

By Neena Bhandari in Sydney for BBC Indian Languages

Elizabeth Brook, 33, and her husband Adam Brook, 32, from Windsor in New South Wales are “ecstatic” that Australia is recommencing the Intercountry Adoption program with India.

“It heralds hope and sunshine for us as we are at the beginning of building our family”, says Elizabeth, who was diagnosed with polycystic ovarian syndrome at the age of 14 years. Since then, she has always thought of Intercountry Adoption.

Coincidentally, around the time when she was told that fertility could be an issue, she happened to watch *Raja Hindustani* on television. “It left a lasting impression on my mind and I was drawn to all things Indian – food, clothes and films. I travelled to India with my sister and my best friend, and then twice with Adam. We became certain that we wanted to adopt children from India”, says Elizabeth.

The adoption program with India was placed on hold in October 2010 in response to allegations of trafficking of children for Intercountry Adoption by some of the recognised Indian placement agencies (the Adoption agencies mandated to place children in Intercountry Adoption) at that time. Since then India has made Intercountry Adoption regulations more stringent with the enactment of the Juvenile Justice Act 2015 and notification of Adoption Regulations 2017.

Two years ago, the couple even contemplated moving to India and adopt as expatriates. Elizabeth, who grew up in a liberal family exposed to different cultures and religions says, “Australia will hopefully reopen the India program by the end of the year. If everything works to plan, and we are home with a child in three years, we would be very happy”.

The average time from when parents first became a client of the department responsible for adoptions in their state or territory to when a child was placed with them was 2 years and 9 months, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare’s (AIHW) *Adoptions Australia 2016–17* report.

The couple would like to adopt two or three kids and they have planned well to receive children from India’s Central Adoption Resource Authority’s (CARA) ‘Immediate Placement’ category.

While the Australia-India Intercountry Adoption program is being reactivated, a spokesperson from the Australian Department of Social Services told this correspondent that adoption applications from Australian prospective adoptive parents cannot yet be lodged. State and Territory Central (adoption) Authorities are currently considering whether they wish to participate in a reactivated Intercountry Adoption program with India.

“Australian states and territories that decide to participate in a reactivated program will need time to establish new processes to support the operation of the program before adoption applications can be sent to India. Any reactivated program will be introduced carefully and slowly, so that Australian authorities can closely monitor the program and ensure that safeguards are operating effectively”, the spokesperson added.

The recommencement of the adoption program will enable prospective adoptive parents, including those of Indian origin settled in Australia, fulfil their desire to adopt a child from the country of their birth.

Joylakshmi Saini, 42, and her husband Manjit Singh Saini, 38, from the northern Melbourne suburb of Craigieburn in Victoria have been waiting for the past eight years for the adoption program with India to resume.

“It is bitter-sweet news for us as currently we are at the third stage of lodging the documents for local adoption. We are torn whether to proceed with local adoption or start the process for Intercountry Adoption”, says Joylakshmi, who was diagnosed with Endometriosis and had to undergo emergency surgery in 2008. Soon after, the couple migrated from Mumbai to Australia. They tried in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) and went through five cycles without success. She then underwent hysterectomy and was diagnosed “infertile”. The couple then tried surrogacy twice, which failed too.

“Adoption is our only option and we were hoping to adopt twins or siblings from India in 2010, just when Australia put the Intercountry Adoption program with India on hold. We visited many orphanages and longed to bring a child home to give him/her a better life and experience the joy of having a family”, says Joylakshmi.

For prospective adoptive parents like Joylakshmi, it was even more upsetting to know that while Australia had the adoption program with India on hold, other major signatories to the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, continued to allow their citizens to adopt from India.

Mary Jones (Name changed to protect identity), 33, a single mother living in the remote mining town of Mount Isa in north-west Queensland says, “This is a very promising development, but I am taking it with a grain of salt. We have to wait and see how effectively the decision to resume adoption from India will be implemented. I have been wanting to adopt a little girl from India for the past four years. This is a remote town and my nine-year-old son feels very lonely”.

Mary had migrated from India to New Zealand along with her husband. Five years ago, she moved to Australia after separating from her husband following years of emotional and financial abuse. A registered nurse, she has seen the plight of children in orphanages while volunteering in Bangalore and she is committed to providing a loving home to at least one such child.

There is much evidence to demonstrate the detrimental impact of institutional living for children who have been orphaned, says Renée Carter, Chief Executive Officer of Adopt Change, a not for profit advocacy and research organisation.

"There has rightly been a push to prioritise children being able to live with families in-country. But where this is not possible, a child should be able to grow up in a permanent, safe and nurturing family. With inter country adoption, all due processes need to be in place to ensure that adoption is a service for the child and that it is a safe, transparent and ethical process with the child at the centre," Ms Carter told this correspondent.

During 2016-17, all 69 inter-country adoptions in Australia were from Asia, with Taiwan the most common country of origin, followed by the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand, according to the AIHW report.