

A performance to discuss surrogacy

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Audience members who went to watch the play *AshramMommies- Investors Lounge* this past Tuesday were in for a surprise. Instead of a full-blown theatrical performance featuring Deepika Arwind and Magdalena Emmerig, Yana Thönnies, they were greeted with an unexpected baby shower.

A visibly pregnant Thönnies sat in the centre of a room at WeWorks Churchstreet, and what followed was a traditional Indian Godh Bharai ceremony. In the 'performance', Thönnies plays the role of a surrogate and the baby shower is a way to celebrate the 'job' of motherhood that a surrogate takes upon herself. "The role of the surrogate is quite interesting to look at. I play a surrogate who is carrying the baby of an Indian couple. In the play, we are looking at how while pregnancy itself is a kind of labour, a surrogate goes through those nine months because it is work she gets paid for," said Thönnies. Sitting down for an interview with TOI, Thönnies shared what brought two Germans down to India to study the diverse and complicated topics of commercial surrogacy and western spiritual

AshramMommies - Investors Lounge is a whimsical take on India's spiritual and commercial surrogacy markets



A LIVED EXPERIENCE: A traditional Godh Bharai is a part of the performance of *AshramMommies- Investors Lounge*

tourism. "Spiritual tourism in India as a subject interested us because we've always had friends telling us that they were going for a silent retreat to an Indian ashram. We found the idea of people buying enlightenment curious," she said. The inspiration for exploring surrogacy according to Thönnies came from Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

"After we read the novel,

Magdalena and I got keen on exploring surrogacy as it exists in our times." Now, while there are surrogacy destinations around the world, India proved generally interesting for Thönnies and Emmerig. "That is because though the market is largely unregulated, a lot of international couples come here willing to have a baby through a surrogate. But there are inequalities in the Indian market.

So, while it is an option available for heterosexual couples who can prove that they are infertile, it is discriminatory against single parents or homosexual couples. Another reason we chose India was that while the country was open to commercial surrogacy at one point of time, it may get banned anytime soon," she explained.

Their five-week-long research in the subject revealed fascinating information. "The most fascinating aspect of this research was seeing how the surrogate emotionally did her job. We had one memorable interaction at the Akanksha infertility clinic in Anand, Gujarat with a surrogate who used to be a bodyguard. She said, 'I used to be a bodyguard and now I am a bodyguard for this baby inside me'." About choosing theatre as the medium to discuss commercial surrogacy, Thönnies said, "Magdalena and I are a part of The Agency, a performance company that employs dance, music and theatre to convey ideas. Surrogacy is a physical process, so we felt that performance was the best way to bring out its physical nature. And as performers, our intention is to put forth the paradox of surrogacy and get people to think about it."

—Anugraha Sabu