

Institution to Inclusion: A story many children are still waiting to live

A life of routine, not belonging

Every story of children in institutional care usually begins quietly- mornings arrive the same way each day with beds neatly arranged, shoes placed in order and meals served on time. There is routine, there's structure and there's safety. For many of the young ones living in these care institutions, this rhythm becomes their entire world. Among them are children who move, learn, hear, speak or understand the world differently. They are cared for and protected, yet when families walk in, their names are often the last to be called as disability still makes many of us hesitate.

When policy began asking the hard questions

Across adoption systems in India, children with disabilities tend to wait the longest. Some wait years, some grow up entirely within institutions, ageing out without ever knowing what it means to belong to a family. Institutions, despite their best efforts, are designed to care for many children at once. They provide shelter, food and supervision but they can't replace personal attention or the quite assurance of being chosen. Over time, policymakers were forced to confront a difficult truth that safety alone can't substitute 'belonging'.

This reflection marked the beginning of a shift with the Juvenile Justice Act of 2015 where adoption was recognized as the preferred long-term solution for children who were abandoned, orphaned, neglected, abused, trafficked or were at the verge of exploitation.¹ Institutional care was meant to be temporary, a bridge rather than a destination; yet for children with disabilities, adoption remained rare. It became clear that the gap was shaped by fear, uncertainty and long-standing stigma around disability.

In response, the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) has begun reframing the conversation. Through awareness campaigns and initiatives like 'From Institution to Inclusion', the focus shifted from seeing adoption as an act of charity to understanding it as a right rooted in dignity. The message was simple yet a powerful one- Institutions can provide care, but families provide love. The intent was to highlight what they can't offer, i.e. individual attachment,

¹ The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015

emotional support and a sense of belongingness, belongingness to a place which they can proudly call ‘home’.

Weight of labels and the fear they carry

Children with disability were categorized under ‘children with special needs’ allowing for more flexible and responsive adoption processes. Now, the emphasis has moved away from persuasion and towards preparation. Families are encouraged to understand medical and developmental realities, and to reflect on their ability to care.

The term ‘special needs’ carries a negative connotation, making prospective parents hesitate before they adopt such children. “Children with minor correctible issues are also labelled as ‘special’ leading to preference for perfectly healthy children as per the age profile”, as observed by the ex-CEO of CARA, Mr. Deepak Kumar.² Such children are often placed for inter-country adoptions where they’re more likely to find families who are willing to support them. This comes as an outcome of these countries having a comprehensive support system for these children along with allowances and planned surgeries.³

Beyond paperwork, towards possibility

The system also recognized that adoption does not end with paperwork. Post-adoption support, access to welfare schemes, healthcare provisions and inclusive education policies are a part of larger safety net. While these measures remain uneven in practice, their existence signals an important shift- the responsibility of care go on even when a child exits the institution.

At its center, the initiative acknowledges something deeply human. That children with disabilities are waiting for a world that doesn’t see their needs as a burden, rather as part of the diverse realities of childhood. By attempting to move children from institutions into families, the state is offering possibilities.

This story is still unfolding. Adoption rates for children with disabilities remain low and social stigma still persists. Yet by reshaping the narrative, the initiative opens space for reflection. It invites families to reconsider their assumptions and society to question why belonging should ever

² <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/over-18000-adoptions-since-2019-only-1404-children-with-special-needs-find-homes/article68565810.ece>

³ Ibid.

be conditional. Sometimes, change begins with a quieter shift in how we see those who have been overlooked for far too long.

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