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Research Article

Revisiting Alternative Methods Of Parenting In Mythology

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Abstract

Parenting is a ubiquitous experience, that transcends the temporal and cultural boundaries and remains evolving with societal conventions and developments in science and technology. Throughout history, myriad cultures in Eastern and Western civilizations have their own beliefs and customs of childbirth and conception. The mythological texts of both civilizations reveal several narratives of childbirth, caregivers and upbringing that offer insights into alternative parenting methods. These methods mirror the contemporary techniques of assisted reproductive technologies (ART) that constitute in-vitro fertilization (IVF) and surrogacy. Through textual analysis of the Indian and Western myths, this paper parallels the mythological narratives and contemporary debates and ethical challenges surrounding IVF and surrogacy, particularly in India. The paper also illustrates how the ancient practices of childbirth and parenting illuminate the moral dilemmas associated with present-day methods of parenthood and childbearing.

Keywords –Mythology, Surrogacy, Ethics, Parenting, IVF

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Introduction

In ancient myths and texts, we see numerous examples of childbirth which are analogous to modern-day ART such as surrogacy, IVF (In vitro fertilisation), and Intrauterine insemination (IUI). Nevertheless, surrogacy remains controversial due to various social, moral, ethical and legal complications. In present times, it is widely accepted that a woman is regarded as a successful wife only if she gives birth to children, so establishing her husband's masculinity and sexual effectiveness to perpetuate his ancestry. In the Indian family circle, fertility is the most important determinant in power distribution. A study conducted by Ushma D Upadhyay reviewed eighteen articles that examined fertility preference. It included a survey by Woldemicael revealing that women who reported their husbands had complete decision-making power over small or large household purchases were more likely to desire large families (five or more children) than women who had some say in household decisions (Upadhyay et al. 2014). The patriarchal paradigm reduces women's status to that of a provider while freeing the father from

childcare obligations. Moreover, motherhood, as a lived experience, has changed due to changes in familial arrangements. Parenting patterns have evolved as result of working mothers and nuclear households. In ancient myths, it has been observed that childrearing responsibilities were usually shouldered by female family members. This paper will review alternative parenting in Indian and Occident myths. The alternative method of parenting implies a form of achieving parenthood that does not involve the conventional method of birth. Though the world considered surrogacy and IVF to be a product of modern medical science and reproduction, the idea of surrogate motherhood or foster parents is the result of a continuous process of development and evolution from the past to the present in India and other countries as well. The analysis of these methods in the context of Indian and Western mythological texts provides insights into the deep-rooted history. This paper will also highlight the ethical considerations surrounding ART and foster parenting.

Surrogacy in Western Mythology

The word "surrogate" or "surrogacy" comes from the Latin word "surrogare," which means "substitute". Surrogacy may be traced back to Ancient Greek mythology, where Chiron, a centaur, was a parental figure and a teacher to newborn infants (Williams). According to Greek mythology, Chiron's duty was known as *Kourotrophos*, which means "child rearer". The parents of these children believed that Chiron could educate them to live a better life. This knowledge would assist them to protect themselves, as Greece was seen as a deadly area in ancient times. As a result, Chiron was renowned as a 'surrogate childcare' provider who eagerly raised children including Achilles, Asclepius, Jason, Perseus, Actaeon, Meleager, and others. Chiron served as a protector for the youngsters. His influence, caring nature and generosity placed him as a paternal figure and a surrogate for great heroes.

Another instance of foster parenting in Greek mythology is Tityus, the illegitimate son of Zeus and Elara. Zeus hid Elara deep in the earth to conceal this knowledge from his wife (Dina G et al. 2010). Tityus was so enormous as a fetus that he burst his mother's womb when Elara gave birth to him. The earth goddess Gaia then gave birth to Tityus. That is how Gaia became the world's first mythological surrogate mother. The fact that Zeus abandoned his beloved to hide the birth of his son demonstrates Zeus' inability to play the role of a father towards his child.

The narrative of Sarah and her husband Abraham who were unable to have a child of their own, is one of the oldest examples of surrogacy in Western mythology (Genesis 16). Sarah had an Egyptian slave named Hagar, who is credited with bearing a child for Sarah's childless marriage to Abraham. This pregnancy culminated in the birth of their son, Ishmael. The account goes, "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so, she said to Abram, 'The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her.' (Lones). In another Biblical example (Old Testament, Genesis 30), a childless Rachel requested her maid Bilhah to bear a child with her husband Jacob. The above-cited examples from Western mythology depict the abundance of stories of alternative parenting that opted to conceive a child when the biological mother was unable to give birth.

IVF: An Evolvement from the Past

In 1977, Patrick Steptoe and Robert Edwards pioneered In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) to treat female infertility (Zhu). However, the early mention of IVF-like childbirth is found in Indian scriptures. In the Mahabharata, the birth of the 100 Kauravas is an example of extra-uterine gestation. Gandhari became a mother through an IVF-like process to fulfil her social duty as a queen and a mother.

Gandhari was married to Dhritrashtra, who was born blind. She tied a bandage across her eyes to share her husband's suffering. Rishi Ved Vyas was overjoyed with Gandhari's kindness and cordiality on a visit to Hastinapur and bestowed a blessing on her. Gandhari, who was childless at the time, desired 100 sons. She

became pregnant in due course but did not give birth for two years. She eventually evacuated the bulk of the fetus. Sage Ved Vyas examined the fetus and discovered 101 normal cells (Sinha). He split the quantity into 101 parts and requested Gandhari to arrange for one hundred and one ghee-filled jars. The two-year wait was fruitful, as 100 males (Kauravas) and a daughter named Dushala were born, fulfilling her yearning for a daughter as well. To expand family lineage, Gandhari went through unconventional method of birth. This ancient example from the Mahabharata demonstrates that in Indian mythology, unnatural births with the interventions of sage and divinity were considered auspicious. Since maintaining social order was the prime motive in ancient times, there were no ethical implications associated with this alternative way of childbirth.

In modern India, the first IVF (in vitro fertilization) baby Kanpuriya alias Durga was born on 3rd October 1978 in Kolkata. Dr. Subhas Mukherjee collaborated with Prof. Sunit Mukherjee, a cryobiologist, and Dr. SarojKanti Bhattacharya, a gynaecologist to develop an in-vitro fertilization approach that was successfully employed on a patient with damaged fallopian tubes (Dhawale 102). The Indian Council of Medical Research established the Dr Subhas Mukherjee Award in 2012 in remembrance of Dr Subhas Mukherjee. This award is given to a scientist who has made excellent contributions to assisted reproductive technology, reproductive biology and endocrinology, and reproductive health in general (ICMR).

Niyog Pratha: A Parallel to Modern Surrogacy

Similar to Western mythology, Indian mythology mentions several examples of reproduction through surrogacy or IVF-like methods of childbirth. One of the primary sources is the Indian epic, the Mahabharata. The epilogue to the Mahabharata declares, "Whatever is here, may be found elsewhere; what is not cannot be found anywhere else," (Kalra et al). This remark is correct since this epic covers a wide range of historical events that might aid in the spread of knowledge about the alternate methods of parenthood.

In the Mahabharata, Queen Satyawati instructs her illegitimate son, Sage Vyas, to impregnate Ambika and Ambalika, the widows of her son Vichitravirya who died without an heir. She commanded him to follow the custom of Niyog to further progeny (Lal 240). Ambika closed her eyes during the Niyog act because she was horrified by Vyas's harsh visage, resulting in the birth of blind Dhritrashtra. When it was Ambalika's turn to enter Niyog, she became pale upon seeing Vyas, giving birth to a sickly pale son, Pandu. Satyawati ordered Vyas to conduct Niyog on Ambika again after learning the truth regarding the birth of weak children in future. At this point, Ambika sent her maid as a substitute to bear a child and Vidur was born. Ambika never acknowledged Vidur as her son, and he was never regarded as rightful heir to the Hastinapura kingdom. As Niyog was a socially and culturally accepted practice in Vedic times, the decision of Queen Satyawati is seen as best in the interest of the continuation of her dynasty. This instance also recognizes the significance of

surrogacy, specifically the notion of 'surrogate father' that existed in ancient India.

Myth of Women's Infertility: A Glance at the Past

The male sterility of Pandu, the king of Hastinapura, is highlighted in a crucial episode from the epic Mahabharata. A sage cursed Pandu with death if he sought to have coitus with any lady. Consequently, Kunti used Sage Durvasa's blessing to perpetuate the family bloodline. He had bestowed upon her a mantra through which she may implore any God to give her a son (Lal 340). Kunti had her first son, Karna, before marriage by invoking Surya, the Sun God in an attempt to test Sage Durvasa's boon. Tragically, Kunti had to abandon Karna since he was an illegitimate child because she was not married at that time. He was never acknowledged by her during his lifetime for fear of humiliation and disgrace. This incident also demonstrates the injustice that a child faces as a result of being born out of wedlock. Kunti deserted her son, Karna, knowing that the society, in which she lived would never recognize him as her son. Following her marriage, Kunti was bestowed with three sons, Yudhishitra, Bhima and Arjuna on Pandu's persuasion and the use of Durvasa's blessing. She also shared the unique mantra with Madri, Pandu's other wife, who gave birth to the Ashwini twins, Nakula and Sahadeva. Another instance of male infertility is found in the epic Ramayana. In Indian mythology, King Dashrath of Ayodhya was one of the earliest examples of infertility (Sanjay et al.). On the advice of the sage Vashishta, he did a Yagna to obtain heirs. He received a bowl of divine drink from the yagna, which he divided among three of his queens. The half portion was given to his eldest wife, Kaushalya, who carried prince Rama, Sumitra, who bore Lakshmana, and Shatrughan drank it twice, and the one-eighth portion was given to his wife Kaikeyi, who bore Bharata (Rajagopalachari).

The divine drink consumed by the queens was used to alleviate King Dashrath's infertility which resulted in the birth of four princes. The instances illustrate that infertility in both a female and male were socially accepted and treated as best as possible in ancient India, even if it was done largely for procreation and sustaining the family lineage and gene pool.

Surrogate Mothers in Indian mythology

A case of multiple surrogate mothers is recorded in chapter 27 of Tagore's English translation of the Skanda Purana, the biggest of the eighteen Mahapuranas (Tagore). Kartikeya, also known as Kumara, Skanda, Murugan, Subramanya, the god's knight, is thought to have been conceived through surrogacy. The epic describes how, as Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati were engaged in sexual delight, the Gods sent Agni (Fire-god) to intrude on them to save the world from being destroyed as a result of their union. Lord Shiva was outraged when Agni pleaded for alms and rushed to slay him. Goddess Parvati intervened and delivered Lord Shiva's semen as alms, which he ate. She cursed him with omnivory. All of the Gods including Agni, began to experience unbearable stomach pain and were pregnant. They prayed to Lord Vishnu, who advised

them to praise Lord Shiva who instructed all gods to vomit semen except Agni. Lord Shiva told Agni to transfer it into the body of a lady, who has a menstrual cycle every month. Agni transferred Lord Shiva's semen into the womb of Saptarishis ladies (except for Arundhati), who were warming themselves near a fire. As a result, the six wives of the sages got pregnant, becoming Kartikeya's surrogate mothers. Their husbands cursed them. They became constellations of Kritikas, moving in the sky. They released the semen on the Himalayas, which drifted in the Ganga. On the banks of the Ganga, the sperm evolved into a child with six faces. Therefore, Ganga is known and recognized as the surrogate mother of Kumara Kartikeya, the oldest son of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati.

Foster Fathers in Myths

The Mahabharata has revealed some loving fathers who played an important part in their child's upbringing. They were known as foster fathers. One such instance is Santanu, King of Hastinapura royalty. His wife, Ganga, the deity of this river, took human form to give birth to eight babies. She revealed that the children were eight vasus (a class of deities, eight in number, attendants of Indra), who were permitted to leave their physical bodies immediately after birth. However, the eighth member would continue his existence on earth. Ganga gave their eighth son Devavrata to King Santanu as she believed that he was the only one worthy of fathering (Narayan). Similarly, Nanda was Krishna's foster father (Pattanaik). Krishna was the biological son of Vasudeva and Devaki, raised by Nanda and his wife Yashoda away from the horrors of Devaki's tyrannical brother Kansa. Krishna was raised by Nanda and Yashoda, who were foster parents to him. Aside from his foster mother, Yashoda's altruistic devotion, he also received a lot of love from his foster father, Nanda.

In contemporary times, some men are hesitant to share the parenting duties. They are indoctrinated to believe that it is not their domain. According to a report titled "Women's work: mothers, children and the global childcare crisis", women handle 75% of childcare tasks in 37 countries, accounting for 20% of the total population (Emma et al). However, the examples from mythology above refute the concept that a father has no responsibility in raising children. Positive participation and involvement of fathers are required to ensure the child's well-being and balanced parenting.

Ethical Considerations of Niyog Pratha

According to Manu Smriti, when a husband dies childless or is incapable of fatherhood, the wife might choose the "Niyoga" technique. When a couple is unable to produce a male child, the woman may obtain offspring by cohabitation with her brother-in-law or another relative (sapnida) on her in-law's side (Jha Verse 9.59). There is also an established practice that the sister-in-law must be dressed in white apparel with the pure intent that her brother-in-law will cohabit with her once a year till she conceives (Jha). Apart from these, certain other conditions were involved with this process, such as:

- a. The woman would consent to this to rightfully produce a child, not for pleasure.
- b. The infant born thus is regarded as the child of the husband and wife, not the appointed man. In the future, the appointed man would not seek any paternal relationship with the child.
- c. To prevent misuse, a man was only permitted in this manner three times in his lifetime.
- d. This deed will be seen as dharma, and the man and the wife will be focused solely on dharma rather than desire.

The verse from the Manusmriti is as follows:

विधवायां नियोगार्थं निर्वृत्ते तु यथाविधि ।
गुरुवत् स्नुषावत् वर्तयतां परस्परम् ॥ ६२ ॥

It states that, “when the purpose of ‘Niyog’ has been duly accomplished, the two, that is the man and woman should behave towards each other like an elder and like a daughter-in-law, if she’s the wife of younger brother” (Jha Verse 9.63).

Surrogacy in India: Ethical Issues and Laws

Surrogacy is undeniably effective in bringing a new member into the family of an infertile couple. It appears to be one of the finest options for childless parents, but there are numerous complications involved. Surrogates from poor backgrounds are more likely to be exploited. Due to the legalization of commercial surrogacy by the Indian government in 2002, India came to be known as the ‘capital’ of surrogacy (Johnson et al. 145). Between the years 2005 and 2008, legislators attempted to provide rigid guidelines that addressed only the eligibility requirements of the surrogates and not the long-term issues. Surrogacy law in India included the ICMR guidelines, 2006, The Assisted Reproductive Technology (Regulation) Bill, 2008, Draft Assisted Reproductive Technology (Regulation) Bill, 2014, The Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill, 2016 and The Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill, 2019. In early December 2021, the current Surrogacy (Regulation) Act, of 2021 was passed. The following are some of the Act’s important features (Devnath et al. 388) -

- a. Commercial surrogacy is forbidden in any form by any surrogacy clinic, gynaecologist, embryologist, or other medical practitioner. Only altruistic surrogacy is allowed which involves no monetary benefit or reward other than the medical expenses and insurance coverage during the pregnancy.
- b. The couple who wishes to have a child must be legally married by Indian law. The female should be between the ages of 25-50 years and the male should be between the ages of 26-55 years. The couple must not have other adopted or naturally conceived children or through surrogacy.
- c. All clinics offering surrogacy treatment must be registered under this Act.
- d. The surrogate mother must be between the ages of 35 and 45 while giving service. Any woman may only be a surrogate mother once in her lifetime.
- e. All the known harmful consequences and aftereffects of the procedure must be disclosed to the surrogate mother.

- f. A ‘Certificate of Essentiality/Infertility’ must be issued by the National/State Assisted Reproductive Technology and Surrogacy Board to an intended couple who has a medical necessity for surrogacy.

All these conditions are laid down to prevent the exploitation of women and the illegal market of surrogacy. However, the laws have certain loopholes, such as, eliminating the non-binary and same-sex couples, who wish to become parents. It also excludes a single mother and a single father from this service. There is a need to raise knowledge in this area, as well as legal clarification. The laws should also include homosexual couples and single parents to prevent discrimination.

Conclusion

In the present era of technological progress, society remains hostile to the notion of raising a family through methods like adoption, surrogacy, and IVF. In India, surrogacy has contentious issues adhering to it, even though it has occurred in the past. Because of several socio-cultural factors, it is assumed that every couple will become parents. One of the primary goals of marriage is reproduction. In such cases, adoption and surrogacy can help couples who could not conceive to have a child of their own. Such procedures, when carried out responsibly, can be extremely beneficial. Dr Sarojini Nadimpally, a public health researcher and social scientist with Delhi-based non-profit SAMA- Research Group for Women and Health, stated in a webinar, “Surrogacy is not an immoral activity; it is not sex work. We should consider surrogacy as an ethical practice and promote the same for everyone after protecting the rights of surrogates and preborn children” (The Indian Express. There is a social stigma around surrogacy and Assisted Reproductive Technology, as a result, it is critical to examine Indian myths, scriptures and epics, where motherhood was revered and embraced via surrogacy, IVF, adoption and so on. Men and Women both contributed equally to the well-being of their children by serving as foster fathers and mothers.

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