Adoption as an Alternative Family System for Childless Couples in Kerala

Lizy P.J[*]

Abstract

Adoption is a process in which the adopted child is separated from his/her own family and parents, and is placed in a new family of the adoptive parents. It involves a major shift in the life of all those who are involved in it. Both the parents and the adopted child need to do a great deal of adjustments throughout their life. For parents, adjustment to adoption begins with infertility and the consideration of adoption as a means of achieving parenthood. It continues throughout the early family life cycle as they integrate their child fully into the family and begin a process of sharing adoption information with him/her. The adoptive parents need to make the child their own, accepting him/her entirely both in the present and in the past and finally integrating him/her into the new family. Once children know that they are adopted, they begin the process of adjustment that involves the integration of the meaning of their unique family status and their dual connection to the two families into an emerging sense of self. There are many factors that contribute to the successful creation of a new family through adoption. This article is intended to reflect on the practice of adoption and the intentions/motivations/reasons for adoption among a sample of couples. The paper presents a study conducted among the adoptive parents in Kerala. A total of 356 adoptive parents from six districts of the state were interviewed for the study. One of the major findings of the study is that among the majority of the parents, the primary motive for adoption was to have a child and thus completing their family, as they do not have a child of their own. It is hoped that the findings and descriptions will be helpful and that practitioners will find it useful for their professional interventions with those adoptive families who are in need of support.

[*] Department of Social Work, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, Kerala, India.
 Email: lizypj@rajagiri.edu;lizy_pj@yahoo.co.in

Introduction

Adoption is the process through which the adopted child is permanently separated from his/her biological parents and becomes the legitimate child of his/her adoptive parents with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities that are attached to the relationship (Government of India, 2006). One of the fundamental rights of the child is the right to a family. Adoption is regarded as the most complete means, whereby family life is restored to a child deprived of his/her natural family. It is in securing his/her right to family, especially when the child is abandoned at an early age, that adoption has come to be recognized as an important alternative for his/her rehabilitation. Gokhale (1976) finds that it is indispensable and therefore adoption should become one of the effective instruments of social action.

The preamble of the Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states that family is the fundamental and the natural environment for the full and harmonious development of all its members, particularly children, who should grow up in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding. Article 20 of the Convention states that a child who is temporarily or permanently deprived of his/her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the state. The state shall ensure alternative care for such a child through various services, including adoption. This paper is based on a major study conducted in Kerala focusing on the intentions/motivations/reasons that led the parents for child adoption. It analyses the circumstances that caused the adoption of the child and other influencing factors. The paper also discusses the changes that were brought out in these families due to adoption, especially the changes in their adoptive family environment.

Theoretical Background

The adoptive families offer an important avenue and an excellent alternative to institutional care and protection of an abandoned, destitute or neglected child in a family providing an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding, which only a family can provide for the realization of his/her talents and potentials (ICCW, 2001). It carries with it all the emotional, physical and material security necessary for the proper development of the

child. It serves as the most reliable means of preventing situations associated with abuse, exploitation and social maladjustment of these children. Acceptance of an unrelated child into the family as one's own has an impact on the child, the family within which the child is placed and the parent–child relationship. It is an issue of importance to the persons most directly involved in the adoption triad—the child, the adoptive parents and the biological parents (Broadzinsky et al.,1992). Adoption is not only the beginning of a new life for both the adopted child and the adoptive parents but also an ongoing process of interactions and adjustments. Acceptance and adjustment to adoption is a lifelong process for both parents and children, with new tasks and challenges emerging at each stage of the family life cycle. Adoptive family formation has been seen from a systems' perspective to provide a broad overview of the family and child development, the constituting and influencing factors as well as the whole family system.

Family Systems Theory

A primary concept in family systems theory is that the family includes interconnected members, and each member influences the others in predictable and recurring ways and focuses on family behaviour rather than individual behaviour (Bowen, 1978). The theory provides a broad and comprehensive mechanism for understanding the core aspects of the performance competence lifespan framework—quality of life, membership and a personal sense of competence. It also focuses on the most important component of environmental influences, namely, the home and the family. From birth, a child's quality of life is directly influenced by the kind of care, support, stimulation and education he/she receives from family members in the home. At the core of this approach is the assumption that adoption creates a new family relationship that links the two families, biological and adoptive, through the child and thereby a new family system (Reitz and Watson, 1992). The authors acknowledge that forming a family through adoption is inherently different from forming a family biologically or from the experience of fostering. The concept of adoption and attitude towards it has undergone a change in recent years. Attitudes to family formation are based on a complex integration of cultural values, structural conditions and personal experience.

Family Integration

The essence of adoption is accepting and making the child a complete member of the new family. This does not mean denying the reality of birth parents of the adopted child or his/her right to know something of his/her origins. Nor does it mean pretending that being an adoptive parent is just the same as being a biological parent. It does mean that adopters need a sturdy belief that their form of parenthood really is parenthood. The process of adoption is said to be complete only when the child fully integrates into the new family. In a sense, adoption is both a beginning and an ending: it is the beginning of a lifelong relationship for the couple and the adopted child; at the same time, for the biological parents, it is an ending, a relinquishment of their parental rights and responsibilities (Mehta, 1992).

Groze (1994) found that one of the most significant challenges facing adoptive families is 'family integration,' a process by which an adoptive family and child come together and work to 'blend' to create a new family system that incorporates aspects of their separate life experiences. This process often involves the adoptive family coming to accept the child and his/her strengths and limitations while also accepting the reality of the child's history and former relationships. Kirk (1985) argues that the success of an adoptive family primarily depends on two factors: the extent to which parents acknowledge that their route towards family formation is different than that experienced by consanguineous families and the degree to which they are willing to openly accept and nurture the uniqueness of their adopted child.

According to Kirk (1981), adoption is potentially an institution of tension and permanent dissatisfaction. In his opinion, failing to treat the adopted child as different from a biological child, and failing to accept the difference between ways of parenting a natural born child and an adopted child, may put the long-term mental health of the adopted child at risk. In such adoptive families, the need of the parents to have a child of their own is of prime importance, for there is little empathy for the child's needs, poor general communication and lack of trust and togetherness in the family. Such a view is also associated with low degree of public sympathy with adopted children and lack of commitment to promote adoption as a useful service for children in need of a home.

The practice of adoption and attitude towards it have undergone changes in recent years. Beginning as an informal practice focusing on the needs

and interests of adoptive parents and society in general, it has emerged in contemporary society as a formalized social service practice, regulated by state law, and geared primarily towards meeting the 'best interests of the child' (Brodzinsky et al., 1998). Its orientation has shifted from parents' welfare to child welfare. In other words, the institution of adoption has broadened from purely parent-based considerations to encompass the needs of the child and make the latter paramount.

Intentions, Reasons and Motivations for Adoption

Baig and Gopinath (1976) explain the motives behind adoption in India. The practice of adoption in ancient times was not strictly motivated by the natural desire to have a child as an object of affection or as an act of compassion, but rested on certain extensive considerations, of which the most important were protection during old age (Billimoria, 1984; Chowdhary, 1996; Chatterjee et al., 1971; Sinha, 2006), perpetuation of family name and continuance of family lineage (Chatterjee et al., 1971; Chowdhary, 1996), security of family property (Chatterjee et al., 1971; Chowdhary, 1996) and solemnization of last rites of the father (Chowdhary, 1996).

However, there were other reasons or intentions for opting adoption. Billimoria (1984) found that majority of the parents adopted the child in the hope of completing a family (80%), and with the hope that the child will look after the parents in their old age (70%). Concerning the relationship between the reasons for adoption and the education of the parents, there seems to be no relationship between the level of education and the reasons for adoption.

Mehta (1992), in her study, viewed adoption as the right of the child to a name, nationality and family and makes a strong plea for a special law on child adoption, which should be child centred, gender just, secular and enabling. She found that a common reason that might make a couple opt for adoption is their involuntary childlessness, a condition that gives rise to a complex of emotions which has its roots in the fundamental human need and desire for parenthood. Other motivations to adopt could be a desire to give a home to a child who needs it; wanting a child of the other sex; as a security during the advanced age and the fear of possibility of genetic problems in one's biological child.

Chowdhary (1996) found that around 90 per cent of parents cited the motivation for adoption as performance of last rites, continuation of family lineage and inheritance of property of adoptive parents. Thirty per cent of respondents in Gujarat indicated the adoption of a son as a measure of support in old age. Only a small percentage argued in favour of providing family to an orphaned/abandoned child. Perhaps none of these motivations are favoured by the majority of the non-resident Indians adopting their siblings from India. According to Damania (1998), the reasons for adoption include recognition of the problem of overpopulation and therefore taking a decision not to have any (more) children of one's own and provision of opportunities to children who cannot grow up with their own families.

Sinha (2006) is of the opinion that adoption has become a custom to meet the natural desire for a son as an object of affection and protection in old age; to continue the family lineage to fulfil obligation towards a forefather and to secure a heir for the ancestral property. The author argues that because of the Brahminical influence, a special religious significance is attached to the son, who is necessary for the spiritual salvation of the parental soul. Hence, adoption of girls was not preferred initially.

One of the earliest studies on adoption in India was conducted by Chatterjee et al. (1971),who examined the impact of social legislation in relation to the effects of communication with respect to awareness, knowledge and acceptance. It was found that very few of the villagers practised child adoption, and accepted and recognized the practice. Caste, education and income were the influencing factors. While analysing the motives for the adoption of a child, it was found that even if the families adopted a child, it was for the perpetuation of family name, succession to property and care of parents in their old age. There was a general negative attitude towards adoption of a female child and a positive attitude towards adoption of a male child. Respondents in the upper castes with higher landholdings were more in favour of adopting boys than girls. Caste and economic factors seemed to negatively influence the respondent's views on the custom of adoption, while education seemed to have a positive influence.

Miall (2000) found that majority (77%) of the respondents strongly approved adoption, while nearly 21 per cent somewhat approved it. There is only two per cent who somewhat disapproved of adoption. An analysis of mother's feelings for an adopted child revealed that majority (77%) had basically the same feeling when compared to the feelings for a child born to her. This same feeling is more among females than among males. Analysis

of father's feelings for an adopted child showed that 70 per cent felt that the feelings for an adopted as well as for a child born to him are basically the same. Not much difference is noticed in this between the males and females.

Ahmad (1975) carried out an attitudinal survey, which was aimed at assessing people's response to the passage of a comprehensive legislation on adoption, and also ascertaining their attitude towards the issue of child adoption. In general, the respondents expressed a negative attitude towards child adoption. Majority of them (82%) had never thought of adopting a child, and a similar percentage (81%) stated that they would not adopt a child even if the family circumstances permitted them. This attitude was shared by the sample as a whole, irrespective of differences in the demographic, social and economic backgrounds. Adoption seemed to appeal only to those who were childless. It was found that Hindus, more than other religious groups, and the better educated, more than the less educated, showed a preference for non-related adoptions, that is, orphaned or abandoned children. Where adoptions of non-related children took place, the underlying motivations generally were inheritance, continuing the family lineage and ancestor worship.

There is the understanding and recognition that the adoptive families offer an important avenue and an excellent alternative to institutional care and protection of an abandoned, destitute or neglected child in a family setting. Adoptive families provide an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding to these children. These families provide an environment for the full realization of the child's talents and potentials. Since the motivation for adoption is one of many factors that contribute to the success of the adoptive family, it is important to analyse the intentions/motivations of parents for adoption. This article attempts to do such an analysis in the Kerala context.

A number of conceptual approaches have been used to understand the issue of adoption adjustment. The social role theory by Kirk (1964) is a landmark in the development of modern adoption theory and practice. A core assumption of the theory is that adoptive family relationships are built, in part, on a foundation of loss for the adoptive couple. It is the loss of fertility and the desired biological child. For the adoptee, it is the loss of his/her birth origins. To cope with adoption-related issues, parents usually adopt one of the two primary strategies. Some parents tend to deny, minimize or reject the meaningfulness of their loss or the differences

associated with adoption. Others are better able to acknowledge their loss and the challenges of adoptive family life. It is important to address this issue of the 'feeling of loss.' Kirk (1964) suggested the acknowledgment-of-difference approach for dealing with this issue of the 'feeling of loss.' This approach will be more conducive to stabilizing the family and developing satisfactory environment for the adoptive parents and adopted child to have positive adjustments.

Methodology

This study was conducted among the adoptive families of Kerala, who had adopted their child/children during the period 1990–2009. The Adoption Co-ordinating Agency, Kerala, has placed 2,306 children in suitable families all over Kerala with the support of adoption placement agencies during this period.From these families, 356 families were selected at random, from six districts of Kerala (Ernakulam, Kottayam, Alappuzha, Idukki, Thrissur and Palakkad). The parents of these selected adoptive families were interviewed using a self-structured interview schedule for collecting the necessary information along with few in-depth case studies.

Results and Discussion

The study presents the findings on the motivations and reasons for adoption among the adoptive parents, to whom do the parents approach for suggestions and guidance to adopt the child and the resultant changes in the family environment due to adoption.

Motivations and Reasons for Adoption

It is revealed that the primary motivation for adoption among most of the adoptive parents (88%) is the personal interest of the parents to have a child and thus completing their family. The major reason is infertility of the parents. This has been supported by various previous studies (Ahmad, 1975; Bharat, 1993; Billimoria, 1984; Mehta, 1992). According to Bharat (1993), people are more interested and motivated for adoption because of their personal interests rather than any other humanitarian considerations. In the present study also it is found that personal interest is a major motivation or intention for adoption. It is found that majority of the parents opted for adoption because there was no chance of having their own biological child. However, very few parents adopted the child with other motives, such as 'to give life to an orphan child' and 'do not wanting to

have one's own child.' The analysis of the interest for adoption among family members shows that among 38 per cent of the cases, both adoptive parents were equally interested for adoption. More or less, an equal percentage of fathers (26%) as well as mothers (23%) were interested for adoption. Among 13 per cent of families, the grandparents, relatives and friends were more interested, and they motivated the parents for adoption. It shows that among majority of the respondents, either both parents or one of them was interested and took the initiative for adoption. It is a very positive step for the better acceptance, recognition and integration of the adopted child into the family system.

Guidance and Suggestions for Adoption

In India, the extended family, friends and neighbours play a very crucial role in the lives of the whole family members. Even though adoption is a very personal decision, attitudes and responses of others affect the adoptive parents and the child. If there is any doubt or restraint expressed by them, adoptive parents feel very touchy and sensitive about it. They expect that there should be total acceptance of the child and feel disappointed if a family member passes any hurtful remark. The study shows that 37 per cent of adoptive parents themselves decided for adoption, whereas 23 per cent of them decided for adoption based on the suggestions from their friends and 15 per cent decided it on doctors' advice. But 25 per cent of the respondents received suggestions and guidance for adoption from their parents and relatives and finally decided for adoption. Thus, more than two-thirds (63%) of the respondents had gone for adoption after getting suggestions and guidance from various sources.

Change in Family Environment Following Adoption

The following are the findings of the changes in the environment of the adoptive families after adopting the child:
- More happiness and peace; relationship between the family members improved
- More feeling of satisfaction, peace and hope in life
- Experience of being a full-fledged family living in an orderly manner
- No change in the family environment
- Tension and anxiety increased in the family
- Lost relatives' relationship and support

The majority of the adoptive parents reported that after the child's arrival, happiness, satisfaction, peace and prosperity occurred in their family. They were really happy about adoption. They felt highly satisfied and said that some hope was there now for their life. They also reported that relationship among the family members has improved. Five per cent of the respondents were of the opinion that after adoption, their house has become a full home and some kind of order and structure had come to their family. Here also a kind of satisfaction and hope were reported.

However, a few of the parents (7%) opined that there was no change in their family environment after adoption, and according to them, it remains the same as before. But among very few families (5%), some kind of negative change has also been noticed; that is, either their anxieties/worries increased or they lost their relatives' relationship and support. Even though it is a minority group, some family interventions are needed for them to cope up with the situation.

The study also shows that almost all the respondents (96%) agree that a family is complete only if there is a child, which is in accordance with the findings of Billimoria (1984). The majority of the parents adopted a child in the hope of completing a family (80%). Almost all the respondents (97%) agreed that after adoption, their family has become happier than earlier. This is reflected in the findings of Panicker (1987) as well. He is of the opinion that home becomes the source of joy for parents once the child enters their world. It never seems to matter where the child was born or came from; it is their child and a part of them. It helps enhance the mental health of the adoptive families.

Conclusion

Adoption is the establishment of a parent–child relationship through a 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/parent. It serves the double purpose of giving a child a home and giving parents a child. Adoption is seen as the best means to restore family life to a child deprived of his/her biological family. Mehta (1992) reminds that developing a bond with the adopted child, and a feeling that the child belongs to the family, is a crucial task for the adoptive parents. Since adoption is different from having children of one's own, one would expect that when difficulties arise, they would tend to relate to those circumstances specific to adoption. This study shows that the primary motivation for

adoption among most of the adoptive parents is the personal interest of the parents to have a child and thus completing their family. They feel a great deal of happiness, satisfaction and peace after the child's arrival at home and also opined that much prosperity has occurred in their family. The adoptive parents feel that their family is complete after adoption, and also they are happy in adoption. They find adoption as the best alternative family system for them. Hence, it can be concluded that the adoptive families in Kerala are basically happy and lead a peaceful life. A few of them need some support, as they find it difficult to adjust with their adopted child. This difficulty could be related to their fear of parental inadequacy, and feelings of their infertility and about their adopted child's illegitimacy.

Acknowledgements

References

Ahmed, I. (1975). Adoption in India: A study of attitudes. *The Indian Journal of Social Work, 36*(2), 181–190.

Baig, T. A., & Gopinath, C. (1976). Adoption: The Indian scene. *The Indian Journal of Social Work, 37*(2), 135–140.

Bharat, S. (1993). *Child adoption: Trends and emerging issues.* Mumbai: Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

Billimoria, H. M. (1984). *Child adoption: A study of the Indian experience.* Mumbai:Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice.* New York: Jason Aronson.

Brodzinksy, M., Schechter, M. D., & Henig, R. M. (1992). *Being adopted: The lifelong search for self.* New York: Doubleday.

Brodzinsky, D. M., Smith, D. W., & Brozinsky, A.B. (1998). *Children's adjustment to adoption: Developmental and clinical issues.* New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Chatterjee, B.B., Singh S. S., & Yadav, D. R. (1971). *Impact of social legislation on social change.* Calcutta: Minerva Associates.

Chowdhary, P. (1996). Need for a child welfare approach. *Social Welfare*, *43*(8), 6–10.

Damania, D. (1998). *Counselling for adoption: The setting up of an Indian adoption programme.* Monograph Series. Mumbai: Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

Government of India. (2006). Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Amendment Act. (2006). New Delhi: Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India.

Gokhale, S. (1976). Inter-country adoptions and consultancy in guardianship. *The Indian Journal of Social Work*, *37*(2), 109–120.

Groze, V. (1994). Clinical and nonclinical adoptive families of special needs children. *Families in Society*, *75*, 90–104.

ICCW (Indian Council for Child Welfare). (2001). *Child Adoption and Thereafter A Psycho Analytical Study.* Chennai: ICCW.

Kirk, D. (1964). *Shared fate. A theory of adoption and mental health.* London: Collier-Macmillan.

Kirk, D., (1981). *Adoptive Kinship.* Toronto: Butterworth.

Kirk, D. (1985). *Adoptive kinship: A modern institution in need of reform.* Ben-Brentwood Bay, BC: Ben-Simon Publications.

Mehta, N. (1992). *Ours by choice: Parenting through adoption.* Bombay: Family Service Centre.

Miall, C. E. (2000). Social support for adoption: Examining the community's role as a stakeholder in the adoption process. Institute for Social Research, McMaster University, Canada.

Panicker, A. (1987). Adoption: Is it always a happy ending? *Social Welfare*, *34*(5), 27–36.

Reitz, M., & Watson, K. W. (1992). *Adoption and the family system.* New York: Guilford.

Sinha, D. (2006). Infertility, adoption, and reproductive technologies: Challenges before the social work profession. *Perspectives in Social Work*, *21*(2), 21–29.