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Designer babies, with an Indian twist

By *Saritha Rai*

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Subhead:

More and more Indians want egg donors, but only if they're from the right caste.

Byline:

Saritha Rai



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Caption:

A baby swings in a hanging basket in in Chandigarh, India, on March 27, 2010. (Mark Kolbe/Getty Images)

BANGALORE, India — The couple was particular: the egg donor had to be under 25, fair, beautiful and educated. But most of all, she had to belong to their caste.

In India, cutting-edge medical treatments for infertility are colliding against age-old biases about the social order.

Welcome to designer babies, with an Indian twist.

In this developing country of more than 1.3 billion, fertility treatments are a flourishing business.

According to the Mumbai-based Indian Society of Assisted Reproduction, its member clinics across India conducted an estimated 18,000 cycles of IVF treatments last year, averaging a 30 percent rate of pregnancy. But the group said that only half of India's fertility centers count themselves among its members, making the total number of IVF treatments sought last year much higher.

What makes IVF treatments particular to India, though, is that many infertile couples demand egg donors and surrogate mothers of a particular caste and sub-caste when they seek in vitro fertilization treatments or surrogacy services.

"Couples are very particular about the caste hierarchy of the prospective mother or even the surrogate carrier," said Ramana Rao, an agent in India's southwestern port city of Vishakhapatnam.

Rao recruits egg donors and surrogates to-order for childless couples and fertility clinics in cities like Hyderabad, Chennai and Bangalore.

In contrast to the West, where medical fitness is often a key criterion for choosing egg donors, in India medical checks are done after the family is convinced about the donor or surrogate's caste background.

Caste is India's ancient system denoting a person's social standing — with the Brahmins at the top of the heap and the dalit untouchables at the very bottom. Despite much modernization and sizzling economic growth, caste still denotes class in many parts of India and continues to touch vital aspects of life, such as marriage and politics.

India's constitution bans discrimination on the basis of caste and community. The country's last caste-based census was in 1931.

However, the Indian government's attempts to enumerate people by caste in the ongoing gargantuan census — and the controversy surrounding its efforts — proves that caste is still relevant. Those supporting the caste-based poll say it will help the government identify and target social welfare schemes to the lower rungs of the social ladder.

Among younger, urban Indians caste is increasingly a non-issue and the old social order is slowly disappearing. Only to vigorously reappear in unlikely places like fertility clinics.

"Alongside looks, skin color and height and education, prospective couples look for egg donors of the same caste and religion," said Samit Sekhar, an assisted reproduction specialist in the eastern city of Hyderabad.

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In Mumbai, couples ask for similar family background, said Goral Gandhi, laboratory director at the well-known fertility clinic, Rotunda.

"Family background" is often the euphemism for seeking out particular castes and sub-castes that number in the hundreds in India's byzantine social system.

A good-looking egg donor of a higher caste could command anywhere between 50,000 rupees (about \$1,100) to 100,000 rupees (about \$2,200) whereas down the caste ladder, the prices could dip to 20,000 rupees (about \$430), Rao said. He has enlisted and provided the services of 70 egg donors and 150 surrogates so far.

In Mumbai, India's commercial capital, the prices can go higher to 200,000 rupees (about \$4,300). Donors are usually from poor economic backgrounds as are the surrogates. None was willing to be interviewed for this article.

Sociologist Carol Upadhyia at the Bangalore-based National Institute of Advanced Studies says caste is ingrained among many Indians as that which preserves the purity of the race. "They feel caste is rooted in the body, in the genetic material," she said.

Even the highly educated want specific genes because they want to pass on the caste and community genes to their future generations, Rao said.

"Prospective parents openly advertise for egg donors and surrogates by caste in the classified sections of local newspapers," he said.

Such advertisements, listed by caste and sub-caste, are staples of the matrimonial sections in India's biggest newspapers.

In Bangalore, fertility specialist Kamini Rao who runs a successful practice said that "some infertile couples recruit egg donors and surrogates of their own caste before arriving at my doorstep for procedures."

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