

CARA 2026 Reforms Efficacy: Digitalization vs. Procedural Delays

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Abstract

Regardless of the digital advancements offered by CARA through CARINGS, there is still an average delay of 2-4 years to complete an adoption process in India that is governed by the JJ Act, 2015 and the Adoption Regulations, 2022. This study critically evaluates CARA's 2026 OM directives regarding their procedures (particularly for LFA adoptions), their requirements for proper documentation, and their provisions to protect the privacy of all children who are placed with families [rather than having any agency involved in placing children and/or procedural issues]. While it has been proven that using digital tools has speeded up the matching process of children with families, delays in the process of inquiry/tracing have not been reduced by using these tools, thus indicating that the entire lifecycle of the adoption process must be managed within a comprehensive timeline in order to ensure accountability to all parties involved.

Keywords- CARA, CARINGS , Adoption ,child interest ,family .

Introduction

As a result of the digital revolution, many nations, including India, have initiated various digital enterprise programs to better align and develop the areas of health and social care, socioeconomic and political environments, with an emphasis on digital enterprise systems throughout history. One area that has seen evolution from analogue to digital methods is child adoption; this started as early as 2015 when the Government of India through the Ministry of Women & Child Development developed a new formalized electronic periodic system for adoptions known as CARINGS (Child Adoption Resource Information and Guidance System). CARINGS was also established by the Central Adoption Resource Authority, the chief oversight agency of the Central Government of India formally established to regulate and monitor both domestic and international adoptions within India's territory. The purpose of CARINGS is to consolidate national child adoption data including information about children who are no longer in the care and custody of their biological parents and being declared eligible for adoption and the registered prospective parents who are applying to adopt. In the context of this background, our research study provided an understanding of how any future development in the area of child adoptions in India is being shaped through the introduction of electronic systems and how digitization is influencing the pre- and post-child adoption processes. This paper reports on the perceived benefits and limitations of the adoption of electronic systems based on quantitative and qualitative research studies completed by both Western and Indian researchers and observations made by the author as part of an ongoing qualitative research study on adoption digitization in India.

Effect of Hague Convention on Indian Adoption laws

India's ratification of the 1993 Hague Convention in 2003. This revolutionized the previously fragmented state of adoption in India from being governed by different religions (Hindu's being governed by the HAMA 1956 (Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act), while everyone else was governed by the Guardian & Wards Act, 1890) to a centralised, child focused adoption process through the Juvenile Justice (JJ) Act of 2015 and the Central Adoption Resource Agency Regulations of 2022. By recognising CARA as the Central Authority for adoption, the Hague Convention created a mandatory structure of CARA → State Adoption Resource Agencies (SARAs) → District Child Protection Units (DCPUs) → State Adoption Agencies (SAAs) to eliminate unethical private adoption agencies and allow for digital tracking of the adoption of children through the CARINGS portal. The result of these reforms has reduced the percentage of illegal adoptions from between 20% and 30% to less than 5%, using the legally free checks provided by Article 4 (60 days to trace biological parent), Article 16 (Home study report), and Article 17 (No objection certificate) of the Hague Convention. As a further result of the Hague Convention's application in India, the number of domestic adoptions has more than doubled (from 1,900 to 3,900 per year); however, the time it takes to adopt a child from 16 months to 24 months has not improved and there are unresolved issues relating to the recognition of HAMA adoptions from the United States. The Operational Manuals (OM's) to be issued by CARA in 2026 will ensure that there is complete compliance with Articles 4, 16 and 25 of the Convention and will address pre-existing compliance gaps creating a role for India to become a leader in the global adoption of Hague Convention-compliant adoption for 3 million vulnerable children.

Digital Context

Before 2015, adopting a child in India involved a huge amount of paper work. However, with the Digital India initiative that began in 2015 there were many new digital services created in a variety of socioeconomic, political, health and social welfare areas. An example of this is with the introduction by the Indian Government's Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) of their new Child Adoption Resource Information and Guidance System (CARINGS) formalising process for adoption. CARINGS is an online program that operates under the central authority overseeing both domestic and international adoptions by the Government (the Central Adoption Resource Authority) and it provides a single national database of children who need to be adopted and registered prospective adoptive parents looking for children to adopt. CARINGS is an attempt to streamline the entire process and therefore provide the greatest level of transparency and efficiency possible throughout the entire process.

The CARINGS portal is digitizing Home study reports, providing real time matches and tracking of Home study reports while reducing the time it takes to approve a Home study report from 60 to 45 days. However, LFA stage delays (making up 70% of overall timeline) continue to occur due to CWC/SAA's being understaffed. OMs planned to enforce nationwide compliance as a Central Authority per the Hague Convention through CARA with the goal of addressing 31 million orphans, as noted by National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21).

Adoption Law & Historical Challenges

The Adoption Laws of India exist within a dual legal framework: the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 (JJ Act), which provides for secular adoption for individuals from all religious backgrounds (sections 56 – 73); and under the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956 (HAMA), which has significantly easier, albeit much less transparent, procedures applicable to adoptions by Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists. The Adoption Regulations of 2022 and CARA Guidelines provide for a standardization of process through the CARINGS online system.

Legal framework and Pre- reform challenges

The Indian adoption procedure has been plagued by systemic breakdowns and delays of between 18 and 24 months before the March 2026 Office Memoranda from CARA, the agency in charge of overseeing adoption in India. The failure to have an accurate count of legally free children for adoption, called LFA children, is due to premature declarations of free legality of orphaned children (i.e., failed parent tracing of at least 60 days), and also children surrendered for adoption have failed to observe the reconsideration period, creating violations of the Hague Convention and the trafficking of children for adoption purposes. In addition, the closures of nearly all SAA/CCI adoption files have caused severe hardships for many adult adoptees (because they do not have access to their origin) and the breaches of privacy of child adoptees’ identities on social media caused by violations of §74 of the JJ Act. In addition, DCPUs have major staffing problems (i.e., a 1:10 ratio between social workers and new child placements), and manual rural social inquiries to identify and place children for adoption have created severe discrepancies in adoption processing times between states (i.e., adoption waits of 40% (Uttar Pradesh) versus 20% (Maharashtra). A significant number of children available for adoption (30,000,000) are waiting to be placed but the adopters (PAPs) number only 3900, and there are 13 PAPs for every available child, thus violating Supreme Court Article 21 family rights of children. These various agency delays and violations of the above constitute the need for the 2026 ongoing adoption reform process.

Measures	Pre CARINGS	Post CARINGS 2025
Home study report Processing	60 Days	45 Days
child matching	6 Months	1.5 Months
Total time	3+year	18-24 months

CARA Guidelines

The CARA has issued three orders to all State Adoption Resource Agencies (SARAs) in all states/territories of India to help strengthen the adoption process, maintain the confidentiality of children's names, and keep adoption records secure.

The above circular represents CARA's authority under the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, and the Adoption Rules, 2022.

Objective: To support transparency, accountability and child protection in the adoption process.

1st Memo: No child who is an orphan or abandoned may be declared free for adoption until their due diligence has been completed by the agency caring for the child.

With regard to children who are surrendered to an agency, the two month waiting period shall be strictly adhered to.

2nd Memo: States and UTs shall preserve and transfer all physical and digital documentation in a secure manner to the agency or institution designated to receive the documentation.

3rd Memo: States and UTs must comply with Section 74 which prohibits agencies and institutions from disclosing the identity of children who are alleged to have committed a crime or who require care and protection.

Adoption Laws Governing Child Adoption in India

Hindu Adoption & Maintenance Act (HAMA), 1956: This law covers the adoption of children who identify as Hindu, Buddhist, Jain or Sikhs. The HAMA does not offer any means of legal court action for child adoptions. Adoptions are defined by personal laws, however there are five conditions that need to occur in order for an adoption to proceed according to S. 3(3)(4).

Juvenile Justice (Care & Protection of Children) Act (JJ Act), 2015: The JJ Act provides for the care and protection of all children in India regardless of their religious affiliation.

The JJ Act provides for child adoptions to take place via a legal order through the courts, however the adoption is subjected to the regulations of the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA), which operates under the aegis of the Ministry of Women & Child Development. CARA is the statutory authority responsible for ensuring that orphaned, abandoned and surrendered children are placed via recognized adoption agencies.

CARA sets adoption-related legal standards for Indian adoption.

To be legally free for adoption, a child must be:

- 1) declared by the Child Welfare Committee (CWC),
- 2) under the age of 18, and
- 3) either abandoned, relinquished, or orphaned.

Who can be a parent under the JJ Act (through CARA)?

- 1) All Indian citizens may apply for adoption (this includes NRIs and OCI card holders).
- 2) Married couples who have been married for at least two years must meet specific requirements.
- 3) Single persons (unmarried, divorced, or widowed) may also apply for adoption.

- The difference in age between the adoptive parent and child should not be less than 25 years.

The maximum combined age limit for adopting a child can be no more than:

- - 45 years of age for an adoption of a child who is less than four years old
- - 50 years of age for an adoption of a child who is 4 to 8 years old
- - 55 years of age for an adoption of a child who is 8 to 18 years old

Note:

1. There are no restrictions regarding age criteria for prospective adoptive parents whose relative adopts them; also,
2. There are no restrictions regarding age criteria for a step-parent and their step-children.
3. Selling or receiving money for adopting a child is not allowed.
4. CARA guidelines do not now allow live-in or same-sex couples to adopt.

Implementation issues

The OMs issued for CARA in March 2026 are facing implementation issues in the states due to ongoing systemic gaps in the time period, several weeks after the OMs were issued.

Records: When agencies close (e.g. Specialised Adoption Agency (SAA) or Child Care Institution).records are often lost, damaged or misplaced, making it impossible for adoptees to do a root search (OM #2).

Staffing Shortages: With DCPUs/CWC being under-staffed, a 60-day LFA must be extended (OM #1).

Training Deficiencies: There is a lack of awareness of the privacy requirements of §74 leading to privacy breaches (OM #3).

Resources: Many rural areas do not have the technology or the resources necessary to comply with the CARINGS Program.

Coordination: There are continued differences in how states respond to a CARINGS coordinator in their state; no penalties have been established.

Impact: The level of service that is provided is only compliant with minimal amounts of training, staffing and audit requirements.

Reforms to CARA in 2026 (Digital Vs Manual Problems Reformulated)

CARA's 2026 Rules have sped up online work for home studies (45 days versus 60) and finding a match (1-2 months versus 12 months—a 20% improvement); however, 70% of the time when

these delays occur, it is due to overworked local offices not being able to complete parent searches quickly enough.

Digital Wins: The use of online tracking shows everything has been completed correctly, and the Hague Conventions are being followed.

Manual Losses: District offices are poorly staffed (for example, one worker handles ten case files). Rural areas do not have internet connectivity; the UP Region is considerably slower than the Maharashtra Region.

A Major Issue: CARA makes rules in India from Delhi. The States are required to comply, but they do not receive funds or staff for implementation. As a result, Children are waiting 16 to 22 months for adoption instead of the Target of 12 months. This wait violates the child's rights.

To Correct the Issue: Grant CARA enforcement power to impose fines on States. This will allow them to hire additional staff at a ratio of one on five (one staff member for every five cases) and automatically connect with the Uniform Civil Code henceforth. There are still approximately thirty lakh children needing to be placed in families.

Conclusion

CARA achieved moderate overall successful 2026 reforms: 20% reduction in timelines for digital CARINGS processes (45 day HSR = 1.2 month), 100% compliance with the Hague Convention with auditable LFA trails and privacy protections. Manual CPUs still have approximately 70% of delays created by chronic understaffing (1:10 ratios), significantly varying by state (UP had 35% vs: Maharashtra had 20% violations), and no punishment for non-compliance.

The fundamental tension has arisen through the use of technology to create more transparent processes; however, national governments have been unable to hold themselves accountable for these processes due to their inability to address their capacity issues. The result is an inability for child welfare to succeed when there are over 30 million vulnerable children in institutionalized settings for an average of 16-22 months, thus violating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) standards for permanency under Article 21 as well as violating the rights of these children to live with a family (there is approximately a 13:1 professional-alternative parent ratio).

Next Steps for statutory changes to clarify CARA (penalties, 1:5 staff mandates), improve tracing through AI technology, establish a 90-day LFA limit, and enable integrated UCC solution for rectifying defects in federalism. Digital advancements will continue to be viewed as only procedural improvements unless they result in regulatory enforcement of child rights as a result of equal treatment to all parties involved in improving child rights. Future research should also track compliance from 2026-27 to demonstrate long-term impact.

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