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## Infertility and the excruciating pursuit of motherhood

URMILA G

**Rohini S Rajagopal, *What's a Lemon Squeezer Doing in My Vagina?* Haryana: Penguin Random House; 2021. Rs. 399, 288pgs, ISBN: 9780143452003**

*What's a Lemon Squeezer Doing in My Vagina?* is a memoir of Rohini S Rajagopal's excruciating five-year long fight with infertility and her journey to motherhood. After several failed attempts at natural conception and many negative home pregnancy tests, the author and her husband Ranjith visit a fertility centre in Bangalore. Rajagopal delivers a graphic description of the physical and emotional unpleasantness of her infertility treatment and also gives a vivid account of her experiences with the assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) such as the intrauterine insemination (IUIs), in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) and intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI). Intrauterine Insemination (IUI) is facilitated by directly injecting a man's sperm into the woman's uterus around the time the eggs emerge from the ovaries. In in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), the eggs are retrieved from the female body and carefully fertilised in a laboratory using sperm to create an embryo which will then be transferred to the uterus. In the more advanced intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) a single selected sperm is directly injected into the retrieved egg, leading to fertilisation. And as with IVF, the fertilised

embryo is then transferred to the woman's uterus. The "lemon squeezer" in the title of the memoir represents the arduous path Rohini Rajagopal had to take; the invasion of her body by medical tools, fertility drugs, hormonal treatments, medical tests, and minor surgeries, which she endured over the years to successfully conceive. These procedures lead to unavoidable anxieties concerning their outcome, where Ranjith, her husband, becomes a mere spectator to her journey, unable to help with the medical functionalities of the treatment. He experiences and manages his own anxieties separately to Rajagopal.

In addition to the medical and biological aspects, the memoir reveals the intrinsic social and cultural factors associated with infertility. The author also delves into the guilt and shame she had to bear after failing to conceive "naturally". Through the author's life we see how the biomedical correlation of ageing and female reproduction affects the quality of a married woman's social life. She fears that her fertility and reproductive capabilities will become the subject of conversations at family gatherings, and that she will face unanswerable frustrating questions from relatives. The phrase, "ticking of the biological clock" would be all too familiar to women of reproductive age in a country like India. Similarly relatable would be the insecurity that Rajagopal experiences, seeing other women effortlessly break into the "exclusive club" of pregnancy.

Crucially, the final chapter of *What's a Lemon Squeezer Doing in My Vagina?* is titled "Why Want Children?" This is a question some of the readers might also ask after going through the intensity of Rajagopal's medical and financial hardships before she can conceive. Indeed, the author does not have a clear answer to it. However, she does not claim that being a mother or experiencing all the "gore and grime" of infertility is the single greatest achievement of her life. In fact, she admits to having bought into the various prevalent myths about the significance of motherhood and she addresses the effect it has had on her. This is a major

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strength of this account. These insights and the final resolution of her initial ethical conundrum— of acknowledging her infertility— makes Rajagopal's memoir a significant addition to the field of medical humanities.

In India, where the value of an individual is often assessed by the conservative public through his/her ability to procreate, diagnosing infertility brings forth a barrage of problems. The World Health Organisation estimates that around 48 million couples and 186 million individuals globally suffer from infertility (1). In India alone, the prevalence of primary infertility ranges between 3.9% and 16.8% (2). In such cases, ARTs play a significant role. Rajagopal's story has much relevance in today's world where more women who want children are seeking help from fertility clinics that offer them a ray of hope. However, an undeniable fact is the tediousness of such an endeavour and

the impact it has over the physical and emotional wellbeing of the woman, which this memoir has meticulously portrayed. While her story has a happy ending, she reminds the readers from the outset that it is also a chronicle of multiple failures and several miscarriages (which she mentions as "deaths"). As the author herself states, *What's a Lemon Squeezer Doing in My Vagina?*, is as much a story about the "transformative powers of reproductive science" as it is about "the ugliness of infertility treatment".

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## Documenting the Indian response to Covid-19: too little, too soon

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**Chandrakant Lahariya, Gagandeep Kang, Randeep Guleria. *Till we win: India's fight against the COVID-19 pandemic*. Penguin Random House India, Gurgaon, 2020, 352 pgs, Rs 299, ISBN: 9780143451808.**

The *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics* had commissioned a review of this book and sent me a copy on October 7, 2021, after a previously invited reviewer was unable to complete it. As I started reading it, the preface gave me the feeling that this book was about the Indian "success story" in controlling the pandemic. Take for example this paragraph in the Introduction:

*However, against the grim projections, India has reported COVID-19 cases and deaths far below every 'disease modelling' estimate made in the earlier stage of the*

*pandemic. It is partly indicative of the success of the many interventions undertaken, but there's no denying the upheavals we have faced.*

The book was published in November 2020, and I am writing this review in October 2021. So, I was concerned that the review may not be relevant, as much water has flowed under the bridge over the past year. Since the publication of the book, we have survived a second wave of the pandemic which was catastrophic in proportion and took a huge toll of life. I have reviewed the book from the perspective of a reader who wants to understand the "Indian response" to the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in the country.

In the first section titled "Understanding the Challenge", the authors provide an excellent overview of emerging and re-emerging infections and why new infections have the potential to become pandemics. Some information, like the fact that there are  $1.25 \times 10^{23}$  viruses per human being on this planet, are interesting and likely to grab the readers' attention. The details about SARS-CoV2, its structure, how it spreads and attacks the human cells have been described well, and in a manner that is easy to understand.

The second section titled 'Mounting a Response' is where I started feeling uncomfortable with the narrative. I felt the presentation was not balanced and the narrative took on a self-righteous tone from this point onwards. For instance, there is a chapter on the lockdown and its impact. However, there is a fleeting mention of the haste with which it was ordered (1), and this is overshadowed by the description of

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