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Book Review: Wombs in Labor: Transnational Commercial Surrogacy in India

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Wombs in Labor: Transnational Commercial Surrogacy in India
Pande, Amrita. 2014. Columbia University Press. New York. 272 pages.
Paper \$28.00

Reviewed by Sarah Thomas¹

Amrita Pande's *Wombs in Labor: Transnational Commercial Surrogacy in India* is a fascinating look at the world of the Indian surrogate and the choice she makes in an effort to better her and her family's economic status. At times heart-wrenching, Pande's ethnographic research provides a detailed and empathetic look at the business of India's surrogacy industry and the women who willingly carry a child for those unable to do so.

Pande's research leads her to southern India where she works to immerse herself in the surrogacy industry by visiting clinics, living in hostels and speaking with everyone involved in this burgeoning labor market. She even spends time with the infertility doctor, "Usha Madam", made famous by Oprah Winfrey's 2006 segment "Wombs for Rent". Unlike in the Oprah segment, Pande highlights the sacrifices made by the surrogates, rather than the trials and heartbreak faced by couples struggling with infertility. Most importantly, through her detailed and rich interviews, Pande provides a highly nuanced and intimate look at the thoughts and hopes of these surrogates, and a realistic portrayal of life as a surrogate.

Consisting of nine chapters and an epilogue, *Wombs in Labor* focuses on surrogacy's role in the changing landscape of India. Carefully woven into each chapter are the numerous field notes and interviews Pande conducted with the surrogates, conversations that vividly account life as a surrogate, including all of the messy details often left unsaid. It's these vignettes that are the real strength of this study and what provide the reader with a keen understanding of the power struggle, joy and pain that is accompanied with surrogacy.

In the early chapters, Pande sets the stage for her study, by providing a brief overview of the history of reproduction in India, specifically in the south, and what she deems a contradictory stance between "pro-natal technologies in an anti-natal state." Ironically, while India is well-known for outsourcing surrogates, its own people are encouraged, through incentives, to practice a two-child norm. Pande argues that this is hypocritical since the government allows surrogacy clinics to promote reproductive tourism while at the same time persuades women to practice birth control at home. In an effort to help the reader understand how and why a woman becomes a surrogate, Pande interviews dozens of surrogates and hears first-hand what brought them to surrogacy, and, in many cases, what keeps them there. Through these engrossing vignettes, we learn the myriad of reasons for choosing surrogacy and are offered insights about their hopes and dreams for the future.

Moving through the chapters, Pande provides insight into the daily lives of the surrogates. She focuses on the recruitment tactics employed by the brokers and the daily rituals at the maternity clinics and how they work to create the perfect "mother-worker." Through conversations with doctors, surrogate counselors, and brokers, Pande illustrates the thinking behind recruitment campaigns and the work that is put into convincing the surrogates that they

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are simply providing a service for someone who cannot carry a child. Pande notes that the success of India's commercial surrogacy is the fact that the surrogates understand that they are essentially renting their wombs for nine months. In doing this, the clinics can assure the families that there will be no unforeseen problems when they come to collect their baby. Pande shows that in the beginning of the contract the families keep in close contact with their surrogate, regularly making phone calls and sending letters to them. Eventually, the daily grind of life gets in the way and the prospective families slowly lose contact with their surrogate until their baby is born and they return to India. These shifts in the relationships have an impact on the surrogates, and many of them express resentment and disappointment towards the families when they realize they are just a "womb in labor."

Though the surrogates often feel disappointed by the lack of a continued relationship with the families, many elect to be surrogates numerous times, likening surrogacy to God's work. Some maintain that the process of being a surrogate can be isolating, painful, and mundane, but many suggest the time spent waiting for the birth is similar to a vacation because they aren't allowed to do any physical labor. From Pande's outsider view, this forced stay at the clinic is not a vacation, but an imposition on the rights of the women, and her narrative takes an opposite view to that of the surrogates.

Since commercial surrogacy is one of India's lucrative industries, clinics carefully monitor the surrogates from conception until birth, and this typically requires that they stay at the clinics until the baby is born. The narratives the surrogates share regarding this forced stay provide some of the most engaging dialogue in the study. Usually held at dinnertime, bedtime or early morning, these conversations provide a glimpse into the minds of surrogates. Pande is a deft interviewer, as the candor with which the surrogates answer her questions leaves the reader with mixed emotions. On one hand, the surrogates cite monetary benefits as the primary reason for electing to explore surrogacy, yet the emotional rollercoaster that is surrogacy is clearly seen. The women consider Pande a confidante and tell her their fears about being branded outcasts by their communities, but are proud that they are able to provide financially for their families. This juxtaposition of feelings is evident in Pande's re-telling of their stories: they are concerned they will not earn enough money to have a life-changing experience, yet they hope that surrogacy will certainly help them improve their family's fortunes.

While Pande's study may not have a tidy ending, the readers are left feeling hopeful for the surrogates and their futures. Although commercial surrogacy may not be the choice for everyone, Pande shows that most of the women who choose this route, do so of their own accord, and that is a victory in itself.