

'Womb for Rent': Socio-Cultural Implications of Reproductive Tourism in India

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Key highlights:

- 1) Reproductive tourism has social and cultural implications for kinship.
- 2) Paid surrogacy commodifies reproductive labour – labour that is typically left unpaid. Old and new cultural meanings of kinship permit the commodification of reproductive labour.
- 3) Reproductive tourism poses serious health risks for Indian women who become surrogates.

Abstract

Commercial surrogacy in India has become an increasingly controversial human rights and global health issue. Indian women living in dire poverty are the most vulnerable group in this transnational phenomenon. Reproductive tourism can be defined as the process whereby affluent people predominately from Global North countries (i.e., Canada) seek assisted reproduction in the Global South (in this case, India), to accomplish fertility and kinship formation goals while remaining oblivious to the inevitable social issues associated with this international trade. This paper investigates how the media and academic anthropological research present current understandings of biotechnology, family, and kinship regarding commercial surrogacy. I argue that reproductive tourism is a multifaceted social issue with significant socio-cultural implications for kinship in India and the Global North, by being rooted in a gendered division of labour, culturally-specific belief systems, technological advancement, race and class stratification, capitalist structures, and globalization. Although reproductive tourism is indeed interdisciplinary in nature, this project explicitly took an anthropological and global health approach to understanding its impacts on kinship in local and global communities. With regards to researcher positionality, I played an outsider role in understanding Indian women and the cultural context in India. I critically and reflexively analyzed diverse media sources that offered insights on reproductive tourism in India within the domains outlined in my thesis statement. These media sources were found online, and included mainstream media outlets, news articles, articles by journalists and social activists, websites for organizations of interest, corporate sources, blogs, videos, documentaries, and images. I used scholarly articles in anthropology as ethnographic evidence to support, challenge, or extend claims reported by the media. Academic sources included peer-reviewed publications, books, open access materials, grey literature, academic websites, and legal documents. I qualitatively compared and contrasted the presented narratives to conduct a secondary analysis of scholarly literature and media reports, and constructed valid arguments about the current state of reproductive tourism in India. The commodification of reproductive labour has had vast impacts on the cultural meanings of kinship in India and Global North countries. Reproductive tourism in India is evidence that culture influences biological, reproductive, and technological processes and how they are perceived in contemporary times. Technology and globalization were found to be propellers of commercial surrogacy that transcend international borders. Expectations related to family formation and gender within Western contexts, and Western forms of kinship contribute to the commercial surrogacy industry. Reproductive tourism perpetuates hierarchies along the lines of race and class, and Indian women face exploitation and serious health risks despite being paid for their reproductive labour.

Transnational surrogacy must be perceived by governments as a public matter rather than a private one, in order to adequately derive holistic solutions to halt the exploitation of vulnerable Indian women while balancing the desire of infertile individuals to utilize surrogacy as a means of kinship formation.

This research paper was written in March 2018. As of December 2018, commercial surrogacy is illegal in India. The Surrogacy (Regulation) Act, 2018 is an attempt by the Indian government to control the industry and associated issues such as the exploitation of poor women and unprecedented health consequences. This law and policy shift by the Indian government affirms the importance of this research.

Key words

reproduction, biotechnology, kinship, global health, culture.

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