



Acid Attacks

Acid attacks happen far too often, and most times, it is a crime against women. An acid attack, also called acid throwing, is a form of violent assault involving the act of throwing acid or a similarly corrosive substance onto the body of another with the intention to disfigure, maim, torture, or kill. The perpetrators of these attacks throw corrosive liquids at their victims, usually at their faces, burning them and damaging skin tissue, often exposing and sometimes dissolving the bones. Acid attacks can and often do, lead to permanent, partial, or complete blindness.

The most common types of acid used in these attacks are sulfuric and nitric acid. Hydrochloric acid is sometimes used but is much less damaging. Aqueous solutions, and strongly alkaline materials, such as caustic soda or ammonia, are also used, particularly in areas where strong acids are controlled substances. The long-term consequences of these attacks may include blindness, as well as eye burns with

severe permanent scarring of the face and body, along with far-reaching social, psychological, and economic difficulties.

Today, acid attacks are reported in many parts of the world, though more commonly in developing countries. From 1999 to 2013 a total of 3,512 Bangladeshi people were attacked with acid, with the rate of cases declining by 15–20% every year since 2002 based on strict legislation against perpetrators and regulation of acid sales. In India, acid attacks are at an all-time high and increasing every year with 250–300 reported incidents annually, while the actual number could exceed 1,000, according to Acid Survivors' Trust International.

Although acid attacks occur all over the world this type of violence is most common in South Asia. Statistics, from Acid Survivors Trust International (ASTI) suggest that 80% of victims worldwide are women.

The most notable effect of an acid attack is lifelong bodily disfigurement. According to the Acid Survi-

vors Foundation in Pakistan, there is a high survival rate among victims of acid attacks. Consequently, the victim is faced with physical challenges, which require long-term surgical treatment, as well as psychological challenges, which require in-depth intervention from psychologists and counsellors at each stage of physical recovery. These far-reaching effects on their lives impact their psychological, social, and economic viability in communities.

One acid attack survivor is Laxmi Agarwal, a young woman from India who has become a campaigner for the rights of acid attack victims. She is now also a television host.

Laxmi was only 15 years old, when she was attacked, in New Delhi, India in 2005. She was a grade eleven student when she was approached by a man working in her neighbourhood. Thirty-two-year-old Naeem Khan proposed to her, but she turned him down.

The culture is different in India, so she did not inform anyone about the proposal as her family would have blamed her and stopped her studies. Ten months later, Laxmi Agrawal was returning from Khan market at 10:45 in the morning when she received the same message from Naeem, saying he loves her, and wants to marry her. She did not respond. Shortly after, she was attacked with acid by Naeem and Kamran (Naeem's older brother). Kamran called Laxmi's name from behind while riding his motorcycle. When Laxmi looked behind in a response to her name, Naeem threw acid directly at her face from the back-seat. Laxmi fainted and, after regaining consciousness,



she tried to walk up and ask for help, but there was none until a man named Arun Singh called the police. He saw her skin melting from the acid and realised it might be too late to wait for assistance. Someone else splashed water on her face hoping to reduce the burns but unfortunately, this caused the acid to move down and burn her neck. Arun, then somehow got her in the back seat of his car. This later caused burn holes in the seat covers. He admitted her to Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital. The police reached the hospital directly. Arun then asked Laxmi about her family and where she lived. He went to her house, informed her family, and took them to the hospital.

Laxmi was to undergo multiple operations including eye surgery. Four days after the attack, Naeem Khan was arrested but was bailed out a month later. He married off immediately. However, after widespread protests and media attention, he was sentenced to prison for life.

Laxmi was attacked because she refused to accept the proposal from Kahn.

Unfortunately, this is common practice in many parts of Asia, but this case went to court. In 2006 the case was heard as a "Public Interest Litigation" (PIL), during which she pleaded for a total ban on the sale of acid, citing the increasing number of acid attacks on women across India. Her PIL sought framing of a new law, or amendment to the existing criminal laws like IPC, Indian Evidence

Act and CrPC, for dealing with the offence, besides asking for compensation. She also pleaded for a total ban on the sale of acid, citing an increasing number of incidents of such attacks on women across the country.

During a hearing in April, the Centre assured the Supreme Court of India that it would work with the state governments to formulate a plan before the next hearing on 9 July. However, it failed to do so, which angered the court. However, when the Centre failed to produce a plan, the Supreme Court warned that it would intervene and pass orders if the government failed to frame a policy to curb the sale of acid to prevent chemical attacks. "Seriousness is not seen on the part of the government in handling the issue," the bench headed by Justice RM Lodha said. Earlier

in February, the court had directed the Centre to convene in six weeks a meeting of Chief Secretaries of all states and union territories to discuss enacting a law to regulate the sale of acids and policy for treatment, compensation and care and rehabilitation of such victims.

Meanwhile, in 2013, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of Laxmi's plea, thereby creating a fresh set of restrictions on the sale of acid. Under the new regulations, acid could not be sold to any individual below the age of 18 years. One is also required to furnish a photo identity card before buying acid.

Laxmi Agarwal claims that not much has changed on the ground, despite all the regulations. "Acid is freely available in shops. Our volunteers have gone and purchased acid easily. I have myself purchased acid," she said. "We have launched a new initiative called 'Shoot Acid'. Using the Right to Information Act, we are trying to acquire data concerning the sale of acid in every district. We intend to present the information collected through this initiative before the Supreme Court to apprise them of the situation on the ground."

In 2014 Laxmi Agarwal was honoured by the then US first lady, Michelle Obama with nine other extraordinary women from 10 countries with the 2014 Secretary of State's International Women of Courage Award. The award annually recognizes women around the globe who have demonstrated exceptional courage and leadership in advocating for peace, justice, human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment, often at great personal risk.

Today, in 2023, Laxmi Agarwal is still an ardent campaigner against the sale of acid and a strong proponent of stricter laws to protect women from such violence and still demands harsher punishment for the perpetrators of acid throwing.



