



Indian-American couples look to adopting children here in U.S.

DIFF'RENT Strokes

Shankari Easwaran and her husband Rajesh Arcot, with their adopted son Ashwin.

By Bhargavi Kulkarni

L— NEW YORK akshmi Iyer is used to the barrage of questions that follow every time she sets out with her three children. Iyer and her biological daughter are Indian-Americans, while her two older daughters are adopted — and Caucasian. “Are they yours? Where are their parents? Are you their nanny? What are they?” The Philadelphia resident said she’s gotten used to the questions over time, but realizes that every answer she gives is important in shaping her children’s thoughts too.

Similar questions and perplexed looks have also followed California resident Shankari Easwaran and her husband Rajesh Arcot. In 2010, the couple adopted Ashwin, whose birth father is Indian and mother is Caucasian. “Most people want to know more,” Easwaran told India Abroad. While some won’t shy away from pointing out the obvious — “Guys, I am being honest, he does not look any-



Lakshmi Iyer and her husband Narayanan Iyer, with their adopted twin daughters. On her blog, Lakshmi Iyer refers to them as Ammu and Pattu.

thing like you,” a little girl once told the couple — a few people will swear that their adopted son looks exactly like them, Easwaran said. “There used to be a lot of excitement when he was a newborn, but things have slowly settled down,” she said.

Iyer and Easwaran are among a growing number of Indian-Americans who are choosing to adopt domestically, rather than going to India. Many blame the complex international adoption laws, the lengthy application and vetting process and the adoption

hierarchy in India, where non-resident Indians are said to be given the lowest priority.

Maggie Rangan defines her family as “non-traditional.” The California-based Rangans adopted their daughter, Pallavi, from India, but because of her “obvi-

ous special needs,” the questions are more related to that topic than her adoption. Rangan, an executive at HP, did not elaborate on her daughter’s condition. “We do get asked many questions by folks who know us, and they run the gamut: From how happy they are for us, to how they still question why we chose to adopt.” The family’s responses also run the gamut, Rangan said. “Sometimes we try to educate them, sometimes we just ignore.”

Open Adoption

Both Iyer and Easwaran have also chosen an open adoption in which the children and the adoptive parents are in contact with the birth mother. Iyer and her husband Narayanan are raising their three children as Hindu; a choice she and her husband made. On her blog, Lakshmi Iyer refers to her daughters as Ammu, Pattu and Laddu. She chose not to disclose their real names.

The couple also took an oath during adoption finalization that

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Maggie and Dilip Rangan with their son Vaibhav and daughter Pallavi. The couple adopted Pallavi from India, when she was 4-year-old. Maggie Rangan says she is an advocate for older child adoption.

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they will treat the children as if they'd been born to them.

However, being in an open adoption has helped open their minds to the possibility of exploring Christianity, their children's birth religion, as something that all of their kids should be exposed to. "Our children's other mother actually is on the same page as us," Iyer said. "She placed the children with us so the children will get a well-rounded exposure to other cultures, religion and languages."

It is a thought that resonates with Kelly Phillips, Ashwin Arcot's birth mother. In an email sent to India Abroad, Phillips, 38, who now lives in New Zealand, said she chose to give her son away for adoption because she wasn't in a good place financially or emotionally to care for a small child.

"Knowing that there were people who would be thrilled to raise and love my child made me feel happy to participate in the adoption process." Both Easwaran, who conducts Indian cooking classes, and her husband, a hardware engineer, were present during Ashwin's birth; Rajesh Arcot cut the umbilical cord, and Easwaran was the first to hold Ashwin. Phillips said she's apprised of Ashwin's progress through Skype calls, photos and videos. "It makes me so happy to watch him grow and be able to have a small part in his life," she said.

In a 2015 blog on the Huffington Post, Iyer wrote about her relationship with her twins' birth mother. "Neither friends nor immediate family,

we are linked by our children," she wrote. "She gave birth to them. I raise them." They make regular trips to meet with one another.

Redefining Convention

By adopting domestically, Indian-Americans are breaking all types of conventions — with no restrictions on race, color or gender. Like most immigrant families, they are also trying to achieve a balance between the Indian and the American traditions and cultures. "While we celebrate the festivals we grew up with [in India], we have also started celebrating America and its culture" much before Ashwin was born, Easwaran said, saying the couple did not have to make any added efforts to

accommodate their son's background. Ashwin is their only son.

Iyer's situation is slightly different: She has a 3-year-old biological daughter in addition to her adopted twins. Every day is a realization that their family will be redefining conventional explanations of what it means to be Indian or American. "The hyphen will define us more than the terms themselves," Iyer wrote in a recent blog on the Huffington Post. "As a family, we will retain some traditions, invent new ones and adopt a few more along the way. Our home will be lit up from Deepavali to Christmas. We will hang a wreath, set out Halloween candy, hang up ornaments and rush to the temple on New Year's Day."

Family Support

Family support is key when embarking on such a life-chang-



Lakshmi Iyer and her daughters dressed for Navratri festivities.



Shankari Easwaran and her son Ashwin Arcot.



Ashwin Arcot in a traditional veshti.



The Iyers with their daughters.

ing decision. The families India Abroad spoke with said their relatives' first reactions ranged from surprise and anger to inquisitiveness.

While Iyer's immediate family knew of their intention a couple of days before the adoption, extended family and friends knew only after the couple became legal guardians to the twins. The reaction was "overwhelmingly positive for us and we had support from both sides of our family," Iyer told India Abroad.

In Rangan's case, immediate family members were surprised they had chosen to adopt, as the couple has an older biological son, Vaibhav, now 11. Rangan said her father helped them follow up with the Indian officers and court to get their file moving and get their daughter home. "The first reaction of every other extended family member was inquisitiveness, of why we chose adoption and if we couldn't have another biological child," Rangan said. "When our child came home, the reactions were mostly positive and welcoming of our decision."

Domestic vs. International Adoption

Visa legalities played an important role for Iyer in opting for domestic adoption, but for Rangan, who was a U.S. citizen, India was the obvious choice. "When my husband [Dilip Rangan] and I made the decision to expand our family through adoption, our first choice was to adopt from India," Rangan said. "Born and raised in India, it was all but natural for us to adopt from India." Since they are U.S. citizens, it was legally possible for them to adopt from India and hence there was never a second thought about domestic adoption. Like Rangan, Iyer started with the idea of adopting from India. But as green card holders, they faced a three-year wait. The couple was not willing to wait that long. The other option was to move back to India, adopt domestically and return to the U.S. after two years. However, that would have meant one of them putting their career on hold and jeopardizing their permanent residency process here. "So, we turned to domestic adoption once we knew it was possible and that it would be quicker than adopting from India," Iyer said.

Unlike Rangan and Iyer, going to India never crossed Easwaran's mind. "Children are children anywhere, we wanted a child to complete our family and it did not matter where he/she came from," she said.

While there is no specific data available on Indian-American adoptions within the U.S., State Department data shows that out of the 194 children adopted from

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