

'Millionrupeebaby.blogspot.com' – New Family Narrations

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The <http://millionrupeebaby.blogspot.com/> tells the story of the young and handsome 'all American couple' and their lovely little daughter Lila, born by a surrogate mother in India in 2009. Lila is genetic child of the couple, who provided both egg and sperm to her creation – only the actual pregnancy was impossible due to a cancer disease where the uterus had to be removed. On the blog, which is narrated by Lila's mum, she shares the pain of being infertile, the many considerations up until the difficult decision of choosing an Indian surrogacy clinic, the worries during the long-distance pregnancy and later the joy of parenthood.

A blog named *Chai Baby* tells the story of the Australian couple CC & John and their road to surrogacy in India. Both CC (short for the pseudonym 'CharlieCat') and her husband are in their early 40's. As they met, they were well past 30 and they did not discover CC's infertility problems until at a late age. The choice of surrogacy in India was mainly taken for legislative reasons, (commercial) surrogacy being illegal in most states in Australia, but the economic aspects were important as well, as the process in the US would be extremely expensive. On the blog they reveal the many thoughts they went through before the decision of using an egg donor, not because CharlieCat didn't produce eggs herself, but because her eggs were labeled as 'aged', meaning that the chances of achieving pregnancy would be statistically lower than they would be with a younger woman's eggs. After the choice of donor nationality (a choice between egg of expensive Caucasian or cheaper Indian origin), the actual donor was personally picked out, which is possible at the Surrogacy Centre India (SCI), and just last week the twins Max and Lily were born.

On <http://spawnofmikeandmike.blogspot.com/> the American gay couple Mike and Mike tells the story of how they became the proud parents of Rose and Eva, and thereby joined the long and growing list of couples and singles crossing borders to fulfill their dreams of parenthood. Rose and Eva are the products of Indian donor eggs and their fathers' sperm – stirred in sterilized jars – and carried by two Indian surrogate mothers in Mumbai. On their blog M&M, as they call themselves, emphasize their love of each other, the marriage ceremony which took place in Massachusetts, and the fierce desire to become parents. The initial plan for the surrogate mothers to give birth on the same day is, on the blog, replaced with worries associated with Rose' premature birth, stories about the long stay in vibrant, yet humid Mumbai, Eve's birth three weeks later, the overwhelming Indian hospitality, the wonderful food, and

the caring clinical staff. With Eve's birth, Mike and Mike are now, as they write on their blog, transformed into a 'real' family: Daddy, Baba, and the girls.

These stories are by no means exceptional. Rose and Eva were born in Mumbai, Max and Lily in New Delhi. Lila was born in the *Akanksha Infertility Clinic* in the small town Anand in the Indian state Gujarat, a clinic which has become worldwide known after the leading doctor Dr. Nayana Patel appeared in the American Oprah Winfrey Show "*Wombs for rent*" in 2007, where she branded surrogacy as 'India's gift to the world'ⁱ. In 2009 a gynecologist at a hospital in Mumbai tells that in their hospital alone, a surrogate every other day gives birth alone to a British child.ⁱⁱ While some intended parents are Indians living abroad, a growing number of the clients come from overseas, most notably Europe, Australia and the United States.

Build-A-Baby / Fertility Inc.

A steadily growing number of Indian fertility clinics offer surrogacy services to a Western audience at very competitive prices. The cross border fertility industry is today a multi-million dollar industry and has all the facets of a marketplace. Besides the low cost, India offers expertise and international standards in medical treatments, less or no waiting periods and English speaking doctors often educated in the US or UK.

In India legislative restrictions are still few, and the combination of IVF-technology and surrogacy allows gay couples as well as singles to become parents. The intended (and paying) parents have the choice of donor nationality and the possibility of hiring an Indian woman as a surrogate mother - a young woman with a family of her own, who typically needs the money to buy a better home or to educate her 'own' children. In India the surrogate mother renounces any claim of the baby as a part of the initial contract provided by the clinics. Depending on different national legislations, the intended parents are given custody after a DNA test, or they are allowed to adopt the baby after birth.

The extended use of internet based communication technology reduces the feeling of geographical distance between the first and the third world - for instance US and India. Hopeful parents learn about their options on the internet. The clinics make extended use of the possibilities on the world-wide web, both in regard to marketing and to education of the 'customers'. Once an Indian surrogate mother is pregnant, the intended parents have – and use – the possibility of joining-pregnancy-check-ups and scans on Skype. For most intended parents the communicative technology plays a crucial role during the process.

And often the intended parents share their experiences, their worries, both in regards to the surrogacy project, but also of parenting and family-making, in international online communities, for instance on weblogs, which is the subject of this paper.

Globalization along with medical and digital developments provides us with new ways of making and thinking families in late modern society, as reproduction is in some sense 'liberated' from geography, gender, sexuality, and even age, and obviously this calls for new modes of understanding as well. In this paper it is my aim to focus on the communication of parents and intended parents of Indian surrogate children through an examination and discussion of the narrative and rhetorical strategies in a number of public weblogs (blogs). I want to show how a narrative form seems to be established in negotiation and reinterpretation of these new families, how it goes on in words as well as visually, both carefully balanced between two very different cultures and between the private and the public realm on the internet.

Post-familial families

Displayed on these blogs seems to be what Ulrich Beck has named the 'post-familial family', new, 'alternative' family structures like for instance bi-cultural families and same-sex partnerships. In late modernity, traditional family values can no longer be taken for granted. The post-familial family demands developing, negotiating and co-ordinating rules and symbolic rituals of everyday life:

"a permanent 'do-it-yourself' project." (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 90-91)

According to phenomenologist and cultural historian, John R. Gillis, each modern family is a narration – existing only if it is told, and is in that sense a unity in need of constant attention.

"Whereas people could once fall back upon rules and rituals, the prospect now is of a staging of everyday life, an acrobatics of balancing and co-ordinating." (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 98)

John R. Gillis claims that the modern family is to be understood as its own symbolic universe, a small metaphysical unit, who now inscribes what was formerly "assigned to religious and communal institutions: representing ourselves as we would like to think we are". By separating a "family we live with" from a family we "live by," he stresses the importance of understanding the modern and late modern family as a set of immaterial ideas, values, dreams and longings and stresses that the family formed in our imagination is in many ways more vivid than the physical reality of everyday life.

This staging and performing of the family has according to Gillis been going on throughout the modern age and escalating in the 20th century. During the last decades the scene has increasingly been the internet, where still new opportunities arise and new borders between public and private constantly show and develop.

Blogging a Family

A weblog (blog) is a certain way of digital communication, most commonly a frequently updated webpage with dated entries in reverse-chronological order, meaning that the newest written text is always on top. In many ways the weblog has resemblance to the old fashioned diary, although with all the characteristics of new digital media: integrating written texts with pictures, film and graphics. A blog is typically interactive, allowing followers/readers to leave comments and messages. Most bloggers follows other blogs on related subjects, which means that a kind of community appears through the various lists of links to other blogs and comments on each other's posts.

I have identified and followed a community of around 15-20 blogs on the subject on surrogacy in India throughout the year of 2010, written and published by parents and intended parents of surrogate children 'produced' and born in India. The blogs are quite focused; the authors have all either taken the decision to try surrogacy, are already or are trying to get 'pregnant', or are back home with one or more children carried and born by an Indian surrogate.

Many bloggers are U.S.-citizens, but some come from Australia and Europe. About half are infertile heterosexual couples, and the rest counts same-sex male couples and a few single men. Thus a variety of medical treatments follows their decision to choose surrogacy: some heterosexual couples can supply the complete genetic material, but other intended parents use donor eggs - either because they are a same-sex male couple or because the female part of the relationship does not produce eggs, or she has an age where her egg production is estimated to reduce the chances of achieving pregnancy.

These issues connects the bloggers closely, they link to each other in a kind of 'inner circle' where everyone 'knows' each other, most commonly not in person, but as online personalities and the online community is at several occasions referred to as a 'blog family'. Thus the distinction made by Gillis between the concrete family 'we live with' and the imaginary family 'we live by' is obvious. In many cases the bloggers (private) biological families are not, or only briefly, informed of the surrogacy process, while the (public) 'blog family' is shown unlimited confidence.

Narrating a family

In the blogging community focus is mostly on the surrogacy process, and the thoughts and worries of entering this totally new universe. Not only are these people having their first baby – they are also going through a number of challenging and often unpleasant medical treatments. They travel to a foreign part of the world – leaving their body parts (semen, eggs or embryos), hoping to return nine months later to pick up a baby.

As a media, the blog suits this theme very well. Reproduction is very obviously a process extended in time: the hoping and wishing for a pregnancy, often in several attempts, later the count-down of days until the expected time of birth.

At the same time the process of becoming a family is in the process of being narrated. Each blog does of course tell a unique story of individual lives and fates, but the bloggers share a high degree of common interests – and narrative strategies. Again the phenomenological diversion made by Gillis is useful to understand and explain how the family consists of the already existing family members, but at the same time also projects the very vivid dreams of the future children hoped for.

Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson also approaches the study of late modern family as a communication practice and argues that family storytelling is a practice about finding and defining ways of producing and doing family”, which obviously seems to be the case here. (Langellier and Peterson 2004)

On one hand the image of a late-modern family is in many ways broadened in the digital environments; the question of single individuals and same-sex-couples reproducing is for instance nowhere questioned. On the other hand it is obvious that although the families presenting themselves are very different, the blogs have a number of similarities and the ways in which these blogs construct narratives are in many ways comparable.

In all the blogs the birth is indispensably 'point of no return'. Many blogs have the digital calendar/clock initially first counting along with the pregnancy and since registering the child or children's exact age. The authors of the blogs are more or less anonymous. The happy parents of formerly mentioned Lila' are simply 'mommy' and 'daddy' – their actual names are nowhere mentioned, although they are totally recognizable on numerous photos. Some use pseudonyms; others appear with numerous recognizable

photos off both themselves and their children, but in any case the important issue seems to be narrating the structure of family life.

We see on one hand a small and limited community of people, who mostly have not met each other personally but never the less know each other through their digital profiles, and know each other's family structures, sexual preferences, and medical history. In many cases they use the same clinics and doctors in India, have been living in the same hotels and have shared some of the most intimate and sincere thoughts and worries with each other. Throughout the year in which I have been following the surrogacy-blog-community, a number of babies have been born (singletons, twins, and in some cases a combination of these have let three newborn babies go out of India together to start a life in the same family somewhere in the Western part of the world). The bloggers are keen on congratulating each other. But many losses have passed as well: fertilizations without result and miscarriages have been announced and commented in the online community.

At the same time it is an open and public online forum and besides the mutual writing and linking bloggers and the people who comment, a number of anonymous 'followers' read and comment without having a blog themselves (like me), and without leaving other traces than the automatic, digital registration on the blog: "a reader from Odense, Denmark, logged in/out".

The blogs display a new balance in the phenomenological distinction made by Gillis between the 'family we live with' and 'the family we live by'. They are certainly a forum of ideals, dreams and longings, and in that sense the imaginary family 'we live by'. But at the same time a unique and extraordinary reality is presented, as traditional views of the family meets a new intercultural reality, colored by the technological and medical discourses, and the world of globalization and internet communication, where reality is formed in words and pictures. It is quite obvious that the individual effort of storytelling creates the family unit, and in the following, I want to focus on how this reality is specifically established.

Changing reality with words and pictures

Lakoff and Johnson argued that metaphors not only shape the human communication, but also perception and (inter)action. And examining the communication on the blogs closer, it becomes very obvious that language and reality interacts intimately. A particular and often quite peculiar linguistic structure,

diction and metaphors develop in the surrogacy blog community in order to negotiate and categorize the subject.

Besides the usual medical abbreviations, for instance

‘IVF’ (In Vitro Fertilization) or

‘LMP’ (Last Menstrual Period),

FET (Frozen Embryo Transfer),

and well known internet slang,

for instance LOL (Laughing Out Loud),

OMG (Oh My God),

a number of particular abbreviations appears:

IP (intended parent), ED (egg donor), SM (surrogate mother). ‘Surro’, short for surrogate, ‘embies’ instead of embryos are totally common abbreviations used and understood by everyone.

More specific is 2SM (2 Surrogate Mothers)ⁱⁱⁱ, "2WW" (2 Weeks Wait)^{iv} referring to the waiting period between an embryo transfer until the first pregnancy test and “BFN” (Big Fat Negative).

Thus a discourse appears, influenced by both the surrogacy context and the internet media. The medical world, with which most of the intended parents have become acquainted, uses many scientific abbreviations – the specialized nature of the subject and the confidentiality of the bloggers at the same time inspire a specific and personalized use of language.

‘Made in India’

The names of the blogs are also clearly reflecting the discursive struggle going on between the intended parents (located in the Western World) and Indian culture.

Blognames as ‘made in india’, ‘procreatedinindia and ‘millionrupeebaby’ hints with humor and irony to the commercial nature of the surrogacy arrangement.^v

Other combinations of names and headlines are more complex in nature: <http://www.fromindia-withlove.blogspot.com/> has the headline “Out of India” and the subtitle “A miracle of life will bud in

Delhi and blossom in California as a gift from God through egg donation and gestational surrogacy”: A message that points towards a religious understanding of the baby as God given, and as a gift from one nation to another. Metaphors of nature (‘bud’, ‘blossom’) are combined with the medical discourse (‘egg donation’ and ‘gestational surrogacy’) whereas the businesslike, commercial part of the affair is downplayed. Though the blog headline “Out of India”, as an inter textual hint to the Danish author Karen Blixens novel based on her life in colonial Kenya from 1937 (or the movie Out of Africa from 1985 with Meryl Streep starring), does touch the interaction between the (Western) first world and a (post) colonial culture - but in a very non direct manner.

The blog titled “Chai Baby” also obviously mediates between the Indian context and the specific needs of the intended parents from Australia.^{vi} Likewise the <http://tajmababy.blogspot.com>, <http://cocoamasala.blogspot.com/> and the <http://faithtovishwas.blogspot.com/> points directly towards the Indian context through the use of exotic expressions as ‘chai’, ‘masala’, ‘Vishwas’. ‘Chai Baby’ has a handwritten introduction explaining how ‘masala chai’ is made and what it symbolizes in both Nepal and India. The expression ‘Vishwas’ is likewise explained as being one of the Hindi words for Faith, trust and confidence that those you come in contact with will deliver. “In our case, we have ‘vishwas’ they will deliver a baby....”

‘Our Magical Journey’

Descriptions of the journeys to India are very central themes in the blogs. The couples typically travel first in order to deliver body parts themselves, and then return for the birth of the child or children. If several ‘deliveries’ are required, sometimes the embryos are shipped, though it is assumed to be connected with a various risks (both in regards to the preservation of the body material and Indian legislation). The uncertainty of both time of birth and how long the issuing of custody and passport will take after the childbirth attaches a number of concerns to especially this journey; a journey not least important, because it transforms its participants into parents. In most cases preparations as well as the actual trip are described in details on the blogs. Pragmatic advice on what to bring along is shared between the bloggers: advice on how to deal with Indian culture, the complicated bureaucracy and the constantly changing legislation in relation to getting passports for the children.

The characterization of the entire surrogacy process as a ‘journey’ is seen on a number of blogs – referring not only to the travels to India but also to a mental journey during which this very special way of becoming parents is understood and accepted. Paul and Edward, fathers of three daughters, Vivian, Aria,

and Sidney, all three born in Delhi in September 2010, presents the blog 'Faith to Vishwas' with under-titles "A Voyage to Our Family – wanna come along" and "This is our journey to 'happily ever after.'"^{vii}

The blog titled <http://www.markandkerriesjourney.blogspot.com/> bears the headline "The Journey Begins....and is now finally on its way!"

The blog "Our Magical Journey" also refers to the journey as a metaphor, and is at the same time a very complex message, not least when the visual message is considered. The marching elephants and the background buildings and exotic trees refers without a doubt to the Oriental culture. The small elephant marching at the end of the row could be read as a sign of fertility. The stars and the butterflies leave a magical and adventures fairytale-like impression, comparable with the blog name "our magical journey". The pink background color leaves it undecided if it is night or the image of a surrealistic dream.

Visually many of the blogs are designed in a way that refer to the Indian cultural frame and therefore, also interacts in the discursive struggles of the communication.

'Christmas Eve Boys'^{viii} has a range of colourful series in the blog

"A Distant Miracle" has the stately Taj Mahal as the initial image and the subtitle "Traveling 7,500 Miles to Grow Our Family"^{ix}

At the same time it is remarkable that the subtitle in for instance 'Our Magical Journey' clearly contrasts the romantic visual image:

The Journey of Surrogacy is never easy! Attempt #1- Fesh Cycle-Negative, Attempt #2- Fresh Cycle-Negative, Attempt #3- FET-Negative (used last 2 embies). Attempt#4-cycled in USA got 6 embies on ice...cant ship! Services suspended to Mumbai. Wait and See in 2011^x

Likewise 'markandkerriesjourney' is a very complex message, mixing the scientific medical discourse with a personal impression of India and a very personal intention of making a family dream concrete and existing...

The Journey Begins....and is now finally on its way!

Step One,ship embryos, caps come off during shipping, 12embryos lost, gone, wasted.Now,start over,fast forward 5months, new shipment arrives in Mumbai safely. Feb 10 brings a transfer and a negative. March brings another transfer and another negative.July 6th, 2010, transfer of three embryos, same day as recent egg retrieval! And now, July 19th another negative. July 29th, embies arrive at new clinic, transfer done August 17th. BFN, Dec 2010 fresh transfer 2SM and ONE POSITIVE^{xi}

'Dream', 'magic' and 'journey' are common metaphors of this community, referring not solely to the concrete trip to the clinic in India, but also to the process of coming to terms with the arrangement. In

general the blogs deliver romantic and smooth images of India, resembling a tourist brochure, without mentioning and lacking images of slum or poverty. At the same time complex messages arise from the combination of confidential use of language and personalized internet slang, highly specialized technical and medical expressions, while at the same time a touch of both the traditional fairytale and postcolonial magical realism dominate in these narrations – the childless couples’ dearest wish comes true – and the surrogacy process in a country far away from home is in many ways magical and almost unthinkable.

Infertility as ‘illness-narrative’

The more ‘post-familiar’ the family is (in sense of singles, same sex) – or the more controversial the reproduction process has been (meaning test tube baby, surrogacy etc.) – the stronger the need of narration seems to be. The blogs express this need of being at the same time a public informational site, an on-line community and a narration of the family as a private unity. These blogs are not autobiographical in a traditional sense and they are not about life in general.

In her work “Illness as metaphor” from 1989, Susan Sontag refers to TB, cancer and AIDS as examples of how metaphors are used in understanding and communicating illnesses. She argues ‘against interpretation’; that disconnecting the metaphors and the diseases will provide the opportunity of regarding the illness’s as just (serious) illness, rather than a metaphysical punishment leading to cultural taboos, feelings of guilt and shame.

Infertility also bears cultural mythology and has been regarded as a taboo. It has been regarded as a problem of the rich welfare states, a distressing side effect of overconsumption and pollution, or a problem mostly related to Western women delaying the age of pregnancy and childbirth.

On the blogs the story of surrogacy in India is in many cases told as an illness narrative. Langellier and Peterson states: “Disease converts a person to a patient, the body to an assembly of fixable or replaceable parts, and the personal narrative to a medical report or clinical history” (Langellier 2004: 190). This certainly describes the experience of infertile men and women, but also gay and single individuals, for whom the problem of childlessness is unrelated to illness, but nevertheless they go through similar medical treatments in order to create a child. Thus, the surrogacy narratives are in many ways comparable to an illness narrative, as “a modern adventure story constructed around recovery and healing” (Langellier 2004: 190), where healing means the birth of one or more healthy babies.

But the blogs also provide the opportunity to broaden the image of difficulties in realizing parenthood. For single and gay couples childlessness has, as mentioned, mostly nothing to do with illnesses or disabilities. The gay couples could in many cases be said to be forced in a kind of exile by restrictive laws in their homelands – or like many of the heterosexual couples – due to their personal economic situation. And they, in a double sense, highlight issues that are normally ‘muted’ - both infertility and homosexuality.

“For storytellers, the narrative is an opportunity to exert agency and empowerment in a disruptive and dehumanizing experience [...]” (Langellier 2004: 190)

As stated by Gillis (1996) the family institution is loaded with metaphors, meaning and mythology. The small international community of surrogacy-in-India bloggers interrogates with the existing dichotomies and mythologies in a number of different manners: Obviously the interaction between the first and the third world is a challenge, both in an ethical sense and in order of adjusting oneself to the reality of a multicultural family when the child has a Indian donor as genetic parent. By narrating in public, the traditional view of the family as a private realm is challenged, and at the same time they break the taboo of infertility and reduce layers of shame traditionally connected to infertility and homosexuality. Mental borders between nature and culture are challenged as the narratives strategically move attention away from the biological towards the social aspects of parenting, by focusing on intention, attention and care, more than genetics, pregnancy and giving birth.

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ⁱ <http://www.oprah.com/world/Wombs-for-Rent>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23695609-investigation-surrogate-baby-delivered-every-48-hours.do>

ⁱⁱⁱ [http://www.markandkerriesjourney.blogspot.com/\(2011-02-14\)](http://www.markandkerriesjourney.blogspot.com/(2011-02-14))

^{iv} http://adistantmiracle.blogspot.com/2010_02_01_archive.html

^v <http://152am.blogspot.com/>, <http://procreatedinindia.blogspot.com/> and <http://www.millionrupeebaby.blogspot.com>

^{vi} <http://havingababyinindia.blogspot.com/>

^{vii} <http://faithtovishwas.blogspot.com/>. Paul and Edwards three daughters are born by two different surrogates, meaning that the two of them are twins. All three have the same egg donor, but who the biological father of which girl is, is not mentioned on the blog.

^{viii} <http://christmaseveboys.blogspot.com/>: Christmas Eve Boys are a gay couple living in Dallas. Both are born on December the 24.

^{ix} <http://adistantmiracle.blogspot.com/> (2011-02-14)

^x <http://ourmagicaljourney.blogspot.com/> (2011-02-13)

^{xi} [http://www.markandkerriesjourney.blogspot.com/\(2011-02-13\)](http://www.markandkerriesjourney.blogspot.com/(2011-02-13))