

Surrogacy Debate Fuels Stigma Against Infertility

BY [AMRITA NANDY](#) ON [10/09/2016](#)

Conversations around surrogacy and other assisted reproductive technologies feed into an age-old assumption: that a woman must be a mother.



The dust is settling after the storm over the commercial surrogacy Bill. Clearly, the cabinet committee got the brief quite wrong – they were meant to regulate, not strangle, surrogacy. As a result, doctors are upset that this ‘kill bill’ will tear into their booming practice and guarded surrogate hostels. Those who desire to have children via surrogacy are anxious about finding a “close relative” after years of evading relatives. The surrogates are concerned about losing their livelihood, despite the many medical risks involved. Many are disappointed with the Bill’s unabashed heterosexism and exclusions, among others.

Yet, the recent wave of support for commercial and altruistic surrogacy has leapfrogged a fundamental issue – our denigration of infertility and its link with ARTs, or assisted reproductive technologies, such as surrogacy. It is relevant to flag this because while motherhood is every woman’s right, it cannot be allowed to make non-motherhood an indignity.

Unfortunately, debates on surrogacy, including the present one, continue to start from and orbit around everything but our meaning-making of infertility (the inability to have biological children). In tune with our deeply pro-natalist sensibilities, we associate infertility with abnormality and then unquestioningly accept it as dreadful, as if it is an awful disease we need to rid ourselves of. This pervasive understanding has a highly detrimental impact on those who are unable to procreate. Among other outcomes of infertility, heartaches happen and marriages totter, often in silence. The suffering of childless women has been the pith of ancient mythological tales, daily news and contemporary soaps and cinema.

Innumerable research studies recount childless women's experiences of shame. Such is the sanctity and righteousness of parenthood that not only do the so-called infertile see their lack as a big failure, even the voluntarily childless can be made to feel humiliation. Of late, fears have been expressed that a ban on commercial surrogacy will encourage the illegal baby trade. However, a deeper look reveals that both the illegal baby trade as well as surrogacy are manifestations of the obsessive value we place on parenthood.

ARTs also have a direct hand in fuelling stigma against those who are unable to have biological children. The whole narrative of the ART industry is premised on the immense trauma and meaninglessness of the childless life. By tapping into and circulating these recitals of pain and desperation of the childless, the ART industry fuels demand for treatment but in the process also reinforces the slur that is childlessness. It is a stigma that often forces women into accepting physically invasive, emotionally straining and exorbitantly priced treatments.

Of course the ART industry is not alone in propagating messages of the mother as the 'complete' woman. Religion has been a traditional cheerleader for procreation. Of late, politicians from the ruling party have joined the bandwagon by asking women to bear as many children as possible. This reveals the criticality of the project of reproduction for the multiple stakeholders it has. By supporting the societal demand for women to be mothers and glorifying motherhood, ARTs further stoke our discomfort around infertility.

Another objectionable aspect of ARTs is their emphasis on biological and genetic parenthood. By endorsing genetic links between the parent and child as natural and ideal, they market ideas that are essentialist. The desire to have a child who carries one's DNA, skin colour, physical features and so on and therefore belongs to the parents is a retrograde notion. ARTs exploit these dated definitions of parenthood for its own profits and boosts arguments against more humane and inclusive options such as adoption.

Against a backdrop as fraught as this, the medical community continues to project ARTs as the ideal panacea for infertility. Meanwhile, blinded by the ray of hope that ARTs offer, we fail to recognise the trauma of childlessness as a self-inflicted wound, created by our own procreative imperatives. This is an apt moment to think critically about whether ARTs are helping or harming us? They may address medical infertility, but do they not aggravate its social and cultural symptoms?

The huge success of ARTs seems to foreclose public conversations on infertility. These may help us imagine new and positive tropes that make life without children as profound as one with them, and as tied to nurturing, commitment and caring. Is it not possible that our craving for a child is a manifestation of other deeper needs? After all, rising above and beyond the *moh* of relationships and their promises is also part of the “cultural ethos” that external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj spoke of. Maybe that will steer us towards a nuance, so we can stop being the victims of our own narratives.

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This article has been taken from The Wire’s website: <https://thewire.in/65044/surrogacy-infertility-motherhood/>