



When justice is served to the anonymous

In the lanes around the Ajmer dargah in Rajasthan, women were kidnapped, raped, photographed, and then blackmailed in the early 1990s. Over three decades the six men have been convicted and given life sentence. **Ishita Mishra** reports on the women who were shamed, the law that took its time, and the journalists who unearthed

Trigger warning: the following article contains details of rape. Please avoid reading if the subject disturbs you.

It is a dingy, narrow lane in Ajmer, known for the dargah of the Sufi saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, the air reeks of the odour of poor drainage. In one of the matchbox houses, Sarita (name changed to protect privacy), 52, is cleaning the framed photos spread across the walls of her single-room home. All the pictures are of another time, of her dressed up, posing, a young woman in her 20s, many of her with her second husband. "I loved getting photographed," she says. Photographs were a curse too.

Sarita is one of the survivors of the many kidnapping-rape-blackmail cases that jolted the city in 1992. Thirty-two years later, on August 20, 2024, a Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) court sentenced six people to life imprisonment out of the 18 accused.

In 1996, a sessions court in Ajmer had sentenced eight to life imprisonment. Four were acquitted by the Rajasthan High Court in 2001. The Supreme Court reduced the life imprisonment of the rest to 10 years in 2003.

Farooq Chishti, a religious and political leader with considerable power convicted in 2007, was declared mentally unfit to be in jail in 2003. One of the 18 men killed himself soon after he was released on bail. Another was convicted in smaller cases. Over the years, the court trial has seen 12 public prosecutors and 50 police personnel in charge. The men never confessed.

Political-religious nexus

On April 22, 1992, Ajmer woke up to the news that high-profile men, including the Khadims (priests) of the dargah, who were also associated with the Youth Congress, had been sexually assaulting girls and young women between 17 and 24 years, most of whom were from Savitri School and Sophia College. Farooq Chishti was the Youth Congress president, while Nafees Chishti (just convicted) the vice president, and Anwar Chishti the joint secretary.

The story by crime reporter Santosh Gupta, in the Hindi daily *Dainik Navajugan*, claimed that the naked pictures of the girls would be used to blackmail them into silence. The cycle of abuse continued for years. Mahesh Ladhani, who owned the ironically named Bharosa colour lab, Harish Tolani, who managed the lab, among others, were acquitted. Putan Allahabadi, an autorickshaw driver, and Ishrat Ali, a flower seller outside the dargah, among others, were convicted and released after 10 years.

Gupta, who is now 60 and a senior manager in a hospital's public relations department, says "the impact of the news report was surprising" because no one was immediately caught. "I was shocked at how rich, influential men were exploiting girls inside godowns, farmhouses, and even in their moving cars in busy markets. Delayed action from the police gave them time to destroy the evidence," he says.

After a month of investiga-

tion, Gupta landed on the naked pictures of the women, which also had some men from the group. On May 15 that year, his editor, Deenbandhu Chaudhary, agreed to publish the pictures in the newspaper, blurring the faces of the girls, but prominently showing the men. The article detailed how the Ajmer police was hushing up the matter by calling these consensual. It sparked anger among people, who came onto the roads to protest. They called for a three-day market *bandh* (closure) and demanded the arrest of the men.

"One of those pictures was mine," says Sarita. She was 20 then. It took 32 years for the men to be convicted. "I was raped several times by them and other men who must have seen my pictures," she says. Naked pictures of the women were circulated in the city from the photo printing shop.

"I got pregnant and delivered a stillborn baby. My first marriage was a hushed up affair. It broke within hours when I told my husband that men had raped me," says Sarita. She was married again, the third wife to a man who abandoned her after a decade because he did not want to be with someone who had been raped. She has a son, who stayed with her in laws after she was forced to leave home, and brothers, who also abandoned her. Her home has no furniture, and she lives to clean the photos on the wall.

Plots and subplots

The public outrage was fuelled by the Vidwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and supported by the then-budding Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) members. The Rajasthan Chief Minister at the time, BJP's Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, assigned the case to the Crime Investigation Department-Crime Branch (CID-CB) on May 31, 1992. The Centre had a communal tension following BJP leader L.K. Advani's *rath yatra* that led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh.

"The agency took months to find the victims. Most had left town, a few had killed themselves after the case came into limelight. Many stayed away from a court trial," says now retired police officer Hari Prasad Sharma who was posted as the Deputy Superintendent of Police in Ajmer in 1992 and had filed the first police complaint in this matter on May 30. Sharma says there was no delayed action. He brags that for the first time in Rajasthan, the National Security Act, 1980 was slapped on such a large number of people in a single case.

The CID-CB convinced over a dozen survivors to give their testimony then, but over the decades all, except three, turned hostile. The first of the six chargesheets was filed in August 1992; the trial began in September. "The statements of around 150 witnesses were recorded in the case, which had over 100 victims as the chain was long and had continued for years," says P.K. Srivastava, another local reporter who worked with the daily, *Lahron Ki*



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SANTOSH GUPTA
Former crime reporter, *Dainik Navajugan*

Barbha. Now 62, Srivastava had filed stories for 68 days straight on the rapes. He says this led to the killing of his editor, Madan Singh, the following year. "Madan was a history-sheer and had started extorting money from affluent families. He would threaten to name their daughters in the newspaper," says a senior police officer, who was posted in Ajmer in 1992. The police booked three people for Madan's murder. They were later acquitted.

Surya and Dharma, Madan's sons, who were eight and 10 in 1992, waited for decades to avenge their father's murder. Dharma attempted to hurt his father's alleged killers in 2012 and was caught by the police; Surya killed one of the three in 2023.

Courtroom harassment

In court, it came to light that a boy had also been exploited. "Nafees was my friend and I went for a party to his farmhouse, where they made me drink. After I dozed off, they clicked obscene pictures of me. I was asked to bring my girlfriend to them, who was raped," the boy had testified in court. Later, his girlfriend too was forced to bring her friends to the accused.

When the trial began, the lawyers of the accused would ask the women uncomfortable questions in court in the presence of hundreds of men. Many men came for voyeuristic reasons, say those present during the sessions.

Virendra Singh Rathore, the current public prosecutor, says he was left numb on an afternoon in 2022 when one of the victims screamed in anger. "She shouted, saying that she had become a grandmother and came to court to testify each time by lying to her family. She just wanted to be left alone. Her voice echoed in my ears for days," he says. This is when he decided to place an application in court that none of the survivors be called again and that their previous testimonies be considered while deciding the case.

Rathore is afraid the victims may be called again to court when Almas Mahara, the last man accused in the case, is brought back to India. He is

allegedly living in America notice issued against him in India to look out for him.

Politics, the police, and Gupta feels that the case got stuck around it. "Everyone political benefit then and that a city known for was tarnished by the men.

"Such was the impact - started leaving many things says Sameeksha Singh, 53, a player, who added that the posed restrictions on then Panchajanya, the Hindi triya Swayamsevaks Sangh ment of leaders of various with baranagar and pol gh Dewaan spiritual her at loggerheads with the K opportunity to malign the to have arrived in India w

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VIRENDRA SINGH RATHORE
Public prosecutor



SANTOSH GUPTA

THE HINDU

ANDHRA PRADESH



was given a clean chit.

Rajasthan Congress general secretary Swarnim Chaturvedi refuted the BJP's claim, saying that though some of the convicts were earlier members of the party, but there was no question of any Congress leader protecting them. He added that the BJP had "no moral right" to accuse the Congress this way when its own leaders, including former MPs and MLAs, are facing trials in rape cases in different courts in India.

'Remember survivors' ordeal

Rathore talks about the plight of public prosecutors working in India's small cities. The plaster from the walls of his government office is peeling, and he says the last laptop he was issued by the government was 12 years ago; it stopped working five years ago. There is no library for reference books. "I brought my own cooler from home because it's unbearable to sit here," he says.

He is frustrated at the way court proceedings take place, in ways that often acquit the men because of the line of questioning. "They are let off even if a woman is not able to recall the size of the photo frame in the room where she was raped."

Since the latest conviction, Rathore has become a bit of a local hero. He has been getting congratulatory messages and receiving garlands from members of the bar and civil organisations. He wants people to take a moment to remember what the survivors went through. "*Bharat ke itihas mein shayad ye pehla case hoga jahan 100 se zyada auraton ke balatkar aur blackmail ki baat kahi jati hai, aur inmse se ek bhi aurat nyay mangne saamne nahi aayi* (This is probably the first case in India where it is alleged that over 100 women were raped and blackmailed, but not one of them ever came forward to seek justice)," says Rathore.

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