

THE
**POLESTAR
AWARDS**



**25th
ANNUAL
POLESTAR
AWARDS**

WINNERS DOSSIER

CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

The PoleStar Awards stand as a tribute to the highest standards of Indian journalism - honouring professionals whose work informs, questions, inspires, and strengthens the fabric of society. These awards recognise outstanding talent across the media landscape and celebrate journalists who serve as catalysts in bringing credible, meaningful, and impactful information to the public domain.

More than a recognition platform, the PoleStar Awards represent a belief: that journalism, when practiced with integrity and courage, shapes public consciousness and drives progress. The awards salute media citizens who uphold truth, amplify voices that matter, and translate complex realities into stories that enlighten the nation.

Conceptualised by the Polestar Foundation in 1998, the awards were instituted to spotlight excellence in IT and Business Journalism at a time when India was stepping into a new era of economic and technological transformation. Over the years, as journalism evolved and society's needs expanded, the awards also broadened their vision. Since 2017, the PoleStar Awards proudly celebrate the power of Good News Features - recognising stories that restore faith, highlight positive change, and remind us of humanity's capacity for resilience and innovation.

Today, the PoleStar Awards are not merely an annual ceremony they are a continuing commitment to responsible journalism, ethical storytelling, and the enduring power of truth.

JURY'S SPECIAL MENTION



JYOTI YADAV

Jyoti Yadav won the PoleStar Award for Jury Special Mention for her article **'2 men raped Bhanwari Devi for trying to stop 1992 child marriage. 'I curse her daily,' says bride'**, which appeared in The Print, on 18th September 2023.

Jyoti Yadav is an independent journalist in Delhi who draws on her journey from a village in Haryana, where she became the first in her farming family to graduate and post-graduate to provide a rare, insider-outsider perspective on gender, politics, policy, and rural India. By blending her rural and urban lenses, she brings a critical element of intersectionality to her reporting, often traveling solo at great personal risk to document the lives of those relegated to the corners of national conversation. Her work has been instrumental in exposing systemic apathy and the human cost of public health crises, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when she published dozens of investigative reports on the plight of migrants, rural healthcare failures, and the impact of the second wave on India's deepest rural pockets. Ultimately, Yadav views her mission as a critical intervention in India's national journey, using journalism as a platform to challenge deep-seated patriarchy and social injustice while questioning the fragility of the nation's modernity.

For Jyoti Yadav, the reporting proved more challenging than the writing. Her objective was to locate the infant who had been married off at nine months old - a central figure in Bhanwari Devi's history. While Bhanwari had seen the girl in passing, she did not know the specific village where she now resided. Following a tip from a local resident, Jyoti spent several days traveling across two districts to track her down.

Having interviewed Bhanwari in 2019 and studied her history extensively, Jyoti sought to reframe her in 2023 as an icon of rural feminism and a symbol of courageous reinvention. She recognized that the strength of the narrative depended on locating the now-grown infant, allowing her to juxtapose the lives of two women at opposite ends of a complex social spectrum. Ultimately, her persistence led to a successful meeting, providing the final, essential component for a comprehensive portrait of resilience.

<https://theprint.in/ground-reports/bhanwari-devi-was-raped-for-trying-to-stop-1992-child-marriage-i-curse-her-daily-says-bride/1765956/>

Jury's Special Mention

2 men raped Bhanwari Devi for trying to stop 1992 child marriage. 'I curse her daily,' says bride

By Jyoti Yadav | *The Print*, 18th September, 2023



Bhanwari Devi with a bundle of files. Scores of young, old, and middle-aged women from all over Rajasthan have flocked to Bhatari village, searching for Bhanwari Devi. She says that she helped and guided most of the women to get justice.

She sat on a jute cot in the verandah of her dilapidated house in Bhatari village in Rajasthan, gazing at the backyard, flooded in the rains. The peeling walls, the

rusting windows, and the weather-beaten interior of her house mirror how Bhanwari Devi feels in her bones these days — like the autumn of an exhausted feminist.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, Bhanwari Devi's name was synonymous with the rise of a new, gritty brand of rural feminism and Rajasthan's long, hard battle against the age-old custom of child marriages. Her name also became a touchstone for a new leadership shift in '90s feminist struggles from urban, privileged class to rural, marginalised groups.

Today, the 70-year-old feisty feminist who wanted to transform rural Rajasthan and women's place in it, helplessly watches her sons and daughters fight over her land and the money that she got in the aftermath of her gang-rape. Two men raped her for trying to stop the child marriage of a nine-month-old infant in 1992.

She misses her husband.

"It is lonely without him. If he were here, he would have gotten this water problem fixed by now." Bhanwari's eyes welled up as she remembered her husband Mohan.Lad Kumari and Dr Pal said the case has come up for hearing



Bhanwari holding a photo of her husband Mohan Lal Prajapat. He died in 2020 due to cancer.

Since 1992, her 'rescuer-rescued' life story has been inextricably tied to the nine-month-old girl. Bhanwari tried hard to stop the wedding. But the child was being married off to a one-year-old boy anyway on the evening of Akha Teej festival after the police and activists left. It was an auspicious day when hundreds of little girls were married off. And she paid heavily for her efforts. Five months later, the bride's relatives gang-raped Bhanwari Devi in a reprisal attack. Her struggles and the rape trial made national and international media headlines for years.

Her rape case resulted in the landmark "Vishakha guidelines" by the Supreme Court in 1997, a law that protects millions of Indian women from sexual harassment at workplaces.

But what many overlooked was how the nine-month-old girl child has grown up hating Bhanwari Devi. ThePrint traced, for the first time, the child-bride, who is now 32-year-old Bai Devi. The two women have come face to face many times since, but have never spoken. They find themselves at two ends of a spectrum.

Their encounters underline the classic dilemma of a rescuer feminist and a woman who refuses to call herself a victim.

What tied the two women three decades ago, now tells a tattered tale of an unfinished feminist revolution.

"I didn't want to become the Bhanwari Devi I became. It wasn't my battle alone. It was a fight for justice of all women and I fought for each one of them," said Bhanwari Devi.

Bai Devi, who lives just 40 kilometres away from Bhateri village, said, "I remember Bhanwari for sending my father and uncles to jail. I curse her every day."

In these decades, India has changed unrecognisably — a trillion-dollar economy, nuclear power, and a bustling middle class. However, the problem of child marriage still persists. Around 1.5 million girls under 18 still get married each year, according to UNICEF.

Malign Gurjar honour'

Akha Teej fell on 5 May that year. And in the fortnight leading up to the festival, the Rajasthan government had run a campaign to end child marriages. In Bhateri village, a marriage had been fixed — of Ram Karan Gurjar and Shanti Devi's two daughters, one adult and one infant. Their home was being renovated, the family had bought new clothes from Dausa town and had paid for tents and sweets.

Bhanwari, who used to buy milk from Shanti, heard about the marriage. She tried to convince her not to marry off their infant daughter.

"The Rs 10,000 you are spending on her marriage can be deposited in a bank. When she grows, you marry her off," Bhanwari recalled telling Shanti in her court testimony later. The Gurjar family shooed her away and stopped selling her milk.

First, Bhanwari took two government officials Roshan Devi Chaudhary and Dr Pritam Pal to the child-bride's family. They got an angry, hostile response. The child's uncle Badri shouted abuses at Bhanwari. He was one of the men later accused of raping her.

"I remember Bhanwari for sending my father and uncles to jail. I curse her every day"

- BAI DEVI

The officials went away and sent the police to the village.

On the day of Akha Teej, the police came. The infant was dressed in bridal red. The wedding altar had been shifted to a neighbour's roof.

"I didn't call the police. The police were sent by the administration. They came, enjoyed the feast and left," Bhanwari said. But the Gurjars were angry and they went after her.

"While growing up, I learnt about my marriage. I was told that my family had organised a desi ghee feast and how Bhanwari tried to malign Gurjars' honour by informing the police," Bai said.

A woman of contradictions

Despite the massive fallout of her marriage on India's feminist movement and jurisprudence, Bai's life has largely remained unscrutinised and away from public gaze.

Today, Bai Devi is a mother herself.

She was the ninth child. Her parents gave her a telling name Galla, which meant Stop, Enough. In school, she was named Man Bhaari (heavy heart). Later, after her marriage, she became Bai which just means a girl.

In 2008, when she was just 17, she began living with her husband.

She works all day these days fencing the 40-bigha agricultural land. She has recently constructed a three-room house on the farm too.



32-year-old Bai Devi is now a mother. Married off at 9-months-old she was sent to her in-laws house at 17.

Her husband, Harkesh Gurjar, who studied up to 10th grade, makes and sells salted snacks. "It's just work, work, and work for a village woman," Bai said, showing her rough, tanned hands.

She complained about the weight she has lost and how her welfare scheme cards from Ashok Gehlot's Mahangai Rahat Camps are of little help. But she said that her family in Bhatari village was able to build a house, get jobs and restore family honour

"I was just nine months old when I was married. I was told that someone carried me in their arms during the wedding. I had no opinion then. But today, I can say that there is no harm in marrying young when you have many children," she said, adding that the girls in her husband's extended family will also marry early.

"We have our customs. We don't marry at birth now, but we still marry our children at a young age," Bai said.

Bai has a son and says she is relieved that she will not have to worry about arranging Rs 5 lakh for dowry. But Bai is a woman of contradictions. On the one hand, she defends her parents for marrying her off as an infant. On the other, she speaks enviously about a distant female relative who became a state police officer.

She also expresses her helplessness at not studying beyond 5th standard.

Becoming a sathin

"I was told that my family had organised a desi ghee feast and how Bhanwari tried to malign Gurjars' honour by informing the police"

- BAI DEVI

Like Bai, Bhanwari Devi was herself a child bride. She was the eldest child in a family of Kumhars or potters in Rawasa village of Jaipur.

Her parents and the four children survived by selling pots and donkeys — the Kumhars belong to Rajasthan's marginalised middle caste groups called the OBCs.

"The poor raise their children the way cats raise their kittens and dogs raise their puppies. It's the same thing," said Bhanwari. She had to wash dishes, make cow dung cakes, and do menial jobs as a child. She wasn't sent to school. And there was no wheat flour at home most days, they just chewed on millet.

"My siblings and I would have blisters in our mouth, and our teeth would ache," she said.

She said that her marriage to Mohan Lal Prajapat wasn't made in heaven but at a donkey fair. Their fathers became friends at the fair and decided to match their children. She was married off at the age of five and began living with her husband when she turned 15.



Bhanwari Devi in her house in Bhatari. She came to live here with her husband Mohan Lal Prajapat at the age of 15.

Jury's Special Mention

"Since then, this mud house has been my home. I fought all my battles from here," Bhanwari said.

But unlike Bai, Bhanwari fought the traditions she was embedded in.

"I didn't want to become the Bhanwari Devi I became. It wasn't my battle alone. It was a fight for justice of all women and I fought for each one of them"

Sometime in 1985, Bhanwari was returning home with a pot of water on her head. She heard someone call her name. The woman was from the Rajasthan government's Women's Development Programme (WDP).

"We have come to select women [for Rajasthan governments' women empowerment scheme]," said Roshan Devi Chaudhary, a Pracheta (supervisor) with the WDP told Bhanwari. "You are selected as a Sathin (sister, comrade, or friend).



A photo of Bhanwari Devi from the 1990s. | By special arrangement

That's when her first journey into feminist work began in the arid, feudal villages of Rajasthan. The state was part of what was once called India's Bimaru belt — sick states that were poor and lagged in health and education. Women had to be veiled and were forbidden from sitting in the village elders' meetings.

It was a government policy that gave birth to India's iconic rural feminist, it was Bai's marriage that became Bhanwari's rallying point in her fight against patriarchy.

From victim to activist

In the early 1980s, the Rajasthan government took upon

itself the difficult task of fighting age-old feudal practices to improve the lives of women. Rajasthan was the first Indian state to come up with an exclusive programme for women empowerment with the help of UNICEF. Sending little girls to schools, stopping their early marriages, restricting the number of children, female infanticide, dowry, domestic violence and widow remarriages were some of the ambitious goals.

It wasn't going to be easy. Governments rarely bring about lasting social change; it is often the grassroots leaders who summon up the courage to challenge traditions.

The programme had three wings— administration, NGOs, and research. It was the NGOs' responsibility to identify and build an army of rural women leaders across the five districts of the large state.

Bhanwari Devi was one of them.

"The government ran many development schemes but no scheme was able to challenge the status quo of women in feudal society," said Dr Pritam Pal, gynaecologist and former project director of the programme. "The question before us was whether an illiterate woman could become a leader and help in improving the social and economic status of other women."

Dr Pal set out to Bhateri village in 1985 to meet Bhanwari.



Badri Gurjar is the only one of the five accused who is still alive. Badri says he is confident that the High Court appeal will be in their favour.

The officers followed a selection criterion. The woman should be from the lowest socio-economic strata or with some influence in her community or one with empathy and no greed.

Bhanwari ticked all the boxes—empathy, clarity and status. At first, she told them she only knew how to work

with a sickle on the farm. It took some convincing. She soon joined hundreds of Sathin at a modest salary of Rs 200 per month.

“She had just come home with a heavy fodder on her head. She was drenched in sweat yet she rushed to fetch water for me and started fanning me when she saw me,” said Dr Pal. Her first meeting with Bhanwari left her awe-struck.

Bhanwari soon left for the training to Jaipur leaving behind her youngest child Mukesh who was three years old. Word spread across the village that Bhanwari had eloped with someone.

But she returned, armed with powerful, new knowledge that violence against women is not related to fate but that it comes out of a patriarchal structure. She started holding meetings to mobilise young girls and women.

A child bride in her village who refused to go with her new husband was beaten by her family. Bhanwari gave her shelter.

The Sathin work changed her outlook toward her own daughters too. Her elder daughter could not go to school and was married at an early age. But she set out to chart a different path for the younger daughter.

“After I returned from the training, I sent my younger daughter to school,” Bhanwari told ThePrint. The younger daughter, Rameshwari studied BA and MA and became a teacher.

Anti-child marriage drive

A new wave of social consciousness among women's collectives was underway. The 1980s was the decade of dowry murders of brides. It was also the decade when an incident of Sati took place in Rajasthan when Roop Kanwar walked into her husband's funeral pyre in the presence of a cheering crowd. Sudha Rani was burnt to death for dowry in Jaipur. The women students of Rajasthan University were on the streets, protesting, parading and picketing.

The Sathin programme became the centre stage of awakening for rural women. The moment to take on the entrenched practice of child marriage was looming.

The state's chief minister at that time, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, issued a public appeal against child marriages. This was followed by the chief secretary writing to all the district collectors to observe the

Akha-Teej festival fortnight as an anti-child marriage campaign.



Dr Pritam Pal has collected newspaper clippings regarding Bhanwari's case over the years

The responsibility of preparing a list of planned child marriages in their villages fell on Sathins.

Bhanwari too prepared such a list which included the impending marriage of the nine-month-old infant of Ram Karan Gurjar and Shanti Devi.

“When I visited their house, Shanti was busy preparing for the marriage. I told her about the letter from the collector,” Bhanwari said.

Nine-month-old Bai was on a cot nearby, Bhanwari saw that the child had soiled herself and had a runny nose. “I couldn't leave her like that, I cleaned her and put her back.”

The Gurjar men got furious with her and she left.

“At that time, people thought that Bhanwari had brought shame to the entire village”

- VEDRAJ BAIRWA, CURRENT VILLAGE HEAD

There was some debate on whether the Sathins should take on child marriages and earn the wrath of their communities.

“IAS V S Singh was the collector. When he asked us to stop the marriage, we protested against the order. We briefed him about how our Sathins were a minority, poor, and vulnerable in the village,” said Dr Pal. But eventually, they handed over a list of upcoming child marriages to the collector.

The Sathins were seen as informers and earned the wrath of the villagers wherever they protested.

The anti-child marriage drive turned out to be detrimental to the programme altogether.



Bhanwari Devi (in yellow dupatta) and other Sathins with Dr Pritam Pal (extreme right)

“The families knew who the informer was. So we knew that this would backfire and Sathins would be stopped from doing their work in the future. In the coming months, Sathins were isolated, attacked, and threatened. In one case, a Sathin and her husband were forced to leave the village,” said Dr. Pal.

But the Gurjars of Bhatari, the dairy farmers group, were rattled. They were a dominant OBC caste group and Bhanwari's caste group was in the minority. The Gurjars are socially, economically, and politically more influential than the Kumhars.

Bhanwari had done the unthinkable and the unpardonable – besmirched the village's honour by making a complaint to the outsiders about what many had come to regard as an internal matter and custom.

“At that time, people thought that Bhanwari had brought shame to the entire village,” Vedraj Bairwa, the current village head told ThePrint. She faced a complete boycott. Even her in-laws and their families stopped talking to her. Nobody sold her milk or flour. The WDP cadre and women activists from Jaipur had to camp in the village to help her with her daily needs. Then the threats against Bhanwari became more and more grave.

Sathins across the state were facing similar calls for boycotts too as they took on child marriage cases in their villages. “But what Bhanwari faced was unimaginable,” Dr Pal said.

'Botched' investigation

The threats were just the beginning. It was going to get much worse. A plan was being hatched to punish her and set her up as an example for other Sathins. On 22

September 1992, Bhanwari and her husband Mohan Lal were working on their bajra farm at dusk. They were collecting green fodder for their buffalo.

“I heard a scream. I thought my husband was bitten by a serpent. I ran towards him. But I saw five men beating him with sticks,” Bhanwari recalled.

Bhanwari later testified in 1994 in the Jaipur sessions court that villager Shравan Sharma and Bai's father Ram Karan Gurjar pinned him down. Bai's two uncles Badri and Ram Sukh, and village community leader and their nephew Gyarsa Gurjar, held her down. Badri and Gyarsa took turns to rape her.

“I was wearing a blue lehenga which was freshly washed a day before. They pinned me down on the sand. They held my legs and knees. I kept pleading not to do injustice to me. They stuffed my odhani (dupatta) into my mouth. The rape lasted for five minutes,” Bhanwari's testimony read.



Bhanwari stands at the spot where she was gang raped. She lives in the same village as the accused. She saw them build houses, get jobs, marry off their children, and restore their honour while she was boycotted.

She said the men disappeared into the darkness. Before fleeing, Ram Sukh forcibly snatched her silver earrings and a gold pendant necklace. Mohan gained consciousness after a while.

“My lehenga was wet. My neck and my ears were badly bruised. We were both crying,” according to the testimony. Bhanwari and Mohan got up and walked towards home. At home, Mohan fell on the cot. Bhanwari asked him to do something about it. Mohan reminded her how no villager had helped them previously.

The nearest police station was in Bassi, 10 kilometres away from Bhatari.

Bhanwari decided to walk outside and tell villagers about what had just happened. She went to two houses. She told two elder men about the rape. But they asked her to inform the WDP. Bhanwari came back and slept.

The next morning, she left with Mohan on their cycle to Paatan village, which is one kilometre away from their village. There, she met another Sathin, Krishna Sharma. The three of them then boarded the 7 am bus to Jaipur. While Bhanwari and Mohan got down at Bassi police station, Krishna went to Jaipur.

Krishna returned to Bassi at 1 pm with WDP supervisor Raseela. She asked Bhanwari what she wanted to do.

"Today, two of them raped me. Tomorrow, four will rape me. I want to make noise. I want to file an FIR," Bhanwari had said.

An FIR was filed, but Bhanwari's medical examination wasn't conducted at the government hospital in Bassi because there was no female doctor present. So the SHO, Raseela, Bhanwari, and Mohan left for Jaipur's Sawai Man Singh Hospital (SMS) in a police jeep. It was late at night when they reached. The hospital refused to do the examination without a letter from the magistrate, according to Dr Pal.

Bhanwari and her husband spent the night at Mahila Police station.

On 24 September, her medical was finally conducted at SMS Hospital. She returned to Bassi Police Station in the evening where the SHO asked her to submit her lehangas.

"I expressed my helplessness as I didn't have any other clothes to wear," Bhanwari said. She finally gave it to the police, and wrapped herself with Mohan's blood-stained dhoti. Both of them walked four kilometres to another Sathin's house to spend the night.

"The police didn't record her bruises on the neck and ears. Her torn blouse wasn't noticed either. The medical was already delayed," said Dr Pal highlighting the loopholes in the justice system.

The case was eventually transferred to the state CID after protests from women's groups. But the state CID too dragged its feet which spurred another round of protests demanding that the CBI take over the case. The investigating agency took charge in January 1993.

"From the accused to the MLA, MP, CM, Judges, CBI, all were men. It was one woman against them," said retired

political science professor Lad Kumari Jain and former convener of the legal cell of Rajasthan University Women's Association (RUWA).

Activists from Jagori, Sahelim Gandhi Peace Foundation from Mumbai, Action India, Ankur, FAO (Forum against oppression of women), and lawyers working for civil liberties such as Naina Kapoor, all came together and launched a series of protests across India. Breaking the silence around rape became a slogan.

"Today two of them raped me. Tomorrow, four will rape me. I want to make noise. I want to file an FIR"

- BHANWARI DEVI

Women hit the streets demanding justice for Bhanwari Devi. The protests became so loud that the national and international press was forced to take notice of it.

Sathins rose against the treatment that was meted out to Bhanwari and raised slogans such as "Pahle Bhanwari ko nyay do, phir gaon mein kaam lo (First, give justice to Bhanwari and then get work done in villages)." India Today magazine wrote, "The Second Sex Awakens."

Even the newly formed National Commission of Women had to send a fact-finding team to Bhatner village. Their report confirmed rape. Bhanwari wasn't lying, were the morning headlines.

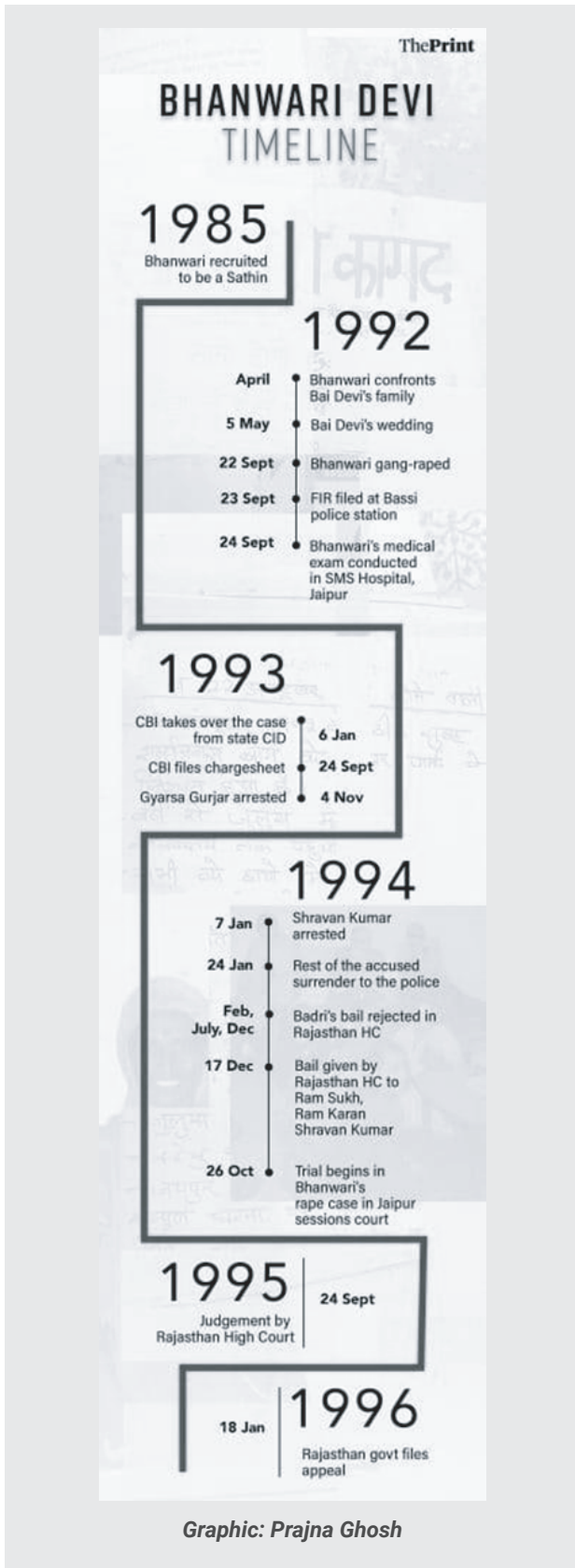
Social boycott

Meanwhile, things got tough for Bhanwari Devi. It was a sort of a social boycott.

First came the milk boycott when Bhanwari confronted Shanti Devi, 10 days before the scheduled marriage on Akha Teej. She knocked on other Gurjar houses for milk, with no luck. She started walking miles to get milk for the family. Then it turned into not inviting her to social gatherings. After this, the villagers stopped talking to her. Abuses were hurled at her. Her daughter and son, who were teens, were shunned at school.

"Media, police, and activists lined up at our house. But nobody in the village talked to us. The scars of that time are still there," said her younger son Mukesh, who had to take a one-year break from college after a film on Bhanwari's life, called *Bawandar* was released in 2000 featuring Nandita Das and directed by Jag Mundhra.

"By then, memories had started to fade. The movie brought it back.



And it became difficult to even reach my college in Dausa. Oh look, that's Bhanwari Kumaharan's son, people would say. I wouldn't get a seat on the bus because I was Bhanwari's son," Mukesh added.

The accused tried to negotiate with Bhanwari before the judgement was pronounced in November 1995.

The village elders got together. They wanted to save the men accused of raping her. The village's name had to be protected from the infamy that was to follow. Many of these elders were the same who had called for her boycott in the immediate aftermath of the rape.

"They called a small panchayat and put their turbans at my feet to negotiate with me. They wanted me to tell the court that I wasn't raped. I asked them to accept their crime publicly. But they refused," Bhanwari said. Turbans in rural India are regarded as a sign of men's pride and prestige.

However, there was no remorse.

The turban gesture was just theatrics to mount collective pressure on her. They were still calling her all sorts of names that day. Their anger hadn't subsided. Neither did hers.

"She was called a liar throughout the case," said Dr Pal.

After the panchayat, things got worse because Bhanwari wasn't backing down. The Gurjar community forged a powerful nexus with other caste groups in the village such as Bairwa, Nai and Nut.

"It was a conspiracy hatched by the women then. I might die, but the High Court's decision on the appeal will be in our favour"

- BADRI GURJAR, ONE OF THE TWO MEN ACCUSED OF RAPING BHANWARI

The accused started mobilising the Gurjar community against Bhanwari across the state.

"They sat outside the house and shouted "Bhanwari Devi Hai, Hai, Hai". [Down, Down, Bhanwari Devi] They were after my blood," Bhanwari said.

But the women's collective countered too, with all their might. They gave a rallying call in her favour. "Jab tak sooraj chand rahega, Bhanwari tera naam rahega" (we will fight for you till the sun and moon shine). Another slogan upended the idea that the honour of a woman is lost when she is raped. "Moonch kati kiski, naak kati Kiski, izzat luti kiski? Badri aur gyarsa ki, Rajasthan sarkar ki, Bhamteri

gaon ki.” (Who lost dignity, respect and influence? Badri, Gyarsa, Rajasthan government and Bhateri village)



Bhanwari at the award ceremony for the Neerja Bhanot award for bravery

Rajasthan was going to the polls in 1993. Bhanwari’s case was used to politically charge the state. Chief Minister Bhairon Singh Shekhawat remarked, “Dhaule baal wali mahila se kaun rape karega? [who would rape a grey-haired woman?]”

No political party or leader wanted to upset the Gurjar vote bank.

“Our MLA Kanhiya Lal Meena challenged in the assembly that if there is any iota of truth in Bhanwari’s rape accusation, he will resign,” Badri Gurjar, the main accused, told ThePrint. Sitting by his motorcycle in the village and twirling his moustache, he said he had the support of community caste politicians.

Trial and acquittal

A toxic mix of politicians, police and unabashed patriarchy played out in Rajasthan to protect the men. For more than two years, the gangrape accused roamed free in the same village.

The CBI filed the chargesheet in September 1993. Gyarsa was arrested in November, as per a report compiled by the district unit of WDP, but there was a lull in the action after this. It was only after women’s groups protested for months that Shравan Kumar was arrested in January 1994. Three of the accused were still roaming free. Due to mounting pressure, the CBI announced that their houses would be seized. After the announcement, the rest of the accused surrendered on 24 January and were taken into custody.

Badri went to the Rajasthan High Court for bail in February

1994. While denying him bail, Judge NM Tibrewal wrote, “I am convinced that Bhanwari Devi was gang-raped in revenge for attempting to stop the marriage of [one of the accused] Ramkaran’s daughter, a minor.” He appealed two more times in July and December of the same year, bail was rejected both times.

But the high court approved the bail petition of three of the co-accused Ram Sukh, Ram Karan, Shравan Kumar on 17 December 1994.

When they were out on bail, they attacked Bhanwari’s house with sticks and physically assaulted her husband.

The trial began in the Jaipur sessions court on 26 October 1994. It was no less than a trial by fire for her. One hundred and eighty hearings were held and five judges were changed over a year. Bhanwari would travel 40-50 km to Jaipur not only to appear in court but also to participate in the protests that were held for her to get justice.



Dr Pritam Pal has worked with Bhanwari Devi for the last 3 decades. She recruited Bhanwari as Sathi in 1985

“What happened in the court was shameful. One judge laughed at Bhanwari. During her statements and cross-examination, there would be 17 men present in the room. She was asked about how her legs and her arms were positioned when she was raped,” said Dr Pal.

According to the court documents, she was asked what position she was raped in, whether she orgasmed after rape, whether she shouted while she was being raped, if she watched her rapists untie their pyjamas and more.

Her replies were leaked to the villagers and they mocked her even more.

Bawandar has a reference to these intrusive questions. Bhanwari’s character, played by Nandita Das, is asked by

Jury's Special Mention

the accused's lawyer whether she had an orgasm during the rape. Das adjusts her veil, looks into his eye and says "If it's done without her consent, a woman bleeds".

The judge who recorded Bhanwari and her husband's testimonies was not the judge who pronounced the judgment in 1995. The sixth judge, Jagpal Singh acquitted the two men accused of the charges of gang rape on 15 November 1995. The judgment held them guilty of lesser offences such as assault and conspiracy.

The session court sentenced them to jail for nine months.

Jagpal Singh's ruling included lines such as a nephew and uncle can not rape together; that it is not possible in Indian culture that a man watched his wife being raped; that one of the accused was Brahmin while the rest are Gurjars and this kind of caste mixing is improbable.

India's leading newspapers carried front page headlines such as "Crime and Acquittal", "Rape of Justice", "Courting Catastrophe", and "Morally Repugnant".

Former Chief Justice of India V R Krishna Iyer called the judgment a black day in the history of Indian courts and the Constitution.

THE NOVEMBER 1995 JUDGEMENT ACQUITTED THE ACCUSED OF GANG RAPE

Judge Jagpal Singh said

- An uncle and his nephew cannot rape together
- Inter-caste group of men can not participate in gang rapes or other crimes
- India's rural society hasn't stooped so low that a 73-year-old man would rape a woman
- An Indian man cannot watch his wife getting raped
- A village head (Gyarsa) can not rape

Graphic: Prajna Ghosh

Dr Pal has collected newspaper clippings that mention Bhanwari and the case. One of the local Hindi newspapers

reported that some politicians celebrated the judgment. In 1996, a Gurjar victory rally was held in Jaipur where the five men were welcomed and garlanded. At this rally, BJP MLA Kanhaiya Lal Meena called Bhanwari a prostitute. The rally participants also called for Bhanwari to be handed over to them or burnt alive.

'No appeal'

Bhanwari could not file for an appeal as private appeals were not allowed and then state law minister returned the file with the stamp 'no appeal', indicating that it not be further pursued.

"Bhanwari needed the government on her side. She was raped while doing her job. But her employer, the state, had refused to lend her support," said Mamta Jaitely, who was a part of the WDP programme.



Mamta Jaitely, who worked with the Sathin program for years. She has been an important voice in the women's collective that fought for Bhanwari over the years.

Jaitely, along with Kavita Shrivastava, now national president of People's Union for Civil Liberties; Roshan Chaudhary, former WDP supervisor; Dr Pawan Surana, RUWA; and Renuka Pamecha, social activist met the law department secretaries, protested against their refusal to appeal and demanded that it be expedited in the High Court.

It took another round of marches, newspaper columns, and meetings from women's groups to pressure the government to appeal against the acquittal.

An appeal was filed on 18 January 1996.

Since then, four of the rape accused have died, and so has Bhanwari's husband, but the case is still pending in the Rajasthan High Court.

Lad Kumari and Dr Pal said the case has come up for hearing only once but neither remembers when. The Rajasthan High Court has no record of any hearings in its online archive. It was never posted again. Bhanwari is still waiting for the case to be listed.

"It was a conspiracy hatched by the women then. I might die, but the High Court's decision on the appeal will be in our favour," said Badri.

Bhateri village remains divided.

But to see Badri in jail remains Bhanwari's last wish.

Over the years, lawyers and civil society groups held workshops in Jaipur and Delhi to discuss workplace sexual harassment, each time Bhanwari's case came up.

"We discussed many cases where women faced sexual harassment at the workplace and there was nothing that the government was doing," said Dr Pal.

Citing Bhanwari's case five NGOs filed a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court of India and in 1997 regarding workplace harassment of women.

Known as Vishakha vs. the State of Rajasthan, the Supreme Court delivered a landmark judgment issuing Vishakha Guidelines to protect women from sexual harassment in the workplace.

It took another 16 years for the Parliament to enact a law to criminalise sexual harassment in the workplace, along with the strengthening of the rape law after the Delhi gang rape case.

Bhanwari's transformation

Twenty-seven years ago, Bhanwari Devi was among the 30,000 activists and government leaders from 189 countries who were invited by the United Nations to the Fourth World Women's Conference held in Beijing, China.

"I learnt that women in all societies were facing similar treatment and were considered lesser human beings," Bhanwari recalled.

She goes to the International Women's Day celebrations each year; she has lectured at a policewomen training; she graced inter-caste marriages; she was awarded the Neerja Bhanot award and a cash prize of Rs one lakh for her extraordinary courage, conviction, and commitment. She was awarded a sum of Rs 25,000 from then PM Narasimha Rao for her 'bravery'. In 2002, the Gehlot

government allotted a plot of land to her and sanctioned an amount of Rs 40,000 rupees for the construction

"I have met thousands of women over the years. When they see me, they cry, hug and just look at me"

- BHANWARI DEVI

Her brothers used the cash given by Rao to organise a Kumhar panchayat to bring about her acceptance into their community. But such efforts were futile. Her own clan continued to be cold toward her. "When my father died, I was barred from sitting among people at the funeral feast. I wasn't even served food," she recalled.

But her life's trajectory was no longer limited to how Bhateri village and Gurjar and Kumhar clans treated her. She travelled across India. She had found a larger canvas to paint on. "I have met thousands of women over the years. When they see me, they cry, hug, and just look at me," Bhanwari said.

In her own married life, Bhanwari struggled with her husband. There was turbulence after the gang rape. "Mohan Lal had moral doubts about how to keep their intimate relationship. The thoughts of impurity often hounded him. But after counselling, he came to terms with the fact that his wife was raped, and raped in front of him. And that she stood by her truth," Dr Pal said. She recalled counselling the husband during those months. She repeated one line to him constantly – that Bhanwari has become as pure as gold.

Bhanwari confided in Dr Pal her most intimate thoughts – "Jiji, if this had not happened in front of him, even he would not have believed me and abandoned me."



Retired professor Lad Kumari Jain who played a crucial role in Bhanwari's fight for justice.

Waiting for justice

Jury's Special Mention

Bhanwari has stopped travelling after her health deteriorated in recent years. She has diabetes and had a heart attack recently.

She keeps a polythene bag full of dozens of files. The files belong to women who were burnt to death for dowry, who were abandoned by their husbands, and who were rape victims.

"Over the years, women from all over Rajasthan, have come looking for Bhanwari Devi for support. Even a child can guide people to her house," Vedraj Bairwa, the village head said. Bhatari village is now known for Bhanwari.

Bhanwari's journey as a Sathin came to an end in 2021. She started with a salary of Rs 200 and retired with a salary of Rs 3,000. NGOs continue to help her with her medical expenses.

"In Bhatari, I stopped seven child marriages. I didn't stop after the rape and attacks," Bhanwari said.

But today she is consumed by the family dispute and the theatre it has turned into.

"My elder son and daughter called me gurjaron ki lugayi (Gurjars' woman). I am done with them," she said. Taunts involving her rape are now often used by her own children.



Bhanwari with her younger son Mukesh, who lives with her. She has been deeply affected by the family dispute over the land the government gave her as compensation.

Dr Pal proposed in a meeting four years ago, on Bhanwari's behalf, that the state should retain her as a Sathin till her end.

"We wanted to start a human rights centre right in the heart of Bhatari village under the leadership of Bhanwari. The Sathin job and the centre would have carried a profound meaning to Bhanwari's legacy and captured the rural imagination," she added. But the movement got scattered and this never materialised.

Unfinished revolution

After Bhanwari's rape case, the Rajasthan government halted the progress of the sathin program. Funds shrank and were diverted to other programs.

"In the 1980s and 1990s, the women's movement at least got some laws passed from the governments. But in 2023, every law is undone if rape convicted Ram Rahim is granted parole after parole, if Kuki women are paraded naked and if Bilkis Bano's rapists are out," said Professor Lad Kumari Jain.

Bhanwari commented on the women wrestlers who won Olympic medals staging protests against sexual harassment at Jantar Mantar and the state's response.

"I was not believed 30 years back, but they are not believing the daughters even today. What is the point of breaking the silence around rape three decades ago, when justice is still not given to Indian daughters," she asked.

Then she looked away for a moment, sighed and added: "Jiji, nyay toh koni milyo. Ek baar sarkar ki kalam se nyay milno chahiye." (Sister, I didn't get justice. The government should have given me justice once with its pen)

The last line written by judge Jagpal Singh in her case instructs that Bhanwari's blue lehanga be given back to her once the appeal period is over.

It's been a long wait.

The PoleStar Foundation

Website: polestar-foundation.org

For further information, contact:

Nachu Nagappan - +91 8939619676