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Tradition mocks at law in Rajasthan

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I JUST SAW A HUGE CHILD MARRIAGE CEREMONY...WHERE FOUR BROTHERS GOT SEVEN OF THEIR CHILDREN MARRIED. THE YOUNGEST BRIDE WAS TWO, ELDEST GROOM 13- BRINYA RAM, a villager

THE ADMINISTRATION was on high alert and informers pressed into service in far-flung areas. An intensive media campaign against child marriage was on through the last few days before the festival.

Yet, scores of child marriages took place unhindered in the interior reaches of the state on Wednesday. This has been happening on every Akha Teej in keeping with a tradition dating back several centuries.

In Bah, a sub tehsil in Jodhpur district on the Phalodi Bikaner highway, eight-year-old Likhma, the groom clad in wedding finery walked ahead, while his five-year-old bride, Genu, followed. They thought it was all a game, after which they would all sit down to a delicious meal.

Elders, well aware that child marriage is illegal, insisted it

was all a charade. "They are playing *dulha-dulhi*, a ritual that brings good luck," said the girl's father.

What he was trying to pass off as child's play is actually a solemn affair, like any other marriage. Weddings are held on Akha Teej because it is believed a good monsoon will follow.

Curiously, even some Muslim communities prefer to arrange their weddings on Akha Teej.

"I just saw a huge child marriage ceremony in a village of Shekhasar Panchayat where four brothers got seven of their children married. The youngest bride was only two and eldest groom 13. For last five years, the family's crops have suffered ruin," said Bhinya Ram a local resident.

An employee of the revenue department posted in the Phalodi Tehsil said, "We have to live here and can't risk the wrath of locals by opposing child mar-

riage. Many members of panchayats are not only participating in such marriages but supporting them actively."

It was the same scene at Kanji-Ki-Sidh village. A participant said, "We belong to the schedule caste. Unmarried young girls are a constant source of worry. We get them married before they attain puberty."

It was the same story village after village. Adverse climate, endless drought, crippling poverty and conventions have blinded people. "Survival in such an area is a daily battle for existence," said a teacher on the one highway dhaba of Bap, trying to explain why the social evil was rampant in these parts.

Elders in many communities believe child marriage actually shields women against violence. They point at the low rate of crime against women in rural areas.

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**CENSUS SAYS****Till 2001:**

- 1.6 crore children got married before they reached 18
- 18.3 lakh of them were from Rajasthan
- Nearly 35% of women were married between 15-18 years
- Nearly 3 lakh girls under 15 had given birth to at least one child

PTI

A child marriage in progress at a village near Ajmer on Wednesday.