

Book Review

Amrita Pande (2014) *Wombs in Labor: Transactional Commercial Surrogacy in India*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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This fascinating and disturbing study of a new form of work – transnational commercial surrogacy – is an unusual contribution to global labour studies. Transnational commercial surrogacy emerged from a combination of the new reproductive technologies and the forces of globalisation. It is India's new form of outsourcing, where couples from all over the world can hire Indian women to bear their children for a fraction of the cost of surrogacy elsewhere and with no government regulations. The book explores the workings of this new labour market for wombs, and analyses the experiences of the labourers as they negotiate the peculiarities of this market – where production and reproduction literally merge.

There have been sensational newspaper reports condemning these “baby farms” where the women live in surrogacy hostels and are sometimes labelled “reproductive prostitutes”. But this book is no headline-grabbing exposé. Over a five-year period, sociologist Amrita Pande sat at the bedsides of the surrogates in a surrogacy hostel in India. She lived with the women during their pregnancies, asking them what it feels like to carry a baby that you have to give up. Most feminist scholars condemn this commodification of women and motherhood. Surprisingly, Pande found that the surrogates themselves resist classifying surrogacy as labour and themselves as labourers. Instead, they see themselves as “virtuous reproducers”, constructing “moral boundaries between themselves and prostitutes and baby sellers, and forge kinship ties with the fetus, intended mothers, or other surrogates” (p. 11).

But these are complex relationships and they are full of ambivalence. The first step in manufacturing “a perfect mother–worker mind” is for the hostel matron to teach the surrogates “one crucial thing: don't treat it like a business; instead, treat it like God's gift to you” (p. 68). Or as one of the brokers – many of the surrogates are recruited by the equivalent of labour brokers – conducts her counselling sessions: “To convince the women I often explain to them that it's like renting a house for a year” (p. 72). The doctor in charge of the surrogacy hostel sees herself as a “missionary”, not very different from Mother Teresa. “I am grateful I can be part of this divine intervention”, she says (p. 93).

What is unique about this labour process is that it is the body of the worker that is “the fundamental and ultimate site, resource, requirement and (arguably) product”. (p. 106). Instead of serving the clients' bodies, as in sex work, surrogates are deploying their own bodies to deliver the ultimate product. The result is that the necessary requirement to be a surrogate relates exclusively to one's body: she should be under the age of 40 with at least one healthy child, should not be breast-feeding her own child, should not have had more than three pregnancies, should have no history of miscarriage, should have a healthy uterus and be disease-free (p. 106).

Pande takes us into this invisible world of the Indian surrogate with great empathy and nuance but the surrogate mothers' responses are full of “remedial work” and ambivalence. Towards the

end of the book, Pande identifies the narratives the women develop to resist the stigma attached to surrogacy. “I will never sell my own children”, one surrogate says; “What kind of mother does that?” (p. 133). They also downplay the idea of choice by seeing surrogacy as a “calling” to “fulfil her familial obligations” (p. 135).

Amrita Pande has written a highly readable and pioneering study. She shows great sensitivity to the situation of surrogate women and how they resist, reframe, and seek to build better lives for themselves and their families through their globalised labour. These surrogate mothers courageously reject attempts – including the author’s – to see themselves as an extreme example of the commoditisation of labour in the Polanyian sense. They, like millions of other women across the globe, are making a living in the age of neo-liberal globalisation. Pande rejects banning this form of work and ends her book with a plea for some form of global regulation along the lines of “fair trade surrogacy”. It is a realistic response to a global reality, and making visible this invisible world is the first step in that direction.

But I could not help thinking that, whatever the surrogate mothers say, these workers are an extreme example of the commodification of labour. Not surprisingly, they resist the idea. If they were to confront the reality of their position, continuing to work under these conditions would be become intolerable and they would have to resign. My worry is that by accepting the choices the women make, does Pande not crowd out an understanding of the concrete realities the women face? Does an emphasis on the agency of the poor not lead to a neglect of the economic, political and ideological structures in which the women are located? Arguably the book pays inadequate attention to the structural forces shaping the women’s choices.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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