

Cradle of the world

Childless couples from all over the world make their way to Anand in south-east Gujarat in search of the woman who will bear the babies they cannot



IMAGING: ABHIMANYU



'I'M NOW TRYING TO FORM A HOUSING SOCIETY FOR THE SURROGATE MOTHERS UNDER MY SUPERVISION'

DR NAYANA PATEL

Aditya Ghosh Anand

Chaitan Hatti from Norway is sitting in a small clinic in the village of Anand in Gujarat, interviewing a stranger to decide whether she's the woman who he wants to carry his baby. Hatti cut short his stay in his hometown of Bangalore when a friend told him about Anand's pool of professional surrogate mothers. A quick Internet search later, he and his wife hot-footed it here in search of the ideal woman to bear the baby they cannot.

The Hattis spent half a day interviewing a lineup of surrogate mothers at a clinic. They finally selected one — a woman who works as a domestic help and is the wife of a sweeper in a local school. An agreement on stamp paper and a financial deal will follow. At the end of nine months, both parties will rejoice in their respective bundles of joy—a baby for the Hattis, a fat bank deposit for the surrogate mother.

It is a story that is repeated constantly in Anand. Women get into the business by donating eggs to begin with—usually for Rs 5000—and then progress to renting their wombs. A successful surrogacy could mean anything from Rs 1.5 lakh to Rs 3 lakhs—much more than the men could bring home in years. The process is established by now: the surrogate mother and the couple sign an agreement on stamp paper, whereby the former relinquishes all rights to the child and her remuneration is fixed. A bank account is opened in her name in which funds are deposited every quarter for upkeep and diet. If there is a miscarriage after three months, the cost of treatment is borne by the genetic parents.

Their not-so-little secret

Expectedly, most of these women are unwilling to be named or photographed. Many still hide their surrogacy from their relatives and relocate, often with husband and children, to Anand, when the pregnancy begins to show.

The women come from the many villages that fringe Anand, but some even find their way here from other states. Like Pinki Mondol (name changed), who's come all the way from Howrah district in West Bengal. She is carrying a baby for an ethnic South Korean couple and her delivery is due in February. "I need the money because my son has to have heart surgery," she explains. Her client has generously promised to bear the cost of the surgery, she says.

Pinki lives here in a rented house with her younger son (her elder son is the one who needs the surgery, she explains). She discovered surrogacy when a domestic maid from her locality, who works in Anand, told her about it.

Manjula Chakranga and her husband Munna cannot even afford a rented place and have been staying in the hospital for over two months now. "My husband was an alcoholic and we barely ate two meals a day. Now with this assured income, my husband has quit drinking and concentrated on work," she insists. Munna, a carpenter, agrees: "I can start a business now."

Others, like 28-year-old Pushpa Pandya, are not driven by desperation but a desire to improve the

family's quality of life. With her husband Jagdish supporting her—"It was a joint decision"—Pushpa brushed aside her in-laws' objections and went ahead with surrogacy.

Padma Srimani 35, Jagdish's sister, also had to relocate from their ancestral home in Dakor village, 35 km east of Anand. Now in her third month of pregnancy, she confesses, "We told our parents we were coming here for better job opportunities." Her husband, a salesman at a local shop, earns only Rs 1,500 a month and Srimani says, "Giving my son a good education was just a dream. Now I will be able to afford it." She will deliver twins sometime between March and April.

Supervision is essential

What women like Pushpa and Padma are gaining is some amount of economic independence. The childless couples paying them are gaining a lot more—a child at a fraction of the cost of surrogacy in developed nations.

A surrogate mother could charge between \$10,000 and \$20,000 in the US, and the entire procedure, including lawyer's fees, could go up to \$50,000 or more. Naturally, Anand gets a stream of visitors from the US and Europe, the latest being an ethnic West Indian couple.

Being close to Mumbai also makes it easier for couples from the city to keep their secret. "We could have done it in Mumbai but we decided to come here to avoid unnecessary gossip," say Lalit and Anupama Jain (name changed), from suburban Vile Parle in Mumbai. A surrogate mother delivered the couple's child in Anand last week.

Most of the surrogate pregnancies take place in Dr Nayana Patel's Kaival Hospital in Anand. There are so many of them that she says, "I'm now trying to form a housing society for the surrogate mothers under my supervision."

What impact do these pregnancies, which involve hormone treatments, have on the women's health? "Every medical procedure has some effect on the body and one mustn't overdo it. Regular medical supervision and proper follow-up are extremely important," observes IVF specialist Baidyanath Chakrabarty.

However, IVF specialist Dr Anjali Malpani asserts: "The surrogate mother or egg donor will suffer no damage if the procedures are carried out under proper medical supervision." Doctors also point out that surrogacy should be the last option and only if a couple's medical history necessitates it.

Some like IVF specialist Dr Aniruddha Malpani attribute the surrogacy boom to a legal vacuum as well, with the draft bill on surrogacy scheduled to be tabled before Parliament only next year.

Citizenship is also an area of concern for babies born in India to genetic parents who are not Indians. While US laws are easier, UK and some other countries have more stringent regulations about offering citizenship to a newborn. But the women of Anand—and the couples who need them—are clearly not held back by such issues. The queues on both sides are only getting longer.

NEST EGG

Rs 5000
What a woman gets for donating her eggs

Rs 1.5 to 3 lakh
What a woman in India gets for renting her womb

\$ 10,000 to 20,000
(app Rs 4.5 lakh to Rs 9 lakh)
What a woman in the US gets for renting her womb

\$ 50,000
(app Rs 22.5 lakh)
What the entire procedure, including lawyer's fees, could cost in the US

Surrogacy laws to be in place by April: ICMR

The pace of technology has defeated the speed of bureaucracy yet again—the Indian Council for Scientific Research (ICMR) has been working on an Act on surrogacy since 2001 but it is not yet ready to be placed before Parliament.

BN Chakrabarty, chairman of ICMR's Assisted Reproductive Technique (ART) committee, says: "The Bill has been drafted and all the formalities have been completed. Experts are having a last look at it to make it foolproof." He claims it will be ready to be tabled in Parliament early next year, in March-April 2007.

Five years ago, the ICMR and National Institute of Science formed a 12-member committee to draft the bill. Opinions were invited from experts around the country and their suggestions incorporated. The draft bill was then forwarded to the law ministry for their opinion and after it was okayed by the ministry and legal experts, it was thrown open for public debate. ICMR came out with the final draft of the guidelines on ART last year.

"I agree that it's been a long time and technological progress has been faster. But a medical Act has to cover all possible sides. There is no point wasting time later trying to make amendments," argues Chakrabarty.

He admits however that malpractices are a cause for worry: "They're happening in different parts of the country but until a law is in place no action can be taken. We hope there won't be any further delay in enacting the Bill."

The Bill contains certain safety clauses, including one that does not allow a woman to be a surrogate-mother more than thrice.

NOT WITHOUT MY DAUGHTER

I still cry for my boy

Pushpa was one of the first surrogate mothers in Anand and is clear and unapologetic about her decision. She was one of only two such mothers who consented to be photographed.

How did you learn about surrogacy?

Pushpa: Somebody in my neighbourhood told me about egg donation. When I met the doctor, she told me I could be a surrogate and earn more. I decided to go ahead.

What was your family's reaction when you announced your decision to be a surrogate mother?

Everybody was dumbstruck. But for me, it was the only way of escaping our poverty and daily tension.

There was no job opportunity for me anywhere though I have completed higher secondary. My husband worked as a painter and what he earned was simply not enough for us.

But you were not starving, were you?

No. But my dream is to educate my daughter; she is very intelligent. Her teachers tell me to put her in a bigger school. The first time, I used the money to build a house. Next time, it will be for Jeenal's education.

Will you do it a third time if you need money?

I don't know. But believe me, it is not easy to part with a child after nurturing it in your own body for nine months. I still cry for my boy when I am alone. I pray to God all the time for him.

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— PUSHPA PANDYA, Surrogate mother



Pushpa Pandya (above) weeps after her miscarriage while a hospital attendant tries to console her. Jagdish, Jeenal, Pushpa and Karan Pandya (above right) in the hospital, just before leaving for home



PHOTOS: MANOJ PATIL/HT

Aunty was ill, so mummy kept the baby in her tummy

She accompanied her mother to the hospital, was by her side when she went through her pregnancy, consoled her when she handed over the newborn. Jeenal, Pushpa Pandya's eight-year-old daughter, is understandably mature for her age. This is her perspective on her mother's surrogate pregnancy.

She wants money for my tuitions and to admit me in a bigger school.

Why did she give away the baby?

That aunty was ill and could not keep the baby in her tummy. So she gave it to my mother to keep it in her tummy for some time.

Did you feel bad when she gave away the baby?

It would have been nice, but I have one brother at least. That aunty had no son. So mummy told me it will be our *punya* (spiritual credit) if we help her get a baby boy.

Do you know why your mother is here?

Jeenal: Yes, she wanted to have a baby for that aunty (the genetic mother).

Do you know why she is doing it?