

Pa: the hunt begins

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There is a boom in an unlikely business in India: paternity tests. And fuelling its demand in various ways is a clutch of factors — from growing sexual permissiveness to an increasing openness towards adoption, mushrooming of path labs to a series of highprofile cases that have worked as catalysts

Shobita Dhar | TNN

The Mahabharata may have ended differently had the mighty Karana known who his father was. In Laawaris, Heera, played by Amitabh Bachchan, goes through a loveless childhood and names himself after a stray dog as he is unaware that he is the son of a wealthy landlord. In real life, though, establishing the paternity of a child requires no high drama — just a tiny swab of cells from the inside of the cheek, or a drop of blood. And in less than a week, five days to be precise, you know for sure whether or not your Old Man is your biological sire.

A clutch of high-profile cases, mushrooming of labs that detect real fathers, growing sexual permissiveness and an increasing openness towards adoption, surrogacy and assisted reproduction techniques like IVF — where the child may later grow up to ask who his biological dad is — have all come together to fuel the demand for paternity tests in India now.

Of course, such tests are de riger in the West. The most recent case — and one that is fresh in public memory because of the people involved — concerns model-cum-celebrity chef Padma Lakshmi and her feuding ex-partner Adam Dell, who

sued the beauty for the custody of their 11-month old daughter Krishna Thea Lakshmi. Dell established his paternity with the help of a DNA test when Lakshmi, who had been spurning her former lover's attempts to play daddy, made it clear that she wanted her current boyfriend Ted Forstmann, head of IMG, as her daughter's father.

In India, paternity tests became major drawing-room talk when Delhi lawyer Rohit Shekhar in October 2008 filed a suit in court to prove that it was senior Congress leader ND Tiwari who was his biological father. "I was about 11 years old when I came to know that Tiwari is my real father. Being issueless, Tiwari had expressed a strong desire to become a natural father and urged my mother to make it possible for him. He established close relationship with her and then cheated her. All through my childhood he kept promising that he would adopt me. But he deliberately delayed the adoption as he never really wanted to make me his own. In fact, he was just buying time till I turned 16, the cut-off age for adopting a child. After that he completely severed all connections with my mother and me," says Shekhar, who achieved landmark victory in his case last month when the Supreme Court asked 85-year-old Tiwari to



DADDY UNCOOL: Rohit Shekhar (below) as a child in the lap of his alleged biological father, ND Tiwari



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undergo a DNA test.

Shekhar claims he only wants Tiwari to acknowledge the relationship. "I tried talking to Tiwari earlier but each time he refused to meet me and humiliated me. That's when I was forced to approach the court. Initially, there was a lot of anger in-

side me. How can he get away with it? He has tortured me inside and outside the court. I have suffered depression, a stroke and heart attack during the course of this case. He has to own up to my mother. He will have to accept me," says Shekhar.

While it remains to be seen whether Shekhar will stand vindicated, his sensational case has translated into roaring business for many path labs. "The ND Tiwari case has created awareness about this test and proved good for our business," says Ritu, paternity test consultant with One Touch Solution and Services lab in Hyderabad. Last year, her lab tested more than 100 samples for both legal and nonlegal purposes and she expects the

numbers to swell up to 1,000 in the coming months. "With cutting-edge technology now coming to India, DNA testing is only set to grow at a rapid pace," says Ameera Shah, CEO, Metropolis Labs.

"Most of our clients suspect their spouse of infidelity. We also get requests for the purpose of immigration, to clear property disputes and we have even helped a lady who strongly suspected that her newborn was swapped with another baby in hospital," says Ritu.

Many labs also offer counselling to clients who seek out the test because of tension in their marital lives. "Even when the samples don't match we advise clients to stick to their marriage for the sake of the child. And most agree because the fathers develop bonds with their children and cannot live away from them, so what if the kids are not biological issues," says Manas Ranjan Barik from DNA Labs, Hyderabad.

Paternity tests offer peace of mind to many, but they can also be misused. Labs that offer DNA testing often get clients who want the reports fudged.

"We have received requests to produce positive reports. But, of course, we turn away such clients," says Ritu. Then, as Rukshana Chowdhary, a divorce lawyer based in Delhi, adds, "The test tends to get misused in cases that involve maintenance of the child. But such instances are rare."

Dr Ashutosh Gupta, consultant (foetal medicine) at Delhi's Max Hospitals, says, "Earlier, paternity test would be called for mostly in criminal cases. Now, people are using it against their cheating partners and even to defame people." Narrating the case of a colleague as example, he says, "A well-respected doctor in Delhi was blackmailed by a pregnant staff in his clinic to accept the fatherhood of her unborn child. When he refused, she threatened to file a paternity suit against him. This would have adversely affected his flourishing practice. So he was forced to go for an expensive out-of-court settlement."