

Youth in India take on tribal elders to end virginity test of brides

By Roli Srivastava

Thomson Reuters Foundation (06.02.2018) – <http://tmsnrt.rs/2Bf345x> – Vivek Tamaichikar didn't think of food and festivities when he started planning for his marriage this year in western India. He instead started a campaign against the virginity test that elders would impose on his bride.

The couple are members of the nomadic Kanjarbhat tribe, which is spread across states including Maharashtra. Members follow caste councils, comprised of elders who dictate rules including rituals performed on wedding nights.

Newlyweds are asked to consummate the marriage while elders sit outside their room.

The bride is first checked by women for any wounds she could possibly bleed from, and the groom is allowed into the room only after that.

Afterword, he tells the council if his wife was a virgin – a verdict that hinges on whether or not she bled during sex.

Young women who fail this test may be abandoned or face a “social boycott”, even though Maharashtra has banned village councils from imposing such penalties.

Tamaichikar, 28, said his family told him that he and his bride would be ostracised by the community if they refused the test.

“I realised the societal pressure was huge and decided to speak publicly against it,” Tamaichikar told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Childhood memories of a woman who failed the virginity test also contributed to his decision.

“I remember enjoying my cousin’s marriage party one night, and seeing her being beaten up the next morning,” he said.

Unelected caste councils hold sway in various communities in India, delivering judgements and punishments to those defying their rules. India’s Supreme Court in 2011 described one such council in northern India as a “kangaroo court”.

Nandini Jadhav of Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti, which campaigns against superstitious practices, said the advocacy group has been fighting virginity tests for five years.

“Even women do not see anything wrong in checking a girl’s virginity,” said Jadhav, adding that more young men are now speaking out.

“The message is reaching a wider set of people.” Tamaichikar’s group has expanded from about half a dozen young members to about 60 since he started it in December.

This is the first time members of his community – where even doctors have obeyed the council’s rules – are speaking against the ritual. “At least the doctors could have explained to the community that the virginity test was not scientific,” Tamaichikar said. “But they didn’t, fearing a boycott.”

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