

The Miracle MAN

BY HITEN TRIVEDI

HIS ACHIEVEMENTS are the envy of top doctors in India and abroad. Dr Gautam Allahabadia, director of Rotunda—the world-renowned centre for human reproduction and infertility clinic in Mumbai, is an inspiration to many aspiring doctors. Coming from a family of doctors, he was least expected to pursue any other career. “My mother was an anesthetist and my father a gynecologist. They worked for 13 years in Ireland, UK. But when my mother was pregnant with me, she came to India,” shares Allahabadia, who probably wanted to pursue art as a career.

“I was very fond of art. I even passed the elementary and intermediate examinations. But because I was brought up in a family of doctors, I took up medicine. When I was doing my post graduation in gynecology, I got an exposure to the medical conferences organised by the MOGS (Mumbai Obstetric Gynecological Society) which is the apex body of the gynecologists,” he informs.

Dr Gautam Allahabadia has India's first trans-ethnic surrogate pregnancy and first same-sex couple pregnancy to his credit. The messiah to many a childless couple however, is facing challenges on many fronts



In spite of having done much good work in his field, Allahabadia had to face the wrath of some religious and political parties recently. Talking about the challenges he faced, he says, "About six months back, some local goons from the RPI (Republican Party of India) barged into my clinic. They were under the impression that we perform illegal kidney transplants. They did not know anything about surrogacy. After I explained the concept to them in detail, they apologised and went away. However, they returned after six months and harassed us again. That's when I had to make a formal police complaint. I had also started a centre in a Muslim hospital about couple of years ago. But we had to shut it down for religious reasons. Some religious head was against the concept of assisted reproduction. It will take some time for everybody to understand these concepts. Almost all Muslim countries including Saudi Arabia and Iran have some of the biggest IVF centres. In India, the major problem is illiteracy. I

they had already reached 9. In that conference, I got a chance to meet some Israeli doctors who were into hardcore research. They were the top guns, even better than the Americans. They invited me to train in Israel. So, a couple of years later, I went to Israel and worked with them. They even gave me an option to settle there. But I was more inclined towards coming back to India," he expresses.

He later learned the tips and tricks of publishing papers and that helped him move ahead of his contemporaries. "I had over 100 papers while my contemporaries had only a couple of papers to their credit. Based on that, I got a job in the infertility unit of Bombay Hospital. During my stint in the hospital, I was fortunate to have won many awards, including the Birla Award, which helped me visit Israel again to train in infertility. I super-specialised in assisted reproduction. I also got a German government fellowship and went to Germany for training," he avers.

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think the media can play a vital role in educating people about the growth and development in science."

The books and papers written by Allahabadia are nothing less than a Bible for medical students. "In 1987, I thought of a new test to check tubal patency in infertile women. I wrote it and sent it to the *Australian Journal Of Obstetrics And Gynecology*. They found it to be a landmark paper and immediately accepted it. So, it was the first paper by an Indian published in the Australian journal. I had named it as *The Scion Test*. Today, the test is very well established and in post-graduate exams, students are asked questions about it. I feel very happy and proud as even I was just a student then," he smiles.

He points towards the awards and trophies that he has won in his medical journey while he recollects, "In 1990, I got the Young Scientist Award from the Canadian government and from the world body of gynecologists. They select two people below the age of 35 from developing countries and send them abroad to attend conferences. When I attended the conference, I realised that our research was very mediocre."

As per Allahabadia, the research work that was presented in MOGS was nowhere close to the standard of the research done in the west. "On a scale of 1 to 10, we were at 2 whereas

It was around the time when news of the HIV virus had just struck the entire world and there was an HIV epidemic going on in India. "In infertility, there is something called donor insemination; some men are born without sperms and they require healthy men to donate sperms. I realised that in India, there was a huge lack of sperms as they had to be HIV tested and there was no sperm bank in Mumbai. I thought of setting up an assisted reproduction or a test-tube baby centre but I didn't have sufficient funds," he adds.

Reminiscing his struggling days, Allahabadia states, "I started in the garage of my building. I converted it to a clinic and a small lab where we would do semen processing. In 1996, I opened a sperm bank and we found that there were huge demands too. By 2000, we had grown by 30 to 40 times. My father then bought this place and allowed me to use it. I later took a loan from a bank and started an IVF (In Vitro Fertilisation) centre and named it Rotunda. We had to struggle a lot for the first three years, as there were not many patients. However, I continued writing papers and books in that period. Fortunately, I got some more awards in the west and that made me popular, and we started getting patients. Recently, I had the privilege of being elected as the youngest president of the MOGS."

Allahabadia regrets that Indian people attribute good doctors to white hair. "I was quite young. There were doctors around who would get semen processed from us, take our reports, tear up our letterheads and show it as their reports. However, the main job was done at our centre. But they were very old and senior doctors. So, people would still go to them. In 2004, times changed and I did lots of firsts in India—India's first trans-ethnic surrogate pregnancy involving a Chinese couple's baby delivered by an unrelated Indian surrogate mother and India's first same-sex couple pregnancy and delivery of twins. Today, we have positioned ourselves as the leaders in third party reproductions (surrogate pregnancy). We have our in-house sperm bank. We have about 40 active egg donors and one of India's largest egg donation programmes," he tells.

Allahabadia feels that things have changed drastically in last 13 years. "In 1996, when I had opened my sperm bank, my parents were totally against it. I had no support at all. Also when I started my IVF centre and took a bank loan, they were against it too. People used to criticise and look down on me because I

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used to collect people's sperm. However, things have changed radically in last few years. Today, even single Indian women come to get pregnant and we have gay couples coming in for babies and there are no eyebrows raised. Under the provisions of the Indian law, Rotunda is the only LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans-sexual) friendly clinic in India. The Indian government has now taken me as one of the experts to draft national guidelines on assisted reproduction. And very soon, these guidelines will be promulgated into a law," he enlightens.



However, Allahabadia is upset for not having received any help or subsidies from the government at all. "That's probably because they encourage family planning and population control. Whereas our centre helps even the unfortunate ones to have babies," he smiles. But he feels that the Indian medical industry has in fact, woken up. "When I started in 1996, all medicines had to be imported but today, everything is made in India and is available at half the cost. Looking at the way the costs are escalating in the west, I am sure that in the coming years, India will become the biggest medical hub in the world. I believe NHS in the UK has contracted some big corporate hospitals in India for cataract surgeries, knee replacement and heart surgeries too. This year, we have taken a path-breaking step and tied up India and Israel, which is helping us in a very big way. They are spending a huge amount of money to send their 20 specialists to train our post-graduates. It's a phenomenal step on a small country's part to help the people of Mumbai."

Talking about his future plans, Allahabadia says, "For the next five years, I plan to focus on detailed and hardcore research, and publish good Indian scientific papers. Also, I have left my passion for art far behind. So, I also wish to acquire a proper degree in contemporary art and I have already contacted some universities abroad. I also have a dream of opening up an art gallery in the future. I also wish to teach students about world and contemporary art; something which has not been taught in schools or colleges. So, once I feel I have made enough crying women smile, I will take a year off and fulfill my dreams." We are nothing but sure that the blessings and well wishes of his patients will make all his dreams come true. <<