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Virginity tests torment women in Rajasthan

JAIPUR: Mevar was a typical Indian bride when she got married four years ago -- a bit apprehensive, but extremely excited about the life ahead of her.

It didn't take long for the 19-year-old's dreams to be shattered. On her wedding night, her husband, Rakesh, approached her with a skein of thread to determine whether she was a virgin.

Minutes later, he emerged from the room and announced loudly to waiting relatives and friends: "She's impure." Ignoring Mevar's pleas of innocence, the young bride was beaten and dragged to a village council for a public hearing.

"When the torture became unbearable, I took the names of youths who came to my mind -- dozens of them," she told Reuters. "But they wanted me to name my sister's husband, a police officer, as my lover and I refused." Mevar is among a number of women belonging to the nomadic Sansi community in India's desert state of Rajasthan who are subjected to such crude virginity tests which assume that an unbroken hymen is proof of virginity.

The centuries-old custom of "Kukari ki Rasam" (thread ritual) isn't just used to torture women. It is also a money-making tool. "Impure" brides are beaten to reveal the names of their "lovers" who are then forced to pay big sums to their husbands' families. Sansi women often name any man to end their ordeal.

An 18-year-old from Alipura Chhan village in the state's Tonk district, for instance, buckled under the pressure and named two innocent men as her lovers, one of whom paid 25,000 rupees (\$535) while the other 60,000 rupees, locals told Reuters. "It's irrelevant that she privately says she was forced to name these men," says Ramavtar (one name), a school teacher.

"Here the brides are beaten to make them admit to affairs." Virginity tests are common among the Sansis, said Zakiya Inam, state minister for women's development. But police say their hands are tied.

"It's more of an immoral thing than an illegal one," says S.N. Jain, deputy inspector general of police in the state capital, Jaipur. "Virginity tests are not covered under the Indian Penal Code and as such cannot be considered a crime. So how can a case be filed?" he asks.

Although Indian women have made enormous inroads in a range of fields from corporate finance and politics to diplomacy and the arts, violence against them is not uncommon. According to a recent government survey, 20 percent of women have either been beaten or physically abused since the age of 15, most commonly by their husbands. But the tourist state of Rajasthan, better known for its palaces and forts, has a particularly horrifying track record.

In the late 1980s, a young widow jumped on to her husband's funeral pyre following the banned ritual of sati, triggering a furious debate over whether she had been drugged and pushed. Under the centuries-old ritual, a widow is supposed to immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. It was a tradition started in medieval times to prevent wives of slain warriors falling into enemy hands.

There are also continued reports of infant girls being smothered to death by traditional families who consider girls a burden because of the huge dowries they must pay for them.

Government officials say the main reason for such crimes in the state is low literacy. According to the last 1991 census, literacy was 38.55 percent. Literacy among women was particularly poor, at 20.44 percent it was the lowest in India and half the national rate of 39.29 percent.

Virginity tests can only be abolished through education, women activists say. "There are conspicuous disparities in the literacy rates in urban and rural areas and among males and females," said Nirupama Banerjee, a women's activist. "Illiteracy is a major cause of ills against women in Rajasthan."

Though women's organisations are active in Rajasthan, moves to abolish virginity tests have yet to take off. Mevar, who dared to file a police complaint, is an exception among Sansi women. Others suffer the humiliation of purity tests in silence rather than face the fate of Mevar who was made an outcast and lives in penury. No action was ever taken against her husband.

Other tests are the "Paani ki Dheej" (purity by water) or a modern day version of the "Agnipariksha" (trial by fire) which Lord Rama's wife, Sita, faced in Indian epic, Ramayana.

"I stayed submerged in water while a neutral person walked 100 steps," says a victim who proved her virginity by holding her breath under water. As part of the trial by fire, brides are made to walk with a piece of red-hot iron in their hands with just a plate of seven betel leaves held together with a thin layer of dough to shield her hands. Women whose palms get burnt are considered impure.

But the government says it is powerless since few Sansi women dare go public with the problem. "The government of Rajasthan cannot do anything but educate the people against this custom," women's minister Inam said. "Whatever happens in the house is between the husband and the wife," she added.