family to raise her child to limit the discrimination she anticipated her child could face being raised in a single-parent home. Her narrative illustrates how family formation for a single woman in India is not a private matter. Although in some respects similar as the situation for married people as described by Pooja in the earlier section, Kavita's narrative demonstrates the need for extra effort in reaching out to her extended family for their support of her decision. The ambivalence in their response indicates how profoundly abnormal her decision seemed to them and how it might also have been concerning from a social and moral standing. Through this decision, Kavita was pushing the boundaries of social perception and challenging the conventional expectations of family and motherhood, which is normally understood only through marriage. Besides the issue of her marital status, Kavita appears to worry more for her daughter than for herself. From Nisha's story in the earlier section we understand that the support of grandparents can be as much a risk as a support, where affection might be displayed whilst discomfort being felt and expressed privately. Kavita was perhaps unsure about the 'us-versus-them' mentality which could marginalise her child, being part of a unique family which is not part of a privileged group of socially accepted family (Gaynor, 2014).

Unlike other adoptive parents whose ambivalence tends to focus on how one's relationship would be determined by others in the absence of blood ties, Kavita's position faced different and compelling challenges, including the justification of her eligibility for parenthood. Within such bounds of uncertainty, her decision to adopt and raise a child as a single mother in India puts her in a socially precarious position and makes her subject to close scrutiny by others.

The implications of anxiety and power dynamics expressed by Kavita, resonate with those of Pooja who, although part of a more acceptable two-parent family structure, also recollected feelings of apprehension when sharing their decision to adopt with parents and in-laws.

Pooja: when we decided, I called up my Dad. I always know that my Dad would be more open and my Mom [.]. I don't know. When I spoke to him, I asked him, Papa can you just inform Mamma? I don't want to have that conversation with her. And he told me, which I would never forget that. He told me, Pooja I will tell her but you need to remember that it's your decision only. So don't care what anybody else has to say. Then we had to tell my mother in law. So we thought let's have the conversation, we didn't know where it go [.] and she has been seeing me. I had the miscarriages [...] she would know, how upset I would become. She was also equally upset at times. So we said, Mummy [.] there is a girl, we want to bring her home. We have decided for adoption. She looked at us and then said why are you guys still thinking about it? Why are you delaying it so much? Go and get the child home. We actually had taken a back. [laugh] we never thought, she would be so open about it."

Pooja's choice of adoption was in response to infertility, rather than as an initial starting point for family building. Her sense of uncertainty about her mother's and mother-in-law's acceptance is quite prominent in her narrative and the hesitancy in her voice perhaps indicates her mother's expected negative perception of adoption. This was surely why she sought to avoid the discomfort of direct communication. Pooja might also have been projecting her own anxieties about the legitimacy of her plans on to her family, perhaps making incorrect assumptions. Her uncertainty about her mother and mother-in-law's reaction indicates the influence of gender on perceived prejudices. It also highlights how influential normative family definition is in shaping adoption decisions. The need for family members' approval to authorise the status of an adoptive family would seem to have the potential to influence the adoption decision. The imperative for Pooja and her husband was to obtain their parents' consent for the sake of family unity, their interdependency, and their concern for others' feelings.

Both Pooja and Kavita's accounts illuminate their anxieties and discomfort around the views of family members - and perhaps their own - regarding the decision to adopt. Both seemed to be uncertain, yet confident at the same time, their family

environments supportive yet unfavourable. These experiences highlight the discordance between a supportive and a suspicious family environment in which adoptive parents decide to adopt, there is the institutional milieu in which the adoptive kinship is made, and there is the future into which adoptive relationships are projected. All come together to form a relationship which is fragile and untimely, whilst nevertheless indicating possibility.

4.4 Being adopted - in the eyes of the others outside the family

4.4.1 A marginal position

Adopted people and adoptive parent participants repeatedly drew attention to their own, their families', and their children's similarities to those in and from non-adoptive, biological families. Anxiety was apparent around narratives of 'I' and 'how' their relationships with others was acknowledged by the outside world. Much emphasis was placed on limiting or discarding the differences between biological and adoptive families, although the general perception of others' reaction to adoption and adopted people was that it is devalued. Adoptee, Nisha, quoted other adopted people's experiences to illustrate how they received different behaviour outside of their families, whilst describing her own experience of being part of an adoptive family as *'blessed,' 'loved,' 'it is like I am equal,' 'no difference,' 'never been treated as adopted.'*

Adoptive parents Malini, Pooja and Kavita similarly described their own feelings about adoption in terms of being *'really lucky,' 'fortunate' and 'blessed'* to have been surrounded by supportive people. The use of these terms indicate how adoption puts those involved with it in a vulnerable and precarious state, albeit one which its protagonists choose to view as mitigated by divine intervention (blessed), human affection (love), and social commitment (I am equal), whilst conforming to social norms (no difference), not treated as different or inferior (never treated as adopted), believe to be favoured (fortunate), etc. I was keen to explore further to understand the reasoning behind this. Analysis of the various narratives reveals that construction of adoptive family relationships works as a complex, multi-

layered process which gradually unfolds. Both adoptees and parents acknowledge that adoptive families are different – differences which put those involved at greater risk of devaluation than biological families. Being accepted in the formation of family despite those differences, makes those within adoptive families feel integrated. Nisha elaborated on this by sharing the experience of another adopted individuals' life in her social network whom she felt was treated differently.

“Nisha: I have never been treated as being adopted.

Sangita: Do you mean adopted people are treated differently?

Nisha: I have a feeling so. I will tell you why. Because of my friends. As I told you there are a couple of people whom I know. Adopted people are treated differently not by their parents but by society. But I have been blessed that I have grown up in a family and a colony [neighbourhood], which is like a family..”

Nisha presented a detailed narrative in which she mentioned other adopted people she knew - a friend, neighbour, cousin and a family friend - and had the opportunity to observe their lives at close quarters. In her view, all the adoptees - with the exception of the family friend who was an adoptee and adoptive mother and another research participant - had dealt with unfavourable comments from neighbours and others.. In comparison, Nisha saw herself as fortunate to have grown up in a family and neighbourhood that acknowledged her differences yet treated her as one of them. She further justified this claim by describing how an adopted boy in her residential area committed suicide after repeatedly failing his secondary school exam and being ridiculed for letting his adoptive mother down.

“Nisha: He heard by mistake as his neighbours talking '*ki yeh toh uski mom hai hi nahi, phir bhi kiya itna uske liye. Kanha se utha ke laaye usko (.)phir bhi*' [She is not his real mother, still did so much for him. Picked him from somewhere (.) still”

She also mentioned a couple of young adopted children in her colony and the extended family, who are guarded by their parents to avoid any conversation around adoption:

“Nisha: They don’t treat him differently, but they protect him a lot. *“koi usko bol dega toh”* – [If someone told him]”

Nisha also drew on a close friends’ experience who was adopted by a single parent by describing how they encountered derogatory remarks from neighbours:

“Nisha: Her neighbour, one lady said something. Some word they use [.] I don’t know what was that word. But it basically meant like impure blood. Like God knows *kanha se aayi hai* [where has she come from]. She was very hurt [.] almost tried to suicide actually [...] She feels her life is only about adoption. Because every single thing she owns, she uses it as an excuses.”

By referring to other adopted people's experiences, Nisha seems to emphasise how her own relationship with her adoptive family and neighbourhood is comparatively well accepted. Her examples of others’ experiences indicate how the general perception of adoption and adopted children is that it is talked about mostly privately, although adopted people are nevertheless aware of it. In the earlier section, Nisha described a personal experience in which she overheard her grandparents talking about her being from a lower caste. In fact, this resonates with the first example she gave about the boy who heard his neighbours' comments about him by mistake. It indicates a private and parallel narrative that views the adopted child as tainted and unequal within and outside of the adoptive family.

A closer look at Nisha’s first example demonstrates multiple points communicated in a single comment. [*She is not his real mother, still did so much for him. Picked him*

from somewhere [.] still']. Firstly, it suggests that people in adoptive families' social networks do not give the same status to an adopted child as they do to biological children such as their own. The adopted child is viewed as having been rescued from an unknown fate or an invalid source; therefore, she/he automatically belongs to a social class inferior to theirs. In the Indian context, social class is categorised by a caste system itself a form of institutionalised inequality with religious elements interwoven into the Hindu faith (Medora, 2007). The adopted child is likely to be – or at least be regarded as – someone belonging to a lower caste/class, which is also reflected in Nisha's case.

Nisha's comment portrays adoptive parents' authenticity, with the adoptive mother being seen as less capable - or less in general terms - than a biological mother [*not a 'real' mother*]. The adoptive mother is perceived as someone who does not deserve equal status to a biological mother, which perhaps compels her to work harder to prove how her adoptive family meets social expectations. The inequality of people's perception and attitude towards adopted children and adoptive parents operates at different levels. However, the narrative reinforces the message that an adopted child is not the 'real' child of its adoptive parents but is rather rescued from a tainted source and brought into a presumed good family with social status. As such, the child should be grateful for the opportunity and live up to its adoptive parents' expectations.

Nisha's second example indicates that people are likely to have a judgmental attitude towards adopted children because of the above-explained characteristics and circumstances of its adoption. Adoptive families are conscious of the significance of underlying negative attitudes and are correspondingly cautious about protecting the child from its effect.

Nisha's third example is equally compelling. It also signals people's attitudes towards the adopted individual, particularly with regard to their legitimacy which seems to be continuously questioned. In relation to the earlier examples, legitimacy seems to be less about infertility and more about caste, a strong and distinct

concept in India's socio-cultural context. The literature suggests that India's lowest castes are considered 'untouchable' and therefore impure and unholy (Seymour, 1999; Medora, 2003). Unlike Nisha who grew up both in a family and neighbourhood that acknowledged her differences and treated her equally, her narrative suggests that other adopted people received the same acceptance only from family, leaving them more vulnerable outside it.

The analysis indicates that adopted people in India are likely to work harder to justify their family lives, so it is all the more shocking when family life is rocky. Nisha's examples show adoptive family functions in parallel, guided by separate narratives for public and private spaces. The private life is freely discussed in public, but predominately behind the backs of the adopted people themselves if viewed through what is perhaps a cynical and suspicious lens. The adopted people are nevertheless aware of this public narrative, and carry its emotional and psychological burdens. Such a culture illustrates that 'doing' adoptive family lives are much more than the creation of the relationship legally enabled by the law and carried out at home. Instead, it is continuously evaluated and rehearsed in the social sphere.

Nisha's examples resonate with another young adult adoptee, Seema, whose narrative elucidated her understanding of being part of an adoptive family and how she felt others perceived adoption.

"Seema: Adoption is a new way to form a family, a normal family. But some people don't think of it as an option to have. But some people do. Like many people are accepting. But many people are very close minded. They think adopting is like [...] what do I say [...] bringing someone else's blood into your family.

Sangita: okay.

Seema: Yes! It's a very rough way of putting it. But that's how it is. And so they would opt for things like IVF or surrogacy instead of adopting. Because it's in their mind like at least [...] one of them is there."

Seema was in her late teens when we first met. Her assertion that adoptive family is like '*a normal*' family illustrates how, in her view, an adoptive family is just like a biological family created through marriage and birth and therefore carries equal status. She also emphasised, however, that although some people chose adoption for family making, the broader public perception did not give the same social sanction to the adoptive family because of the absence of blood ties. The onus for the adoptive family seems to be on the adopted child, who is considered to have a contaminated origin and a lower social class/caste. Seema captured this sentiment when stressed upon to establish a different blood idea from a particular way of thinking about biology. It is for this reason that she surmises people opt first for alternative reproductive technologies that ensure a blood connection to at least one of the parents and thereby establish their child's social legitimacy.

Seema also underscored the term, '*it's in their mind*', which indicates how the child's origin – in a context based on caste, class and religion - is firmly ingrained in Indian's psyche. This might signal the social hierarchy that decides an individual's membership. However, it would appear that when the adopted child's origin is pejoratively known, they are denied full membership into the society. As a result, the adoptive family seems to be denied the same social sanction of family status as the biological family. Seema's explanation seems not easily narrated. By foregrounding the comment with a positive, she manages to share an insight which is clearly a troubling one. The discomfort evident in her articulation was visible as she said, '*it's a very rough way of putting*'. It illustrated how, as an adopted person, she is well aware of such discrimination and finds it hard to articulate and express the feelings attached to it.

As young adult adoptees in modern day India, the power of Seema and Nisha's narratives powerfully signal how hard the practice of adoptive family lives in India is - not least for adopted people themselves. All their examples demonstrate the prevalence of disparaging cultural and societal attitudes that make adopted children stand out, and prevent them from truly belonging to the community they are part of.

Hence, 'doing' adoptive family requires more than foster parental love and 'hard work'. It depends on wider social acceptance of equality of self, as adopted and from different castes/classes. The analysis of young adult adopted people's accounts suggest that social legitimacy of adoptive childhood, family lives and practices will not be achieved by loving parenting alone. In instances where adopted children do not thrive and succeed particularly, the outcome is often blamed on bad blood or caste origin. The fact that adoption is not viewed as '*normal*' is further evidenced by Shikha, another adopted participant. Her account is, however, somewhat contradictory.

"Shikha : adoption should be seen as a very [...] normal thing. Not very extra-ordinary or a very great thing or a bad thing. Means, it should be treated as normal."

Shikha is the only child of her adoptive parents, whose adoptive status was selectively disclosed and not shared with her school community. Initially, her narrative gives the impression that her experience of others' perception of adoption is that it is a deviation from the societal norm. However, we understand from later into her account what she meant by '*normal*', and her view is quite contradictory. She shares two instances in which she displays her status as an adopted person differently. In the context of participating in a public forum organised to share the experiences of adoption, she says:

"Shikha : Yes, I liked that district board or what? (*looking at her mother*)

Mother: District Administration

Shikha: Yes, they complimented me for my speech

Sangita: okay. That you liked. You said, something you didn't like. Can you share about that experience?

Shikha: Yes, someone asked me in school [...]

Sangita: What did she asked that you didn't like?

Shikha: No, she asked in a serious tone

Father: (*Father pitched in*): That's what she says to deal in a normal way.

Sangita: pardon

Mother: She is saying that it should be dealt in a normal way but she [schoolmate] asked seriously

Mother: Who asked?

Shikha: That Anita. In class 10th

Mother: What did she ask? Are you adopted?

Shikha: Hmm (*in a very low voice*). I said no.

Mother: You said no? okay. [laugh]

Shikha: I asked her, why? She said, someone told me. So I said [.] umm [.] I thought about it and said No."

Shikha's account contrasts with the other two young adult adoptee's versions in both content and the context within which it was shaped. To get an insight into the fragmented narrative, it is crucial to understand Shikha's position, and the place within which her story was negotiated (Wetherell, 1998). I conducted the interview at Shikha's home. We sat in a compact living room filled with books and adorned with framed certificates and family photographs on the walls. We sat facing each other – she had placed herself in the middle of a three-seater sofa and I sat on a chair. As I struck up our conversation, her father came in and sat to her left. Adjacent to the living room was the dining room and kitchen – a single unit divided into two sections with open access between - where her mother was cooking with the domestic helper. At times throughout the interview, she too joined Shikha on the sofa, sitting on her right. Shikha, therefore, shared an approved narrative, one that was 'allowed' to be shared with an outsider, about her adoptive family life. Both parents frequently interrupted, presenting their own versions of Shikha's narrated experiences – believing they were helping me to understand, or perhaps ensuring I received the 'correct' account of their family narrative. Shikha did, at times, turn to her parents for support, but she did this comparatively less than the number of times her parents intervened.

It is interesting to note how Shikha's narrative developed and how she articulated these two experiences. Her narrative illustrates Shikha's ease and also her struggle to share these experiences with – and in spite of - her parents' interventions. One

instance was when she was given a space in a public forum to share her adoption experience and was complimented by the District Administrator. Another was when she denied her adoptive status to a peer who directly asked her: '*you were adopted?!*'. Both cases illustrate how when adoption is communicated or expressed, it has both positive and negative resonances. The first experience would seem to be a positive one in which Shikha felt valued and appreciated for her differences and adoption was treated as something more – better - than '*normal*'. However, in the second instance, she was made to feel uncomfortable. Shikha's emphasis on the tone of the question indicates that she found it insulting, perhaps in that inferred that she had been abandoned by her biological parents. That may, however, simply have been Shikha's own anxiety as she acknowledged that her adoptive status was not disclosed and therefore known within her school, making the question a shocking and unexpected one.

Considering the context, both the spatial and emotional conditions are significantly different from each other: one is a public forum, and the other a reasonably isolated space in which a conversation takes place between two people. In the first instance, there is pride and positivity regarding adoption, and also public acceptance. In the second is a counter-narrative that is defensive, diffused with anxiety and fear of others' negative perceptions of adoption, albeit in a more private space. Clearly, when the inherent difference attached to the adopted person is acknowledged and positively accepted, the adopted person feels safe. Throughout the interview, the instance with the classmate was the only one Shikha shared which evoked an unhappy emotion. Otherwise, she seemed elated - particularly when recalling the episode at the public forum. When relaying the second incident, however, Shikha did so in a low voice and with a great difficulty, suggesting that adoption perhaps isn't quite as '*normal*' as she would like it to be.

In Shikha's statement '*adoption shouldn't be treated as extraordinary [...] or a very great thing or a bad thing*' she contradicts herself. The feelings of joy and pride shown on her face and in her voice, in fact show how adoption being treated as extraordinary is well accepted. She didn't object to the applause she received, but

showed reluctance for her perceived anxiety when asked by her friend. Shikha was perhaps more sensitive to the potential negative connotations associated with adoption and therefore more likely to internalise it than her friend, which made her feel uncomfortable.

Shikha's account resemble Kavita's in terms of the latter's experience at the Passport Office where she felt insulted by an official's treatment:

"Kavita: Today the law is changed that you don't need to put the father's name. For her first passport I went three times to the passport office and its always insulting. Last time I went for renewal, the guy looked at me and said *haan, adoption case* [yes, adoption case] . *maine bola ki aarey*, [I said, oh!] you are talking about like talking some criminal case. The tone he said, it was like that. But [...] what can you do? He is the Passport officer."

Kavita's account illustrates a sense of disillusionment derived from the passport officer's response, which Kavita clearly felt was due to her daughter's adoption status. Her reference to his '*tone*' indicates how it was his expression of the words as much as the words themselves which made her feel different. These feelings might be negatively intensified because of her status as a single adoptive parent – the statutory requirement to have a father's name on the application was removed only recently. Kavita perhaps felt an expectation to prove her marital status, or her daughter's father's identity in what was three separate visits she made to the Passport Office

Though the law has changed and no longer requires that a father's name be on a passport application, the reaction Kavita got from the passport officer suggests that social attitudes towards adopted people and adoption at large is still unsettled. Kavita emphasised the officer's tone which, to her, illustrated the intentionality of the insult. In addition to her lack of marital status, Kavita's gender may also have had an impact on the social discrimination she faced. The literature claims that gender might be the cause of excluding one out of action, particularly when one is

the only woman in the field (Murphy, 1984 cited in Della Porta et al., 2015). Though this claim is in the context of economic opportunity, it could be considered relevant to adoption as family creation is largely influenced by the dominant notion of married heterosexual parents. Kavita's narrative indicates how, in others' eyes, her status as single parent is unequal and a deviation from the social and cultural norms of parenthood. She almost certainly also possesses a heightened awareness of her difference due to her gender and marital status, and is therefore more sensitive to these discomforts which she internalises and which create in her a greater attentiveness to how her family deviates from the married biological norm.

The narratives of Nisha, Seema, Shikha and Kavita all illustrate the internalising of perceptions of ambivalence regarding their adoption-related statuses. Scholarships on adoption stigma suggest it is important to distinguish between perceptions of societal stigma related to adoption and acceptance, or the internalisation of stigmatising beliefs (Miall, 1987; Goldberg et al., 2011). The adoptee's accounts indicate that public attitudes towards adoption and adopted people is different, and that those differences relate to them being viewed as 'inadequate' or 'unequal'. Both Shikha and Kavita's narratives reflect a discomfort in others as a result of their adoptive status to an extent consistent with the concept of a social stigma and disrupting others' sensibilities (Goffman, 1963; Miall, 1987; March, 1995; Wegar, 2000). Public attitudes illuminated in Nisha, Seema and Kavita's stories create external pressure on the adopted individual and parents, and establish how biological ties are superior and authentic. They do not give the adopted child equal status or acceptance as an equal human being, creating a constant mental and emotional struggle which adopted people internalise and, perhaps, struggle to contain and resolve within their own minds.

4.4.2 The symbolism of skin colour

Besides the negative comments and inequalities faced by adopted people as a result of their lack of blood ties and their caste, and that adoptive parents may face due to their gender and marital status, Nisha mentioned the additional element of skin

colour. She recalled how, as a child, she was insulted by her peers at school for colour of her skin and how 'disturbing' the experience was for her.

"Nisha: In school what happened with me when I was in senior KG, there were these people like bullies they ran towards me and they hit me with a bottle and everything [...] because I was very talkative. I had an accent and I was very like somehow [...] and they started irritating me. I still know them. They are my friends now but ummm [...] something used to bother them about me and they used to call me names like *adivasi*, dark [...] something. I was always called dark like you are dark, you are black, you are this, you are that."

In her narrative, Nisha highlights the significance of intra-group discrimination among children in a social space. In her view, her skin colour and non-resemblance to her adoptive parents made her vulnerable in a social environment like school. The term '*adivasi*' was used in relation to her complexion - and perhaps her features - both of which may have stood in the way of her acceptance into their peer group. The comments are likely to have induced a sense of inferiority in Nisha, making her feel that she was not equal to the other children in her class. The tone of her voice in recounting the incident indicated how resentful she was of the insult, although she clearly fell short of words to properly articulate the experience and the emotion it stirred within her [*you are this, you are that*]. Through this incident, Nisha was objectified and depersonalised, and perhaps her classmates felt threatened in turn by their association with her - as did her grandparents in her earlier narrative.

Nisha's narrative led me to explore the literature on skin colour, particularly in relation to the Indian context. It suggests that India is similar to other communities in which skin colour - and specifically its stratification of lightness and darkness - is a significant issue (Hussein, 2010). In Hindu communities in South Asia, for instance, lighter skin is equated to the revered caste of *Brahmins*, who are priests. The lower castes of the *Shudras*, and *Dalits* are predominantly manual labourers and have correspondingly darker skin (Hussein, 2010; Mishra, 2015).

Discrimination linked to darker skin is connected to historical and socio-cultural ideologies, and is further influenced by global media that encourages skin lightening through various skincare products (Hussein, 2010).

Nisha's narrative tells a story of differential behaviour that made her feel devalued as a result of social stratification based on characteristics she falls foul of, namely caste, class, and skin colour. All of which are interrelated. The behaviour of her peers further demonstrates the relatedness of desired and undesired characteristics, thus the discrediting of those who do not fall within the category of 'normal'. Such binaries create division, and establish power relations and inequalities that have ultimately influenced the bonds between Nisha and her peers. Her physical characteristics combined with her adoptive status create layers of complexity which Nisha, as an adopted person, sought to vocalise and share.

The inequality felt by Nisha during her school days, however, appears to have dissipated over time, captured in her comment: *'they are my friends now.'* This would indicate a process of acceptance and alignment, both socially and emotionally. Ambivalence is indicated, too, in relation to her early experiences. My analysis of her childhood account in the previous section illustrates how her grandparents maintained a dual mindset in which they showed Nisha love directly whilst a degree of discomfort existed privately. The school incident, occurring during the same period, demonstrates how discomfort can be publicised and naturalised. As an adult, Nisha felt accepted by the same friends who had once made her feel less than equal to them. On the other hand, she experienced a derogatory comment from her grandmother pertaining to her unknown biological origin just a few months before our interview. These experiences show us how, over time, the power dynamics associated with inequality in the social sphere based on physical and personal characteristics shifted.

Discrimination linked to skin colour and facial features also surfaced in Julie's narrative. An adoptee and now an adoptive parent, Julie's story is particularly interesting. Adopted as a baby by an Indian couple in America who subsequently

returned to India when Julie was seven years old. Julie introduced herself to me as '*I am half black, and half white*'. A mother of two – an adopted daughter and a biological son - Julie is an established business woman with fair skin. Her Indian husband is darker skinned. Julie mentioned in her story that her adopted daughter, Seema, looked like her father. Her narrative is unique in that it presents both the perspectives of an adopted person and an adoptive parent. While recalling and sharing the story of her daughter's homecoming - an exciting moment for her family, Julie elicited emotion when referring to an objectionable remark made by a neighbour in relation to her daughter's skin colour.

"Julie: We were living in a society, a small building. Everybody was curious. We didn't tell anybody. People started chuckling him [her husband]. They wanted to see the baby. It was nice. Everybody came and whatever [...] except one lady. I will never forget. She said, '*Itna kala baby kyun le kar aaye ho?*' ['Why did you bring such a dark baby?'] Then I was furious. I am not an angry person and I got furious. I thought how stupid can people [...] you know [...] how dumb can people be?."

The image created by Julie's statement is full of emotion: a happy mother enjoying a special moment of motherhood, followed by the hurt and rage caused by the insensitive comment. The neighbour's unexpected comment created a sense of vulnerability around her adopted child, and will have reminded Julie of the potential for bias which will always exist in a public social sphere. The remark clearly had an enduring effect on Julie as she went on to say: '*I will never forget.*' Through this experience, we see how skin tone seems to be a primary attribute in the provision of acceptance, irrespective of age. The remark also illustrates the symbolism of skin colour revealed through the words: '*itna kala*' ['too dark'], which represent a further categorisation of discrimination. The neighbour's comment suggests she was not happy with Julie bringing home a child of dark complexion, and that its connotations – that the infant was of a lower caste - made her uneasy. Julie's account of the incident reveals her anger, as well as what may have been uncertainty of her own.

Another way of thinking of the incident, is that the comment was made out of genuine concern by the neighbour. Perhaps she felt that the child's skin tone not matching its parents' could make it vulnerable by being viewed differently. It might be said that those involved in, or in the vicinity of, adoption have to work hard emotionally and socially to understand, accept and celebrate this particular type of family formation. Julie's reaction does acknowledge this, but perhaps that is understandable. Her narrative also illustrates how others' views regarding adoption are likely to be influenced by educational, cultural, and geographical milieus, although her point was that individuals can be ignorant regardless of education.

Julie drew on her experience as a child coming to India when she reflected on the unpleasant comments encountered by her mother about skin and features, although this was contradictory in terms of skin colour to her own daughter's experience.

"Julie: My mother always say, you know when we came back from America, lot of people said, she does not look like you. She is so white. Look at her hair. Look at her nose. She looks like a [.] at that time the word Anglo was very used in India. And mother was finding it so offensive, you know. Because living in America you had become [.] sensitive to those types of words. And being a brown skin woman, you become so sensitive to those type of words and accusations and feelings and all those. And she could get so angry."

Julie's narrative highlights the physical characteristics that define class and caste differences in respect of her mother's experience of bringing her daughter back home to India. However, Julie had the opposite experience with regard her own daughter. Despite being a fair-skinned child, she also attracted offensive remarks. A closer reading of her narrative reveals multiple meanings. For instance, Julie recounts how people seemed unaware of her adoptive status when they looked for resemblance between her and her mother. Additionally, despite her lighter skin tone she received similar discriminatory reactions to her daughter. Julie further

highlighted her mother's emotional response to societal prejudices, expressing her humiliation and, one might imagine, concern for her daughter who had been marginalised by the term '*Anglo*'. Perhaps her mother felt also that others might challenge the legitimacy of Julie's claim to affinity.

The fact of her family's return to India from America, indicates the higher socio-economic status of Julie's family. Nevertheless, their social standing is not sufficient to prevent the social discrimination the family faces in relation to their adoptive status. In Julie's case, her fair skin is not automatically associated with the higher social class that would usually be the expectation. Instead, she is denied equal status suggesting that, whether dark or fairer skinned, adopted children represent an enigma to the ignorant outside eye and a challenge to the normal order of things (Howell and Marre, 2006). Julie's reflections on discovering her belonging within her community is directly connected to her physical resemblance to her mother.

Julie's story led me to explore scholarships of embodiment that explain how physical traits, such as skin colour, are central to developing our understanding of social structures and social processes and to articulate social inequalities (Shilling, 2016). Public reaction to adopted people and their families hints at cultural assumptions that physical similarity between parent and children is expected. Therefore the absence of resemblance invites disapproval. The subconscious or deliberate nature of biased attitudes towards adoption makes it difficult for adopted people and adoptive parents, irrespective of skin colour.

4.5 The perception and reality of adoptive lives – A tug-of-war

The effect of physical resemblance – or lack thereof - became more prominent as I progressed through my analysis. It is also reflected in Seema's story, whose adoptive status was not accepted by her friends even though she resembles her adoptive father. This issue of family resemblance is perhaps one of the reasons why adoption is viewed as a last resort for those who have tried all other means of modern reproductive technology to create a family. In Seema's view, adopted

people are not automatically accepted positively by those in their family and social circles. When I specifically asked her about other's perspectives of adoption, she responded:

"Seema: The first reaction to most of them is like (.) either you are joking or they would like completely rejected. They would be like [.] NO.

Sangita : Why do you feel so?

Seema: Oh! First they say that you look like your father. So [.] that makes it tougher for them to believe it."

In the earlier section, Julie talked about her neighbour's insensitive remark when she brought Seema home, describing how other's understandings of adoption was contradictory to her own experience. Her narrative demonstrates, however, that having a visual resemblance to her adoptive father - particularly with regard to complexion - made it difficult for people to believe Seema's adoptive status. Julie's account highlights the importance of physical resemblance between at least one of the adoptive parents and the adopted child. Because of this presumably accidental affinity, Seema managed to be acknowledged as 'the same' and therefore given equal status. Nevertheless, Seema had to work hard over the years to have her adoptive status accepted.

Her response to not being accepted by her friends led me to inquire further into whether there might have been other reasons she felt that her adoptive status was hard for her friends to accept. She responded

"Seema: YEAH. They don't understand it. Ummm [.] their understanding of adopted children is [.] resentment, being a wrecker and not enjoying life and just been sad all the time.

Sangita: But in your experience, it's not like that.

Seema: NO. It's not like that. Its basically people who have not been used to with kids or not been friends with people who are adopted, they are influenced by movies. If you see movies, they usually show adopted child, who is always a trouble maker, always going against the

rules, and say stuff like that [...] you are not my parents etc. So [...] that's what they are influenced by. The main things are movies and TV shows."

Seema's view was that the sources that inform people's understandings of adoption are mostly negative and biased. Her narrative indicates the fantasisation of adoption stories, which are not based on real life experiences. She challenges the media's exaggerated portrayal of the image of the adopted child, and criticises how it sends out powerful and negative messages which then inaccurately shape people's perception. The media's unbalanced image of adoption is summed up by her reference: *'some portray happy [children], but mostly it's another way round.'* Further, she underscores the limited socialisation of non-adopted children with adopted ones, which further renders adoptees invisible and may explain why others may not be aware of their adoptive status - as indicated by Shikha's narrative in the earlier section. Since general understandings of adoption are shaped by predominantly fictional stories as emphasised by Seema, adopted children's own views of being 'rejected' or 'unwanted' are carried as a contaminated status (Baden, 2016). The result of this could be chosen restricted socialisation by adopted children. This would be in accordance with Nisha's account in which she refers to how the adoptive parents in her neighbourhood guard their children and limit their interaction with others.

Similarly, Nisha - who is open about her adoptive status - finds it difficult as her friends and colleagues don't want to accept the fact that she is adopted. Recalling her adoption disclosure while having a casual conversation with colleagues, she shared:

"Nisha: Nobody has ever made me feel that I am adopted. No one. I made myself reminded about it as I talk about it. But you know in office also, people are still like [...] as I told you, I told all of them. They are like *'jhoot mat bol. Aise thodi hota hai.'* ['don't tell lie. It doesn't happen like that']. Don't lie. Don't make a case. I am like, [...] I am adopted. It's okay. It's not a big deal. They are like *'kuchh bhi mat bol'*. ['don't

just say anything’]. I am saying they are so terrified themselves even they are not adopted. It’s me who is telling them.”

The way Nisha describes reminding herself about her own adoptive status might be an attempt to demonstrate how her life has progressed despite what might be conceived of as the challenges of her unknown biological parentage. During our conversation, she referred several times to being ‘*grateful*’ to her adoptive parents, illustrating perhaps how she feels duty bound to live up to their expectations. However, it might also be a means of internalising a sense of inadequacy and reinforcing the same because of her adoptive status.

It is interesting to see that Nisha seemed to find unpleasant the fact that her adoptive status puzzled her colleagues – perhaps because their response demonstrated that they did not expect an adopted person to have a life equal to theirs. Nisha, whose family belongs to a high socio-economic strata, proved to be independent in her thoughts and celebrated her life at least as equal to others. This was unusual and not generally or easily accepted by others. Nevertheless, Nisha's story tells us that she is aware that the general perception of adoption and adopted people is that it evokes anxiety in others who may choose not to be associated with them as a result. As relayed by other participants, the popular notion of adoption is largely informed by the media and portrays adopted children as having disadvantages to overcome, such as terrible poverty and/or the stigma of illegitimacy. It seems to have been startling for Nisha's colleagues to find someone who could talk so openly and confidently about being adopted, which might be expected to be treated as a confidential and private practice.

Further, her narrative illustrates that the sentiments surrounding adoption are of an institution – or institutional practice - that scares people. Her friends’ rejection of the truth regarding her adoptive status illustrates how hard adopted people are having to work to justify that they are different but equal.

Both Seema and Nisha's accounts reflect the struggle/alarm of friends and associates when faced with the knowledge that someone they saw as 'normal' is in fact adopted, where adoption is expected to be experienced as a diminished/contaminated status.

4.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how building adoptive family lives in India by following a legal process is an uncertain journey. It demands different ways of thinking and doing family in space and time as it develops over time – creating an equal status to that of a biological family. While creating the adoptive family, adoptive parents and adopted people challenge the cultural complexities and social fabric of Indian society based on caste, class, religion and gender; fundamental to formation of family through marriage and birth. As biological ties are privileged over social ties in the creation and maintenance of kin relations, adoptive families work hard with a sense of inherent ambivalence to establish their family against the conventional model of what is right, proper and desirable. The process becomes more strenuous for single-parent adoptive families as they face additional layers of challenges, intertwined with social, cultural, moral, and gender dynamics. Hence, the manifestation of greater inequality for the adoptive parents as well as for the adopted child.

My exploration illuminates the intergenerational norms, expectations and power dynamics that influence adoptive family relationships, where adoptive parents and adopted people make a heavy emotional investment to justify their choice and maintain kin relations. The sense of discomfort is constantly visible throughout the family narratives that view adopted people as contaminated, devalued, less than equal and repudiates their full membership. However, the analysis indicates that open conversation can enable change, through which adoption is validated. The findings reveal adoption unsettles ingrained assumptions about the 'good' society, family, parent, and child, and that people struggle to accept these ambiguities. Nonetheless, the exploration indicates some resolution/accommodation to the

intrinsic inherent ambivalence of adoption. The older adoptee's account shows possibility and hope, rather than intrinsic unresolvable conflict.

Chapter 5: Everyday negotiation with adoptive family practices

5.1 Introduction

This chapter draws on the threads and narratives of the previous chapter which revealed that, although adoption gains legitimacy through being legally sanctioned, it remains socially challenging. Adoptive families face a variety of challenges and emotional discomfort while creating a new version of kinship that is inherently counter-cultural and needs to be negotiated within day-to-day family lives. In this chapter, I explore the narrative accounts captured to understand how adopted people and adoptive parents navigate their challenges to establish their 'family' and confirm their membership of it in a situation in which that relationship falls under constant suspicion, denial and disapproval. Adoptive people's responses to the precarious position of adoptive family is complex and contradictory.

The forthcoming analysis focuses on the 'doing' of adoptive family lives, understood as a set of performances played out individually and collectively to establish, legitimise and maintain relationships that work. This includes day-to-day encounters with people and institutions in and outside of the immediate family to resist the discourse of biological primacy and negotiate the disruptions caused by negative attitudes and cultural boundaries in order to reinforce a legitimate sense of family.

5.2. Negotiation - a flexible approach

The analysis illustrates how adoptive families strive to achieve socially sanctioned forms of familial kinship. Participants described adoptive family relationships that are negotiated within an environment in which they must strive to be qualified for full social acceptance as an individual and a family in the normative category. In so

doing, they challenge the cultural and biological notion of family, as well as the structural power inequalities associated with caste, class, colour, gender and family obligations. Establishing social legitimisation of relations within that environment is seen as a success and displayed as strength in terms of the enduring character of the bonds constituting family. I discuss the practice and displays that are performed openly, selectively and privately in the process of constructing adoptive family relationships. My analysis provides evidence of how adopted people and adoptive parents interact within their families, as well as in social relationships - such as with neighbours, friends and colleagues. Engagement requires deliberation, the sharing of information on a 'need to know' basis, and education about the lived experience of adoption. It also involves a relationship of give and take to navigate the experience of adoption and create a supportive environment.

5.2.1 Preventive telling to obtain acceptance

For Pooja and her husband, the decision to adopt following a series of miscarriages instigated a process of interactions and engagement with various people. Starting at home, they shared their decision with their parents, apprehensive about and uncertain of how it would be received. On receiving a positive response, they shared their decision more widely among colleagues and neighbours. In Pooja's own words, *'we shared with people who matter to us.'* They anticipated that their decision to adopt might be treated differently if people learned about it from other sources, i.e. through bumping into family members, meeting neighbours in the park, or from domestic helpers or security guards working in and around their residence. A few months before committing to their decision, the couple had set up a new office in Delhi with a small team of eight members. Pooja claimed to have good relationships with her colleagues as they had trusted Pooja and her husband when they initiated the start-up. Before bringing their daughter, Ritu, home, they decided to gather all their colleagues together to announce their decision.

“Pooja: Before we got Ritu home, we got all of them together and we said, all of you matter to us so much. We have taken a huge decision. It also means that I am not going to be there for next three months. You will have to come and see me at home [smile] that’s how we will be working when a baby coming home. And they were so thrilled. I think we were very careful that we were never let any information flow which is not been created by us. So instead of people finding from here and there, we would go and let them know who ever mattered. Because I would know she would start playing with kids in the building [.] they would know about it. I knew my colleagues will visit [.] they will know about it. So all those people we picked up in small small groups [.] we thought of they matter.”

Pooja and her family live within a gated community. Before bringing their daughter home, they made a point of socialising with others within their residential community, including the creation of a WhatsApp group with 10 families they were closest to at the time. Pooja used the platform as a medium through which to share her daughter’s homecoming via messages and photographs.

“Pooja: We decided that instead of people finding out from maid, from security guard and all those kind of things. We inform through Whatsapp. We said, this is our baby. She has come home. She is three months old. From today she is our daughter and we put it in the group [.] Then people started sending positive messages, congratulations. People started coming home with gifts [.] I never expected.”

Pooja’s story demonstrates a pro-active approach towards mitigating anticipated discrimination or negative perceptions towards themselves for their decision to adopt or towards their adopted child directly. Their pro-active stance and the process they decided upon through which to openly communicate with others seems to have been determined by structured social relationships in their everyday lives, and selected as means through which to safeguard and preserve their roles and social ties within their immediate residential and business communities. Although it was all considered and carried out in order to avoid discrimination and negativity, their decisions could be interpreted as, in fact, projecting their fears onto

others. Their actions also indicate their awareness of the cultural perceptions about adoption, i.e. that an adoptive family is not as legitimate as those formed biologically. This awareness led to negotiations through which they sought others' approval for their version of family which might otherwise have been undermined because of its contaminated origin.

Pooja's reference to '*trust*' led me to explore the concept in social capital theory that suggests trust is a crucial component for maintaining social relationships and wellbeing (Algan, 2018; Reimer et al., 2008). Establishing trusting social relationships is a way of creating a supportive environment that could diminish the risks posed by attempting to do family through adoption in India. Through Pooja's approach, she and her husband created a safe space in their immediate social circle in which they were accepted, despite the socially contaminating status of their adoptive family. This preventive sharing became a means of maintaining the integrity of key relationships, whilst building a supportive ecosystem and reducing the possibility of negativity within it. By such process of doing they created an inclusive environment for acceptance of their choice of forming the family through an alternative, non-biological process, usually practiced in secrecy. It perhaps also enabled them to gather the moral and social support for what is still a relatively unusual decision in India – described by Pooja herself as '*huge*'. Her account also demonstrates a sense of commitment to the people who matter most to them. In the previous chapter, Pooja narrated how significant it was to share important decisions with parents and in-laws – relationships based on blood ties. However, sharing their decision as openly with friends, neighbours and work colleagues indicate an almost equal importance on relationships based on friendship regarding the support and acceptance they know they will need.

These acts might also have been intended as a signal to those in Pooja's immediate social circle to suppress their negative perceptions about adoption - or as a way of giving them advance notice of the family's inability to have a biological family and subsequently gain their sympathy and understanding before meeting their adopted child. These sentiments are reflected in Pooja's narrative when she says:

“Pooja: Even if one per-cent people those who don’t know how to react [...] whether they will be happy or sad, we told them [...] please be happy because we are really happy [smile]”

However, social and familial relationships can operate differently for two parent and single parent adoptive families. For the latter, findings suggest that there can be complex interplay between the wider social context and individual family members within which parents must work harder to negotiate their choice of adoption in order to gain the same level of social acceptance. Kavita - a single, unmarried, independent woman - never sought permission from anyone in her family or her wider kin relations regarding her life decisions. However, when she decided to become an adoptive mother, it was key for her to first gain acceptance for her decision from her parents – and then subsequently from extended family members and relatives:

“Kavita: For me it was important to get people on board that the child is accepted. So I took the pain of meeting my uncle, my cousin, informing them. Lot of them were concerned. Because they are much older people, for whom hesitancy is not just biases but it comes with lack of awareness. [...] So I remember typically when somebody has a baby, everybody will go and see the baby, you know as babies are nice. She [Ani] got treated just like a biological child of mine. That’s how I feel.”

Her account illustrates that it was important for Kavita that her child be accepted by those closest to her and not treated as an outsider. The steps she took to ensure this convey how integral family is in a child’s life and that these relationships - between a child and their family - is usually a long-term one. Kavita understood that bringing an adopted child home would require framing a new set of relationships for her daughter and herself as a parent which did not fit the traditional model of family in India. She would, no doubt, have been concerned about the social legitimacy of her new family and how it challenged the foundational elements of conventional family

based on caste, class, marriage and blood ties. She therefore attempted to create an environment in advance in which her child would feel safe, included and accepted. Pro-active, early engagement with her kin relations would have also been beneficial in garnering support for her decision to become a single adoptive parent as an unmarried woman. Home visits by family members to welcome her daughter seem like acceptance of the child and gestures of solidarity and support for Kavita as a single, unmarried, adoptive parent. By insisting that Ani be treated as her biological child, Kavita seemed to negotiate the norms and values that define motherhood and, within that, create a space for herself as a parent like any other. Although recognised as an adopted child, Kavita managed to normalise her daughter's position within her family by working hard to gather support and to build a 'sense of connectedness and commitment' (Williams, 2004, p.46). In so doing, she tried to influence others to recognise and validate the kin connection between her and her adopted child as a legitimate familial relationship.

Sometimes, participants disclosed their adoptive status to those within their social circles without even being asked – perhaps in a conscious attempt to control others' actions and mitigate any negative implications associated with others' knowing about their non-standard origins. Nisha reveals her adoptive identity freely to those with whom she shares her daily routines, and with others as well. Citing an experience involving her best friend's mother, Nisha underscores the importance to her of being open about her adoptive status and how she believes it helps make her more acceptable to others:

"Nisha: I am very free and open about my adoption. The reason I am telling you because, it has relevance. I spoke to Rupa's Mom about adoption. And I was like, this is how it is. I was talking to her and ummm [...] her Mom really liked me, how open I was about everything. That's how Rupa and I became so close."

Nisha's openness about her adoptive status gives the message that she acknowledges the difference between herself and others, but that the difference is

not diminishing nor does it contaminate her status as an individual. Nisha clearly found her friend's mother's acceptance of her situation encouraging, and felt confident that the mother took away from the conversation a positive view of her adoptive identity. Nisha undoubtedly feels this way about openness because of her own adoptive parents' openness about their adoptive family; in turn, she is confident and vocal about her adoptive status. The lack of physical resemblance between Nisha and her parents often invites questions, to which her parents openly respond '*she does not look like us because she is adopted*'. This openness which Nisha has learned from her parents is most effective when used with someone she already knows. A similar level of acceptance may not, however, be as confidently assumed with people with whom she is less familiar. Recalling a conversation with some colleagues, Nisha indicated how being open about her adoptive status sometimes surprised – and even '*terrified*' – people:

"Nisha: I am saying they are so terrified themselves even not they are [...] they are not adopted. It's me who is telling them."

Nisha's colleagues demonstrate an ignorance of adoptive family lives and their reaction suggests that Nisha's openness about it is unwelcome and unsettling. Nevertheless, Nisha's frankness will have gone some way to desensitising her colleagues about adoption and presented a positive, real-life experience of an adopted person which they had likely never encountered previously. Nisha's account also illustrates how this rejection was not entirely anticipated, although she clearly believes in the importance of openness to educate and give a positive perspective on adoptive family life. Nisha says so explicitly, in fact, revealing how being vocal about her adoptive status has benefitted others, and how she is often asked by those within her social and domestic circle to interact with other adopted children and prospective adoptive parents to share her experience.

Nisha's preventive telling might also be an attempt to reduce the morally disputable interpretation with regard to blood ties and biological relatedness. By gaining

exposure to - and through that a better understanding of - a person who is adopted but conventional in all other ways, is likely to encourage a redefining of others' images of adopted people. By taking what might be inferred as a defensive stance of her adoptive status, Nisha projects her conflicted feelings about adoption onto others. This defensive approach is helpful in reducing and controlling the discomfort around the subject of adoption while helping to protect adoptees' self-esteem. Inherent in these attempts at negotiation, however, is the implication that doing adoptive family life is a hard work, requiring constant explanation and negotiation by adopted people and adoptive parents in order to gain social acceptance and legitimisation of and for their families.

5.2.2 Selective disclosure: 'a need to know' approach

All of the adoptive parents I spoke to expressed joy and pride in the example they and their children had set of being an adoptive family. *'We are proud of our decision'* was a frequently used statement. However, this pride did not always extend to disclosure, about which adoptive parents were often much more circumspect. This selective strategy regarding disclosure was primarily applied within social spaces, the fact of a child's adoption being hard to conceal within the family.

Malini and her husband are proud of being adoptive parents of two daughters. Nevertheless, they carefully choose with whom they share their adoptive family status outside of their family. The reactions of outsiders' – even those who are part of their everyday lives - are beyond their control and therefore to be carefully managed. For example, Malini spoke of her daughters sometimes going to the park with their nanny. She assumes the nanny might well share her children's adoptive status with other parents in the park, but has not warned her not to do so. The children's adoptive status is also disclosed to their school out of need; One of Malini's daughters is very attached to the home and often refuses to go to school. Malini believes that her daughter's anxiety is rooted in a fear of being abandoned if left, and shared this with the school so that teachers would be understanding and act appropriately. Malini's elder daughter was adopted at the age of three and half.

As a predominantly Hindi-speaking child placed in an English medium school, Malini again needed to disclose the child's adopted status with the teacher and Principal to ensure that her daughter was communicated with in Hindi as well as English.

Malini's selective disclosure according to situation and context seems complicated in terms of the multiple interacting communities of family, neighbourhood and school, whose reactions are unpredictable. There seems to be a complex interplay between the wider social context and individual members, in which Malini tries to negotiate a space where her children can feel safe, respected and included. As a parent, Malini understands that neighbourhood, school and park are integral for her children's socialisation, and that the relationships developed in these social spaces can be long-term ones. Through her approach, she seeks to create a supportive and safe environment by carefully selecting the nanny, teacher and Principal to incorporate the differences of her adopted children into *their* everyday lives. The response appears to be positive, and addresses the specific needs of each child. In her disclosure to teachers specifically, Malini ensures sensitivity with regard the needs of her children, whilst encouraging the school as a whole to support family diversity.

Being an adoption activist and counsellor, Malini is always looking to actively and positively alter the public perception in India of adoption. When she discloses, she does not assume that the information will be kept a secret by the people she discloses to. She does disclose selectively, however, balancing the needs of her children with protection from negative reactions. Her approach indicates a congruence between adoptive family strategy and the social context in which it functions. The selective approach is chosen while anticipating people's behaviour towards the adoptive identity. This is also evident in Seema's story, who is vigilant about people's behaviour and doesn't reveal her adoptive status until and unless she shares a level of comfort with them:

“ Seema: If someone asks me, I would not deny. I will be very free. I openly tell them. But the thing is that [...] some people take it in a different way. So, like [...] after I come to comfort level with some, I told them that I am adopted.”

This excerpt illustrates that Seema’s selective disclosure is a means by which she avoids negative reactions. She understands enough about the rules of social relations and the importance of mutual respect to not conceal or lie if explicitly asked, but by saying ‘*people take in a different way*’ she indicates how some view the adoptive status as less privileged, disallowing her full membership of society. Acceptance gained through disclosure is dependent upon others’ approval to gain legitimacy, which makes Seema selective in her approach and suggests that those in established relationships are less likely to judge her negatively. Her narrative indicates how disclosure of her adoptive status is always in her mind when she engages with new people, and that its likelihood is dependent on the quality of the relationship. It underlines the importance of the development of quality interpersonal relationships for adopted people in order to be treated as equal irrespective of the differences of origin. By disclosing upon enquiry, Seema attempts to remain true to herself. However she seems to understand that greater benefit can be gained by focusing on goals larger than the self and as such makes the effort to interact and build relationships. Based on her comfort levels, Seema engages with those outside her family to negotiate her differences, and the norms and values within them, to fit in the space of ‘normality’. The effect is to increase acceptance of her adoptive status, while minimising negative reactions related to her biological difference.

Further analysis of Seema’s account reveals how the process of negotiation is not as straightforward as it might appear, and that it permeates through micro-level processing. In rationalising her disclosure strategy, Seema explains that people often object to things that are new and unfamiliar, hence the negative reactions towards adoption. In saying so, she acknowledges the negative social reaction activated through the process of differentiation of her identity – which is likely to be

discredited - leads her to engage with a complex negotiation process to gain social legitimacy.

“Seema: it depends on the type of person. Some people are more open minded and some people are closed minded. So usually, firstly, I am very judgmental when meet a person, I try to scan them and understand if they are being more accepted what I am going to say or not.”

The ‘*type of person*’ referred to in Seema’s narrative is primarily her peers and friends. Her account is illustrative of a strategy focused on the anticipation and consequences of a negative response that may derive from another’s outlook towards adoption. Her approach to negotiating acceptance seems not mechanical, but contingent on various limits - including the other person’s perception, circumstances and her own subjectivity. If any of these are not favourable, she may prefer not to disclose. Concealment may have no further repercussions if from a relatively unknown person. However, Seema refers to those who are primarily in her social circle - some of which will undoubtedly already be aware of her adoptive status. The fact that Seema is open to confirming her adoptive status if and when asked, suggests that she does not want to pass her identity off as normal, but rather intends merely to avoid potential negative reactions resulting from disclosure. By acknowledging the presence of prejudices, she confirms the deviation, but denies a difference to others. To avoid negative consequences, Seema uses counteracting as a mechanism; avoidance when unsure and confrontation when asked, to escape undesirable outcomes. The variance in approach demonstrates fluidity and complexities across space and time. The strategies used to manage her adoptive identity, indicate how a supportive and accepting relationship contributes to the endorsement of confidentiality and enhance the openness of adoptive family lives.

Most of the adoptive parents I spoke to took a similar approach, treating their adoptive family as any other, the adopted child as a biological child, and not disclosing their adoptive family identity unless asked. Outside the family, the adoptive family identity is shared on a ‘need to know’ basis. Amita, an adoptee and

now an adopted mother, shares the status of her daughter with those she feels she can relate to it. She believes that much of the society in which she lives looks down on adoption, and will do what she must to avoid her child being looked down on. According to Amita, knowing about her family's adoptive status is no-one's business but their – and those they choose to share it with:

“Amita: I don't want everyone from *dudh wala* [milk man] to *sabji wala* [vegetable vendor] discussing it. Because they will discuss it from their perspective, which is very narrow. So I don't want them to discuss about it. One it's none of their business. Two it is not something he will understand and relate to. He may be very good human being but he can't relate to that. And I don't want him to looking at my child differently. So [...] anyone I feel can relate to it, can resonate with them I share. It is to protect them from any unpleasant comment or anything you might have to hear.”

Amita has two daughters - one biological and one adopted - and they are a multi-faith family. As an adoptee herself, she knows how important biological lineage and blood ties are in Indian society and that people will question where a child comes from. Because adoptive families are not representative of society, Amita doesn't feel it is necessary to be open about her family's adoptive status unless she has to. Her account illustrates how adoption belongs to - or is only meant for - people of a certain social class, and perhaps not for people of a lower socioeconomic position. It looks like that in her view, lower and working-class individuals are more prejudiced, and have a narrower outlook towards adoption. To them, the premise of adoption perhaps represents a threat to their 'normal' and will therefore respond negatively to it, which is why Amita withholds disclosure from this group as far as possible. Amita seems to believe that adopted people are devalued by wider society, and that disclosing to those with an unfavourable view may lead to the creation of further risk and vulnerabilities for adoptees. This narrative also illustrates how differences in socioeconomic status shape the subjective perception of people about others. By saying '*I don't want them to discuss*', Amita signals an association between social class and prejudice and, as a result, attempts to pass off the identity of her

adoptive family as a biological family among this group in order to secure the wellbeing of her daughter. Amita may be displaying prejudice herself in her belief that people of a lower social class are illiterate - or at least less educated – and therefore have a negative or ignorant view of adoption.

Amita's beliefs are, however, in contradiction to the findings of this study which, as explained in the previous chapter, illustrate how prejudicial attitudes are also held by those with affluent and educated backgrounds - both within and outside the family. Therefore, adopted people and adoptive parents walk a fine line between disclosure and protection of self and family in order to reduce the power and control of public discourse of pretty much any social group as any have the potential to make adoptive families vulnerable in myriad ways. To do and be an adoptive family without necessarily knowing what the attitudes and reactions of others will be, seems like the playing out of everyday forms of negotiation and addressing uncertainties.

5.2.3 Disclosure: A Must!

Amita's story illustrates how, although she chooses not to disclose her family's adoptive status in her everyday life, as an adoptee she deliberately shared it when planned for her marriage. Hers is an interfaith and love marriage, which is rare in India in obtaining family and social approval. Moreover, the adoptive status might be an added impediment that she wanted to clarify at the beginning.

“Amita: One of the first thing, I told my husband that I am adopted. Check with your Mom whether she is okay with that or not. That is first thing I told him.

Sangita: ok.

Amita – He said, my Mom won't bother. I said, tell her. It's not a secret. I don't want her to know later. So he told her. Then [...] she said, its okay. How does it matter? But I am sure there are families, where it would matter. I don't know tomorrow when my daughter wants to get married, whether in the family does it matter or not.”

Amita's desire to share her adoptive status with her prospective parents-in-law illustrates the significance – and potential impact - of adoption in relation to marriage. In India, marriage is regarded as a social, religious and cultural duty - and obligation (Medora, 2007). Although Amita's adoptive status was not a secret, her desire to seek her future mothers-in-law's approval in advance signifies the importance and relevance of biological background to marriage in India. It also demonstrates the level of influence and involvement parents have in matters related to marriage. Amita, as a management graduate and only child of doctor parents, was clearly socially and economically well-positioned in all other respects. Perhaps this went some way to reducing any potential negative connotations related to her deviant biological status. However, being part of a non-conventional family concerned Amita that her association with a biologically conventional family might disrupt the social norms. Amita's desire to pre-warn her future parents-in-law stems from the institutionalised prejudice around adoption. However, their acceptance was more likely due to individual attitudes and personal choice which chose to treat their son's relationship with their future daughter-in-law as 'normal' (Heaphy, 2018). Amita's approach in this regard therefore appears as a negotiable family form, and as such represents a shift from regular family practices in India.

Amita chooses to flag her adoptive status to her future parents-in-law in terms of marriage and in doing so shows her vulnerability and helplessness. Despite her middle-class family background, she was not confident that it sufficiently minimised the negative connotations associated with her deviant identity. Her account illustrates how, when it comes to marriage, the adoptive identity needs collective approval. Though marriage in India is a family matter with an emphasis on the compatibility of two families, in the last part of the narrative, Amita seems concerned only about her daughter's adoptive status rather than her own. It signals that the deviant position of an adopted person gradually diminishes after marriage and becoming a biological parent. Through being a married woman and a biological mother, Amita has perhaps strengthened her position to be considered 'normal'. Aside from education and socio-economic status, being part of social institutions like marriage and family seems to be significant in the reducing of the impact of the

anomaly of adoptive identity. Even though disclosure is a must for Amita in matters related to marriage, it also seems to have created potential for the 'detraditionalisation and demise of conventions associated with marriage and family as social institutions' (Heaphy, 2018, p.172).

5.3 Resisting and challenging

5.3.1 Being vigilant – a covert warning

The adoptive parents' narratives illustrate the various strategies applied by them to legitimise their choice of adoption and how those strategies vary according to context and characters. Further analysis of Malini's story shows how she helps to ensure positive behaviours towards her adopted children and how her approach varies with the different people who interact with them. The selective approach to disclosure of adoptive status is used as a preventive measure in social spaces to protect children from potential negative behaviours - family and kin relations mostly being aware of it. However, awareness does not guarantee a positive attitude towards adoption - as we learned from Nisha's account in relation to her grandparents. Describing the issue of acceptance of her daughters among their adoptive kin, Malini stated:

"Malini: I was careful about how people treated my children [.]. If I felt anything odd in their behaviour, I would immediately sort of [.]. pull back. Because, my priority was that my kids should be okay. That's my priority. I don't [.]. ummm [.]. its tough to say what effort I put to build relationships around me. Perhaps, I didn't put any effort to building that. I think, I put more effort in watching and the reactions."

Here Malini recalls how strongly she resisted any unfavourable behaviour of kin towards her children. Her acts of resistance illustrate to what degree other's preconceived notions of adoption is unacceptable to her as an adoptive parent. Her strategy involves the complete avoidance of any behaviour that may impact her

children negatively and lead to them feeling excluded. In so doing, she refuses to accept the underrated identity of her daughters, and challenges prejudicial attitudes. Malini justifies her actions in the name of protection, and her narrative illustrates how there is no permanent solution to handle the behaviour of adoptive kin towards adopted children in everyday life. As a result, Malini is vigilant, careful and quick to respond in whatever ways she feels is best according to the context. Her efforts of everyday resistance are likely to be informal, unstructured and will largely take place with immediate effect. Such resistance might be viewed as transformative action towards adoption prejudices. Malini does not seem particularly concerned about the risks associated with her actions, which may be a reflection of her social position that naturally bestows her with the power to resist through acting. In response to my question, what does she mean by being '*very careful*,' she explained:

"Malini: If I thought they treated them well, then that's great. That's the relationship I would nurture. But if I felt like that they are cold towards my daughters, whatever [...] I would immediately pull back."

Malini's phrase, '*cold towards my daughters*' signifies a lack of warmth and compassion in other's behaviours that seems unlikely in Indian biological family and kin relationships. During our conversation, she was always selective and cautious about how she portrayed adoptive family life, taking pains to explain in detail, for instance, that her choice of adoption was independent and not as a result of infertility. Her stance demonstrates that, even though she encountered discriminatory behaviour from her kin, her activist position requires defensiveness in the way she seeks to present her experiences and her reactions to them. The 'cold' behaviour she describes may threaten the validity of her adoptive family because of its contaminated origin, and yet Malini's activist position gives her the power to take a proactive stance in resisting the threat. By acknowledging the impact, and therefore the importance, of other people's behaviour on her children's

welfare, Malini made me realise the relevance of others' attitudes towards adoption, and in particular the discomforts related to adoptive kinship. At the same time, it indicates how her extra-Indian professional confidence was used to put others firmly in their place.

Other adoptive parents, however, preferred to have such dialogues only if and when they became aware of any devaluing attitudes or negative comments towards their adopted children. They engaged with neighbours, colleagues and friends only after careful deliberation, sharing information and educating people about adoption, giving and taking knowledge and advice as each situation demands. Sometimes, such dialogue would be in response to discrediting comments, or else as a prudent measure to avoid such remarks. It was a surprise for Pooja's new neighbour when Pooja disclosed her daughter's adopted status. Pooja was in turn disturbed by the neighbour's response: *'but you love her so much!'* Although Pooja initially responded defensively that bringing a child home through adoption made no difference to the love one feels, she subsequently decided to take the time to sit down with the neighbour and explain about adoption:

"Pooja: I had to sit down and explain to her, how she is in her little ecosystem never ever heard of people with adoption. So [...] I just informed her that world is larger than that. Different things are happening. Families are getting created in lot of different manners. And people do ask. But you don't need for five years down the line."

A process of subtle negotiation in the social spaces of everyday adoptive family practice is apparent in Pooja's narrative, which illustrates how she must defend the love she has for her child and her family's validity in the face of comments which would present her adopted child as inferior and indirectly questions the legitimacy of Pooja herself as an adoptive mother. Instead of avoiding such comments within a social interactions, Pooja's preference is to sensitise the neighbour in a subtle-resistance of the socio-cultural norms of *'own child'* - particularly in a society where blood ties, cultural identity and legitimacy are primarily the first choice for the

forming of family. This everyday encounter is indicative of popular assumption, which seems to carry an implicit taken-for-grantedness about family set-ups formed biologically. It looks like for the neighbour Pooja's family is a deviation from the dominant model that requires extra work by Pooja in negotiating social interactions. By challenging the neighbour, she perhaps tried to establish her motherhood as being on a par with a biological mother. Further, through using the strategy of education, Pooja attempts to avert - or at least soften - the neighbour's negativity regarding adoption in the future.

Pooja's narrative reflects the prevailing understanding that an adoptive family is somehow less than a biological family. Her strategy in informing about alternative processes of family formation demonstrates a defence of the validity of the adoptive family practice. Her statement '*five years down the line*' indicates her understanding of an increasing trend of alternative family formations in India. However, it also signals that her recognition and knowledge is gained through being part of the new wave. In the absence of a supportive ecosystem to address the knowledge gap, the individuals and community who belong to the alternative process - in this case, the adoptive parent - take on the responsibility of education to bridge the gap. This might be viewed as an alternative mode of knowledge production, resisting the dominant notion of understanding in favour of creating an active live resource.

As an adoption counsellor and part of a campaign that advocates for adoption, Pooja seems empowered to challenge negative public perceptions. Therefore, instead of avoiding or withdrawing from negative comments and attitudes, she chooses to negotiate in the hope of changing public perceptions. Pooja's strategy doesn't sound a straightforward one. Rather, it feels like a combination of multiple actions played out in the process of doing adoptive family to gain social legitimization of her family's status.

5.3.2 Speaking Out

Direct action against differential behaviour towards adopted people is evident in some cases. Participants shared incidents in which they confronted others, rather than avoiding or educating them. Adoptive mother Julie, for instance, shared an encounter with a school teacher who asked her about her daughter's adoptive status. Julie recalled receiving a phone call from the teacher after which she met with her at school. On Julie's arrival, the teacher told her that Seema had informed her class that she was a '*heart baby*'. The teacher explained how she was confused and surprised to learn of Seema's origins in this way as the information had never previously been disclosed to the school.

"Julie: I said what is that to be confused about? She said, no, you never told us. I said what is that to tell? Why should I tell you? Does it make her different than rest of the class? She said, no, no. It's not that. We should know. I said why? So you should say that she is not reading because she is adopted. She is not doing well mathematics, because she is adopted. Or she is not getting well with her peers because she is adopted. She said, you know, she is very proud of it. I said, I am adopted too. She said, really Ma'am? No, no. I said, what no? Yes. She said but you never told us. Why should I tell you? Because that becomes like a crutch."

Unlike Pooja, Julie's response to the teacher's enquiries and bewilderment was quite aggressive. Herself an adoptee, Julie did not feel any necessity to inform the school of her daughter's adopted status so as to avoid any preconceived notions or judgments that might be made as a result of that knowledge. Julie demonstrated a strong resistance to the teacher's questioning, which she seemed to take as a personal attack on her daughter as deviant. Her confrontational stance is a defence against the discomfort she feels from the way the teacher maligns her daughter's validity and legitimacy and seeks to protect her daughter's equality by justifying non-disclosure. By confronting the teacher, Julie rejects any negativity which the teacher might perceive in regard to Seema's adoptive status, and presents instead a positive and inclusive image. It is a way of 'coming out' and displaying positive adoptive family relationships to others (Almack, 2008). Rather than being

automatic, Julie's defensive voice seems to involve an asymmetric power relationship which enables her to resist negative perceptions. Being aware of other's reactions to adoption, Julie made a conscious decision not to disclose it to Seema's school and, in so doing, presented her daughter as like any other - with strong personality traits and a social position.

Julie's confrontational response reflects a power struggle in which she uses her social and personal position to overcome the identification of differentness posed by other's perceptions. And it is likely to be shaped by the relative power of this educated, outspoken woman from an upper-middle-class family. Julie exercised her power to protect her daughter's chronic status as an adoptee, and tried to establish that she is like any other child in the school. The incident illustrates how, besides having 'social capital', Julie opts to use a self-centred defensive strategy instead of disclosing voluntarily (Pinkerton and Dolan, 2007). Being adopted herself, Julie perhaps felt that the social environment had not changed enough for her to rely on schools taking a positive outlook towards adopted people. Her response suggests how adoptive family's face a lack of social legitimisation and discomfort with regards to acceptance of their adoptive status. As a result, they adapt various process through which they confront or conceal to establish their family and legitimise their relationships.

It is interesting to note that, unlike her mother, Seema was happy to openly share her adopted status, suggesting that she was comfortable to do so and felt positively about her status among her peers. Her disclosure may have been a means of educating others. I wonder whether openness about their status encourages support and equality, or risks possible censure. There may not be a straight answer - and either or both may be true depending on the individuals involved. However, adoptive mother Maya's story throws some light on the question.

5.3.3 Strategic avoidance and acceptance

Maya told me how she did not share her son, Ravi's, adoptive status with anyone. In a conversation regarding disclosure of her adoptive family status specifically, she said:

"Maya: we don't, generally, [...] we don't talk much about it. It's not a news item, you know."

Like Julie, Maya chose not to disclose Ravi's adoptive status to his school when she enrolled him. In fact, the school's Principal was a good friend of Maya's and was already aware that Ravi had been adopted. As with Seema, Ravi also chose to share his adoptive status with a friend. According to Maya, the disclosure had no discernible effect on their friendship, but at a later date the friend abruptly shared the information in class. Narrating the incident, Maya said:

"Maya: One day they had a Science lesson about DNA, when Ravi's friend stood up and said, I think Ravi should take the DNA test

Sangita: Okay

Maya: So now there is a context to it why should he take the test? The teacher was bit afraid and said why should Ravi take the test? What makes you say it? And he didn't know what to say about it. So Ravi volunteered. He said Ritesh is saying that because I was adopted. So the teacher, thankfully (smiling voice) had the presence of mind to say that Oh! That's ok. I didn't know that. It looks like you are very lucky that you have good parents. So [...] he came home and told me that."

The incident illustrates the risks involved in revealing adoptive status and the potential for discomfort when it is shared more widely in the public sphere. According to Maya, her son was offended by his friend's seeming betrayal which subsequently compelled him to disclose his adoptive status to the entire class. Maya and Ravi utilised different strategies to present – or conceal - their adoptive status

as a family and as individuals: Maya chooses to avoid revealing her family's adoptive status and discloses only specific information at specific times and views it as something personal and not for general public consumption. By not sharing her family's distinctiveness, she attempts to present them as 'normal' and thereby avoids potential differentiated behaviours and reduces the impact of adoption discomfort. Her attempt to some extent demonstrates downplaying the differences between an adoptive and biological family in order to reject negative perceptions. Keeping their 'secret' seems like a defensive strategy to avoid potential threat, as opposed to actively challenging threats when they occur. Maya's attempt to 'pass' off her adoptive family as any other biological family may be due to her perception that disclosure won't allow her family to be fully accepted in public spaces (Renfrow, 2004). It also indicates risks for her family members being outed unexpectedly as Ravi was and left vulnerable. Maya seems to have considered and weighed up the costs and benefits of disclosure versus non-disclosure, and confines disclosure to where and when it can be least avoided only.

However, disclosure might actually have been beneficial in that it removes uncertainty and promotes a sense of personal power. For Ravi, it would have saved him the discomfort of unexpected disclosure, and had the teacher been appraised they could have handled the situation better and more appropriately. Maya's defensiveness of adoptive family practice led me to explore Finch's (2007) notion of 'degree of intensity', which states that, although display is potentially a feature of all families, it becomes more or less intense at different points in time. This has particular relevance for situations of uncertainty, and for families whose contours are not easily recognised, and resonates with Ravi's response. It indicates how the disclosure of a private conversation publicly was unanticipated and unwelcome. His own selective openness about his adoptive status illustrates how either he is not comfortable with his adoptive identity, or that he is unsure as to the degree of support he can expect from his environment.

A similar inference comes from Maya's remark about how Ravi encounters different situations in his everyday life, particularly in discussions with other children on

matters related to birth – i.e. the arrival of a newborn into a family - which reminds him that his story is different from theirs. Instead of being open about his adoptive status, Ravi pretends to be like the other children in an attempt to pass off his adoptive identity which may be perceived as threatening (Renfrow, 2004). According to Maya, one of the reasons for this pretence is that *'he feels uncomfortable sharing about his mother'*, which signals that he perhaps fears disclosure will be accompanied by further questioning about his biological origins. Ravi uses passing off as a strategy for identity negotiation to transgress the social boundaries of everyday life.

Arguably, Ravi's decision to share his adoptive status privately demonstrates the integrity of the friendship within which he shares, and feels comfortable and confident that the disclosure won't affect his friendship. The unexpected revelation happens as a result of a lack of awareness and sensitivity among young people who cannot understand the implications of this sort of public disclosure and its impact on the individual. The incident also reveals the unforeseen, precarious and sensitive nature of the adoption narrative from other's perspectives, which may well be another reason for non-disclosure. Ravi's cautiousness about revealing his status seems to stem from a fear of exclusion. Moreover, his parents' choice not to share it openly may also influence Ravi's own understanding of selective disclosure. Through his classroom disclosure – albeit somewhat forced upon him – Ravi seems to overcome his apprehensions, even though it could have led to negative consequences. But by taking this stance, Ravi resists his difference and becomes an active challenger.

Ravi's teacher's ostensibly supportive response acted as a cushion for absorbing the unanticipated blow, and enabling him to negotiate a space for mutual acceptance. By mediating the consequences and presenting a positive image, the teacher may have positively influenced Ravi's own perception. The way Ravi managed his adoptive identity according to time, circumstance and degree of comfort, appears to be fluid rather than fixed. And although unanticipated by Ravi, the unexpected act of his friend is perhaps anticipated by others – not least his mother, Maya – and is

another reason that adoptive families make careful choices about when and to whom they disclose.

A broader understanding can be garnered from the narratives in respect of the degree to which young adult adopted people and adoptive parents are open about their adoptive status in different contexts. Complete avoidance of the subject is often evident in relation to topics about the adopted child's biological origin. Exploring Nisha's narrative of this topic specifically, it becomes evident that her approach changed as she grew up and became less dependent on her parents to manage potentially unpleasant comments or judgements. Her own resistance mechanism was developed to avoid contexts in which she expected to encounter difficulties. She touched on one such incident when she described overhearing family members discussing her biological origin and its being from 'Muslim' religion, to which Nisha responded, '*kis ke pass itni time hai, yaar?*' [who has the luxury of time to think all these?]. She cited the comment as a rumour 'heard from some sources', but by referring to it, Nisha highlighted the different narratives that circulate about adoptive families which question adopted children's origins as less privileged. Nisha preferred to avoid confrontation and responding to comments which put her down. Her desire for avoidance might also depend on who the comments were made by and the importance she places on the specific comment - or rumour. Nisha seems to expect a certain amount of derogatory remarks to be made concerning adopted people both within and outside of adoptive kinship. However, not every remark carries equal importance, and I sensed from her casual way of sharing this particular incident that Nisha as an adult was resigned about the stereotypes and beliefs played out within her culture regarding the biological origins of adopted children. To this comment, Nisha attached no great importance, indicating how she tries to deflect self-blame in a passive avoidance of negative comments.

5.3.4 Exclusion and Inclusion of birth parents: a paradoxical view

Exploring further, the approach to handling unpredicted negative comments in adoptive kinship becomes more prominent. In a previous narrative described by Nisha, she shared an encounter with her grandmother who commented on her biological origin and what she believed were the circumstances of women who surrendered their children for adoption using the term '*knocked up*'. Unlike the scenario described in the previous chapter, Nisha was greatly upset by this incident, describing how it '*hit me in the face*'. At the time, she felt unable to question her grandmother in order to gain a better understanding of what provoked her claim. Nor could she avoid it. Instead, Nisha shared it with her mother:

"Nisha: it is around six seven months back. And then I went and I asked my Mom. I said Mom, was I from a place from where women are just knocked up? They have no one to look after them and the doctor used to. And my mom got so angry with me [...] she is like how can you use that term? That's such a bad term to use for women. Whatever it is I don't know. Your grandmother was told you, I don't know *kanha se* [from where] she heard it but its such a bad term to use. And my mom has always been a person who explains to me why you shouldn't take things in different manner. That's why when I spoke to you on phone, I told you my mom will be okay talking to you. Because, she is okay with it."

Nisha's mother, Hema, also shared this incident with me in her own account in which she added some context to her adoptive family life. Hema's reaction to Nisha's question appears to be a 'defence mechanism' (Mihalits and Codenotti, 2020):

"Hema – Recently she [Nisha] gave me a statement and I was very upset with. She said, my mother-in-law told her, you are born to someone, I don't know, she used a term. I said you don't have any rights to talk about anyone. You don't know who they are. We don't know under which circumstance she gives you for adoption. So we have no rights to comment on her or even caste [...] those kinds of thoughts. Why should we? That is a past, its gone. You

have come to our family. How does it matter? Who she was? Why she left? Why should we talk bad about her?"

Hema reacted defensively to what she considered to be negative moral and ethical judgements made on Nisha's biological origins. Even though the statement seemed strong and emotionally disturbing for Nisha, she doesn't confront or resist it as an adult. However, neither could she ignore it in the same way as she had the earlier one as it had come from her grandmother - an important person in the family. The intensity of the impact of the comment was evident in Nisha's actions and facial expressions as she relayed it. Her mother's reaction similarly indicated that the comment was unexpected and even 'disgraceful' and through its similarity offered solidarity with Nisha's own feelings and, indirectly, a degree of respect to Nisha's birth mother. In disregarding her mother-in-law's allegation, Hema tried to portray Nisha's birth mother in a more positive light to protect Nisha's self-image and emotional wellbeing. Hema rejected the statement, but also could not challenge it directly with her mother-in-law as she did in the previous incident which invoked the term '*Shudra*'. A positive outcome of the incident was to allow Nisha to see her adoptive mother behave with compassion and sympathy toward her birth mother. By saying '*she is okay with it*', Nisha understands that her adoptive mother accepts - and defends - her birth mother's circumstances. The grandmother's comment encourages Nisha to reflect on her life and on the circumstances in which she was born, and seems to make her grateful to her adoptive parents for the life she is living now. Nisha's own account doesn't give clarity to her feelings without being viewed alongside her mother's response to it.

Hema's defensive narrative is in response to an unexpected revelation by her mother-in-law which triggers her emotion and initiates a display of familial warmth and responsibility in respect of her daughter and her daughter's position within and among her family and kin relations. Despite how unexpected the revelation, Hema rejects it outright as a means by which to navigate the terrain of Nisha's condition of adoption that is not about 'display' but about resisting and maintaining resilience

(Pinkerton and Dolan, 2007). Though she appears to be empathetic with Nisha's birth mother, she also demonstrates a strong resistance to Nisha's curiosity to know about her biological origins. As an adoptive mother, Hema is all too aware of the likely context behind her adoptive family life and knows what need and need not be exhibited in their everyday lives. A conflict of feelings towards the birth mother, coupled with apprehension, is reflected in Hema's account which seems to suggest that Nisha not ponder on her past, but rather embrace her present and future life. This is illustrated as a defensive attempt to conceal Nisha's biological origins. By saying '*you have come to our family*', Hema signals a demarcation between the status of Nisha's birth and adoptive family. A sense of avoidance in the statement demonstrates that Nisha's adoptive family wishes to remain at a distance from the birth mother's, even though there has never been contact with the latter and a refrain from engagement with any discussion about it. The truth of her birth mother's condition and circumstances might be difficult for Nisha to handle. Therefore, her mother's avoidance may be a means to protect Nisha from any negative impact around it. The contrasting narratives suggest that discussion of adoption within the family is expected within a defined framework where birth parents have no space. By ignoring Nisha's biological origin and expecting her not to think about her birth mother, Hema denies her daughter's acknowledgement of it and her and demands that she view her life as a 'clean break and fresh start' (Howe and Feast 2003).

Rita and Rajiv reacted similarly when relaying the details of their daughter, Shikha's, enquiries regarding her birth parents. According to them, a few years ago Shikha expressed an interest in learning about her birth parents – even asking to visit the adoption centre she came from. Her parents chose to dismiss her enquiries as merely casual, and told her that the information she sought was not available at the adoption centre. The conversation we had on the subject of Shikha's birth mother was also more restrictive than that of the other adoptive parents I spoke to:

"Rita: she asked us very lightly not very seriously.

Rajiv: Just like is it possible that I can get their information? We told her, no. it's not possible. That's all.

Rita: Otherwise, she is not very [...]

Rajiv: She is not so much of serious about it. Once she was trying to ask about those things. When we told her, no it's not possible. There is no policy to disclose all these things.

Sangita: Okay. So it's not that you don't want to share. But the information is not available.

Rita: We are not very much into that to know. We didn't ask much about it either. We wanted a baby, and we got a baby. It as simple as that [.] We didn't ask anything about her root or anything like that. never thought that it is important to know or something. Going back, ummm [...] and digging the root has no point.

Rajiv: It is not good at all."

The evidence from the adoptive parents' above narrative demonstrates that they were perhaps acutely aware that Shikha's enquiries were not just casual. Their response is adult-centric and one-sided, reflecting their own concerns and not their daughter's. They clearly intended to avoid any impact from the disgrace attached to the birth mother on themselves and Shikha by association, and in so doing underscore their own parental investment - in terms of emotional, mental, physical, financial by way of love, care, time and resource in their relationship and sense of entitlement towards their daughter. Throughout the interview, these adoptive parents displayed their protective parenthood.

The birth parents' background and the biological origins of both Shikha and Nisha, appear to be used as a stratification device based on social class (Connelly et al., 2016). Even though their relationship with their birth mothers is biological and based on blood ties, it looks like considered tainted, less powerful, and therefore less meaningful. Association with birth parents is perhaps viewed as threatening - more so for the adoptive parents than the child. Even though Shikha might be genuinely interested to know about her biological origins, her adoptive parents' strong defensive reaction to her interest indicates that her questioning is inappropriate. They don't conceal their status as an adoptive family, but they do pass off the differences between their family and biological families by presenting

them as the same. But the process of its formation, indicates what can and cannot be displayed (Almack, 2008). The not displaying of birth parents may be intentional because of the perceived risk involved in doing so - such as fear of disapproval by related others. But this is likely to have a cost. By restricting the display of birth parents in adoptive family practice, adoptive parents are constantly needing to guard against what their children might say.

A closer look at the narratives unveils the impression that the discussion around birth parents was not a comfortable one for Rita and Rajiv. Their repeated refrain of '*we didn't know*' signals a restlessness and indicates that they genuinely have no desire to learn more about the biological origins of their daughter. So the role of biology is likely to be mediated by the social context of position, the power that determines who and what is accepted as family. Presumably, they have weighed the benefits of not knowing and decided it to be advantageous in avoiding further marginalisation of Shikha's identity as an adoptee. That silence is preferential to the weight of concern. By restricting Shikha's inclination to develop any contact with her birth parents, they tend to avoid the worry of what others will think about Shikha's life and marital prospects in the future, and instead promote a moral discourse of positivity. On the other hand, the cost of not knowing is to leave Shikha in a vacuum for rest of her life regarding her true biological origins. To live with such unrequited curiosity might well have a deep and lasting impact. Adoptive parents' avoidance of talking about birth parents, and their dismissal of any association with them, is a strategy which seems to be based on power dynamics, as well as a lack of availability of adequate information - which would seem to suit most adoptive parents. An ambivalence reflected in both adoptive parents' narratives indicates that, although they are happy to be open about their adoptive family status and embrace the adopted child as their 'own', ownership comes without the biological origin of the adopted child (Lambert, 2019).

It is not only adoptive parents who think and act in self-defence when it comes to learning about adopted children's birth parents and biological origins. Of the three young adult adoptees I spoke to, Seema reflected similar views. Seema explained

how she was very cautious about disclosing her adoptive status to others, although she doesn't deny it when specifically asked. Her concern being that, following disclosure, people tended to ask questions about her biological parents and whether she was interested in finding them. Her response to this enquiry was always 'no'. Citing the reason, she explained:

"Seema: because I have one set of parents. They are my parents. There is no point of dreaming about other people unless [...] there are other children, who are adopted and they said, they should find their biological parents. But according to me, my parents are my parents. That's about it."

Seema's subtle yet candid account reflects how she thinks of her birth parents as 'living in an imaginary world' which she is not interested in making into a reality. By indexing her biological parents as '*other people*', she separates herself from them and from a relationship which may render her marginalised and that she views as not equal to the one she shares with her adoptive parents. Hence, she displays an acceptance of her adoptive parents as her '*own*'. Further, by referring to other adopted people's views on birth parents and their quests to find out more about them, she distinguishes herself as different and as someone who does not feel loss or incompleteness without them. As someone who has, in fact, fully embraced her adoptive family life. From her pause followed by an incomplete sentence, I suspect that Seema is aware of how intensively other adoptees have undertaken the search process to illicit information about their birth mothers and sympathises with them through her understanding that their search is a distant dream in the Indian context. She has perhaps accepted this fact and made peace with her loss. By saying '*my parents are my parents*', Seema tends to reconstruct kinship and parenthood that is not connected by blood ties in an attempt to strengthen social legitimisation of her adoptive family relationships.

Seema's views about her birth parents differed from the other two adoptee participants, which made me reflect on the possible reasons behind that. Being part

of a family in which Seema's adoptive mother is herself an adoptee perhaps provides an auxiliary reason for the creation of a supportive 'ecosystem' for Seema which is not the case for the other two (Eppler, 2019). However, there might be additional factors contributing to the development of her self-defence mechanism. Broadly speaking, adoptive parents and their adoptee accept that being adopted or being part of an adoptive family is a deviance from the hegemonic notion of family. By rejecting their association with their birth parents and biological origin, they seem to succeed in passing off this deviance as normal.

There is a distinct response of young adoptive parents (who are relatively new to the practice) towards the subject of birth parents in so far as they seem to believe in disclosing the child's adoptive status to them at an early age through storytelling and visual presentations. The birth parents - especially the birth mother - is usually fantasised, or portrayed as unknown. One of the reasons often cited for this is the closed adoption practice in India through which adoptive parents get no information about birth parents. Their response to this might seem appropriate, but I wonder how many adoptive parents are genuinely interested to know details of the child's biological background. The telling of stories reveals that adoptive parents' openness about adoption is limited to disclosure of adoptive status and raising the child as their 'own'. The participants in this study largely held a consistent view regarding their child's biological background, with most expressing sympathy towards birth mothers whom they see as victims of a system which compelled them to abandon their child. Some parents are interested in finding out about their child's background for medical reasons. However, except Maya, all adoptive parent participants generally do not feel it is a necessity to know about the child's background from the child's perspective.

Adoptive mother, Hema, shared how her daughter Nisha sometimes asks why her biological parents gave her up for adoption, and what would happen if she found her biological mother. In response to these sorts of enquiries, Hema explains

“Hema: I tell her see, in America, in stories and movies, its possible. But in India we don’t know the reason why are you given up for adoption. The person may not even want to acknowledge that you are there or you may be [...] somewhere. So don’t even go in that line.”

The account illustrates how adopted people’s curiosity about their biological parents is treated as imaginary in India. Hema implies that it is the closed adoption practice in India that prevents any information being available and that a clean break from their past is best for the adopted child. Hema’s strong resistance to learning details of Nisha’s biological background demonstrates adoptive parents’ dominant position in their adopted children’s lives. Her response effectively restricts Nisha’s eagerness, and perhaps sends a message that enquiries of this nature are not welcome within her adoptive family. By telling Nisha that her birth mother may not even acknowledge her, Hema portrays a somewhat fearful image of the birth mother which suggests that she might be irresponsible or uncaring. Her response may also be a way of protecting Nisha and her birth mother from grief and confusion were they ever to actually meet – or of protecting herself from the potential threat of a future relationship between birth parents and her daughter.

Ironically, the adoptive parent participants of this study were all aware that adopted children in other countries are known to seek out their birth parents at certain points in their lives. Some also referred to the fact that knowing one’s biological origins is a right. Nevertheless, none actively encouraged this interest in the case of their own children. Whilst most adoptive parents held this unequivocal response, Maya’s narrative gave an alternative view. She recalled a conversation with her adopted son, Ravi, during which he stated, *‘you are one of my best mothers’*. Maya casually responded:

“Maya: so for me, I didn’t pay much attention. I asked how many mothers you have? Then he said, I have two mothers. Remember?”

Maya is mother to a biological daughter and an adopted son. She adopted Ravi when he was five and a half months old. From an early age, Maya ensured openness with her son about his origins, telling him that he had been born to another mother who gave him up for reasons unknown. Through this openness, Maya attempted to portray a positive image of Ravi's birth mother to him. Her narrative indicates that she encouraged Ravi to express his feelings about his adopted status and birth mother. Even though Maya has no information about his birth mother, she seems to prepare for the time when Ravi will be older and likely to question his origins. Keeping communications open in this regard perhaps strengthens Maya's bond with her son. Further, she explained how over time Ravi's questions about his biological mother have left her feeling helpless in the absence of information about her.

"Maya: One day he actually came and asked me, do you know her name? He was about 8 then. I said, no. Sorry baby. They don't give out that information to us. But if it important for you, then we might find out at some point. So he was very disappointed. He actually said, how could you, do this to me? You don't even know her name? And I had to actually apologize. I said, I am sorry. That's something, which I didn't think of asking. And if it is important, we will see, how we can find out. And he was satisfied with this answer."

Maya's narrative illustrates how her openness about Ravi's adoptive status has given him the confidence to ask whatever he wants, whilst simultaneously revealing the vacuum that exists regarding even basic information about birth parents which she cannot fill. Maya could have made up a name to appease her son. Instead she opted for truth and transparency which will likely strengthen trust between herself and her adopted son. Even though Ravi enjoys equal status in his adoptive family and has been raised as their 'own', these incidents show how adoptive parents are sometimes forced to acknowledge his difference. Maya also mentioned how she informed Ravi that he could conduct a search of his roots once he turned 18 if he chose to, and assured him of her support in that process. A pleasant surprise for her son.

Maya's narrative implies that meaningful openness is not solely about disclosure, but the degree to which adoptive parents can accept and accommodate questions and curiosity from their adopted children. Even in a closed adoption scenario, Maya accepted her son's biological heritage and created space for his active participation. In the absence of any real information, Maya made an effort not only to create a positive image of the birth mother, but to reassure Ravi and educate him in regard of his future options. Maya's account also demonstrates adoptive parents' liabilities towards their child, which they realise may not be fulfilled by simply making the child part of their family and bestowing them with love and care. It also signals the importance of sensitivity towards the child's former experiences, and of providing information to help the child develop a positive sense of their own identity.

Maya's account illustrates the important role that adoptive parents play in the development of adoptees' understandings about their birth parents. Ignoring the subject and rejecting discussion about it inhibits communication and perhaps leads to the adoptee looking outside the family to discuss their thoughts on the subject. Such supposition is apparent in Nisha's account who fantasises about meeting her birth parents, even though she accepts that it will likely never happen:

"Nisha: sometimes I think like *aarey yaar, kaun hai woh log?* [who are these people?] What about if I see them in public, I don't even know them they are my parents? Then my friend cracks me a joke that when someone I see looks like you, I will tell you [smile]. She is quite older and I also ask her some strange questions. That's one thing but I have never wanted to know. I have bit curious about it sometime. Like suppose they call me and say we want to meet you. It is never going to happen in India. Never."

Nisha understands that tracing her biological background in India is an impossible task, but it doesn't stop her curiosity or her imaginings about her origins. Her mother's refusal to engage with the subject had led her to seek support from a friend with whom she shares her thoughts about her birth parents. Her imaginings regarding the unknown reasons behind her adoption are entirely natural. However,

her strong belief which accompanies it that it will never happen in India leaves a vacuum in her life. Her account suggests that access to information, or a supportive family environment, might have helped to curtail Nisha's curiosity about her birth parents. It also illustrates that many adopted people in India will have a similar understandable and genuine interest in their biological origins, the reasons behind their adoptions and perhaps even in meeting their biological parents. Although Nisha attempts to deny hers, she contradicts herself when she refers to being impressed by the open adoption process in American and European countries where access to information and open communication is possible between birth parents, adoptee and adoptive parents.

"Nisha: when you see in abroad, suppose I am expecting a child and I don't want to keep the child and put the child in adoption. If a couple wants to adopt my child, they can come to meet me. It's so open over there.

Sangita: Yes. Do you like that process?

Nisha: Of course! And there are options. Do you want to get photos of your child? Do you want any information? I have done some reading actually plus movies. There are so many options and its so wonderful. Do you want to know about your child? Would you like to see your child after your child adopted? Everything so crystal clear and its so cool. But here it's not like that at all."

Nisha's appreciation of this openness elsewhere is viewed primarily from the perspective of the birth mother in this account. Even though she denied ever wanting to know anything about her birth parents, Nisha clearly understands how a more transparent process leaves no ambiguity for imagination. Her narrative indicates that an open adoption system can provide an adoptee with an authentic reason behind their adoption and a more positive experience for all members of the 'adoption triad' as it involves mutual engagement between adoptive parents and birth parents which is not the case in India (Grotevant, 2000). Nisha's understanding of openness around adoption seems to be one sided, perhaps because openness might also present challenges and create conflict between adoptive parents and birth parents. It might be that, as an adoptee, Nisha imagines a

transparency in which adoptive parents are better prepared and better able to answer questions from their adopted child about their biological origins, therefore giving the adoptee greater confidence about their adoptive family status.

5.4. Presenting through a positive lens

Aside from the negotiations and navigation of challenges in everyday life, adoptive parents emphasised the praising of their adopted children, the sharing of the parent-child relationship, and how the display different family activities in order to construct adoptive family relationships. Kavita spoke at length about how her relationship with her daughter had developed since she brought her home, and pronounced their relationship to be '*very open*' in terms of her daughter's understanding of her adoptive status:

"Kavita: She knows about her adoption since the day she came home. I talked to her about the hospital story. I always talked to her like that. Just like biological parents have pictures of first day with their baby, second day with their baby and the hospital and all of that, I have pictures of the home from where I brought her etc."

Kavita brought her daughter home when she was approximately two and a half months old. Through her narrative, Kavita emphasised the role of family activities in the establishment of familial relationships. Since her daughter was just a few months old, she has taken pains to recreate and relay a hospital story in relation to the start of their life together, even though in truth she collected her daughter from the adoption centre. By forging a hospital story and presenting it as the start of their relationship, however, Kavita attempts to draw similarities with the birth story of a biological child. By doing so, she communicates or '*displays*' messages of family intimacy, parental affection, belonging, and above all legitimacy of the family relationship (Finch, 2007). Kavita's reference to day-wise pictures demonstrates an effort to build a family history that attempts to convey belonging for her daughter

and making that sense more tangible and strong. Creating such stories is understandable when viewed within a socio-cultural context that gives particular importance to biological kinship, which is characterised as real, strong and enduring. Besides, when sharing her adoptive family with others, Kavita is likely to exhibit her family as on a par with biological families and thereby seek social legitimisation for it.

Kavita's reference to '*just like biological parents*' indicates her attempts not only to present her family by legal provisions, but also to actively engage in 'doing' it through different activities as relevant in the social context (Morgan, 2011). Even though membership of an adoptive families is legally equal to that of a biological family, the qualitative character of the relationship is likely to be better defined by elements of the display. Through photographs and her hospital story, Kavita attempts to negotiate her relationship with her daughter, family members and external others in the hope that they will who recognise it as a successful family display.

Kavita's story combined with photographs creating what she intends to be a realistic makeover of the start of her daughter's life with her adoptive family, led me to reflect on Finch's (2007) work on displaying family. It tells us that people convey the meaning of relationship through social interaction in which they sometimes use tools like photographs or domestic artefacts. In the scenario described by Kavita, stories and photographs a 'vehicle' through which she communicates the family relationship and parental love (Finch, 2007, p.77). While Finch's emphasis on family display is about nurturing and developing family relationships, in the context of adoptive family practices in India, 'family display' is about legitimising adoptive family as a social institution and recognising relationships - which are challenged because of their contaminated origins. As a result, adoptive families embrace various approaches to validate their kinship. Some adoptive parents also attempted to create a narrative of affinity in order to present the family relationship. Adoptive mother, Malini, mentioned how her two daughters' personalities have brought them closer to each parent:

"Malini: you know, my younger daughter, she is extremely active. She wants to stand on your head, she wants to jump around and bounce and I can't do all of those things. My husband can.

Sangita: Okay

Malini: So she spent more time with her father just because she is a very physical kid. She needs to just rest somebody on ground and she needs to jump on people. Ummm [...] whereas my older kid, she is like a calmer. She will sit down and do her homework and do her activity. That way she can[...] she probably hang on more to me. So, I think that goes more with the child's personality."

In this narrative Malini symbolises the personalities of her daughters in a way that creates a meaningful connection between adoptive parents and their children. The activities she describes illustrate parent-child bonding, which Malini highlights by conveying a sense of mutual affection and connectedness. In drawing comparisons between her elder and younger daughters, Malini presents the construction of adoptive family relationships and the creation of kinship as a way, perhaps, of describing the process of becoming family in terms of familiarising with children, identifying their specific needs and fulfilling them. The symbolic presentation of children's personalities and activities supported by parents is likely to carry meaning associated with family, which Malini exhibited to me - an outsider - as evidence of her family's dynamics and relationships. By categorising and equating her children's personalities with their adoptive parents, she creates a narrative of resemblance. Since the adoptive family environment is more fluid than a biological family because of its ingredients and process of formation, the adoptive mother seeks to validate the relationship between parents and children. By specifically denoting '*my daughter*', '*her father*' - not to merely name the individuals, but to demonstrate an effective familial relationship. In one way, this could be understood as a 'family practice' that locates fragments of everyday life in the wider system of meanings (Morgan, 2011). Children's different ways of playing and interacting with their adoptive father and mother in daily life is 'doing family' which does not entail display (Morgan, 2011). Such regular daily activities are instantly recognisable and

would not usually be thought worthy of sharing. But Malini's way of presenting them indicates that, for her, they represent more than the simple sharing of everyday family life. Through the processes of interaction she describes, she emphasises how her family does not simply exist as a family, but how between them they have successfully established familial relationships. Throughout the interview, Malini never missed an opportunity to address her daughters with the prefix 'my' to further to strengthen the intensity of her family display. This might be because she was presenting her family to someone not known to or familiar with her particular family unit who was there specifically to listen to her adoptive family story. As a result, Malini perhaps wanted to present her family in as natural a way as possible to gain the requisite recognition and avoid any misinterpretation.

Alongside the parent-child relationship, Malini also shared her daughters' sibling bond to exhibit the relationship between adoptive siblings. By exhibiting the activities and intimacy between parent-child relationships, she challenged the notion of real and adoptive kinship and signalled how a non-conventional family can relate and function organically as a biological family. The narrative and presentation indicate that even though there are routine activities in the adoptive family which can be understood as 'doing family', adoptive parents must make an additional effort to display them in order to confirm the qualitative characters which establish them as legitimate family and through them gain recognition and validation.

Such verbal reference to activities and behaviour were also evident in adopted people's accounts articulated to present their family relationships as on a par with biological families by mirroring and comparing activities of normative familial constructs. Nisha, for example, shared a wide range of activities, interactions and characteristics of family relationships to demonstrate the bond she shared with extended family members. From a string of stories she shared to communicate and construct intimate family relationships, the following is an example:

“Nisha: My aunt once told me, when they got you na, you look like a crow. And we used to feed you so much *laad pyar se* [with lot of love and affection] [...] after six months we have to put you on diets. The paediatric put me on diet because I became a fat baby.”

In this story, Nisha emphasised the relatedness of her to others within her adoptive family. To me, this sounded like a well-rehearsed story that had been told to perhaps many others and had gradually become part of her adoptive family narrative. The story conveys multiple messages, through which Nisha seems to highlight her family's adoration and care. An intersection of age, time, gender, and generation is visible that connects her, the individual, with the institution of family and family members. By presenting the story, she attempts to confirm her membership of the family. This narrative seems to be important for her to share as it gives a message and reflects an understanding of the social world she is part of. Through it, she presents the reactions of family members in a way that illustrates their concern for her healthy growth and conveys a positive image of her adoptive kinship. The love and care shown to a newborn child is an expected and routine act in any family. However, Nisha's narrative demonstrates the significance of family practices and relationship with others which serve to construct and strengthen her sense of identity within the family and, through her presentation of them, Nisha communicates her identity as a family member to the outside world.

Being lawfully adopted does not on its own give Nisha the family membership recognised by others. Therefore, she constitutes membership via others involved in the process and displays. In both narratives, Nisha brings into focus comparisons between adoptive families and normative families. The significance becomes apparent when viewed in the light of cultural assumptions of the primacy of biological connections and the reduced status of adoptive or legal kinship. Nisha's desire to share this particular experience is therefore significant for her as the process and composition of her family is different than the hegemonic definition of family.

The family practice presented in Nisha's story is not different, but the way in which adoptive family practices convey the significance of family relationship through the eyes of the adopted person is perhaps important to understand. It may also be understood that the general perception of an adoptive family is likely to be fluid and less authentic. Presenting it within familial relationships has the potential to appear powerful and conveys a sense of intimacy. Part of the process of displaying and constructing adoptive family relations is probably an attempt to resist the cultural notions that devalue adoptive kinship, which is widely apparent in the narratives of most of the participants of the study, albeit in different contexts.

Nisha's story resonates with adoptive mother, Julie's, narrative who described her daughter as a pampered child, spoiled by the love of her grandfathers, uncles and aunts. Narrating the details of both her children's relationships, Julie described the following:

"Julie: They are growing up and they are inseparable. There is no difference. There is no difference between the way they fight, the way they talk to each other, they love each other, the way they hate each other [...] you know, its just perfect. It's just fine. It's like anybody else's. You would have to talk to me to know there may be some sort of difference."

Like Nisha's, Julie's experience illustrates the positive elements of family relationship that contribute to building the adoptive family which she tries to exhibit. By highlighting extended family members' love and affection for her children, Julie confirms her daughter's acceptance and position in the family. Her narrative indicates how acceptance and inclusion of a child within the adoptive family is a process of developing kinship and that one of way of achieving this is by talking about the child in a recognisable kin idiom (Howell, 2000). By sharing her children's bond, Julie presents her family as real as any other, perhaps as a way of establishing the legitimacy of her family's status. Through her narrative, Julie symbolically negates the differences between her biological and her adopted

children in what may be a chosen narrative shared often to describe her adoptive family. Exhibiting intimacy appears to be an established 'family practice' that takes an important place in maintaining family relationships (Morgan, 2011).

While Morgan's concept of 'family practices' emphasises the quality of relationships to deal with fluidity and complexity in modern life, in the context of adoptive family practices in contemporary India, such demonstrations are likely to have a different role. Julie's narrative is significant in relation to her adoptive family because it is intended to gain social recognition and legitimacy which might otherwise be denied because of its tainted origin. These family practices, therefore, are not to maintain and sustain the relationships, but rather to establish and legitimise kinship - which is the limitation of Morgan's concept to fit this research context. Apart from the circumstances, audience may also be important in relation to the displaying of such practices; in this case, a researcher who may well constitute an important audience for Julie to present a positive image of her non-conventional family to. Further, the continuous process and ongoing family narrative has the potential to establish adoptive family bonds as equal, and to gradually influence and gain social approval of adoptive kinship.

5.5 Summary

In this chapter, my analysis explores the ways in which adopted people and their parents' relationships - both among themselves and with family members and relevant others - are negotiated and navigated at the juncture of becoming an adoptive family. It illuminates that the social prescription of denial of contaminating origins affects adoptive family practices in contemporary India. Therefore, they engage in active negotiation and demonstration of familial relationships with others in everyday life to gain social legitimisation of kinship. This includes the working out of new kin relationships between adoptive parents and their children, and the extent to which these relationships are validated and recognised by others. As adopted people and adoptive parents navigate a terrain in which adoptive families face a lack of social legitimisation and the discomfort of lack of acceptance due to

their adoptive status, they used various strategies to establish themselves as different but equal. Clearly, it presents dilemmas for those involved and want to do their best for the child, including sometimes wanting to provide details of their origins in response to questions, and yet fearful also of the disgrace of the contaminating origin that might follow. The analysis reveals that adoptive family lives are displayed much more readily in private than in the public sphere. Hence, the relationship between adoptive parents and adoptees is achieved in the face of threats to their legitimacy as a family. While the concepts of 'displaying family' and 'family practices' have been useful to understand the dynamics of adoptive family practices in India, this analysis challenges its limitation in the new research context (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011).

Chapter 6: The evolving socio-legal process and its influence on social work practice

6.1. Introduction

The previous chapters have drawn on the accounts of adopted people and adoptive parents and how they are 'doing adoptive family' within the family set up and in social spaces. This chapter now turns explicitly to exploring how the evolving socio-legal processes involved in adoption influence the adoption process of 'doing adoptive family'. Along with adoptive parents and adopted people, this chapter brings in the voices of social workers - who play a central role in the adoption process - to understand the interactive relationship between adoption policy and social work practices. Drawing on the conceptual framework of 'doing and displaying family' (Finch, 2007 and Morgan, 2011), this chapter explores how social workers and adoptive parents negotiate their requirements while following the statutory process to practice adoptive family lives. In the light of legislative and procedural changes, the chapter gives an insight into the complexities of the day-to-day experiences of social workers and adoptive parents involved in the process of 'doing adoptive family'. It is divided into two parts: the first explores the interplay of policy and practice from the perspectives of adoptive parents, and the second follows with the experiences of social workers.

6.2. Narratives of policy change and practice dilemma

6.2.1. Adoptive parents' perspectives

Adoptive parents' experiences of engaging with adoption agencies and social workers for pre and post adoption support in the process of building adoptive family lives varied widely. In sharing their experiences, they acknowledged social workers' influence in their decision-making process, showing them to be key players in the adoption process. Of the ten sets of adoptive parents who took part in

the study, two had adopted through both the old and new systems. The change of policy and its significant impact on social work practice is reflected in those adoptive parents' accounts. Drawing on her experience, adoptive mother, Pooja, shared the following:

"Pooja: I like the theory behind the new system, that any child, anywhere, as the system decides. You just go and pick up that child. So you are only reaching the child who needs the help. So I like the theory. But practically, what you missing completely in the system, is the human element in adoption. When I adopted Veena, I had already visited the agency three times without even meeting Veena. The trustee had spent time with us. I had spent time with the social worker. We had developed a bond of trust and then they decide who would be the right child to introduce to this couple. That element gets completely missed out in the new system."

Adoptive mother, Maya, who adopted her son through the previous system but was aware of the procedural changes in the new system as she works as an adoption counsellor held similar views. In narrating her experience, she too stressed the human connection and role of the adoption centre in the old system which is lacking in the new:

"Maya: see, the old system is more of a human contact. We would go to the centre first. The counsellor would make sit us down and explain to us about the process and also tell us that look, parenting is not about social work. It's a responsibility. It's a commitment for lifelong. And you can't say today I will adopt, tomorrow I will leave the child. So she actually counsels us. And there is a human connection. I know whom I am talking to. Somebody is there to guide you through the entire process [...] but today the system is devoid of any human connection."

The revised policy Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, was introduced with a narrative of transparency to rejuvenate the adoption system;

moving the adoption process online being the fundamental change. Both Pooja and Maya's narratives highlight the role of the adoption centre and social workers in the process of 'doing' adoptive family. Pooja's reference to '*I like the theory*' suggests that the theory – the official and procedural narrative of bringing greater transparency into the adoption process - is welcomed by adoptive parents. However, she simultaneously underscored how the adoption agency is undermined in the new system. Both adoptive mothers' accounts emphasised the lack of human connection in the new system, highlighting the mental and emotional engagement required in the adoption process, alongside professional guidance. Their accounts also suggest that frequent contact through physical presence enables closeness and reliability between the two parties. In her reference to visiting the adoption centre three times before meeting her adopted daughter, Pooja mentions how spending time with the social worker and the trustee gave her the opportunity to display her preparedness and suitability to becoming an adoptive family. The direct contact with the social workers also developed the quality of relationship between the two parties. These displays also minimised the remoteness to achieving the approval of the adoption agency.

The emphasis on regular communication likely relates to the process of exploring the meaning of adoption for the would-be adoptive parents. It is also indicative of the fact that active involvement empowered adoptive parents to trust the adoption agency to develop an appropriate. These narratives suggest that both the adoptive mothers were acutely aware of the significance of the adoption agency and social workers and their accessibility with regard support during the pre-adoption process. The role of the adoption agency indicates that those working for them have the potential to significantly influence prospective adoptive parents positively and in so doing ensure they are on course to become adoptive families.

However, non-cooperation of social workers was also evident from the analysis, which I have discussed elsewhere. Maya's narrative highlighted the competence and expertise of the adoption professionals in resolving ambivalence throughout the pre-adoption process. Likewise, familiarity with agency professionals developed

through meetings and other interaction appears to be an avenue through which potential adoptive parents can display that their commitment and preparation towards becoming adoptive parents is in line with expectations.

Furthermore, Maya's reference to '*I know whom I am talking to*' illustrated that she felt she was speaking to a competent authority capable of guiding the adoption process and addressing any adoption-related apprehensions she might have had. Regular communication and meetings were viewed as therapeutic, which was perhaps felt to be critical for would-be adoptive parents. It was particularly for addressing their concerns as part of the home preparation phase in which family members are consulted and involved in this alternative path for forming a family. Both Pooja and Maya felt that the pre-adoption period was a time when prospective adoptive parents are perhaps feeling most anxious about their decision. It is also a period during which they may find it hardest to be open about their feelings in such a way as to have their anxieties appropriately addressed. So narrating oneself as an adoptive parent requires, testing this through the mind of the social worker. It could, perhaps, be said that the social worker contains the anxiety that legitimises the scary new status (Ferguson et al., 2020). Relying on the social worker's mind becomes relying on one's own mind which eventually leads to crystallisation of the decision to adopt.

An additional factor to consider from Pooja's narrative is that an objective of the new system seems to be streamlining of the adoption process and a move away from a parent-centric approach in which parents choose a child, towards a child-centric approach that ensures every adoptable child gets a home. By saying '*you just go and pick the child*', Pooja indicates that prospective parents were less sensitive to the needs of the child and more concerned about their own requirements. By choosing a child according to their preference, all the children who didn't fall into the desirable categories were deprived of the chance of a home. The parent-centric approach of the old system was also visible in Maya's narrative, who provided more detail when she said:

“Maya: It was extremely parent-centric. Parents would come and reject the child. No, there is a scar on the face, scar on the head, you are too dark, you are too this [...] and reject the child. So the pile up of children waiting would increase and the child will grow old and the institute will [...] so it doesn’t happen. We would go, a child is identified for you. If you don’t like the child, they would again tell, okay, come later and look at the child and another child. They will keep doing that. I think there was a limit to three.”

Although Maya formerly expressed an appreciation of the old system which enabled better human connection, here she voices her disappointment in the parent-centric approach of the old system which saw children rejected on the basis of physical ‘flaws’ conveying the cultural norms and biases attached to parents’ preferences. Her phrase *‘you are too this’* reflects her struggle to define the mindset of some prospective parents and also the notion that such behaviour is not acceptable. Her account indicates the flexibility of the previous system, combined with the insensitive attitudes of some prospective adoptive parents which she finds hard to accept. The repeated rejection of potential adoptees is likely to create safeguarding and welfare issues, as they remain ever longer at an adoption centre.

One of the objectives of the new system is to curtail the former parents-centric approach. However, what is significant is that, irrespective of safeguarding issues, the system and the adoption professionals, in positions of authority seem fully aware of which ‘family practices’ were acceptable within the socio-cultural environment and accordingly fulfilling the requirements (Morgan, 1996; Morgan, 2011). In comparison, the new system which restricts human connection limits the opportunities for display. Adoptive parents suggest that adoptive family lives should be enacted directly – and before they are legitimised. However, under the new system with its limited interactions, adoption professionals can have only limited awareness as to how each adoptive family will be created. For other adoptive parents, however, the requirements were different.

Malini adopted two of children through the old and the new systems. She preferred the new system because of its transparency:

“Malini: Overall I think the new CARA centralised system is better. I had very positive experience with both systems. The older one as well as the new one. The older one, I think I had a good experience because the adoption agency was very good. I think I had a good experience with the older system because it just happened and we just got lucky. In the new system, the reason I like the process is that because I felt it is quite transparent.”

Unlike Pooja and Maya, Malini clearly does not feel that human connection is crucial for adoption. Although she had a positive experience under the old system, she felt it did not have a sufficiently formulated or structured approach and that rather things came together almost accidentally. She attributes her positive experience with the old system to the particular adoption agency she went through. By saying *‘we just got lucky’* she indicates her belief that adoption agencies cannot necessarily be relied upon to meet prospective adoptive parents’ expectations. The statement is further strengthened by her comment about the helpful transparency of the new system. Transparency of the adoption process, which is a procedural aspect, seems to be a critical concern for Malini. It highlights the complexity of the old mechanism that was perhaps controlled more by the adoption agencies leaving prospective parents with limited scope to play their role. Sharing her experience with the new system in the adoption of her second child, Malini explained:

“Malini: When I adopted my second child, I said I will adopt a child that will not be easily adopted by somebody else. I know that sounds strange. I know that [...] what’s the point if some children always sitting in children’s home and not getting adopted and those are the children should be highlighted. So in the second time I picked up slightly higher age group. And I was okay with special need adoption and all of that. What I like about the system is that I did not have to go and find an agency. We could just sign up online and we could give whatever [...] like fill out the form, specified the criteria etc. and then we were open to the

child from anywhere in India. So that's why it does not make any sense to me that in older system you have to register in an agency somewhere. If I am okay with the child from Haryana [...] as I am from Tamilnadu or I am from Odisha why force me to register in one agency? So that's why I like the new system better because we just can adopt from anywhere in India. And you know, we just got matched with our daughter and it was so amazing that the social worker did our home study and as soon as our profile got active, we got matched with our daughter in four days."

In this narrative, Malini highlights a number of facets of the adoption process, as well as her own views about her second adoption. For instance, she portrays an image of herself as a saviour who is sensitive to the plight of children living in adoption centres whose characteristics are less preferred by the average prospective adoptive parent. By saying 'average' I refer to what she sees as a large number of prospective parents whose preferences include factors such as age, appearance, skin colour and physical ability, which together put them in a category of 'young, healthy, perfect-looking baby' (Bhargava, 2005). Her reason to adopt beyond these selective categories appears to convey a message to other adoptive and prospective parents to be less choosy and more open in their preferences. By considering a special needs child from a higher age group, the adoption process was also much swifter, another factor she was keen to highlight.

Malini's account suggests that children with minor physical disabilities that can be corrected with appropriate medical aid are also placed in the 'special needs' category and therefore do not attract prospective parents' attention who prefer a healthy and physically able child. Malini's narrative illustrates that the new system, which enables option from '*anywhere*' in the country, is more convenient than having to visit individual adoption centres. More than just operationally advantageous, '*anywhere*' indicates the 'Indian-ness' of the adoptable child under the new law, i.e. Indian children adopted by Indian parents in what can be seen as a nationalisation of the process and all those involved in it. In the previous system, parental discrimination in child selection perhaps undermined the sentiment of Indian-ness. By restricting adoption to within set geographical boundaries, the

former system didn't allow prospective parents to adopt from anywhere in the country. Therefore, the increased Indian-ness offered by the new system could be seen as a step towards mitigating regional prejudice as an aspect of parental preference.

Malini also seemed to appreciate the flexibility and digitised aspects of the new system that negated the requirement for physical presence. Her reference to '*we could give whatever [...] like fill out the form, specified the criteria etc.*' in relation to the new online procedure, seemed to make little of the necessity to meet the relevant criteria and otherwise carry minimal significance. Malini's narrative discards the influence and involvement of the adoption agency in the child's life, and suggests that the adoption centre is purely a medium through which prospective parents can connect with adoptable children. A power dynamic is also reflected in her narrative. The new system appears to give more space and power to prospective parents in the making of their decisions than the earlier one did. Malini's view, in contrast as it is to Pooja and Maya's views, might be attributed to her position as an adoption activist who perhaps has a specific desire to present adoptive parents as influential stakeholders within the adoption process who are not reliant on social workers to make decisions on their behalf. It may also indicate that 'others' beyond the adoption agency are more relevant to Malini who intends to send a message in her display of parenting an older, special needs child.

6.2.2 Social workers' perspectives on policy change

Adoptive parents' narratives viewed alongside social workers' give the impression of discordant voices with competing and contradictory narratives – largely in agreement with transparency, but not in the process of implementation. Whilst social workers acknowledged that the new legislative changes have given better recognition to adoption as a programme, in terms of its legitimacy and authenticity the space for professional discretion has been severely limited. Social workers, Ajay and Leela, explained this in more detail:

“Ajay: Yes, it is changed. Earlier when talked about adoption, with officials at government level, the response was [...] what? what adoption? Just like someone gives and someone takes. Like buying, selling.

Leela: completely buying and selling

Now it's a legitimate work of the government. Now we can tell people that this is a work for rehabilitation of children. One of the best programs. It brings openness. Then the legal system is online. You can keep a track. No one can say anything. And also those who are adopting children, for any problems they ask the information online, they can ask any authority for information.”

Within what was a joint interview, Leela was the more senior of the two -in fact, the most senior social worker in the state with more than three decades of adoption experience. Ajay, a male social worker, has been a manager of an adoption programme for more than twelve years. Leela wanted Ajay to join the interview as he deals with the day-to-day activities of the adoption programme.

Their combined narrative suggest three distinct changes in the adoption programme that are, in fact, interrelated. Firstly, they refer to a new recognition at government level of adoption indicating that it is now unequivocally a statutory matter. They also indicate change in the official adoption narrative; unlike before when there was an element of shame attached to marketisation, that is no longer the dominant narrative. The changing narrative also seems to have enhanced social workers' professional position within government departments. Secondly, they mention the enhanced transparency of the new statutory adoption regime. And thirdly, in their view the centralisation of the new adoption procedure removes some of the former control held by the adoption agencies. Their narrative indicates that the new statutory changes have given adoption a make-over which has in turn given it a new level of acceptance - particularly within government circles.

Ajay's reference to the response from people in the Government suggests not only that adoption policy is an instrument for changing family practices, but that it has the potential to endow the new family form with a degree of legitimacy and respectability. It also implies that adoption under the previous system which was primarily managed by the adoption agencies, was considered to be somehow devious in its lack of transparency. The new system seems to have enabled changes of perspective by bringing openness into the process whereby information is no longer limited to adoption agencies, but can also be accessed by prospective adoptive parents. Ajay seemed to emphasise that, although the legitimacy of the programme hasn't changed, the new process has enhanced its stature making adoption professionals more confident about their roles.

Although relatively less experienced as adoption professionals than Ajay and Leela, Priya and Sheela held similar views:

"Priya: We are happy with the new system. There is transparency. Parents can know about the process and how much they need to spend.

Sangita: Do you say they didn't know it before?

Priya: No. Means, if you have registered and someone else came and offered more money, they would give.

Sheela: Yes. So people also think they can adopt by paying money. There are thousand such cases. Many people consult me to adopt a child. Since I am a nurse and work fulltime in adoption, many people approach me that we would give you whatever money you want."

Priya and Sheela both had brief experiences of working with the earlier system and echoed the transparency narrative, particularly in the context of financial transactions which were sometimes a feature of the old system. One of the key reasons behind that was the authority and influence adoption agencies had with regard to adoption decisions. With the entire adoption process now online,

adoption agencies have limited scope to influence decisions and therefore to benefit financially from that influence according to prospective adoptive parents' paying capacity. Both social workers clearly felt that decisions motivated by money hindered opportunities both for prospective parents - who are not so economically privileged - and adoptees. The improved openness of the new system is compatible with the views of prospective adoptive parents and fairer than the earlier system. Adoption under the new system reflects as an attempt to convey the political change and moral development with the new narrative of transparency. The improved openness and transparency of the new system also perhaps elevates the ethical and professional positions of social workers in the eyes of public.

In terms of the other benefits of the new system, Leela highlights the operational modifications that have impacted professional practice in relation to discretion by social workers as well as the wellbeing of the adoptable children.

"Leela: But child's emotional upbringing, child's relationship with the adoptive parents, in the case of older children [...] it has very bad effect. Earlier when prospective parents used to come, we see their colour and then see the child. The reason is if the colour does not match, while going out, or going to market, people may say, probably it's not their child. Earlier all these things we used to do. Agency had a responsibility. We allowed parents to mingle with the child. To hold the child, adore them, to spend time with them. That is not there now."

In this narrative, Leela seems to be concerned about the quality of commitment of some prospective adoptive parents related to the process of building an adoptive family in which adoption agencies played an important role. The former process of interaction and engagement between adoption agency, would-be adoptive parent and adoptable child aided a higher degree of stability and social integration. Her concern indicates that 'doing' adoptive family is a gradual process which starts before the child formally becomes part of its new adoptive family. In the previous system, the adoption agency had a larger responsibility in facilitating collaboration between the child and the prospective adoptive parents. Leela suggests that

building the parent-child relationship is dynamic and transactional and requires investment of proper time. The previous process provided adoption agencies with the space to assess the needs and expectations of prospective parents, as well as the authority to make decisions on behalf of adoptable children. Through her account, she indicates that prospective adoptive parents' 'display' need to be successful to obtain social workers' acceptance and approval of their appropriateness for parenthood.

Leela's reference to *'people may say probably it's not their child'* signals the adoption agencies' views of 'doing' adoptive family from the perspective of relevant others beyond immediate family members. What others may think about the adoptive family is likely to be a critical consideration for her as a social worker. Her reference also suggests that, despite the legal process, social workers are concerned about the social legitimacy of adoptive kinship. Her emphasis on matching indicates a means by which to avoid the discomforts that can arise through the everyday practice of adoptive family lives. Simultaneously, it signals that in order to gain acceptance, resemblance is required to replicate the 'natural' family form. In the absence of matching practices in the current system, social workers are apprehensive about the quality of relationship between adoptive parent and adoptee which might be considered fragile and risky.

The account seems to focus on the 'relational practices' between prospective adoptive parents and social workers involved in 'doing' adoptive kinship (MacDonald, 2015). It indicates that, as a social worker, Leela's role is both gatekeeper and supporter – to assess the suitability of the prospective parents and offer them suitable preparatory advice for adoptive parenthood. Under the new system, she seems to feel a loss of space and authority and to suggest that the old system allowed more opportunity for professional discretion. Nevertheless, she also acknowledges the potential for deceit in the old adoption system and that the new has more robust procedural mechanisms.

The annoyance in Leela's voice clearly indicates her feelings about the limitations of the new system in terms of adoption agencies' involvement as well as the way in which it risks the wellbeing of the adopted child. Even though social workers play their parts as prescribed in the revised norms, they seem to adjust alongside adoptive family members. Nor do they seem to adopt the new operational ways openly and unequivocally, but rather seek to undermine them. Her account also signifies that Leela tries to claim and display that social workers' sense of responsibility and obligation towards adopted children and adoptive families are compromised by what has become a mechanical and centralised process. More significantly, however, is the power imbalance reflected in Leela's account, through which she implies that control has shifted from the social worker to the state.

6.2.3 The shifting power dynamics and ethical dilemmas of social work practice

The social workers further elaborated how the reduced scope of human interaction has affected the adoption process in the new system:

Ajay: What I always say that the computerized system is matching a human life. But it's not that the child is getting only a home. They will have their extended family, the society. The connecting questions parents want to ask, rather what we make them speak out, or release their concerns. That's not happening now. They are not getting that scope. They are scared. If I say no [.]

Leela: They are thinking, if I say no to this child, I won't get another child

Ajay: Yes! They accept the child with fear and uncertainty [.] in confusion. Whether to accept or not"

The above excerpt demonstrates how the changes in the new system are focused too much on the operational aspects, rather than on the care needs of the adoptable child and prospective parents. It also illustrates that pre-adoption preparation and

emotional readiness for adoptive parenthood cannot be evaluated through a purely mechanical process and that social workers' subjective evaluations are essential to this process. In these social workers' views, the mechanical process limits prospective adoptive parents' scope for raising their anxieties, potentially contributing to a scenario where an adoptive family is built on uncertainty, apprehension and ambivalence.

Elsewhere in her narrative, Leela mentions that the majority of prospective parents are childless, and therefore that the pressure of not getting another opportunity to adopt can lead to them making hasty decisions, which might turn out unfavourably for the child. The new procedure seems to be viewed by these social workers as a controlling intervention by the Indian government and an attempt to shift from one mode to another for purely ideological reasons, i.e. a mechanical process which dictates that Indian children should have Indian parents, whilst refusing adequate provision of space and time for deliberation by potential adoptive parents and professionals. The social workers' narratives suggest a great deal of uncertainty and ambiguity around the new process of 'doing' adoptive family, whilst nevertheless following the new procedures. The new system appears to be a 'compeller' of decision making, rather than an 'enabler' conveying that certain displays are compulsory and thereby force the mechanism to function.

Further, by stating that *'they accept the child with fear and uncertainty'*, Ajay expresses his apprehension about the instability and fragility of the process of 'doing' adoptive family under the current procedure. By stressing that the relational practices and interactions involved in the process of doing adoptive family which are led by the adoption agency ensure a strong and enduring adoptive kinship. What the social workers deem to be 'legitimate' family displays, simply cannot be substituted by a mechanical process. The narratives reflect that, in the previous system, both the adoption agency and social workers had important roles in authoring and approving the narrative of adoptive family lives, and that the authority and power of the adoption agency used to control the process is missing from the present system. Formation of adoptive families in changing political, socio-

cultural times is dominated by the state narrative that has withdrawn authorship from social workers. This relocation of power and authority appears to be a source of great annoyance to Ajay and Leela.

The social workers' accounts also illustrate how the current system is designed to maximise the numbers of adoptions without considering various social and cultural factors which can negatively impact both child and family. This approach is perhaps an attempt by the Indian government to reframe the legal rights of children within a narrative that states that 'every child has the right to family' and therein impose a radically new way of thinking and practicing adoption (JJ Act, 2015, Chapter VIII). The welfare interests and rights of the child are likely to be the key reasons for promoting adoption through a mechanical process.

Emphasising the role of the adoption agency and its impact on the adopted child, Ajay added that the new system had not only reduced the degree of involvement of social workers, but also curtailed the timeframe required to prepare the child for a smooth transition from adoption centre to adoptive family. By sharing an example of adoption of older children, Ajay explained:

"Ajay: An older child who is there in the institute for 7-8 years, they share the bond with some [...] may be with their peers, caretaker, aaya [*nanny*], nurse, or the office staff over 8 years, starting from washing the hands till going to bed. From the voice they know who is their in the room [...] *Apa* [*refer to older girls with respect*] or *Maa* [*Mother, the founder of the organization is being called as Maa by all children in the organisation*]. They know the atmosphere so well. They feel at ease. When they will leave the place, they should be prepared that they are leaving this place forever for a new set up. That is a big moment. To bring that feelings, understanding [...] it requires certain time and process."

Besides the critical role of the adoption agency presented, Ajay highlights the relationship between the adoption centre and the child. By bringing children into the picture, he demonstrates the involvement and influence of social workers and

other care-givers in children's lives. By stating *'they know the atmosphere so well'* he emphasises how the relationships with the adults they interact most regularly with are developed throughout the children's formative years and how that needs to be carefully considered and managed when placing older children within adoptive families. By underscoring the relationship of adoptable children with social workers and the adoption organisation, he highlights three key aspects. Firstly, the emotional wellbeing of children and how this can be impacted by inadequate preparation and thereby challenge the stability of the adoptive family. Secondly, that not only social workers but also parents and children are having to change their adoptive family practices and narratives under the new procedural framework. Thirdly, by exhibiting the relationship between children and social workers, and the environment in which children live, he attempts to present a positive picture of his profession in a context where the function of adoption agencies is controversial.

Elaborating further on the details of the new system and its procedures and timeframes, the excerpt below illustrates how the changes have affected day to day duties of social workers, according to whom the changes have not only limited the scope of their involvement in the adoption process, but also undermined their role which is reflected in prospective adoptive parents' approaches towards them:

"Ajay: In the new system, technically you are given 48 hours and 20 days time to confirm the decision, after the child is matched to your profile. Suppose a person is coming from Mumbai, he comes straight with his mood thinking that he will show the confirmation, see the child and then take the child. But is the child prepared to go? No. Preparedness of a 6 months child, a 2 years old child and a 5 years old child is different. So the children do not want to leave us. When they will shift, they will shift permanently. For that they need time [...] they need to meet the adoptive parents a couple of times before leaving. Go out with the parents to the park or to the restaurant. There should be some inclusion of feelings, thoughts of adoptive parents with the child to develop the bond between them. Then the child is mentally prepared to leave the place. But what happens technically, the parents come and say, we have come for this purpose. Fix up the meeting tomorrow [...] We have the flight day after. I want to take the child and go'. So the matching is not successful in this process."

Ajay's account illustrates how the stipulated timeframe of the new system is problematic in multiple ways. It seems to suggest that once a child is linked to prospective adoptive parents online, the relevant adoption agency contacts the prospective adoptive parents for confirmation of their decision to adopt within 48 hours, a decision which is based on a photograph and whatever information has been made available online. The potential adoptive parents must then visit the adoption centre within 20 days to complete the required pre-adoption process, usually travelling from another state than that in which the adoption agency is located. After completion of the procedural requirements, the parents take the child into foster care until the legal process of adoption is completed within the following 12-24 months.

Ajay's narrative suggests that the newly centralised process has changed the dynamics of the relationships between the adoption centre, social workers and prospective adoptive parents. It is likely that prospective adoptive parents will view the role of the adoption agency merely as a transitory residence for the child, rather than the place where the child has spent a significant and important part of their life, which is reflected by the despair in his voice. The emphasis on the importance of investing effort - in terms of time, money and emotion - reflects the subjective evaluations of social workers as displays of parental commitment and their readiness for 'doing adoptive family'. And simultaneously, their control in the creation of the adoptive family. The new policy narrative of adoptive parents which sees them as more active agents in the forming of adoptive family lives, enables more children to be adopted more speedily and shifts the power balance away from the agency and social workers, a move directed by government and seemingly opposed by social workers.

The above described procedural changes have heavily disrupted the power and authority of adoption agencies and social workers – by the state and also by adoptive parents. This loss of control seems to make social workers feel vulnerable in their professional practice and indicates how power is not only anchored at macro level by the changing policy narrative, but is also reflected in micro-practices

in the way it operates in everyday professional practice and relationships. The changes also signify that the state sought to design a model of adoptive family lives that would replace the former professionally managed process with a mechanical approach with asymmetric power dynamics. While the professionals talk of love and bonding milieu being imperative in 'doing' adoptive family, the Government seems more interested in empowering Indian adoptive parents through its new procedures to get more children adopted more quickly.

Delving deeper to understand more about prospective adoptive parents' expectations from the new system, aside from the power dynamics Priya shared some interesting details about how Indian parents generally prefer to adopt younger children - ideally within the 0-2 years age range. She has personally facilitated the adoption of five children over the age of five years old, and just one with a physical disability. Of the five older children, four were placed overseas and one within a domestic adoption. However, Priya had a completely different narrative for children adopted by foreign nationals:

Priya: "Four of our children above five years are placed in intercountry adoption. Two have gone to Spain, one Canada and one USA. They are all doing well. The parents send us photographs. You know [...] they are very open. They are very interested to adopt. Even though the child has a disability, they will accommodate. One of our children had some complication. He had a joint problem. The adoptive parents were aware of that. They adopted happily. They have given him medical treatments. He is improving. We have no such cases in in-country adoption."

Her experience illuminates the differences in the preferences and expectations of domestic adoptees and those from overseas. The word '*open*' indicates that adoptive parents from European and Northern American countries are better prepared and therefore able to accept a child without pre-conditions and expectations. Priya underscored how intercountry adoptive parents placed the child's interests before their own, particularly with regard to the adoption of older children. Their

readiness to provide medical treatment suggests that these adoptive parents' intent is to ensure a secure and safe life for the adopted child which they lacked in institutional care. Priya's use of the word '*open*' is better understood when viewed in terms of the acts of domestic adoptive parents. She shared a number of examples where Indian parents expressed a desire for the conducting of additional medical tests for adoptable children which are not permitted within standard statutory procedure - irrespective of whether the child appeared to be medically fit. Disallowance of these tests invariably led to cancellation of the adoption.

Priya's narrative suggests that the importance of timeframe and rapport building between prospective adoptive parents and child, emphasised by Ajay, is contradicted in cases of intercountry adoption. Although Ajay and Priya illustrated similar examples of adoption disruption, both their examples involved children placed with Indian parents in India signalling that disruption is high only in domestic adoption and primarily in the case of older children. Ajay's emphasis on the need for adequate time in the pre-adoption process would seem particularly relevant in this context. However, the fact that such disruption does not seem to be relevant in relation to intercountry adoption suggests that intercountry adoptive parents have access to better pre-adoption preparation and post-adoption support and services in their respective countries.

Referring back to Ajay's account with regard prospective parents' haste, the indication of their unpreparedness does not convey a successful display in the construction of adoption kinship (Jones and Hackett, 2011). It would seem that in the earlier system, the would-be adoptive family display enacted during the frequent visits demonstrated their way of belonging to a new community in which the adoption agency played a central role - albeit an obligatory collaboration. In the absence of what might be convincing enactments and asymmetric power dynamics, the new system seems to reflect an enforced norm which aims to formalise the operational process whilst overlooking the significance of human relationships. Exploration of these narratives illustrates how social workers demonstrate that

adoption, for them, is more than a rehabilitation programme. Instead, it is a process through which to create a new permanent family for both child and parents.

The social workers also acknowledged that the stringent procedural requirements are not always preferred by the prospective adoptive parents, who do not want to go through the accompanying lengthy process.

“Sheela: one thing I must share that there are cases where people come to us to learn about adoption process [...] how to take a child home. Suppose there is a lower middle class family, like a small business person or a farmer, who is interested in adopting a child. There is no guideline in the government about the monthly or annual income of a person who can adopt. When they come to us and we tell them in details about the process and documents required, they get discouraged. Because they think they have to arrange so many documents, follow such a long process [...] then also it won't happen immediately. They ask if we get the papers ready, how soon will we get the child? We tried our best to counsel them, so that they don't lose their hope. Sometimes we also lie that you do the registration first, don't worry. You will get the child in 5-6 months. But not many people turn up.”

Sheela shared this account in the context of her experience with the new adoption process. She underscored how the exclusive nature of the new policy made it applicable only to a particular section of the Indian population who have the appropriate access as well as resources. Simultaneously, she highlights how, in reality, adoption is a realistic alternative option to doing family for people with wide range of socio-economic profiles, but that the bureaucratic process was not sufficiently equipped to accommodate their needs. It seems they could be qualified in theory but not in practice. The class difference reflected in the new policy cannot be overlooked. It forces social workers to face ethical dilemmas in order to maintain a balance when dealing with prospective adoptive parents at the intersection of professional obligations and personal values. The issue of class also indicates that the state's promotion of adoption through transitional legal and procedural change

targets a particular section of society who care about such things, are equipped to access the online platform, and meet the statutory requirements in terms of pre-adoption preparation and post-adoption care without having to rely on the adoption agency or social workers. Perhaps this strategy is intended to bridge the socio-cultural vulnerability of adopted children by placing them with families with higher socio-economic profiles which Indian adoption policy aims to build.

6.3 Summary

The evidence presented here suggests that there is a diverse response to the new procedural changes of adoption. Both adoptive parents and social workers are in agreement with the new narrative which brings greater transparency to those involved in the new statutory adoption regime. Recognition at government level and changes in the official adoption narrative present adoption unequivocally as a statutory matter. However, reduced human interaction is highlighted as an unfavourable element of the change. Furthermore, centralisation of the process means that it is no longer controlled by the adoption agencies creating new power dynamics which have become an integral part of the change. Procedural changes appear to be driven by the Government in an effort to relocate the power structure to maximise the number of adoptions by placing as many children as possible without regard for social and cultural dynamics. The changes also evoke an impression of an agenda around Indian-ness to maximise in-country adoption statistics via a mechanical process.

These findings illustrate that adoption, which had formerly been regarded as a private way of doing family, would now be viewed as a more public affair. Under the influence of the Government's imposed narrative, the process of doing adoptive family is surrounded by a great deal of uncertainty that has the potential to affect children's wellbeing. The data also suggests that the new policy has undermined the specialised skills of social workers by limiting their professional discretion through a digitised medium, and created distance between adoptive parents and social workers. Viewed altogether, adoption promoted under the new policy seems to lack

crucial understanding of the subjective experiences of all the actors involved, and force social workers, adoptive parents and children to adapt their adoptive family practices and narratives as they are asked to do by the state.

Chapter 7: Thinking through the theoretical lens

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I draw on the evidence presented in previous chapters to answer the research questions focusing on the issues raised in this data set, primarily how can the subjective experiences of adoptees and adoptive parents be understood theoretically? Viewed through a theoretical lens it is not straightforward and I have struggled to move on from the explorations of the previous three chapters into theoretical interpretation.

This study is distinct in its intention to illuminate how adoptive family lives are practiced in contemporary India at a time of urgent and contentious policy change. The analytical framing of findings has been informed by the sociological construct of 'family practice' (Morgan, 1996) and 'family display' (Finch, 2007). It provides insights into the process of 'doing' adoption within the unique and radically changing socio-legal framework of India to create a legitimate version of kinship. This approach to framing and analysing the process of adoptive family formation enables legal principles and policy narratives themselves to be scrutinised. The accounts of the experiences of those involved in making adoptive family life work 'in practice' have enabled an effective evaluation of policy principles and adoption agency expectations under Indian law. The overarching social scientific stance that emerged from the narratives is the idea of family as practiced and developed through doing and displaying, rather than by way of a set template to follow. In this chapter, I mobilise ways of thinking through theories that discuss the process of doing and displaying adoptive family lives in more detail, as illuminated through participants' accounts.

A consistent theme that emerged from the analysis was that 'doing' adoptive family lives in India is hard work and consists of two essential parts. In the first place,

doing adoption itself is tough and involves challenging the dominant cultural notion of family that is congruent with lineage, caste, and religion; facing the social and emotional threats that question social legitimacy of family, and then navigating those challenges in everyday life. Through this process, adoptive family practices do and display to gain social legitimacy, regardless of the legal affirmation of family. Secondly, narrating the hard work of doing adoptive family lives to a researcher brings all of this into focus. Even though most participants were engaged in various activities to support adoption practice, some found it hard emotionally and socially to tell their stories publicly, despite their pioneer roles.

My overall theoretical framing is that adoptive family lives are being done and displayed, rather than simply done to fit a legal template. Specifically, I have shown that making the doing process more public by speaking to a researcher about it is hard work too, and that has been a novel aspect of the research. The accounts of those who live and practice adoptive family lives in India explored in this thesis provide important opportunities to engage with literature from social psychology, sociology, and psychosocial disciplines. The discussion chapter draws together the central themes: (i) Hard work - Practicing adoptive family within discomforts and challenges, (ii) Everyday negotiation in adoptive family practices, and (iii) adoption reformation – an entanglement of power and powerlessness

7.2 ‘Hard work’ – Practicing adoptive family within discomforts and challenges

A significant dynamic explored in the data was the emergence of the theme of ‘hard work’. In this study, my analysis suggests that participants those who embarked on doing family through adoption felt that the legitimacy of their adoptive family was at stake. Although the law has sanctioned adoptive family lives and policy, and professional agency practices regularise an official mode of family formation, in day-to-day living the legitimacy of the legal and policy narrative cannot be taken as given. Adoptive families continuously strive to achieve social legitimacy by

displaying how family activities involve active work to establish the relationships that signify biological connections (Jones & Hackett, 2011). This process involves continuous work to negotiate the societal prejudices they face in their new family setup. The analysis suggests that adoptive family lives are practiced/displayed through love and loving relationships. However, this is the only part of most of the life stories of adoption presented in the research, and it needs to be viewed from different angles. Firstly, the adoptive identity of the child is compromised by their discredited heritage in an unequal caste society. Secondly, adoptive parents wish to protect their children from the realities that may cause them discomfort. This means that ultimately adopted children cannot always be fully part of practicing and displaying their adoptive (family) identity.

By expressed their discomforts, participants invalidated the hurtful comments and insults they sometimes attract in overt and also subtle ways which personify inferiority. Through this personification, adopted people are made to internalise the inadequacy they experience as a result of discriminations. Such inequality is often linked to caste, skin colour, religion, absence of blood ties, and a tainted birth history, all of which create a stereotypical image of the adopted child that I explored in the first analysis chapter.

Parker & Aggleton (2003) argue that social discrimination takes shape, strengthens, and reproduces in specific contexts of culture and power concerns with social structures, institutions and classifications. Even within relatively affluent and educated families who belong to higher strata of social structures and institutions, there is power imbalance and inequalities between adoptive families and others which manifest in negative behaviours and prejudices. Weistra and Luke (2017) suggest how prejudicial perception leads certain members of society to have negative beliefs towards adoption which is reflected in their behaviour and makes adoptive families feel marginalised and devalued (Kline et.al., 2006). It also illustrates which kinds of family relationships are desirable and which should be avoided in terms of domination and marginalisation (McTernan, 2017). In essence, prejudicial perception means that adoptive life is marginalised and those who are

part of conventional families formed by marriage and birth do not fully recognise the existence of an adopted person (Fisher, 2003; Finch, 2007; Almack, 2008; Garber and Grotevant, 2015). The social norms that govern the recognition of family relate to birth where an individual inherits the caste, religious beliefs and alliances of their parents and are also granted membership of their family.

My data and analysis suggest that recognition by others is vitally important for adoptive families to fully establish their own family relationships in a social context. Although the law, legal policy and professional agencies formally recognise adoptive family lives, the pioneer participants who took part in this study and are doing and displaying adoptive family in a dialectical space in which they are included and excluded at the same time, have had to continually negotiate adoptive kin relationships to justify that the relations and meanings attached to them are indeed similar to biological ones (Weeks et al., 2004). Therefore, there is a continued effort to gain recognition of their chosen family that is different to the conventional family (Finch, 2007).

McLaughlin (2015) argues that certain families seek to establish and yet struggle to get recognised because of pre-existing narratives that assert they are of little or no value because of their association with troubling social categories. Lawler (2002) claims that cultural recognition is significant for families deemed to have values, lives, and pasts which fall outside acceptability. These arguments resonate with a common feature of the stories shared by the young adult adoptees and adoptive parents which gives a dense description of their work to establish legitimacy of adoptive family relationships as 'family'. This was the case regardless of the timing and legal natures of adoption, as multiple laws govern adoption in India which constitutes a cultural environment which values biological kinship - which comes with fixed attributes of caste, class and religion over social kinship - but which has also legally sanctioned parental responsibilities that completely remove birth parents' responsibilities in favour of adoptive parents'. Within the dichotomy of cultural and legal context, adoptive families strive to find a new way of 'doing family' to achieve legitimacy in the face of competing discourses (Morgan, 2011).

This echoes Jones (2009) claim that while the legal process creates a new family-like structure, it alone cannot create family in the eyes of others. Therefore, adoptive families work out various family practices to fit into the conventional framework that requires comparatively more effort to gain legitimacy for their chosen family.

Weeks et al. (2004) suggest that the existence of a chosen family needs to gain social acceptance from external audiences before they can be fully operational. They also emphasise the importance of the quality of the interaction with others in one's chosen family to be recognised as having a 'family' like anyone else. This claim is consistent with my analysis, suggesting that adoptive parents are likely to maintain relationships with people - such as extended family members, neighbours and friends - who support their adoptive family and accept the child. They interpret acceptance through different social interactions, such as those visiting the adoptive family to welcome the child and presenting gifts and showing affection towards the child. These activities define a quality of relationship and convey acceptance, as well as an acknowledgement of adoptive family relationships.

Finch (2007) argues that social interaction is one of the aspects of 'doing family' through which the nature of relationships is established and reinforced through a sense that relevant others are supporting the social meanings thereby established (p.75). However, what is peculiar in my participants' cases is that adoptive parents are vigilant towards the quality of interaction of related others with their children. As adoptive mother, Malini, shared, she puts more effort into watching the reactions of others interacting with her children than she does in building relationships herself. This essentially passive process involves deeply personal and internal work, and is constantly in process to make sense of the everyday acts of relevant others. So, gaining social acceptance is hard work that is carried out under constraints where cultural practice acknowledges that family relationships are based on blood-ties. Finch (2007) and Morgan's (2011) concepts provide a lens through which to identify and describe the important elements of doing adoptive family lives. However, the rigorous intensity involved to carry out the process of doing and

displaying family lives - which I termed as 'hard work' - is not explicitly defined, and is a shortfall in the core accounts of their work.

Alongside the issue of legal recognition of adoptive family as a conventional family, some level of acceptance of child and parenthood is likely to be significant for adoptive parents as illuminated from the analysis. When I unpacked adoptive family practices, my findings showed that adoptive family lives are practiced and displayed through love and loving relationships. Families of choice, as McCarthy and Edwards (2011) argue, are based on values of love and intimacy, which stretch beyond the conventional family. However, these bonds are not automatically recognised as kin outside of the legal process. Such families are therefore 'achieved' rather than 'ascribed' sets of relationships, that is, they are acquired personally and socially through choice and effort, in contrast to the relational status assigned at birth (McCarthy and Edwards, 2011). The analysis illuminated a couple of reasons why display is important. Firstly, adoptive identity is often compromised by tainted heritage in an unequal society divided by caste, class, religion and gender. Scholars who studied family life and identity, highlighted a link between social processes and relationships and between interpersonal intimacy and personal identity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Vignoles, 2017).

Weeks et al. (2001) in their study on intimacy amongst non-heterosexuals (as the authors' referred) argued that relationships within 'families of choice' are located within a network of commitment and support. According to them, the essential character of 'chosen' families' is that they are actively created as a positive step to underpin lifestyle, which affirms their identity and provides a new way of 'belonging' in the social world (Weeks et al., 2004). Their claim resonates with Morgan's (1996) concept of family practices that creating families of choice is one dimension of actively 'doing family' in a particular social context. The chosen families' effort to do something different from conventional families is a means by which to seek legitimacy for their relationships by linking them with existing positive family images, a process towards having them accepted (Weeks et al., 2004; Finch 2007).

Secondly, ambivalent features of a full membership of the adopted individual in the adoptive family appear in the analysis, which reveals that adoptive parents are cognisant and protecting of the child from their polluted heritage. The adopted child is, therefore, not always able to be fully part of practicing and displaying their adoptive family narrative which is not only shaped by primary disruptive events, but also throughout. Although differential behaviour is not strikingly visible within the narratives, in some cases certain responses could be characterised as discomfort in the way that participants found it difficult to talk about some of their experiences, particularly those related to their birth family and heritage. Their uneasiness is emotional as well as ethical (Butler, 2009). However, adopted people and adoptive parents expressed their discomfort differently. The narratives of adopted people indicated that their adoptive status caused discomfort in others and that this was communicated through different acts, such as the discarding of their adoptive status upon disclosure, distancing from the adoptive family (as shared by the adoptive mother Malini that '*I could see some of my relatives are holding back a little*'), and questioning of adoptive parents' affection towards their adopted child as if they are not entitled to be as loved as a biological child. The secrecy around and non-availability of information about their biological origins further strengthens the sense of discomfort in adoptees by preventing them from responding effectively to questions and negative assumptions.

A sense of discomfort is also congruent with scholarships on embodiment that suggest there is a potential correlation between various features of the body and social inequalities (Howson and Inglis, 2001; Shilling, 2001, 2016). Shilling (2001) argues that embodied experience exists as a crucial means by which individuals are attached to, and positioned within, their social milieu. According to her, body matters are central to our understanding of social structures, and comprehension of other social processes (Shilling; 2016). Drawing on the example of racism in the USA which has a potential correlation between skin colour and earnings, she emphasised how body is key to the construction and maintenance of social inequalities.

Shilling's argument resonates with Goffman's (1963) concept of social stigma disrupting others' sensibilities. However, the conditions of stigmatisation or discomfort (as coined in this thesis) in the Indian context are unique and different to those defined in adoption literature. Scholarships on adoption stigma illustrate how, because of their unknown genetic past, adopted children are viewed as second rate, and experience stigma that is manifested in judgments, attitudes, behaviours and prejudices (Miall, 1986; March, 1995; Wegar, 2000). The stigma literature, which is predominately limited to North America and Europe, overlooks the cultural influence and ingredients of stigma in the Global South. In the context of India, genetic past is not just a biological construct. Rather, it comes from the socio-cultural perspectives of caste, class, religion and the adoptive life within that condition which is apprehended as a precarious life (Butler, 2012). It is not that adopted people are not loved, cared for, or don't have a normal life. But in the minds of others they are not equal human beings because of the disruption of lineage and blood ties, i.e. not being from the same caste and religious affiliation as the adoptive family of which they are a part. This precarity does not give the adopted child the status of an equal and full human being.

Butler (2009) argues that precarity is an emerging abandonment that pushes humans away from a liveable life and which implies the denial of the full reach of human subjectivity. Therefore, the process of emergence into a precarious subjectivity, which my findings show, is more or less recognised by those involved and worked on by them. Although the adopted child's family history is officially unknown, the silence around and avoidance to talk about the birth family suggests that the heritage of the adopted child is known only pejoratively. As a result, the adopted child is presumed to be from a community at the very bottom of the social order - like '*Shudra*'. Since people of the lowest section of the caste system are considered ritually 'polluting', they are consigned to a sub-human status (Sikand, 2001). Hence, because of their discarded heritage, adopted children are vulnerable to their ethical positions 'being less than equal'. Also, being from a lower social class and caste adds to the adopted child's precarious position. Many themes reify how a

lack of information related to caste, religion and adopted children's biological backgrounds makes them inferior. Findings such as these provide compelling reasons how expression and regulation associated with human body are shaped by social relationships, inequalities and environmental conditions characteristics of adopted peoples' lives (Shilling, 2016). Adoptive lives are not just stigmatised or discomfoting in various ways, but are precarious too and always needing to be made 'liveable'.

A peculiar feature of my findings was the differential behaviour and 'family talk' of related others in the presence - and absence - of the adopted child and how that conveyed the existence of parallel narratives within the adoptive family (Cheal, 2002 cited in Morgan, 2011). Most participants acknowledged the differential behaviour of related others - albeit in a manageable way - while drawing on other people's life stories rather than their own. Although this particular analysis rest on only a few accounts, it is significant enough to discuss. For example, Nisha's grandparents' conversation in the kitchen implies that adoptive family life cannot be displayed fully to the adopted child, even when she grows up. The existence of parallel narratives revealed a fluid and inferior position of adopted children within a social discourse of adoption in which love is displayed openly, but condemnation expressed privately. An example of the parallel narrative process can be taken from the broader scholarships of sociology.

For example, Gaynor (2014) argues that the existence of parallel narratives in a social, cultural and institutional context, demonstrate that discourses are used for oppression and marginalisation against those who are not included in the dominant social groups and treated as 'Others'. The author's argument, particularly in relation to family-based discourse, suggests that family and relationship structures of Others are considered to be abnormal and do not confirm to dominant normative standards and, therefore, the behaviour towards them is not respectable. Similarly, Walker (2017) develops the concept of parallel narratives within the field of the sociology of labour force, while drawing on stories of female low-level hospitality workers and black enslaved females. She argues that slavery narratives appear

within culture that don't recognise female slaves as persons. These arguments suggest that the oppression of Others who do not fit dominant standards predominately takes shape within their own culture.

My analysis could be viewed alongside aspects of 'Others' as defined by Gaynor (2014) and Walker (2017) in which adopted individuals appear not to be granted full membership and social acceptance in the eyes of others. Evidence indicates that such narratives are presented behind closed doors, surreptitiously and sometimes abruptly, fostering negative perceptions about adopted people because of their social and biological differences – and subsequently, shape approaches, thought processes and institutional structures that marginalise them. Not only does the evidence demonstrate how adopted people are marginalised within the families and social spaces they are a part of, but it also creates an image of adopted people as less than equal - or perhaps less desirable – and therefore not respected in the same way as other people are. Simultaneously, it reflects existing power relations between adopted people and their biological counterparts, and confirms the inadequacy of biological as well as caste connections as a basis of kinship.

It is evident that the discourses around adoption define how adoptive kinship is not treated as equal to biological kinship. Morgan (2011) states how the discourses constitute the context of constraints within which family practices are conducted.

Drawing on Morgan's point, it may be argued that adoption discourses shape the context of parallel narratives within and outside adoptive family. In the eyes of the law, adoption operates to sever and remove the child's birth history and replace it with a new family culture. However, their original social background is simply not reducible to the replacement of new family heritage in which it operates (Sales, 2018). Even though no information is available to confirm the child's social, cultural, economic and religious background, the narratives analysed in *Chapter 4* inevitably place significant emphasis on social inequalities and cultural forms of domination that presume the adopted child belongs to a lower caste. Adopted individuals raised within an upper-middleclass lifestyle referred variously to their unknown

background directly or indirectly, creating a complex and paradoxical position for them as well as for their adoptive parents. Being aware of this, both adopted people and adoptive parents put extra effort into establishing familial relationships as part of their family practices. Since the general discourse around adoption expects adoptive families to be of less value than families connected socially and biologically, pressure is put indirectly on adoptive families to work harder than normative families.

According to Morgan, narratives themselves are part of a broader category of verbal communication which offer other types of tools for the displaying of distinctive types of family 'talk' (Morgan, 1985, p.183-207). Roberts (2002) argued that narratives play an important role in social life, enabling formulation and communication of understandings of social worlds. Roberts theorises about a single 'own social world' which can be narrated or displayed. However, my analysis suggests that adopted people have multiple social worlds in which they engage with different people with whom they are selective about sharing their adoptive status. Adoptive family narratives provide a vehicle through which to understand that adopted children are not fully accepted within their families, and do not share equal status to other family members because of their stigmatised history. Further, the quality of interaction within the family and outside appears not to recognise adopted children and adoptive families as having equal status to biological children/families (Finch, 2007). This unequal recognition comes from related others, i.e. family members, friends, colleagues and neighbours, and is often conveyed subtly and directly. In Honneth's (2004) exploration of recognition theoretical conception and justice, he argues that the experience of inequality is measured in terms of the withholding of some recognition held to be legitimate, stating:

"recognition must be obtained if the individual is to obtain a personal identity, namely love, equal treatment in law and social esteem" (Honneth, 2004, p.46)

My analysis demonstrates that doing adoptive family in accordance with the legal discourse that equates adopted children and biological children does not solidify the recognised form of familial relationships as they struggle in the process of socialisation. It also shows that recognition is a psychosocial construct in which ambivalence is internal(ised) emotionally, and where anxiety, shame, sadness and low self-esteem are expressed (Knight, 2020). This resonates with Heidegren's (2004) argument that recognition is a crucial process of socialisation, social integration and identity formation. In order to achieve it, 'an individual is dependent on recognition from different, concrete and generalised others' (Heidegren, 2004, p. 46). Contemporary Indian adoptive families, therefore, could be seen to be putting effort into 'doing' family things, rather than by 'being' a family in order to gain recognition from relevant others and as part of the core process of consolidating recognition for oneself personally, too (Finch, 2007). It echoes Morgan's (1996) work on family practices that states that family is not a structure to which individuals belong, but rather a set of activities, associated with family, at a given point in time.

Morgan's concept of family practices incorporates a number of key concepts, such as fluidity and diversity, which have been used by other scholars in family studies (Finch, 2007; Seymour, 2007; Heaphy, 2011). My findings suggest that there is diversity in adoptive family practices and displays in India. The diversity is in response to the challenges that adoptive families face in the everyday life of adoption practice in which they attempt to create a legitimate version of kinship. It is to be understood that adoptive families are the 'families of choice', created by day-to-day 'doing' of family in a particular social context (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 1996). In India, the traditional form of family is that of the joint family, where a number of married couples and their children live together in the same household (Medora, 2007). Even though families in contemporary India no longer physically live together because of urbanisation and globalisation, the cultural values, norms, and sentiments of the 'joint family' are expected to be adhered to and transmitted to the next generation (Hackett and Hackett, 1993). While family membership across different religions are decided by marriage and birth, my participants appeared to

do something different to conventional families in the seeking of recognition for their chosen relationship.

7.3 Everyday negotiation in adoptive family practices

Analysis of the participants' accounts presented in *Chapters 5 and 6* provides evidence to support Finch's (2007) argument that 'family display' is a feature of contemporary families and in this context, adoptive families in India. They claim and display their adoptive identity as individuals and as family because they desire to be perceived as a family that 'works' and is therefore, 'legitimate' (Finch, 2007; Heaphy, 2011; Almack, 2011). The analysis reveals how being part of an adoptive family adds layers of 'outsiderness', particularly for adoptees, that must be negotiated in order to gain recognition in the social context with a focus on the process. These processes involve negotiating and renegotiating the hard work of adoptive family lives in which members must decide to 'display or not to display and in each case to whom, how, when and where' (Goffman, 1963). The meaning of negotiation in the current usage assumes 'a dual sense of claiming' adoptive status for oneself and communicating that to others (Almack, 2008). My data suggests that the ways in which adopted people and adoptive parents maintain relationships with their families and friends vary widely. Some choose to actively negotiate and demonstrate familial relationships, while others prefer to do selectively and only when needed. Participant accounts emphasise that they negotiate with the socio-cultural expectations of being part of a family and display their adoptive status to minimise their position as *other* (Gillespie, 2006). This process includes working out new kin relationships between the adopted child and adoptive parents, and the extent to which individuals 'come out' about their adoptive identity within their own spaces and networks (Almack, 2008).

According to Valentine et al. (2003), the meaning of 'coming out' over a period has shifted in terms of the ways in which individuals relate to society, in which traditional ideas, expectations and hierarchies are reworked. This is usually explored in relation to personal narratives, i.e. those in the process of 'coming out'

negotiate their identities with others who are close to them or share their lives in various ways. Scholars' analysis presents a nature of interdependency in the process of 'coming out' to gain acceptance.

The claim of Valentine et al. (2003) is reflected in Almack's (2008) work in the context of lesbian parents. Almack's notion of 'coming out' resonates with Finch's (2007) concept of 'displaying family' in which adoptive people's narratives around display through different activities contribute to ways in which the meanings of 'family-like' relationships are conveyed, recognised and understood. The negotiations necessary to demonstrate familial relationships are not 'one-off' activities, but rather a continual process to emphasise 'the continually evolving character of the relationship' (Finch, 2007, p.67). The display work undertaken by the participants of my research is also useful in revealing their commitment to sustaining the adoptive family, as well as personal relationships.

Williams (2004) argues that people are 'energetic moral actors, embedded in webs of valued personal relationships, working to sustain the commitments that matter to them' (p.41). The findings presented in *Chapter 5* in relation to employing different approaches to negotiate a comfort zone to display adoptive status, provide strong evidence that displaying family is a personal choice by those who have a relevant audience or relevant others. They adopt a number of strategies to work out multiple audience requirements. Despite this, it could be argued, that individuals experience this differently depending on how compatible the audience requirements are with those of their own needs. People within the family and close social network - such as extended family members, neighbours, and friends - are the preferred choice to display the adoptive status to gain social legitimacy.

Finch (2007) identifies social interactions as a central component of display work and introduces the idea of 'audience', which although not ignored, needs to be explored further. These include the extent to which external audiences are involved in acknowledging adoptive family relationships and highlighting issues related to the interactive and multi-layered nature of display work (Almack, 2008). The

evidences indicates that adoptive family displays are observed by multiple audiences and that each audience does 'require' families to display in ways that they perceive to be 'legitimate' (Haynes and Dermott, 2011; Finch, 2007). Hence, adoptive families consistently express the need to display successfully to multiple audiences because, as Heaphy argues:

"There is a powerful incentive to claim recognition as family because of the access it affords to full relational citizenship. For those relationships that display the 'natural' traits of families, full relational recognition and citizenship can seem like a freely given right. Those relationships that fail to display 'normal' family characteristics are likely to be constructed as second-class families or as 'other' family." (Heaphy, 2011, p.33)

Display requirements can, however, be culturally located and influenced by exposure to political narratives and affected by the intersectionality of audience characteristics (Kim, 2011; Carver, 2014). This study illuminates the difficulties faced by adopted people and adoptive parents when negotiating the complexities of these diverse audience requirements, and the customised strategies they adopt in order to do so. For example, adoptive families are able to adopt strategies to construct displays that meet the requirements of particular audiences. My adoptive parent participants report, for example, omitting information regarding their child's adoption status in their communications with the child's school, not revealing their adoptive status when asked, and presenting themselves as a 'non-adoptive family' to anyone not formerly aware of their adoptive status (*Chapter 5*). The analysis also shows that family members and kin are not the only audience displayed to (Finch, 2007). However, display requirements are prioritised according to the audience and to what degree it meets the individual's needs and context, be that in terms of presenting themselves as positively different, or a cautionary measure to avoid unwanted questions or to gain acceptance (*Chapter 4, 5 and 6*). When subjected to the gaze of outside audiences, adopted people and adoptive parents evaluate their needs and make choices according to individual capacity and need, indicating that

choices made related to adoptive family display is directly relational to who matters and with whom they need to negotiate familial and social obligations. Negotiating the challenges regarding the correct choice for display is not simply an option for adopted people and their families, but rather it is fundamental to successfully constituting adoptive family relationships as a meaningful feature of their social world (Finch, 2007).

Despite successful negotiation of kin relationships, to a certain degree there are everyday practices where choices have to be made about what is and is not displayed. Participants were alert to displays which appear to have been successful, i.e. which were not acknowledged or did not produce the desired response. For example, the findings identified instances of subtle resistance in adopted people and adoptive parents' narratives - such as taking a stand in an interaction which indicated non-acceptance of their adoptive status or educating individuals about adoptive family formation - in such a way as to refuse internalisation of secondary status and to reject the differences between their adoptive family and biological families. The everyday experiences of such practices are identified by Smart (2007) as 'the issues of living in and with ongoing difficult family relationships'. She describes such complex relationships as being difficult for researchers to 'get at' the 'imperfections of the families we live with' (Smart, 2007, p.137).

Although these aspects of family lives might go beyond what the concept of family display and family practice can reveal, the concepts are nevertheless useful as orienting devices to explore what might be going on beneath the surface of adoptive family lives. In this context, my analysis has revealed the positive elements of adoptive family practices and illuminated what is happening at the 'edges and behind the narratives of display' (Gabb, 2011, p.39). It could be said that negotiating displays of adoptive status and the practice of adoptive family lives is a continuous process people carry out more or less silently. The continuous process has, however, been instrumental in creating space for increased tolerance of adoptive family relationships in Indian society - although it is not yet at the same level of acceptance of adopted people.

7.4 Adoption reformation – an entanglement of power and powerlessness

The analyses within *Chapter 6* reveal how India's revised adoption policy is a controlling narrative that dictates what adoption is and precisely how to do adoptive family lives. In the context of framing social policy, Stone suggests:

“We don't usually think of policy as literature, but most definitions of policy problems have a narrative structure” (Stone, 2012, p.158).

Stone argued that narratives are ‘the principal means for defining and contesting policy problems’ (Stone, 2012, p.158). They can tell something about dominant discourses or paradigms within a society, often repeated by powerful actors and, consequently, rigidify in public discourse (Hall, 1993; Hay, 2001). Jones and McBeth (2010) in their work on Narrative Policy Framework suggest that the power of narratives is influential in shaping beliefs, public opinions and ultimately governmental actions. The revised policy narrative could therefore be viewed as a narrative of the numbers of children in institutional care and the promotion of adoption as a statutory programme towards getting more children adopted in India by Indian parents.

The narratives of policy, as used in the political process, carry analytical value to understand ideas of reformation as well as strategic action (Blum and Kuhlmann, 2019). The reformation through a controlling narrative, simply has not set out legal powers and duties. Rather, its rigid procedural frame hardly has any discretion for social workers to exercise their professional skills, but expects to follow the rules. The changes resonate with what Stone (2012) coined ‘stories of power’, a combination of two actions - stories of helplessness and stories of control. The policy makers, in this case, are the controlling authority which highlights the strength of their preferred solution by promoting adoption within a narrative of

transparency and accountability. It portrays social workers - the decision making authority in the previous system - as not effective ('helplessness') (Stone, 2012).

The policy change is a processed way of shifting power from the social workers' perspective to the state perspective in order to control practice. The shifting of power is inconsistent with Power's (1997) definition of the 'audit society'. However, Lymbery (2003) argues that the problem with an audit of welfare services is that 'what is evaluated is rarely what ought to be central to the work of the organisation' (p.101). For example, the restructuring of adoption procedures and social workers' roles, as understood from the analysis, heavily rests on accelerating the number of adoptions that is measurable. It largely ignores the delicate area of service quality, which potentially distorts the effect of change. Besides, presenting the revised policy as a solution to the problems (lack of transparency and accountability) and taking control of the entire process, is a way to shifting the blame to social workers for failure of previous practices. Such amendment of policy and remodelling of procedures have contributed to an undervaluing of the skills, competencies and relational issues of adoption professionals that are at the heart of social work practice (Orme, 2001). The effect is visible in the wider context that closes down social workers' narratives of 'doing adoptive family', as well as affecting the role and relationship of social workers in a contradictory way. While the legislative changes have attempted to recreate a positive image of adoption in terms of its legitimacy and authenticity, through the consecutive narratives of transparency the narrowing role of social workers leads to concerns regarding their low status in the public eye.

Social work scholars have demonstrated the damaging effect of increased control of professions (Freidson, 1994; Erikson and Bjerger, 2019). As Foster and Wilding (2000) argue, the attempt to curtail social work professionals' power tends to focus on the negative aspects of the concepts of professionalism, that is, self-interest and lack of accountability. By contrast, the process fails to build upon more positive characteristics, such as commitment to public service and the development of high-quality practice (Lymbery, 2003). As reflected in the analysis, disquiet among social workers because of the bureaucratic process and policy interventions aimed at the

increased marketisation of adoption, has profound implications on social work practice. It indicates that alternation is deliberate by policy makers which lacks openness, and requires very little input by adoption practitioners. Welander et al. (2018) argue that 'openness is a fundamental value for social workers, and when it is perceived to be disrupted, the relationship between the professional and the organisation is affected' (p.95). The controlled procedural changes seem to compel social workers to negotiate a space to practice and adapt to the current adoption programme requirements, which they are often not in agreement with – which is reflected precisely in what adoptive parents and adoptees have shown in my study.

The changing policy provides a narrow space for professional discretion with regards adoptive parents' behaviour. While the professionals and parents draw on psychological theories that view attachment and bonding as fundamental in the creation of adoptive family lives, the policy narrative seems to ignore it (Walker, 2008; Raby and Dozier, 2019). Attachment theory, more than any other aspect of modern development knowledge, has impacted child care policy and practice that has in turn caused a strategic change in adoption professionals' attitudes towards the adoption process (O'Halloran, 2015; Duschinsky et al., 2015). It emphasises the psychological and emotional wellbeing of each child through the intervention of programmes, whilst upholding the principles that children's welfare interests must prevail. The findings in *Chapter 6* suggest that adoptive parents - such as Pooja and Maya - expressed satisfaction with social workers' inputs. However, the revised and procedurally controlling policy seems to overlook it by restricting human contact pre, during and post adoption-related engagements. The social workers - who used to be representatives of the authorities and made decisions affecting adopted children's everyday lives - are left with no space to exercise their professional practice. A comparison with the development of adoption policy and practice in the United Kingdom would be helpful in this context.

Adoption, which has been promoted across the political spectrum for many decades, has a clear emphasis on increasing adoption rates (Gupta and Featherstone, 2019). Adoption policy has greatly changed since its inception and the latest changes are

aimed at speeding up court processes (O'Halloran, 2015; Cameron, 2016, cited in Gupta and Featherstone, 2019). Current legislation is similar to procedural guidance and allows professional discretion within certain parameters - such as pre-adoption engagement, matching, and post-adoption contact. In contrast, Indian adoption policy has similar goals but very little space for professional practice. It might be reasonable to say that the legislative and administrative reorganisation have turned into a permanent condition for social work practitioners, where they have to constantly negotiate the challenges and stress posed by the changes in order to ensure continued relevance in the practice (Eriksson and Bjerger, 2019).

Pawar (2019) defines policy practice as purposefully participating in and contributing to policy formation and implementation with a view to altering policies that are unfair and unsuitable. The revised adoption policy in India, however, does not reflect this in spirit. While it has narrowed social workers' involvement, it has created space for prospective and adoptive parents to choose their preferences. The findings suggest that parents are constrained in their choices as the powerful procedural narratives limit the choices and spaces for 'doing' adoptive family. Further, it has created a distance between adoptive parents and practitioners, rather than space for meaningful engagement. As the changing policy suggests, the dichotomy of reformation and restriction can be questioned, especially with the sharp increase in prospective parents, declining rates of adoption, and rising adoption disruption. The legislation in this scenario is a constraint, rather than an enabler.

The overall rationale of the evolving socio-legal process of adoption indicates that reform is not simply an exercise of solving the problem of adoptable children in institutional care. Rather, it is best seen also as a fight over the dominant problem definitions and policy solutions that are deemed appropriate in this sphere of public policy and lived experience of family formation (Blum and Kuhlmann, 2019). The policy narrative has a strategic function that directs who can author the adoptive family lives prescribed, and whose narratives should dominate in adoptive family formation in the changing social, political and cultural times. In the Indian context of

competing and contrasting narratives, adopted people, parents and practitioners are conditioned to 'doing' adoptive family in a way they are being told to, and not in ways of their own choosing.

Chapter 8: Implications

8.1 Introduction

In this final chapter, I address the implications of my research methodology and findings for social work practice, policy and research. In it, I seek to demonstrate how research that utilises the insights of ‘family practices’ can add to, disrupt and in some cases ultimately improve social work practice and policy debates through new ways of seeing and thinking about adoptive family practices in contemporary India. I show, too, how understanding the subjective experiences of adopted people can create openness in adoption practice, and frame policy accordingly to make adoption more child-centric.

The overall findings of the research established a diversity in adoptive family practices in India over a period that has seen significant change. There is no template to be applied in the conducting of adoptive family life, or which might be followed procedurally. Instead, the *‘doing’ of family* is an ongoing and dynamic process (Morgan, 2011). Moreover, my research demonstrates that ‘family practices’ in adoption demand sustained and nuanced performative efforts, where the pressure to legitimise this particular kind of family life stems from fears of contamination attached to the child’s origins. The research also shows how social attitudes towards adoption are themselves open to revision through the experience of adoption in the family constellation - as well as being unsettled by it. Adopted people and adoptive parents struggle to settle the inherent ambiguities that must be lived with and through when an adopted child joins a family and community. So they adapt and utilise customised strategies to negotiate validation as a family. It is the inherent ambiguity of the child’s origin that needs to be recognised before it can be negotiated, and research, policy and practice all have roles to play in that negotiation process.

8.2 Implications for social work theory

This research brings a narrative conceptualisation to social work theory and research methodology (Riessman and Quinney, 2005; Roscoe et al., 2011). The research message for social work as a discipline is that thinking in narrative terms helps understandings of how people live their (adoptive) family lives, manage the complexities and disjunctions of it, and display their lives in ways which effectively establish, sustain and legitimise them. The disciplines of psychology and social-psychology are helpful in the way that they can offer insights into adoption practice. For example, concepts such as attachment (Walker, 2008; Raby and Dozier, 2019) and stigma (Goldberg et al., 2011, Garber and Grotevant, 2015) were relevant in illuminating the Indian adoptive family experience. However, particularly in the context of adoptive family practices, with children and families, for which a narrative inquiry method could be employed as a 'method of conversation' to reflect broader cultural and social ideas (Roscoe et al., 2011).

The use of narrative theory in social work practice in India could challenge and enhance the ways Indian policy makers and practitioners think theoretically about adoptive family lives. My analysis in *Chapter 6* suggests that little social or psychological theory is employed in adoption policy and practice narratives. Instead, the simple idea of the policy narrative is that transferal of a child from an impersonal institutional to loving and respectable family care (primarily within India rather than abroad) is all takes for success. The narrative approach I have employed in this research exposes the micro socio-cultural dynamics which challenge this simplistic assumption. My research demonstrates that adoption unsettles the standard policy and practice narrative in that it is avoidant of the historic and continuing social cleavages by caste, class, race and religion.

8.3 Implications for adoption policy

8.3.1 Need for a comprehensive family and child-centred policy

My findings demonstrated a discordance between adoption policy and practice, suggesting that perspectives for framing adoption policy to date have not been considered in relation to adoptive family practices. Current policy fails to address the unique requirements of adoptive families which requires a comprehensive, tailored family and child-centered policy and practices to fit the needs of adoptive families in the specific socio-cultural context of India. In this study, I have suggested that it is hard to do adoptive family lives in India during changing times. These kinds of family lives challenge social convention in various ways. For instance, they expose assumptions about social hierarchies beyond the family, which those involved in adoption must challenge if their own family life is to succeed or be considered as equal. Doing and displaying adoptive family life is as much a *political* as a psychological endeavour. Therefore, there is a need for 'family practices' to be undertaken deliberately - particularly where families are considered non-conventional - to gain social recognition as 'family' which derives from the analysis that families need to be 'done' as well as 'displayed' (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011).

My findings also illustrated how adoptive family relationships were, to varying degrees, disrupted, negotiated and renegotiated at the juncture of becoming an adoptive family. The intergenerational relationships, and their involvement in doing family, is also evident in the findings. However, it is difficult in practice as adoptive family lives are entangled within power and politics. Current policy, guided by narratives of power, aims to promote adoption as a programme through which to get more children adopted. The fundamental point is numbers without recognising adoption as a family form that corresponds to distinctive family practices. Adoption is a different form of 'doing family', and the nature of its differences needs to be understood by and within policy to make the services effective (Luckock and Hart, 2005). Unquestionably, procedural policies lack the core elements of family practice in their intervention model by making adoption unequivocally a statutory matter.

By replacing a professionally managed process with a procedural approach, the policy attempts to equate the adoptive family with the biological family, whilst overlooking the specific needs of adoptive family lives. This is not to suggest that previous legislation did this better. Merely that both are problematic in different ways.

In this context, I suggest that to make adoption policies more family oriented, they need to be supported by practices, programmes and services that enhance the quality of adoptive family lives. To strengthen the responsive culture of adoptive family practices requires a new approach, moving away from the historical legacy of confidential adoption to understand adoptive kinship and its unique requirement for support. Hence, policy should be framed within a guiding vision that encompasses well-being principles for adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents, and through which there is scope for responsibility and accountability from the various actors involved. A change of this nature would mean considering adoptive family life and kinship as separate from the current prescribed template and instead as a practice of social tasks that family performs.

The increased diversity of family practices in contemporary India - such as single parent families, surrogate families, family formed through sperm donation - shows a transition away from the prescribed form of family to practice-based family. However, what makes adoptive family life distinctive, as demonstrated by my findings, is its pejoratively known origin which is remodelled through enforced transition by law and obligatory collaboration with professionals. This legal transition, which comes with power and autonomy, is not enough to establish adoptive family lives within an environment of socio-cultural differences. It is the quality of autonomous family relationships which needs to be formed with the support and surveillance of the state - which would make adoption distinctive within a community of family differences (Hart and Luckock, 2004).

8.3.2 Emphasis on transparency and openness in practice

Confidentiality around adoption is still a priority within adoption legislation and policy, as it has been for many years. My findings have demonstrated how adopted people have a need to understand their identity, and therefore a degree of openness is important for that. However, the concept of openness is still remote in the Indian context and adoption policy and legislation staunchly silent on the matter, despite an emphasis which exists within adoption practice itself. The Adoption Regulations, 2017 framed to streamline procedural details, includes a section on 'root search' which does not once refer to openness. Although the policy makes multiple references to the principles of the best interests of the child, procedurally it lacks direction on how to ensure it in spirit. Even though the root search has been provisioned in the Adoption Regulations, 2017 in relation to the right to identity, it is not part of the legislation itself which is likely to make expectations of service change futile. In the case of children surrendered by their birth parents, the policy does not make mandatory the provision of basic information. As a result, the data recorded by the adoption agency is largely inadequate and unidentifiable.

Moreover, adoption guidelines strongly emphasise how the rights of the adopted child should not infringe on the biological parents' right to privacy, which again points to the adult-centric approach of India's adoption policy. In this context, the root search service seems to be provisioned to comply with international legislation and present an image of a responsible government. In reality, however, information about their biological origins is not considered a priority or in the best interests of adopted children. Viewed altogether, these factors suggest that current Indian adoption policy does not promote openness in adoption and takes little account of evidence regarding the complex interplay of the risks and benefits of openness, the individual circumstances of children and families, or the changing needs of individuals across the life course. The absence of birth parents/birth families' voices in the adoption process illustrates how adoption is promoted as a replacement of family or family substitution, which does little to address the continued struggle

with the challenges of communicative openness faced by adopted people and some adoptive parents, as evidenced by this research.

If Indian adoption policy were to introduce the concept of openness, it would need to be supported through the guidance of practices within it to create an inclusive environment for those within the adoption community. Prior studies have suggested that openness in adoption should include the voices of birth parents/birth families, without which it would have little meaning (Grotevant and McRoy, 1998; Neil et al., 2013; Jones, 2013). Openness would break the enduring ambiguity around adoptive family relationships, whilst acknowledging family diversity and social shifts within family structures. The policy agenda should have scope to include the experiences of adopted people, adoptive parents and birth parents in relation to pre-adoption assessment and post-adoption support to address the long-term needs of all members. Considering the intricacies around adoption openness, greater attention is needed for critical engagement with openness as a culturally, socially and politically specific and complex process. Because uncertainty regarding the nature of openness persists not only in the minds of adoptive parents and adopted people, but also within the minds of adoption practitioners, as illustrated in these findings. I suggest that current policy fails to address the contradictions of adoptive kinship faced by adopted people and adoptive parents which can threaten practice. Careful planning and the development of sensitive support interventions through which all members can engage in the process of remodelling family relationships, would be a better start. In order for adoption to be experienced positively, policy makers must be prepared to engage more critically with the legacy of confidential adoption and the sensitivities associated with openness (Jones, 2013).

8.3.3 Bridging the gap between policy and practice

Through working with the data, I have highlighted a need for greater alliance on statutory guidance, social work practice and family practice to create space for a socially legitimate version of adoptive family. Together these collective

responsibility to be performed appropriately by all the actors to ensure meeting the optimal outcomes. Changes in adoption legislation and policy within a controlled narrative of doing adoptive family have placed new demands on adoption practice. My findings demonstrate that the new policy has restricted the space and time available for the professional discretion of social workers who draw on psychological narratives of parental love-based care with an emphasis on parent-child interaction for secure attachment, and as such cannot play their part in the new bureaucratic framework and procedurally controlled policy. Ultimately, their role has become primarily that of intermediaries between adoptive parents and adopted children, rather than skilled and professional bodies equipped to provide appropriate support.

My findings also identify current gaps in the needs and availability of services. Some adoptive parents' accounts illustrated the need for pre-adoption orientation as they had no real-life knowledge or experience of what doing an adoptive family would entail. The current policy, with its focus on strengthening service delivery mechanisms to address the specific requirements of adoptive families, has no structured framework for pre-adoption engagement with prospective parents - except preparation of the Home Study report, a one time activity. Mandatory pre-adoption training for preparing prospective adoptive parents could be introduced as an important component of the service delivery mechanism.

The need for a post-adoption service is also evident in my findings. The unavailability of services and incompetent professionals were two key reasons shared by adoptive parents for not making use of government services. Although the provision of post-adoption services is part of the Adoption Regulations 2017, it does not exist in reality. While the need for skilled professionals is an immediate requirement, policy must rely on and collaborate with existing expertise available outside. The research findings demonstrate that adoption services currently fail to address the specificities of adoptive family lives. In recognition of the lack of support and competence amongst professionals, some adoptive parent participants proactively engaged in various activities in order to extend their own knowledge of

adoption practice, reflecting their commitment and passion. Many worked together to create a practitioners' collective to support adoption agencies and to address the different needs of adoptable children, childcare workers, prospective and adoptive parents, which the policy and its attendant services fail to cater to (Hart and Luckock, 2004; Egbert, 2015). These sorts of ideas and opportunities could be explored, to capitalise on the resource and to design a more responsive service to meet the unique needs of adoptive families more effectively than following a bureaucratic, procedural approach that treats them as unitary structures. Some adoptive parents suggested how current policy could also benefit from opportunities for collaboration through which adoptive parents/family members could work as practitioners alongside adoption professionals. Since these people come from a wide range of disciplines related to adoption - such as social work, counselling, law, medicine and education - their contributions would qualitatively enrich support services, and substantially contribute to the formation of a landscape of social, emotional, legal, medical, therapeutic, educational and practical support for the adoption journey.

8.3.4 Training and capacity building

My research also identifies a significant lack of professional skills and competence in current social work practice in relation to adoption in India. Frustrated by a lack of post-adoption support, some adoptive parents sought to act privately. A reframing of current adoption policy requires incorporating appropriate mechanisms to enable social workers and adoption professionals to play their parts confidently. Aligned with the principles of adoption policy proposed in an earlier section, I suggest that 'family practice' and 'family display' are effective concepts for incorporation into pre- and post-adoption preparation and training of social workers and adoption professionals. For example, social workers could be encouraged to use an assessment model to find a balance between requirements, provisions of support, services and decision-making. It is to be noted that the Home Study Report used within current practice is the document used by the Child Welfare Committee to make its decisions. The report serves an institutional

purpose by displaying applicants' suitability to be adoptive parents (Noordegraaf et al., 2009). My findings suggest that social workers' assessments of the criteria for becoming an adoptive parent reflect a traditional and stereotypical family, i.e. a heterosexual married couple with a significant focus on educational status and financial security. These exclusive, mainstream, middle-class values reflect a very narrow meaning of suitability which should be reframed with a view to inclusivity, and social workers trained to employ them without prejudice. The policy should also allow space for the sensitising of all those who play key roles in the process of doing adoptive family - such as doctors, teachers, counsellors and lawyers - on adoption ethics. Such training might incorporate the processes and tools to encourage openness around adoption, such as preparation, the use of life story books, assessment, and the planning for post-adoption contact, which I have elaborated on in the following sections.

8.3.5 Building public awareness

The findings illuminated the negative assumptions and prejudices adoptive families face in their everyday lives, with the analyses presented in *Chapters 4 and 5* demonstrating the particular challenges of adoption talk between adoptive families and their social communities. In such circumstances, adopted people and adoptive parents attempt to find a balance between disclosure and holding back information to avoid awkwardness. This lack of public awareness about adoption is one of the reasons for most adoptive families of my research to confine disclosure of their adoptive status to their close sphere only.

It also became evident that most Indian people's understandings of adoption have been shaped by fictional stories portrayed in movies and on television, which those involved with adoption find unhelpful and misleading. It suggests that there is a task to be undertaken to increase awareness of adoption and to educate the public more generally to ensure that adoptive family lives are acknowledged and valued as an alternative way of 'doing' family. This might be achieved through structured interventions for both positive and negative experiences of adoption and adoptive

family lives. One place where intervention is strongly recommended is through school-based programmes. Schools are an ideal location to address various issues as students are a captive audience whose interactions can be mobilised around a common theme - like adoption (Miller, 2014). Educational programmes on adoption and non-conventional families would help sensitise the school community to the existence of children who reside within the category of 'doing family' rather 'being family'. At present, no such interventions are available and the onus is on individual parents to act – and react – responsibly and sensitively. Through a structured intervention, the issue of adoption could be tackled as a social issue, rather than a personal trouble.

There might also be value in tackling adoption within the context of discussions on 'family diversity'. Similar challenges will undoubtedly be faced by children of other diverse family forms - such as step-families, single-parent families, and families formed through surrogacy. Discussions about family diversity more generally would ensure that adopted children were not singled out and made unnecessarily visible, pathologised, or stigmatised within their peer groups. Besides, considering current diversities in family formations in India which have risen significantly, the scope of textbooks should be broadened to include alternate and non-biological family forms in order to remain relevant.

Greater public awareness of adoption practice in India might also be enhanced through public service advertisements utilising various platforms, such as video, radio, online and print with appropriate messaging to address the social and legal challenges faced by those involved in adoption. For example, promotion of the JJ Act (2015) by the Government offers an opportunity for the inclusion of a strong public policy message.

The present media campaign for adoption is a deliberate attempt to promote it through a range of narratives that proclaim 'adopt happiness, not fear' [*Khushi godh lijiye, dar nahi*], 'bring these innocent faces to the frame of life, make the picture beautiful' [*in massom cheheron ko zindagi ki frame me laayiye, tasveer khoobsurat*

banayiye], (CARA, video messages 2018). Such messages present adoption as risk-free, which is not realistic and does not fit with adoptive families' and social workers' narratives. The issues and challenges inherent in adoption practice should feed into public awareness raising initiatives in order to reflect messages that are balanced, practical and helpful. By portraying a 'happy family narrative', the voices and experiences of adopted children, adoptive families and birth parents are disregarded.

8.4 Implications for social work practice

Social work is a story-telling profession which enables stories to be told by people about their families and social lives in ways which help explain their struggles and, in doing so, make those lives more liveable under conditions of social vulnerability (Butler, 2009). In the context of adoption practice, I would like to see the discipline of social work engage with people's narratives in their own terms, and attempt to understand their lives rather than applying a standard template to them - however well theorised the template may be - to create and support solutions in the struggle to establish adoptive family life. My findings illustrated that the policy and practice of adoption must recognise the power of people's own stories in providing insights into the nuances of adoptive family lives, which could not be captured through a restricted theoretical and procedural framework. For example, the social workers accounts in *Chapter 6* emphasised their preference for multiple visits by prospective parents to the adoption centre in order to build a connection with the child. This preference reflects a confined way of thinking within attachment theory, whilst arguing for the procedure they preferred. However, my research also illuminates that loving and caring is not enough to build an adoptive family in India. Hence, narrative techniques could be used to recognise and address the socio-cultural elements and inherent ambiguities within which adoptive families strive to achieve social legitimacy.

Additionally, the policy decision to encourage in-country adoption specifically, exposes socio-cultural dynamics in India that are not widely spoken of and which

make the social work practice more challenging. The theories of 'doing and displaying family' enable recommendations to be developed that could support social workers in their day-to-day engagement with children and families in the process of adoption

8.4.1 Using tools and narratives in family practice and family display

It is evident from adoptive parents' accounts that they employ various tools and narratives to construct their children's biographies and establish membership within their adoptive kin outside of social workers' interventions. Through these practices, certain objects are found to be important in the making of adoptive families and give meanings to the new relationships (Bell and Bell, 2012). This process can strengthen the quality of adoptive kinship. The sharing of photographs albums and video can significantly aid development of the narratives of family formation and make them part of family histories which can then display them as 'real' - not only to others, but also to the child. Photographs, when displayed within the family narrative, convey messages of care, affection and belonging. The biographical narrative formed through the displaying of photographs over a period of time is a means through which to convey and present parental commitment and affirm new membership (MacDonald, 2015). As well as books and DVDs of films that have plots about adoption, greetings card can also be useful tools within family practice to initiate the adoption talk and provide a springboard for dialogue about adoption in the family. Social workers may also consider the sensitive use of stories, photographs, or other tools of display to communicate family bonds, care, affection and responsibilities - both within the adoptive family and outside (Jones and Hackett, 2011).

8.4.2 Openness in communication

Another challenge faced by the adoptive parents in this study was their discomfort around, and lack of vocabulary to express, association with birth parents. Similarly, adopted people's own challenges regarding displaying their ambiguous relational

position to their birth parents was reflected in their narratives. Formulating family narratives that includes that of birth parents could be an effective tool in countering communication challenges, identifying subtle elements affecting adopted children, and promoting positive discussion within adoptive kinship. Adoptive family communication which reflects an open attitude towards and acceptance of birth parents would be a useful and positive family practice. Such openness would also be beneficial in unsettling dominant cultural assumptions about the primacy of biological connectedness and the designation of kinship as either real or fictive (Carsten, 2000). It would also help to gradually disrupt the unsustainable social expectations that families are formed through a structured template and that people who do not fall into that structure are denied membership.

I also discovered that the new adoption system has effectively distanced any contact between adoptive parents and social workers. The importance of space and time for deliberation on both sides is not well understood, or rather it is not given sufficient value. If openness around adoption is accepted as a positive family practice in terms of expression and promotion of adoption kinship, social workers could have a role in ensuring that opportunities for this are maximised. However, social work practices in the current system are too formal, routinised and procedural, and therefore poorly suited to the concept of openness in communication. In the absence of specific provision for pre- and post-adoption consultation in the current practice, through counselling and in-person meetings between adoptive parents and social workers, the practice of openness could be better enabled.

In the previous section, I suggested that current adoption policy needs to introduce the concept of openness. My findings demonstrated the presence of parallel narratives in adoptive families, which implied that adoptive family life cannot be displayed fully to the adopted child. To challenge such discomforts around adoption, openness in communication could be considered as a family practice. A means through which to introduce openness in family as well as social work practice could be 'Life Story Books' (Hooley et al., 2016). . Its a therapeutic process which would enable children to explore their experiences and feelings to better understand their

earlier life and develop a coherent life narrative around it, whilst also helping them to express their emotions and strengthen their adoptive family bond. The provision should be introduced with appropriate training for social workers, such as monitoring the quality of books produced, and the preparation of guidance for adoptive parents to help them engage in the process.

Another means through which to encourage and maintain openness in communication could be considered for post-adoption contact through individualised planning, whilst taking account of the desired goals, strengths and vulnerabilities of all parties (Neil et al., 2013). There cannot be a standard formula applied to all with regard post-adoption contact as evidenced by my findings which illustrated that not all adopted people have a desire to learn about their birth parents. Individualised planning, therefore, could provide appropriate support specifically for those who want to establish contact. Social workers would play a key role in the planning process, which would include analysis of the potential risks and benefits in each case. Since 'root search' is provisioned in the Adoption Regulations, 2017 but without any modalities, the letterbox approach might be regarded as a starting point to establish contact.

8.4.3 Emphasising ethical principles of social work practice in training and capacity building

The findings highlighted how social workers imposed their prejudices to influence prospective parent's decisions regarding adoption. This negatively influencing approach is not within permissible professional discretion of social work practice and not only discourages parents from making informed decisions, but deprives them of appropriate support. To avoid prejudice and bias from social workers, adoption training should emphasise the ethical principles and responsibilities of social work and social workers must also be mindful of their own biases and cultural differences. Through training, social workers should have the opportunity to reconsider gendered foundations of family composition - especially with regard to single parent families - upon which such processes are positioned. It should also

cover the use of family display tools, post-adoption support as described previously, and services provided to support adoptive family practices.

Forewarning of 'adoption discomfort' could be an educational tool to make adoptive parents aware of the stigma, prejudice and differential behaviour that they and their adopted children are likely to be subjected to in their everyday lives. With prior warning and understanding, adoptive parents will be better prepared and able to find appropriate ways to support their children through active dialogue and relevant engagement with teachers, other students and other parents to sensitise them regarding adoption. Additionally, parents educating family members about adoption discomfort can help safeguard against potential future issues.

8.5 Implications for adoption research

In order to build knowledge and develop a greater understanding of adoptive family practices, there is a need to develop a stronger research base. In the process of conducting this research, I learned of the thinness of the research base on adoption in South Asia for which very little empirical work on adoptive family practice has been conducted. These are critical shortcomings, especially at a time when the Government is undertaking an aggressive drive to promote in-country adoption that challenges the conventional notion of family in India.

Research-based intervention is increasingly emphasised in social work (Finne et al., 2020). However, there is considerable literature on social policy that acknowledges the defensive practice in social work that fails to incorporate evidence in policy (Whittaker and Havard, 2015). Linking research with policy comes with goals, priorities, accountability, investment and mutual respect. Although there is vast scope for research on adoption, incorporating the evidence into policy needs to be a continuous and dialogic process. Through its successful utilisation of life stories and narrative methodology, this study proposes that further research would benefit from using similar methodological groundings.

Since India conducts a 'closed adoption' process and its socio-cultural perspectives are unique in comparison to Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand where 'openness in adoption' is the norm, the issue of openness should be studied within the contexts in which the beliefs and behaviours occur (Grotevant and MacRoy, 1998; Jones 2013; Del Pozo de Bolger et al., 2018). Failing to acknowledge that culture shapes practice and imposes a framework without adequate support and services, may introduce risk into adoption practice. As my findings suggest, the process of 'doing' adoptive family needs to be given greater importance than procedural requirements. The concepts of 'family practice' and 'displaying family' are fertile ground for further research as these are not currently used in closed adoption practice. In particular, these might be helpful in understanding:

- adoption from a birth parent's perspective
- how family practices vary within families with only adopted children and families with both adopted and biological children
- the risks and benefits of family practices and family display in a closed adoption model.

The new addition in the Adoption Regulations, 2017 of the 'root search' seems not especially helpful in supporting adopted children's interests in, and serving their right to know about, their biological backgrounds in the absence of adequate birth family information. My findings in *Chapters 4* and *5* describe adopted people and an adoptive mother's quests to learn details about birth parents. As current adoption policy places a greater importance on birth's parents' interests than those of the adopted child, this provision would seem to be merely symbolic. My application to CARA in December 2020 revealed that 50 inter-country adopted people have applied for root search since 2017. Of those, only three received any information relating to their biological origins. It would be worth exploring exactly how root search intends to facilitate the needs of in-country adopted people since it was introduced.

The lack of empirical studies of adoption practice in India suggests a need for rigorous research that includes the voices of all relevant actors, with a special focus on adopted people and birth parents. This study has shown that what does exist has been primarily drawn from psychological theories that address the perspectives of adoptive parents and practitioners and there is a void around adopted people's own experiences in the context of in-country adoption. My research further acknowledges the presence of birth parents in the narratives of adopted people - and of some adoptive parents. However, within closed adoption practice, birth parents are silent characters. Future research on adoption from the perspectives of adopted people and birth parents would be a valuable contribution in understanding the impact of adoption on their lives.

While this research acknowledges the paradoxical nature of adoptive family practices which operate at multiple levels, focused research on that particular aspect would enable better understanding of adoption in a localised context. Focused research would also contribute to the development of a wider understanding of family, and inform social work policy and practice.

These areas of potential future research attention suggest an interesting time ahead for adoption policy, practice and theory development in the context of India.

9. Conclusion

This exploratory, ground-breaking research sought to illuminate the lived experiences of three young adult adoptees, 10 adoptive parents and four social work practitioners. It is the first research undertaken in the Indian context that has brought out the voices of young adult adoptees and made them – alongside the voices of adoptive parents – central to knowledge production in the practicing of adoptive family lives. Through the knowledge I have gained from their lived experiences, I have challenged current social work practice and policy narrative under the new legislations, and offered insights into understanding the uniqueness of adoptive family lives in the Indian context. Further, the paucity of qualitative accounts of adoption in India might explain my struggle to recruit participants, and therefore be indicative of the sensitivities around adoption and its public illumination, even when personal anonymity was assured and ensured. Reluctance by professionals to share accounts of adoptive family formation was mirrored in my study by the reluctance shown by parents in enabling some adopted children to give voice to their accounts. In such a challenging environment of knowledge production, this study substantially contributes to social work scholarship by providing a more in-depth understanding of lived experiences.

While social work practice with a focus on adoption is primarily informed by psychological and psychosocial theories, this research has explored that elicited more sociological concepts of doing and displaying family, and flagged the limitations of those concepts in the research context. Key findings highlighted the enduring effect of intrinsic, inherent ambiguities within which adoptive families negotiate their everyday family lives, whilst also indicating some resolution of ambivalence in older adoptees' accounts which suggested possibility and hope rather than intrinsic and unresolvable conflict.

9.1 Strengths and Limitations

This narrative research provides a context for the qualitative exploration of adoptive family lives. Its key strengths are in its methodological approach and analysis that have been developed from qualitative data generated through narrative interviews with young adult adopted people and adoptive parents. Primarily, it has sought to give voice to adopted people which was formerly absent from adoption scholarship in the Indian context. The in-depth narrative approach applied in this research has placed adoption within the context of a lifelong journey, rather a one-off event. It has illuminated the everyday practices and accessed the meanings, and understandings of these within a very specific social, cultural and political context, without ignoring individual narrative selves (Riessman, 2008).

Moreover, this is the first study undertaken post enactment of the new 2015 legislation, and therefore provides insights as to how the secularisation of child welfare law in recent times - in support of policies of deinstitutionalisation of state care and indigenisation of child adoption - are changing the ways in which adoptive family lives are practised in India. Finally, undertaken as it has been by a local child welfare practitioner, the study uses an analytic method and in so doing joins Riessman's (2000) narrative work in the Indian context, enabling the 'practice' of adoptive family lives as narrated within the Indian social and cultural context to be illuminated for the first time.

Despite its strengths, the study inevitably has its limitations. The young adult adoptees and adoptive parents who participated were all from the middle and upper class urban families with sound international exposure. The study, therefore, has little to say about semi-urban and rural-based adoptive family lives. Nor about single father adoptive parenting, families that have not disclosed their adoptive status, and special child adoptive family lives. Adoption having been a male child-dominated practice for a long time in India, from a gendered perspective this study also lacks the voices of male adoptees. Due to research

ethics requirements, this study relied on social media platforms for the recruitment of participants, which restricted its reach to potential participants not connected on social media. Additionally, my research focused specifically on adoptive families' experiences where a majority of participants were adoptive parents. This decision was not intended to diminish adoptees' critical perspectives, but was made in consideration of the challenges inherent in accessing adopted people directly within the study's time frame. Further research is needed to seek the perspectives of adopted people and birth parents to a greater extent.

9.2 Final thoughts

At the end of this exhausting journey, I am thrilled by the insights and knowledge gained through this piece of research. Through its distinctive methodological approach, I have built connections with the primary beneficiaries, which I am keen to strengthen further. Through dissemination at academic seminars, symposiums and international conferences, this study has already initiated academic debate on adoptive family practices in contemporary India in the context of its 'closed adoption' model. I have also established a blog and Facebook page [<https://www.facebook.com/AdoptionResearch>] for the consolidation and development of further engagement with the emerging 'adoptive family practice' community across India which are generating public interest.

The young adult adoptees and adoptive parents I interviewed for this study enriched me by sharing their unique life stories. Even though my interaction with them was for a couple of hours or less, I will never forget that they continue to live with the same uncertainties and ambiguities they shared with me. Through this study, I have presented my interpretation of what they communicated to me with trust and confidence. I hope I have honoured that trust in the sharing of their stories with the outside world. I hope also that the fair and non-discriminated life they deserve and strive to live becomes a reality in the not too distant future.

Chapter 10

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Chapter 11

Appendices

11.1 Appendix A – Ethical Clearance



Social Sciences & Arts C-REC
c-recss@admin.susx.ac.uk

Certificate of Approval	
Reference Number	ER/SP423/4
Title Of Project	The social process of being adopted and becoming family An exploration of adoption practices in India from the perspective of young people
Principal Investigator (PI):	Sushri Sangita Puhan
Student	Sushri Sangita Puhan
Collaborators	
Duration Of Approval	3 years and 1 month
Expected Start Date	30-Jan-2017
Date Of Approval	11-Oct-2017
Approval Expiry Date	29-Feb-2020
Approved By	Ana Pereira
Name of Authorised Signatory	Ana Pereira
Date	11-Oct-2017

Young Adult's Views on Adoption in India

YOUNG ADULT'S INFORMATION SHEET

Hello! I am a researcher at the University of Sussex in England doing a study that aims to learn about young people's views on adoption in Odisha, India, who have experience of being adopted. Can you help me learn from your experience?

Why am I undertaking this research?

- For my doctoral studies at the University of Sussex, England.
- Because not enough is known about adoption practices in India, and even less from the perspective of adoptees.
I want to understand how adoption works in Odisha, and how best to support adoption practice and improve the wellbeing of adoptees.
- To learn the views of young people in India who have experienced being part of a family through adoption.
- To learn from the experiences of adoptive parents and adoption agency professionals.

Who will take part?

- I wish to talk to young people aged 15-17 and/or 18-25 who live in Odisha, India, and have been part of a family through adoption.
- I wish to talk to and learn from adoptive parents and also those working within the Indian adoption system based in Odisha.

What will taking part involve?

- One-to-one conversations within which I will seek to learn about your life and experience of adoption. You may prefer to share your experiences through the sharing of photographs, through the drawing of pictures of important people in your life, by writing a story or poem about yourself or sharing a song that you like to sing or listen to.

You can select one or more of these options. Or we can just talk.

- Interviews will take place between November 2017 and April 2018 during which time I would like to meet you 2-3 times for 60-90 minutes – depending on how much you wish to share.
- From our meetings, I would like to find out:
 - what you are happy for someone to know about you
 - your experiences of being part of a family through adoption
 - who/what relationships are most important to you
 - your hopes and plans for the future
 - what or who has been most impactful in getting you where you are today

- anything else you would like to share.

- The time and place of our meetings will accommodate your preferences and schedule. Ideally, we should meet somewhere quiet where you feel comfortable and can talk freely.

What happens to the information shared?

- I will record our conversations to make sure that I understand and accurately reflect what you have shared with me.
- Everything you tell me is confidential and will be stored securely somewhere that only I have access to. The only reason for confidentiality to be compromised would be if I had good reason to believe that you or someone else was at risk of being hurt. In such circumstances, I would do my best to discuss the actions I wished to take with you first.
- I will remove all identifying criteria (names, places, etc.) from the final data to anonymize the source and further protect the confidentiality of the information you share.
- The final report of my research findings (doctoral thesis) will be submitted in 2020 on completion of my doctoral course at the University of Sussex.
- Further reports or articles sourced from my data may include quotes from my interviews but these will be anonymized, ie. no names or other identifying criteria will be included.

What do I hope to achieve through my research?

- By learning from your experiences – as well as those of adoptive parents and adoption professionals – I hope to be able to make recommendations to relevant governmental departments and organisations in India for the improvement of adoption services and practices.

What are the risks?

- It's possible that talking to me could bring up memories or thoughts that you had suppressed and that might be upsetting. For this reason, it is

important that you don't feel you have to discuss anything with me that you are not comfortable sharing. You must take as many breaks within our meetings as you need. Or stop completely if you wish to.

Do I have to talk to you?

- No. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can decide to discontinue your involvement at any time, or choose not to talk about anything specific during our conversations. These decisions will in no way affect you or your family.
- I will continue to check with you right up until the end of April 2018 that you are happy to continue your involvement. You can also contact me at any time up to 30 April 2018 to inform me if you wish to discontinue your involvement and withdraw the information you have shared from the study.

Keeping in touch

- I will share my findings with all those who take part and will remain contactable until the end of my research project.

If you are concerned or unhappy about something

- My research has been approved by a Research Ethics Committee at the University of Sussex [Approval No: ER/SP423/4] comprising Professor Janet Boddy and Mr Barry Luckock. Should you have any concerns about any aspect of this research that you would prefer to put to someone other than myself, my supervisor, Barry Luckock, can be contacted by email: b.a.luckock@sussex.ac.uk.

What's next?

- If you decide to take part in this research project in theory, I will contact you after one week to arrange a meeting at a mutually convenient time to explain things in more detail. If you have any

questions about the research
before then, feel free to contact
me:
adoptionresearchindia@gmail.co

11.2.2 Information sheet for



[m](tel:+919937066539) or +91 9937066539

Thank you for your time
adoptive parents

Adoptive Parent's Views on Adoption in India

PARENT/GUARDIAN INFORMATION SHEET

Namaskar! I am a researcher at the University of Sussex in England doing a study that aims to learn about young people's views on adoption in Odisha, India, who have experience of being adopted. Can you help me learn from your experience?

Why am I undertaking this research?

- For my doctoral studies at the University of Sussex, England.
- Because not enough is known about adoption practices in India, and even less from the perspective of adoptees. I want to understand how adoption works in Odisha, and how best to support adoption practice and improve the wellbeing of adoptees.
- To learn the views of young people in India who have experienced being part of a family through adoption.
- To learn from the experiences of adoptive parents and adoption agency professionals.

Who will take part?

- I wish to talk to young people aged 15-17 and/or 18-25 who live in Odisha, India, and have been part of a family through adoption.
- I also wish to talk to and learn from adoptive parents and those working within the Indian adoption system based in Odisha.

What will taking part involve?

- If you agree for your son/ daughter to be part of this research project, I will set up one-

to-one meetings with them through which I hope to learn about their experiences. They will have the opportunity to share their experiences in a number of different ways, including the sharing of photographs, the writing of stories or poems, or the sharing of a song that holds some importance for them.

Alternatively, we can just talk.

- Through my interviews, I hope to get to know about your child as s/he wants others to know them avoiding direct questions that might make them feel uncomfortable.
- I also wish to learn about your own experiences through one-to-one conversations. Topics covered will include the struggles and joys you have experienced in relation to adoption, your relationship with your child, and how family and others may have felt about and impacted on the adoption process.

When will everything happen?

- I will carry out my research between November 2017 and April 2018. I hope to meet your child 2-3 times during this period for 60-90

minutes, and with you once or twice (depending on how much you wish to discuss).

What happens to the information shared?

- I will record all conversations to make sure that I understand and accurately reflect what has been shared.
- All information shared is confidential and will be stored securely somewhere that only I have access to.
- I will remove all identifying criteria (names, places, etc.) from the final data to anonymise the source and further protect the confidentiality of the information shared.
- The final report of my research findings (doctoral thesis) will be submitted in 2020 on completion of my doctoral course at the University of Sussex.
- Further reports or articles sourced from my data may include quotes from my interviews but these will be anonymized, ie. no names or other identifying criteria will be included.

What do I hope to achieve through my research?

- By learning from the experiences of adopters, adoptees and adoption professionals, I hope to be able to make recommendations to relevant governmental departments and organisations in India for the improvement of adoption services and practices.

What are the risks?

- It's possible that talking to me could bring up memories or thoughts that have been suppressed and are upsetting. All of my interviewees are free to not discuss anything that makes them uncomfortable or unhappy, take as many breaks within our meetings as needed, and stop completely if they wish to.

Do I have to talk to you?

- No. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can decide to discontinue your involvement at any time, or choose not to talk about anything specific during our

conversations.

- I will continue to check with all participants that they are happy to continue their involvement in my research project right up until the end of April 2018. Adopters and adoptees can also contact me up to 30 April 2018 to discontinue their involvement and withdraw information shared from the study.

Keeping in touch

- I will share my findings with all those who take part and will remain contactable until the end of my research project.

Who is doing this research?

- My name is Sushri Sangita Puhan and I am a doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex in England. I am from Odisha, India, and have extensive experience working with children and young people in different circumstances - in Odisha as well as other states in India. My research is funded by a Chancellor's International Scholarship on the basis of the importance of the topic and the strength of the researcher.

If you are concerned or unhappy about something

- My research has been approved by a Research Ethics Committee at the University of Sussex [Approval No: ER/SP423/4] comprising Professor Janet Boddy and Mr Barry Luckock. Should you have any concerns about any aspect of this research that you would prefer to put to someone other than myself, my supervisor, Barry Luckock, can be contacted by email: **b.a.luckock@sussex.ac.uk**.

What's next?

- If you decide to take part in this research project in theory, I will contact you after one week to arrange a meeting at a mutually convenient time to explain things in more detail. If you have any questions about the research before then, feel free to contact me:

adoptionresearchindia@gmail.com or
+91 993706653

Thank you for your time



Adoption Professional's Views on Adoption in India

ADOPTION AGENCY PROFESSIONAL'S INFORMATION SHEET

Namaskar! I am a researcher at the University of Sussex in England doing a study that aims to learn about young people's views on adoption in Odisha, India, who have experience of being adopted. Can you help me learn from your experience?

Why am I undertaking this research?

- For my doctoral studies at the University of Sussex, England.
- Because not enough is known about adoption practices in India, and even less from the perspective of adoptees. I want to understand how adoption works in Odisha, and how best to support adoption practice and improve the wellbeing of adoptees.
- To learn the views of young people in India who have experienced being part of a family through adoption.
- To learn from the experiences of adoptive parents and adoption agency professionals.

Who will take part?

- I wish to talk to young people aged 15-17 and/or 18-25 who live in Odisha, India, and have been part of a family through adoption.
- I also wish to talk to and learn from adoptive parents and those working within the Indian adoption system based in Odisha.

What will taking part involve?

- Through one-to-one conversations, I would like to hear about your experience as an adoption professional, including:
 - your perception of the birth parents you deal with

- your perception of the adoptive parents you deal with
- the processes you must undertake in relation to adoption
- your relationship with adoptive families before and after adoption
- the reasons as you understand them behind increases and decreases in the numbers of young people in the adoption cycle
- your interactions with adopted young people
- the impact of changing laws and policies on adoption practices.

When will everything happen?

- I will carry out my research between November 2017 and April 2018 during which time I would like to meet you once for 60-90 minutes (depending on how much you wish to discuss).

What happens to the information shared?

- I will record all conversations to make sure that I understand and accurately reflect what has been shared.
- All information shared is confidential and will be stored securely somewhere that only I have access to.
- I will remove all identifying criteria (names, places, etc.) from the final data to anonymize the source and further protect the confidentiality of the

information shared.

- The final report of my research findings (doctoral thesis) will be submitted in 2020 on completion of my doctoral course at the University of Sussex.
-
- Further reports or articles sourced from my data may include quotes from my interviews but these will be anonymized, ie. no names or other identifying criteria will be included.

What do I hope to achieve through my research?

- By learning from the experiences of adopters, adoptees and adoption professionals, I hope to be able to make recommendations to relevant governmental departments and organisations in India for the improvement of adoption services and practices.

What are the risks?

- It's possible that talking to me could bring up memories or thoughts that have been suppressed and are upsetting. All of my interviewees are free to not discuss anything that makes them uncomfortable or unhappy, take as many breaks within our meetings as needed, and stop completely if they wish to.

Do I have to talk to you?

- No. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can decide to discontinue your involvement at any time, or choose not to talk about anything specific during our conversations.
- I will continue to check with all participants that they are happy to continue their involvement in my research project right up until the end of April 2018. You can also contact me up to 30 April 2018 to discontinue your involvement and withdraw any/all information shared from the study.

Keeping in touch

- I will share my findings with all those who take part and will remain contactable until the end of my research project.

Who is doing this research?

- My name is Sushri Sangita Puhan and I am a doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex in England. I am from Odisha, India, and have extensive experience working with children and young people in different circumstances - in Odisha as well as other states in India. My research is funded by a Chancellor's International Scholarship on the basis of the importance of the topic and the strength of the researcher.

If you are concerned or unhappy about something

- My research has been approved by a Research Ethics Committee at the University of Sussex [Approval No: ER/SP423/4] comprising Professor Janet Boddy and Mr Barry Luckock. Should you have any concerns about any aspect of this research that you would prefer to put to someone other than myself, my supervisor, Barry Luckock, can be contacted by email: b.a.luckock@sussex.ac.uk.

What's next?

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Thank you for your time.

11.3 Appendix C – Consent Form



CONSENT FORM

1. I have had the research explained to me ☐
2. I understand what the study is about and what is involved in taking part ☐
3. I know that:
 - a. the information I provide - including photographs - will be used by the researchers to write reports about the study ☐
 - b. no information which could identify me or anyone else (eg, names, places, images) will be used in reports from the study ☐
 - c. everything I share is private and confidential to the study, unless you think that I or someone else might not be safe. ☐
4. I understand that I do not have to take part in the study ☐
5. I know that:
 - a. I can change my mind and stop at any time ☐
 - b. I can refuse to answer any questions ☐
 - c. If I decide not to do the research, or withdraw, it will not affect me or anyone else connected to me ☐
6. I am happy for the researcher to record our conversations and take notes ☐
7. I am happy for the researcher to keep in touch with me during the period of research data gathering, and to ask for my involvement in the next stage of the study ☐

Name of person taking part in the research	Date	Signature
Name of researcher	Date	Signature

11.4 Appendix D – Topic guide

Topic guide

The topic guide is designed as a helping tool to ensure relevant topics related to the research questions are covered systematically with some form of uniformity, while allowing flexibility to pursue the detail that is specific to each individual participant. However, the same questions will not be asked in the same way to each individual. I see this topic guide as a mechanism to steering the discussion that will cover the broad points around the research questions. This study applies an inductive approach to learn and understand adoption practice from the perspective of people's experiences, attitude and believe, which will be drawn primarily through interaction and some observations, wherever possible. As I will conduct semi-structured interview with adoptive parents and adoption agency professionals of a wide range of experiences and association with adoption, the method will be molded in response to the context and participants. Hence, I understand that the data gathering process will evolve and improve as it progress.

Research questions are:

1. How is adoption practiced in Eastern India?
 - a. What role do social, cultural and familial factors play in adoptees' experience of adoption?
 - b. What sense of self emerges for adoptees?
 - c. What social processes contribute to feeling of belonging and/or alienation of adopted young people?

The topic guide for adoptive parents broadly covers the followings.

Topic guide	Rationale	Expected outcome
Self -introduction of the participant	To learn about the person, their family background, socio-economic profile, education etc.	Useful to understand the participant's profile, building rapport that would lead to understand their subjective experience in a better way.
Experience as an adoptive parent	An exploration to learn about their lived experience, to	It is anticipated that it would yield richer and more

	understand their journey, the reason for adoption, the joy and struggle as a parent, family dynamics, relationship with their children	detailed understanding of their lived experience as adoptive parent and familial factors that plays a role in this process.
Identity as an adoptive family and their relationship within and outside family set up.	To understand the cultural, contextual, and social factors that contributes to develop the feelings of adoptive parents. And developing insight to adoptive parents' experience on how do they manage their relationship within and outside family set up , how it influence their children's life.	It is expected that the conversation will allow an ongoing dialogue with the participant in order to acquire deeper understanding of the community attitude, social stigma, adoptive parents' relationship with extended family, kins, friends, their socialization process and how do they respond to their adoption experience.
Children's response to adoption and their relationship with parents, extended family and friends	To understand how the degree of openness is managed and how do children respond to their adoption experience. And also to explore the social and cultural values concerning biological family and adoptive family and how it affects to develop kinship bonding among adopted children.	It will promote a more open and holistic exploration of strategies/process to disclosing adoption by adoptive parents, an insight to understand how kinship is being nurtured. And also to delve into adoptive parents' perception/thoughts/attitude towards birth parents.
The experience on adoption system and process	To learn about adoptive parents' experience and understanding on adoption system, and pre and post adoption contact with	It will offer a broader picture of adoptive parents' experience on adoption system and support extended by adoption agency in the

	adoption agency.	process of adoption.
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The topic guide for adoption agency professionals broadly covers the followings.

Topic guide	Rationale	Expected outcome
Experience on working with adoption agency	To understand their perspective on adoption practice and their role as a practitioner.	It is expected that the conversation will be helpful to building rapport with the participant and develop an overview of their role and responsibility as a practitioner.
Perspective on adopted children	To learn from their experience about the context of adoptable children, in what circumstances they come to the agency, and their perception about birth parent.	It would provide a deeper understanding of the social scenario, context of abandoned/surrendered children, gender dynamics of adoptable children, and disposition of birth parents.
Experience of working with perspective/ adoptive parents	To understand reasons for adoption, perspective adoptive parents attitude towards adoptable children, their preparedness and preference to adopt a child, socio-cultural roles that influence perspective adoptive parents' decision to adopt a child, their perspective/enquiry/eagerness about biological parent (if any), relationship with adoptive parents before and after adoption.	It will promote an exploration to understand the rationale and context of adoption practice, socio-economic status of adoptive parents, the socio-cultural values that influence adoption, approach of adoptive parents pre and post adoption, strategies of adoption agency to maintain the relationship with adoptive family.
How is the experience	To learn the effectiveness,	It would provide a

of working with new and old adoption system (the system/process of adoption has changed in 2015)	strength and weakness of old and new adoption system.	comprehensive understanding of new and old adoption system and how have the systemic changes affect the practice and how have the professionals received it.
Experience on maintaining confidentiality of adoption.	To understand the concept of confidentiality in adoption (whose identity is confidential and how much openness is allowed to reveal the identity of which party – adoptee, adoptive parent, birth parent)	It is anticipated that the discussion would create a space to develop an in-depth understanding on confidentiality of adoption practice, and how the adoption agency respond to the enquiries (if any) by adoptees about their birth parents and vice-versa.

11.5 Appendix F

11.5.1 Communication with potential research participant - an adoptive parent

From, <xxxxx@gmail.com>

Thu, Nov 9, 2017, 1:53 PM

To: adoptionresearchindia@gmail.com

Subject: Hello

Hi, I want to know more about this initiative.

Could you please share?

Regards,

Reema

From, <adoptionresearchindia@gmail.com>

Thu, Nov 9, 2017, 3:48 PM

To, <xxxxx@gmail.com>

Subject: Hello

Hi Reema,

Thanks for your response. Happy to connect with you. This is Sangita Puan, hope you remember.

The Adoption Research is a qualitative study as part of my doctoral research at the University of Sussex, UK. This study aims to understand adoption practice in India primarily from the perspectives of young adult adopted people (adoptees) and how the wider socio-cultural context influences the practice. I am looking for research participants; young people (adoptees of age group 18-25 years, who are aware of their status as adopted) and adoptive parents (not necessarily parents of same adoptees). Although I am looking for participants from Odisha but I am open to listening to people from any parts of the country. If you are interested to know further, I would be glad to share details about the study. Kindly revert.

I would appreciate if you kindly share about the study with people in your contacts, who might be interested to participate.

Warm regards
Sangita

From, <xxxxxx@gmail.com>

Fri, Nov 10, 2017, 10:31 AM

To: adoptionresearchindia@gmail.com

Subject: Hello

Hi Sangeeta,

This is awesome! Of course I remember you from XXX.

I adopted my daughter when she was eight months, so I guess we would not be part of the group you are looking at. I am not aware of people who have adopted children in age group you are looking at.

I will keep a look out. Also, if you know parents who have adopted children who are around four years now, please do let me know.

Let's stay in touch.

Reema

From, <adoptionresearchindia@gmail.com>

Fri, Nov 10, 2017, 11:29 AM

To, <xxxxxx@gmail.com>

Subject: Hello

Hello Reema,

It is nice to hear from you. Yes, your daughter is too young for the research participant I am looking at. But I am interested to listen to any adoptive parents and would like to listen to you. If you are interested, I would be happy to consider you as a potential participant. Please do let me know.

I hope during this process, I'll come in contact with some adoptive parents. Will keep your words in mind and update.

Warmly

Sangita

11.5.2 Communication with potential research participant - an adoption professional

from: Abc <abc@gmail.com>
to: Adoption research<adoptionresearchindia.gmail.com>
date: Nov 23, 2017, 6:48 PM
subject: Hello

Dear Sangita Ji

Good Evening...

It is pleasure to hear from you. I am Mr. Y Program manager and my contact number is *****. you can contact me.

With regards
Y

from: Adoption research <adoptionresearchindia.gmail.com>
to: Abc <abc@gmail.com>
date: Nov 25, 2017, 5:10 PM
subject: Adoption research

Dear Mr. Y,

It is a pleasure talking to you. Thank you very much for your prompt response and willingness to participate in the research. As discussed, please find attached the information sheet that gives an overview of the study, what is it meant to participate in it, mutual expectations and ethical considerations. Kindly go through it and if you have any further queries/clarifications, I will be happy to answer.

I will get in touch with you in a few days to explore the possibility to proceed further. Otherwise, you could also write to me.

Warm regards,

Sangita

from: Adoption research <adoptionresearchindia.gmail.com>

to: Abc <abc@gmail.com>

date: Dec 4, 2017, 11:19 AM

subject: Adoption research

Dear Mr. Y

Hope this email finds you well. This is a follow up to my previous email regarding the research on Adoption. Hope you have gone through the information sheet. I look forward to hearing from you. Its absolutely fine if you want to take more time. You can just let me know and give a tentative date. I would contact you accordingly. Many thanks!

Warm regards
Sangita

from: Abc abc@gmail.com

to: Adoption research<adoptionresearchindia.gmail.com>

date: Dec 4, 2017, 11:27 AM

subject: Adoption research

Thank you, I will let you know.

from: Adoption research <adoptionresearchindia.gmail.com>

to: Abc <abc@gmail.com>

date: Dec 18, 2017, 11:14 AM

subject: Adoption research

Dear Mr. Y,

This is in reference to our telephonic conversation on 14th December regarding the study on adoption. Thank you very much for your willingness and consent to take part in the study. As discussed, I share a tentative schedule (8th/9th January) for our meeting followed by a semi-structured interview. Kindly select a suitable date and time (it will continue for 90-120 minutes) and confirm. I will prepare my visit plan accordingly.

Warm regards
Sangita

from: Adoption research <adoptionresearchindia.gmail.com>

to: Abc <abc@gmail.com>

date: Jan 2, 2018, 5:06 PM

subject: Adoption research

Dear Mr. Y

New Year Greetings!

Hope you are doing well.

This is in reference to our discussion on today morning; kindly confirm a date for our meeting. I will make my visit plan accordingly.

Warm regards,
Sangita