Cross-Culture Parenting
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American Parents Who Adopt Indian Kids

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Brown complexioned, Indian-born Benjamin Mahadev, now seven, is nestled happily in the U.S. home of his white adoptive family of Gail and Albert Walton. When he was three, he took Gail's drivers' license picture and colored it because he wanted mommy to look like him.

Louisa, one of the four Indian daughters adopted by Dr. Jerri Jenista, a single parent, spontaneously exclaimed when she was little, "Mom, you must be sad because you will never be Indian."

Anecdotes like this abound. Hundreds of children, who might have faced a bleak future in an Indian orphanage, have been adopted by American families and are growing up not only as proud Americans but proud of their Indian roots as well, thanks to the efforts of those American parents. This seems to be yet another way mainstream America will develop an understanding of Indian culture and religion, a step toward building interracial harmony and foster good will in a society that remains plagued with racial hatred and conflict.

Hundreds of American families around the country who have adopted Indian children have welcomed not only the children, but their unique heritage into their homes. They are working hard to inculcate in the young ones a pride about India, and a healthy self-esteem about who they are, from their looks to the deep core of culture. About 600 Indian children are adopted into United States every year.

Creating the Home Environment

The Walton's son Ben is showing a deep interest in classical Indian dance kathak, and his family has encouraged him to take formal lessons. He actually performs quite well and has entertained before 200 people. The family reads several books about India and Indians, and Indian crafts adorn their home. Although the family is Mormon Christian, and Ben is raised as a Christian, they have visited Hindu and Jain temples, and Ben can identify the Gods. "When I grow up, I want to marry a brown girl and have brown babies," Ben says.

Ben's classmates told him he was lucky to be an Indian after Gail taught an informative and interesting lesson about India consisting of food, crafts, fairly tales and animal stories to his pre-kindergarten class. She told Hinduism Today, "I feel enriched by bringing an Indian child and Indian culture into my home, and I have served India through my work."

Dr. Jerri Jenista, a specialist in infectious disease, was 29 when she first adopted Louisa, then a tiny infant and now 11 years old. Then she went on to adopt Rohina, now 10, a special-needs child with cerebral palsy and confined to wheel chair. Her third one, Annika, 9, is very bright and Julia, 8, is gifted, too. "India was one of the few countries who could let single parents adopt," said Jenista. "The adoption of my children has brought India into the lives of five generations of my family, and also to countless relatives, neighbors, friends and school children," she said.

The Jenistas are enthusiastic about Indian classical dance, learn bharata natyam and attend all the dance concerts in Ann Arbor, Michigan. They also go to all the Spicmacay programs which are aimed at developing an appreciation of Indian music and culture among college youth. Indian dress, music, books and food (among other international foods) are common in the household. The family dream is to take a joint vacation in India.

Dr. Jenista goes to India every year due to her work with children's diseases, and has developed deep friendships in Calcutta. "Before, I was an Italian American. Now, I am an Italian Bengali American," she quips.

Another single mother from Eastern United States, who wants to remain anonymous, was 40 when she adopted her first Indian girl-the second came soon after. A high school teacher, she calls them "my miracle daughters" and a dream come true. Her extended family lives in the same town and all of them-two grandmothers, a grandfather, four uncles, six aunts, three cousins-dote and cherish her brown-skinned daughters. The girls read Ramayana, stories of today's Indian families, visit the local Indian bazaar and attend Indian holiday celebrations.

For John and Judy Thorp of Big Rapids, Michigan, the Indian subcontinent came first in their lives and then the children. John, a cultural anthropologist, did his PhD dissertation on Bangladesh, and the couple lived there for four years. They could see the devastation due to war and cyclones and the many kids who needed homes. Later, they adopted two girls from Bangladesh (Megna now 13, and Anjali now 10) and one (Jayana, 10) from India. They were adopted when they were infants and toddler respectively. "With us the family food is Indian food, the children love Indian snacks," Thorp told Hinduism Today. As for clothes, "They feel very dressed up when they wear salwaar kameez. "

The Thorps are typical of "middle-middle class" U.S. families with incomes around US$50,000/year, who can afford to adopt a child, a procedure that can easily cost $9,000. It can take up to a year to adopt a child from India, and Indian law prohibits parents seeing or choosing the child. It is a telling note on Indian society that three or four times more girls are available for adoption than boys. In the camp photo to the left, for example, there are 22 Indian girls and 9 boys.

The families face what Gail calls the "obvious appearance of adoption, but build a protective castle for the child at home." Most painful are thoughtless racist remarks, such as a friend who greeted Gail in a supermarket and commented on Ben, "He's getting lighter [in color]." Her response-"Oh darn, you caught me putting bleach in his bath water"-hid her outrage. "You can't answer silly or rude questions with anger," she explained, "You have to do it with humor. And they never asked me again." Outsiders seem to be unaware that Indians are also Caucasians, and therefore of the same "race" as themselves.

Creating an Indian Identity

Adopted children get a strong Indian identity within their American set up. The Thorp family does puppet shows on Ramayana, and the 20-minute show is shown in many schools. They read books by Tagore. "We want to put before children great role models that are Indians. They need to know that Indians like Rabindranath Tagore won Nobel Prizes. In the American society they see white teachers, doctors, principals. They need to know that brown-skinned people are very successful professionals too." Many adoptive parents consciously took in Indian children because of their striking features and their lovingness and brightness. Thorp said, "We work so hard to inculcate Indian culture among the children, that in the process, parents become half Indians."

The family is Catholic, and they attend the church every Sunday. But they also make the girls familiar with the Hindu and Muslim religions. They have a Krishna idol and Ganesha picture in their home. They have visited many Hindu temples and are working on a special program in cooperation with Vivekananda Monastery in Ganges, Michigan. "Paths are many, but God is one," they believe.

Hinduism Today also came across a Hindu couple from Pennsylvania, who wish to remain anonymous. They have adopted an Indian girl. Strong in their faith, they adopted a child to clear karma. The wife had two abortions prior to giving birth to their first child. Later on she felt badly about it, and to cleanse the karma, almost as an antidote, sought a beautiful Indian little girl who miraculously came into their life and became the object of their love even before they adopted her.

Newsletters and Culture Camps

Gail Walton started publishing her Connections newsletter a few months after her infant son arrived from Calcutta, to help other parents like herself raise a child from India [see sidebar below]. Meeting on the printed page was not enough, so the idea of a culture camp, "Hands Around the World" evolved. The culture camp, now in its seventh year, meets for one week annually in July. Each day for five hours children share music, dance, games, crafts, food and guests from diverse cultures. Gail, as president of "Hands around the World," listed the camp's four guiding purposes: 1) To learn to balance a healthy pride in one's self and one's heritage with respect for other's feelings and appreciation of their heritage. 2) To enhance self-esteem as a member of one's birth culture, one's adoptive family and the community of the world. 3) To embrace all cultures by inviting others to develop a curriculum and join hands around the world. 4) To support all participants of camp in discovering their

identity while having fun.

Another camp, called the Spice Rack Culture Camp is held every summer. The tenth one took place in Dayton, Ohio, in June `93. Over 200 adults and children from 18 states attended the camp, involving themselves in projects and activities relating to Indian culture, and creating an Indian village scene. Even some grandparents attended the camp.

Gail explained that adopting parents do not attempt to raise the children as Hindus (or Muslims). Rather the children follow the Christian, Jewish or non-denominational faith of their new parents. For this reason, they do not send the children to camps run by Hindu temples, as they are too "heavily religious," according to Gail. However, Hindu organizations such as the Swaminarayan temple in Michigan have provided much welcome assistance. Indeed, there are probably many ways Hindu organizations could help these families raise their Indian children.

The culture camps are just one of the activities that enrich the lives of these admirable families. In all their day-to-day life, they are making a selfless, deliberate and conscious efforts to make their children aware of their glorious heritage. Hindu families and organization should take the opportunity to help in whatever way we can.

Connections: Families of Children From India and the Indian Subcontinent

When Gail, a homemaker and active community volunteer, and Albert, an electrical engineer, adopted infant Ben as their third child in 1986 (their two adopted daughters are American-born), they wanted to learn a lot about India and share that with their boy in his growing years. Since she could not find a whole lot that addressed the particular needs of an American adoptive parent of an Indian child, she started a quarterly newsletter, Connections, to connect families who have children from India and the Indian subcontinent and to assist them in raising their Indian children with good self-esteem about who they are.

Connections, since its debut summer of 1987, has grown into a vital networking tool. Its 30-odd pages are chock-full of vital information about the Indian children,

interesting stories about the Hindu religion, mythology and customs and myriad columns. It now reaches four-hundred families in all U.S. states plus four other countries.

The columns are children-focused as well as parent-focused. Children's Treasures contains stories and poems written by children, giving them pride to see their "byline," while a column written by a medical doctor and psychologist answers specific issues. The newsletter also includes information on places of Indian cultural enrichment, customs and tradition, video and book reviews, recipes, children's photos and adoption information. "Connections has brought us close like an extended family, also developed a meaningful place for children to relate to other Indian children growing up in American families," Gail shares.

Address: 1417 Miner Street, Arlington Heights, Illinois, 60004, USA. Subscription (quarterly) US$14/year; outside US$18/year (in US currency).