

Debate Rages in India on IVF for Women Over 50

Tens of thousands of fertility clinics have sprouted up in the last decade

By *Muneeza Naqvi*
Associated Press

ELLENABAD, India—To see Manjeet Kaur around her little daughter is to see joy at its pur-est.

The 15-month-old toddles about the sprawling courtyard of her parents' farm, her oily curls tied up in a top knot, her rubber-soled shoes squeaking. Kaur's eyes don't miss a thing, and they often mist up with tears.

Gurjeet is the child Kaur yearned for desperately, after 40 years of being that thing which a rural Indian woman dreads more than almost anything else — barren. She gave birth at 58 years old, with help from a controversial IVF clinic in this corner of north India that specializes in fertility treatments for women over 50.

Such treatments have become more common across the world, and

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they strike a cultural chord in India, where a woman is often defined by her ability to be a wife and mother. While there are no reliable statistics for how many Indian women undergo fertility treatments each year at what age, tens of thousands of IVF clinics have sprouted up in the country over the last decade.

Fertility specialists say pregnancies like Kaur's are troubling because of the potential health risks and the concern that the parents may not live long enough to raise their babies to adulthood. Legislation is pending in India's Parliament setting 50 as the legal upper age cap.

But Dr. Anurag Bishnoi, the driving force behind the National Fertility and Test Tube Baby Centre in Hisar, harbors no such worries. His clinic's website home page is dominated by photographs of patients who carried babies to term at ages well beyond what most other doctors anywhere in the world may permit. At least two of his patients gave birth at 70.

For Kaur, it's simple enough. Bishnoi made her belong.

“You have no idea how I suffered,” she says of her life before her daughter. “The pain I lived with. I used to work all day, but my nights were spent in tears.”

Kaur married her husband, Gurdev Singh, when she was 18 and he was just a little older than 20. She simply assumed that children would follow marriage, and there was no question of waiting. Her new relatives were relatively wealthy Sikh landowners in this corner of Haryana, and they had the means to raise a family and property to leave to their offspring.

But no children came. She felt worthless.

“I asked God why he had abandoned me. I had been a good Sikh, a good person. Then why?” she asks, as she nervously fidgets with the green scarf she uses to cover her almost entirely grey hair.

With each decade she felt the dream slip further away. The couple tried IVF twice in their 40s at two separate clinics in north India. It didn't work.

A woman in Kaur's setting, without a child, is an inauspicious creature. Her very presence is often shunned at social gatherings, especially at weddings and birth ceremonies which celebrate fecundity.

“What I suffered you will not understand. People would turn their faces away from us,” she says, wiping away the tears that run down her cheeks, lined by age and years of working in the sun.

For the vast majority of married Indian women, the inability to produce a child, preferably a son, can result in the taboo of divorce or abandonment by their husbands. For years Kaur begged her husband to take another wife.

“I wanted to marry him off myself. I was willing to do anything for this family. I said to him, this property, this house needs an heir. I haven't been able to give you a child,” she says, as she

walks through the guava trees outside her house, plucking fresh fruit for her visitors.

Singh refused.

“I said I won't do it,” says Singh, a short man with a smile constantly hidden behind his flowing white beard.

“If it's meant to be, God will give me a child with you. If I marry again, what will happen to you?”

They lived, like most rural Indians, with extended family, and Kaur showered all her love on the nephew and niece she helped raise. She says



AP PHOTO/ALTAF QADRI

In this Dec. 23, 2016 photo, Manjeet Kaur, left, and her husband Gurdev Singh, right, walk with their daughter Gurjeet Kaur in the compound of their house in Ellenabad, India. Gurjeet is the child Kaur yearned for desperately, after 40 years of being that thing which a rural Indian woman dreads more than almost anything else - barren. She gave birth at 58 years old, with help from a controversial IVF clinic in this corner of north India that specializes in fertility treatments for women over 50.

it is perhaps her unconditional love that made God and the Sikh gurus turn her fate around.

It was Kaur's nephew who first heard of Bish-

noi, the doctor in the nearby town of Hisar, who had built a prosperous medical practice and tidy little business empire by helping ag-

ing women across north India have children through in-vitro fertilization.

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