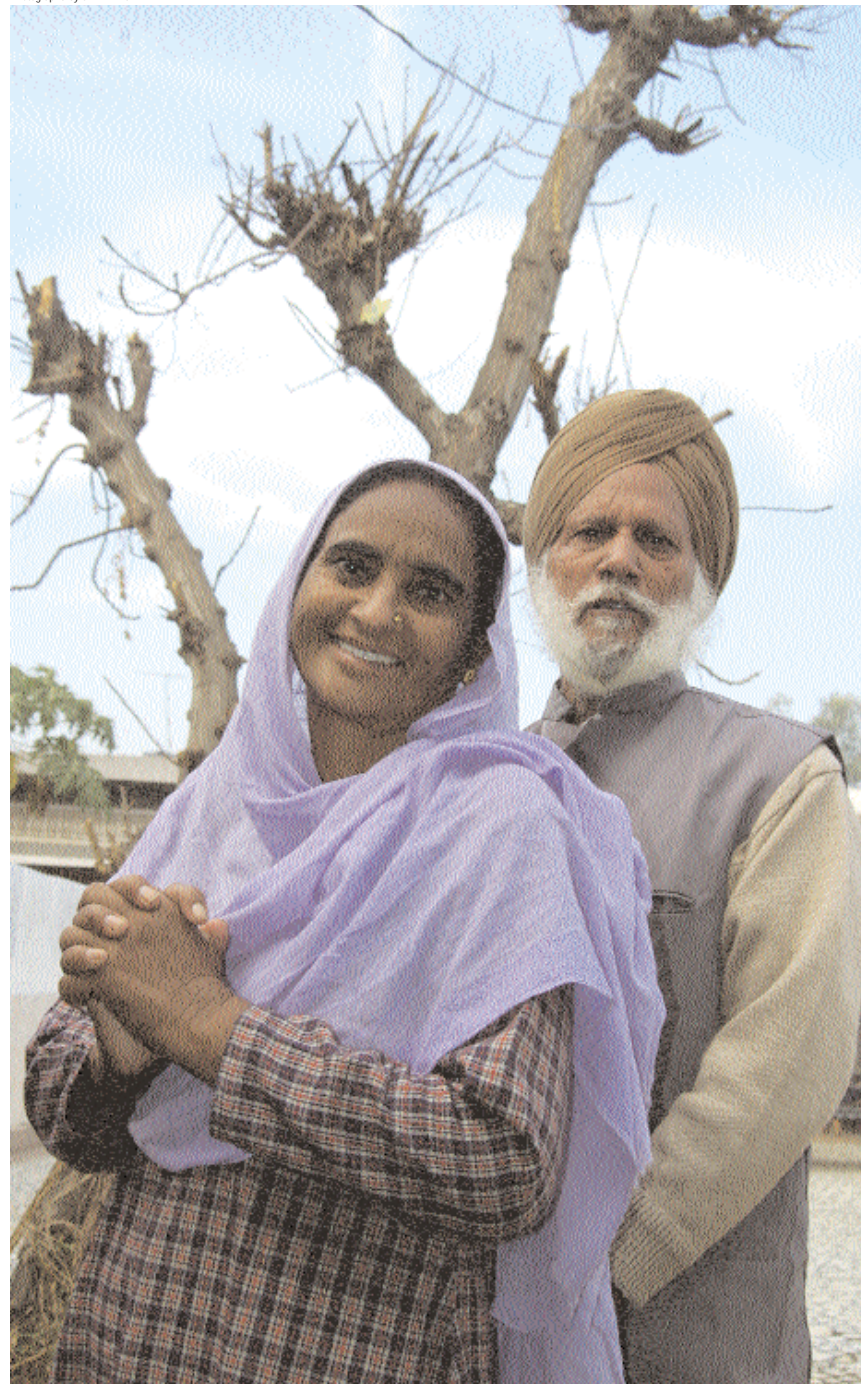


GRAND OLD PARENTS

As technology makes it possible for middle-aged women to bear children, couples are queuing up at fertility clinics in Punjab. But it seems science is being exploited to ensure a male child.

Photographs by SHARAD SAXENA



Dalip Singh, 58, and Savinder Kaur, 56, Gurdaspur, oldest woman in north India to conceive. Ten years after menopause, Savinder conceived quadruplets through her niece's donor eggs. Reduction converted them to twins. All for Rs 1.5 lakh.

■ By Ramesh Vinayak

Science has turned the natural biological clock. It can be rewound, fast-forwarded, paused, even stopped. Easy accessibility to Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) has extended a woman's childbearing years. But in Punjab, this empowering technology is churning the deep-seated issues of patriarchy: it is a last resort to ensure inheritance through a male child. Or, help reconstitute families which have lost an adult son in an accident or war. For this, age is no bar.

That explains why more than 40 per cent of the couples seeking technological help to conceive in Punjab are in the 40-plus age group. In fact, the recent case of Gurdaspur-based Savinder Kaur, 56, carrying a successful 14-week pregnancy led to hysteric reactions. In five days, more than 100 senior women—including a 65-year-old from Sonapat—queued up outside the Rotunda-Virk Centre for Human Reproduction in Jalandhar. "We may soon be labelled as a centre for old women," jokes S.P.S. Virk, director embryologist.

Jest notwithstanding, it is a bit odd to see men with grey beards and women with wrinkled faces (and dyed hair) waiting to become parents. They look more like expectant grandparents. Most never had children while some lost an adult male child and now want to resurrect a truncated family. In 2000, Virk's clinic was visited by the mothers of four soldiers who had died during the 1999 Kargil war. For the middle-aged women, conceiving again with ART was the only way to overcome their trauma of the loss of their family's breadwinner. One of them did conceive and deliver a male baby.

Following suit are Nirmal Kaur, 48, and Avtar Singh, 50, a poultry farmer from Gurdaspur, who lost their young son two years ago. Wedded for the past 28 years, they have two daughters in



Baldev Singh, 46, and Manjit Kaur, 44, Sangrur, parents of twins born with ART process. Manjit Kaur had conceived for the first time with technological aid after 20 years of marriage. "The blessing has wiped out all my miseries," she says.

their 20s. "Time pass *nahin hunda*, (it is difficult to pass time)," says Kaur whose dyed hair and red lipstick belies her age. Now in the fifth year of her menopause, she has been visiting a fertility clinic armed with hope. Most of these women are housewives from the neo-rich peasant class, who realise they can afford technology-blessed sons, complications like Down's Syndrome and other congenital defects notwithstanding.

ART became a big buzz in India in 1986, when the first IVF (in-vitro fertilisation) baby's birth was facilitated by Dr Indira Hinduja in Mumbai. In north India, these techniques seeped in 10 years ago, but in Punjab it was the success of the Donor Ova IVF technique which upped its popularity. "There has been a tenfold increase in IVF in the state in the past three years," says Gautam Allahbadia, a Mumbai-based IVF specialist who runs Rotunda, an ISO-2002 clinic, with franchises in Delhi, Srinagar and Jalandhar. His Jalandhar clinic performs 400 IVF cycles a year—a steep rise from 30 cycles in 2000. It is the only centre in India that has a six-month waitlist with more than 400 clients.

An intriguing facet of this trend is how it is attracting NRI couples. Half the clients at the Rotunda clinic are NRIs. Low-treatment costs and easy availability of donor eggs are the biggest draws. In the US, Canada and the UK, the wait-

lists for IVF treatment range from six months to three years. In the US, an IVF cycle costs \$10,000 (Rs 4.5 lakh), while in India it is around Rs 1 lakh. Some business-savvy clinics also offer discount packages. US-based Bicki Kaur, 43, and Karan Bir Singh, 44, childless for the past 20 years, are now in Jalandhar for IVF treatment. Bicki tried it twice in the US, but she aborted both

Makhan Singh, 54, and Harjit Kaur, 48, (seated) Gurdaspur

Spurred by a DD programme, this couple opted for fertility treatment 20 years after marriage. "Only a son can wipe the *paap* (sin) of childlessness," says Harjit.



times. The US clinic has refused to transfer her husband's frozen sperms, but Bicki wants another chance. Sensing the increasing need, fertility centres offer innovative ova-sharing programmes. Underprivileged young IVF treatment seekers who cannot afford it but can produce healthy eggs are made to donate their eggs to rich women, who pay for their treatment.

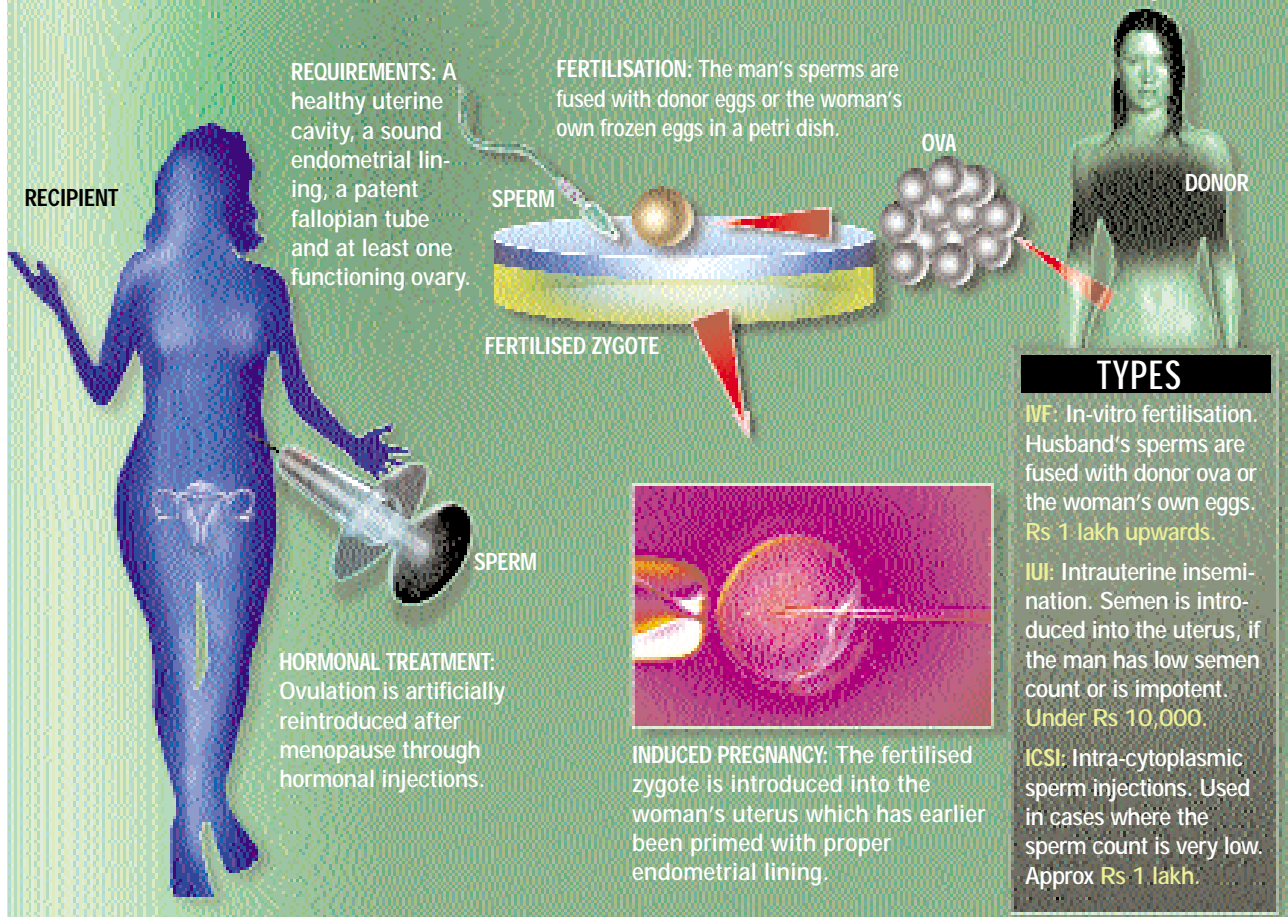
ART is a boon in terror-ridden Kashmir too. It saw its first and only IVF clinic two years ago. Allahbadia, who is a consultant there, says there is high demand for donor ova-IVF because of high prevalence of premature ovarian failure.

The need for technology-assisted late motherhood is high in urban India as well, but the patterns are different. Most women who seek such options are career women, who had postponed having babies till their careers grew. "I get a lot of queries from single and successful women who want to freeze their eggs before they turn 45," says Dr Hrishikesh Pai, Mumbai-based fertility expert. Then there are those who want to have children with their second or third spouse. Delhi's 51-year-old Ragini Verma, who has three children from previous marriages, is one such case. Married for the third time, Verma went in for ART and is now four months

Graphic by NILANJAN DAS

ART OF REPRODUCTION

Ova and sperms are fertilised in the laboratory. The fertilised zygote is then induced into the woman's body.



pregnant. "A child is the ultimate expression of love. I want to share this expression with my present spouse too," says Verma who works as a secretary.

However, Mumbai's 61-year-old housewife Sanyogita Chavan stands out as an exception. Chavan who delivered a baby girl six months back at Lilavati Hospital, says her need for motherhood suddenly became acute after their joint family disintegrated.

But this is not just a happy, hopeful trend. A common denominator among the late parenthood seekers, particularly in Punjab, is the desire for a male child. Fertility clinics do roaring business because they discreetly promise and deliver male children. Destiny alone cannot explain why all the middle-aged women who conceive through IVF donor ova deliver boys. "In most cases, the craving for a late pregnancy is for a son," says Chandigarh gynaecologist Mangla Dogra.



Rashpal Singh, 52, and Rajbir Kaur, 50, Amritsar

Married for 24 years, they have two daughters, but have sought medical help for a male heir. "I need a son to complete my family," says Rajbir.

All in all, the idea of late motherhood has a split verdict. As a clinical discourse on progress made in post-menopausal pregnancy, it is a great subject. But as the journey of a woman who has to deal with physical and social complexities of such a decision—which may not even be hers—it is not just a compelling story. It may soon become a legal wrangle.

Till date, there is no law for ART in India, but a policy has been drafted that will declare 45 years as the cut-off age for seeking ART. "Otherwise old women reproducing babies will lead to a debate between the rights of the child versus the rights of the mother," cautions Dr Kamini Rao, director of Bangalore Conception Centre and one of the experts who drafted the policy. A sound argument which underlines the need for shortening the gestation period for the draft to become a law. *with Shefalee Vasudev, Sheela Raval and Nirmala Ravindran*