1,100 Infertile Couples Use Faith At Vedic Rite for Children in India
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Scientists around the world are pursuing the gift of motherhood for infertile couples through nitrogen-frozen sperm, in vitro fertilization, surrogate motherhood and other biologically experimental means. Each is an ethical powder keg. At a spacious compound bristling with palm-thatched halls in Kerala. South India, 1,100 childless couples sat hopeful-eyed through seven days of a 4,000-year-old Atharva Veda yagna rite designed to trigger conception within a month. Two hundred brahmin priests trained from 3 A.M. to 12 noon over five months for the yagna. No one knows how long it has been since this conception ritual - called putrakameshti yagna - was last empowered. This one - May 3-9 - was the brainchild of V.S. Ramakrishna Nair of the Center for Astrological Research and Development (CARD).

Nair, sporting a long, thick philosopher's beard, said the idea developed as more and more couples came to CARD for assistance in conceiving. As soon as news of the yagna - costing US $280,000 to stage - became public, rationalist and women's groups raised a furor over the ceremony's possible skewing toward male progeny. Nair and CARD insisted from the start that this 20th century performance of the rite has no male bias, and the couples had to truly be childless (not with daughters, or remarried with a child from the previous marriage) and the prospective mother must be under 51 years old. "I must add here that some couples with female children offered us lakhs of rupees, but we did not entertain them," said Nair. Rationalist attacked the efficacy of the ceremony, but Nair pointed out that 14 wives had conceived just by applying for the rite.

On the morning of May 3rd, with overcast skies, the ceremonies ignited off a special brick and stone yagna platform inside the main hall. The 2,200 attending husbands and wives were the only ones allowed in the hall most were simply dressed in bordered white saris and kurta outfits. The couples were celibate during the rites, avoided spicy/salty foods, and eschewed footwear. Thirty thousand clay pots and 120 kilograms of ghee from specially shepherded cows were utilized. Customarily, a yagna like this would involve each participating couple's being at

the side of the priest, but the head priest, 78-year-old C.V. Akkithiaipad, improvised in having a representative couple sit yagna-side with the remaining couples witnessing. At the mystical zenith of the ceremony the couples looked intently into pots filled with water and then picked them up and flung them over their shoulders to shatter into shards, a magical correspondence to the shattering of the karma condition keeping them childless.

Most of the couples had sought every medical redress to their barrenness. CARD, in what some critics say is a lost opportunity to scientifically validate the Vedic ritual, did not insist on the couples avoiding medical treatment during the yagna.

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