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From insight to impact.



Adoptions of Indian children in Switzerland: giving everyone a voice

Topstory
School of Humanities
and Social Sciences
International Adoptions

The research project “International adoptions from India into Switzerland” under the aegis of ethnology professor Rita Kesselring examines the adoption practice of the two cantons of Thurgau and Zurich between 1973 and 2002. The project is conducted in cooperation with researchers from India and takes into consideration the perspectives of the birth mothers, the Swiss adoptive parents and the adopted persons themselves.

Rita Kesselring took over the newly created Chair of Urban Studies at the School of Humanities and Social Science in 2022. Before the 42-year-old ethnologist joined the University of St.Gallen, she had studied ethnology, English and international law in Zurich and Cape Town and obtained her doctoral degree and a postdoctoral qualification of *Habilitation* in Basel. She had lived in Africa for several years. In Zambia’s mining town of Solwezi, Rita Kesselring explored the conditions of raw material extraction in a copper mine. In Cape Town, she exposed the late consequences of apartheid in South Africa. Since 2022, Rita Kesselring has headed the research project “(Foreign) adoptions in the cantons of Zurich and Thurgau, 1973-2002”, which examines the placement of Indian children who were received by foster parents in the cantons of Thurgau and Zurich for later adoption. Rita Kesselring’s team extends the Swiss authorities’ perspectives by two aspects: by means of interviews with

Indian birth mothers who gave up a child for adoption in Switzerland and with adoptive parents in Switzerland who accepted an Indian child.

Project with a public mission

The research project examines the questions as to how the placements and adoptions came into being, where the children came from and in what environments they were accommodated. The project team consists of Sabine Bitter, historian, Andrea Abraham, ethnologist, and Nadine Gautschi, sociologist, who are responsible for the archival work and the interviews in Switzerland and India. Furthermore, the Swiss academics cooperate with two researchers from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai, Josephine Anthony and Asha Iyer. In terms of geography, the research team had opted for India in their application since the South Asian state was one of the most important countries of origin

of children adopted in Switzerland between 1973 and 2022 and since, nonetheless, very little is known about adoption agency work from India. In the country with approximately one and a half billion inhabitants, the research team primarily concentrates on the state of Maharashtra and its capital Mumbai.

In 1973, a new adoption law entered into force in Switzerland; adoption agency work was legally regulated for the first time. From 2003 onwards, the supervision of adoption was passed on from the cantons to the Confederation, and the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption entered into force for Switzerland. The project, which is funded by both the cantons of Thurgau and Zurich, has a public mission: “It is a research with an immediate societal impact, internationally and in Switzerland, which takes place in the context of the reappraisal of the Swiss authorities’ role demanded by the Federal Council and the associations of adopted persons,”



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says ethnologist Kesselring. When the results of the study are available in 2024, they will be made accessible to a general public in a book publication and on a website. The researchers aim to initiate a process to prompt other cantons to reappraise their adoption history. Besides the historical reappraisal, the project is intended to provide information about current and future developments such as surrogate motherhood at the same time in order to be able to regulate international cooperation with

reforms early on to ensure that past mistakes will not be repeated.

Extending perspectives and giving a voice to all

Methodologically, the project is based on approaches drawn from history and social sciences. The critical source studies in the cantonal archives of Zurich and Frauenfeld, in the municipal archives of Zurich and Winterthur and in the Federal Archives concern pro-

tected personal data which requires very careful handling to ensure that personal rights are not violated. The classic archival work is complemented by biographically narrative conversations with persons concerned and interviews with experts such as doctors, researchers, NGOs and social workers. Besides the biographical interviews with adoptive parents, the inclusion of the birth mothers in India has been the greatest challenge to data: “Although it’s possible to find mothers, access is

declined by the university ethics commission in India,” Rita Kesselring says of the situation. Nonetheless, the research team examines mothers’ experiences with the help of discussions with social workers, gynaecologists and activists, for example. It is complex to respect that social and political context, on the one hand, and to explore the familial, economic and health conditions that mothers were subjected to, on the other hand.

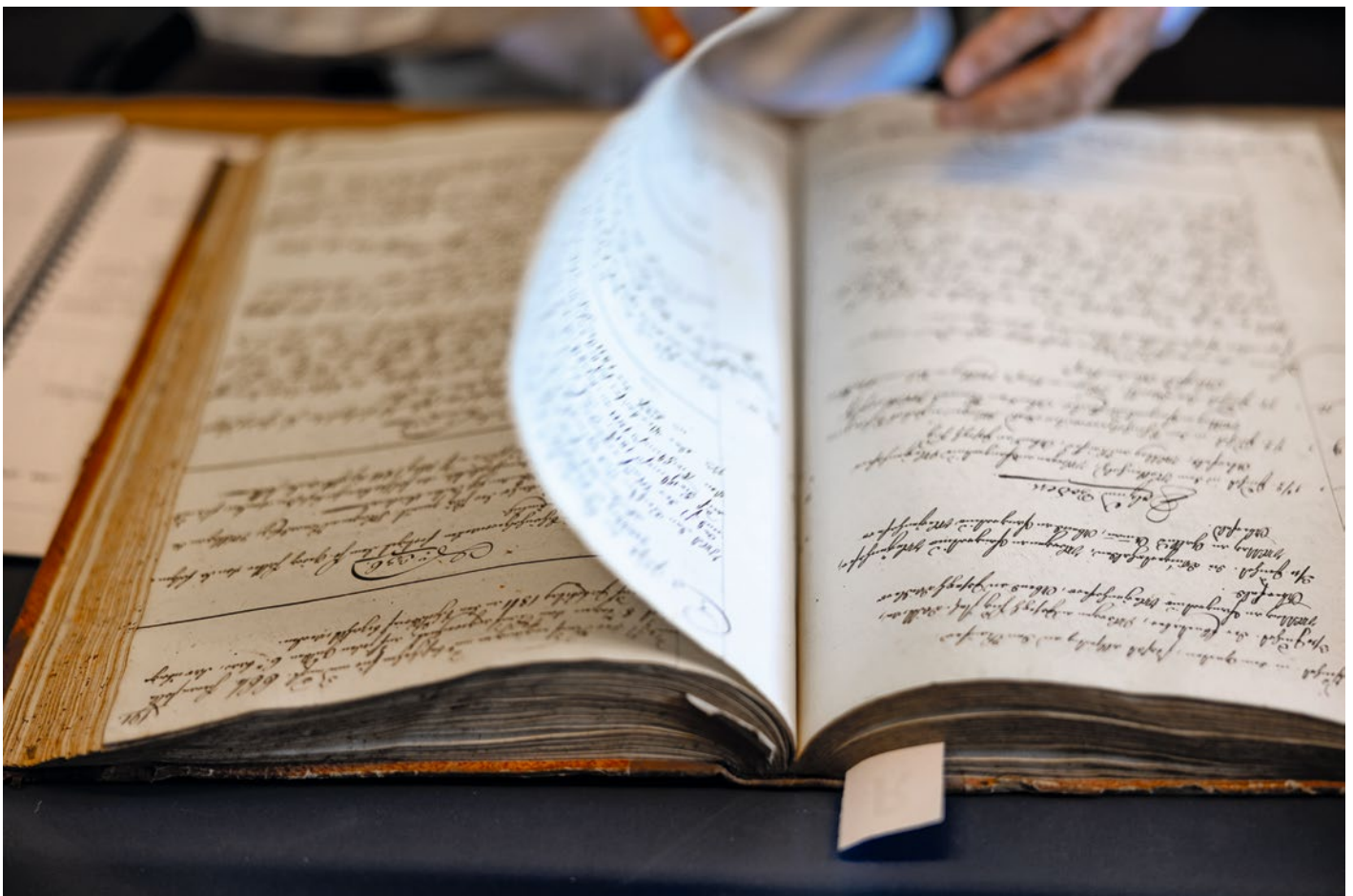
Back to the scientific roots

Although both India and Switzerland are new to the ethnologist as research countries, her experiences and discussions from southern Africa are useful for her in this context, too:

“The difference of whether I speak to a mayor in Zambia or a member of a cantonal government in Switzerland isn’t very big.” Rita Kesselring says that she learned to move across hierarchies and to assess decision-makers not only with regard to their function but also with regard to their political and social contexts.

One common denominator of her research are Switzerland’s international interconnections: “I’m interested in how Switzerland has often been able to position itself in a privileged and profit-making role and is still able to do so, whether it’s in commodity trading in Africa or in the transfer of children from India,” says Kesselring about her personal research interests. After her research into mining

in Zambia, which was more technical in nature, the project about adoption agency work from India is a return to her scientific roots. The fate of the adopted children from India reminds her of her research project on the consequences of apartheid in South Africa, where she dealt with the truth commission and the legal steps that victims took out of their discontent with the limited reappraisal of the crimes – inter alia, in Switzerland. “This, too, is about mothers who have lost their children. For me as a researcher, this is therefore a homecoming to human and at the same time very difficult issues,” says Kesselring. The direct exchange with those concerned, as well as listening openly, are crucial to my work in order to understand their knowledge and experience,” says the professor.



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