

# Adopted by fate: Looking Indian, feeling Dutch

11.8.04 Times of India Mumbai

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TIMES NEWS NETWORK

**Mumbai:** When Dilip Venfaassen emerged from an air-freshened Northwest plane into the body odour of Mumbai, he felt choked—not by the fishy, fetid fumes but by their instant familiarity. “I have no memories of Bombay,” says the 27-year-old, who was a nappy-clad bundle when he left his Matunga orphanage for a new home in Holland. “But that smell...it felt a little bit like home.”

Venfaassen is one of the thousands of Indians who, as babies, were adopted by families in distant countries like Denmark and Canada. Of these, 7000 scrawny Prashants and Aradhanas made their way to Holland, where they gradually metamorphosed into sturdy Pauls and Sandras. But beneath the veneer of everyday reality—the melody of ‘Slaap kindje slaap’, the aroma of apple pancakes and the bite of Amsterdam winters—they retained the shadowy memories of other songs, other smells.

“I left India when I was nine months old,” says Anand Kaper, 27, whose childhood interaction with India was through news snippets about drought and floods. “But when I stepped off the plane in Delhi for the first time in 1995, I was overcome with *deja vu*.”

Anxious to retrieve the few available fragments of a shredded and sealed past, seven Indian adoptees from Holland visited the city last week. Some tried to trace their biological mothers, others made wrenching pilgrimages to the or-

phanages where they uttered their first ‘yayaya’, and most stocked up on Bollywood blockbusters and pashmina shawls.

“Many of us feel our lives are jigsaw puzzles with pieces missing. Coming here helps find some pieces,” says Kaper, who is the only member of the group to have visited India earlier. Adds Mark Degraaff, 23, whose Hindu girlfriend and fondness for Hindi films triggered his curiosity about India, “I wanted to come here because, although my character is Dutch, my heart is Indian as well.”

Indeed, many Indian adoptees experience the sense of being a “nowhere man living in a nowhere land”. In the predominantly white classrooms of Warmenhuizen and pubs of Delft, their brown faces are the subject of inevitable curiosity. While in India, where they look like any Cuffe Parade collegian, they share neither language nor love of Tendulkar.

“People often ask me whom I look like, and I feel terrible that I have no answer,” says 18-year-old Sandra Aradhana Vermy, who hates the inevitable questions about why she



The Indian adoptees and their Dutch friend spent a month exploring the country

looks so different from her parents. Adds Degraaff in his deliberate, studied English, “With my Dutch friends I feel Indian, with my Hindu friends I feel white. It’s hard.”

Concurs Kaper, “The identity crisis of adolescence is always more complex with adopted children who don’t have the same genes as their parents. As for us, we don’t even

have the same skin colour. This makes questions like ‘Who am I?’ more troubling.”

The trip to India has helped resolve a few questions, or at least put them into perspective. “When I see men my age sleeping on the street, I feel it could so easily have been me. Why was I chosen to go to Holland when others were not?” wonders Kaper. Adds Venfaassen angrily, “They say life can be a bitch. And I saw that at the children’s home yesterday.”

Nevertheless, Kaper and Venfaassen are unwilling to let sleeping records lie. Although Indian law protects the identity of the birth mother, Kaper ploughed through the files of the hospital where he was born and actually found a name and address. “I don’t know if I will contact her,” he muses. “I have to work out the consequences both for myself and for her.”

And what of the consequences for the Dutch woman who adopted him 27 years ago? Don’t adoptive parents fear they will lose the children for whom they pureed carrots, relearned the sticky rules of algebra and built a new life? “Our parents were a bit afraid that we would stay on in India and they wanted to come with us,” says Paul Prashant Vermy, 21, who is Sandra’s adoptive brother. “But they finally decided that this was our journey, not theirs.”

“My mother is very supportive. But then,” says Venfaassen, adding with a smile which proves that at least one mamma in distant Ghoojeveen has no reason to worry, “I have the best mother in the world.”