

A 39¢ Bottle of Acid for a Lifetime of Scars: The Reality for Victims

By Neha Kelkar

The 2020 Bollywood film, *Chhapaak*, is based on the life of Laxmi Agarwal. When Laxmi was just 15 years old, she was flung into the streets, pinned down, and attacked with acid in a crowded area. Three days prior, she had rejected an older man's advances. Instantly, her ears melted and both arms were charred black. At the end of ten weeks, she underwent seven surgeries and required at least four more. For eight years, Laxmi stayed inside, while her attacker was out on bail after a month. Every job application she submitted was rejected and she was shunned by society.

Acid attacks are a premeditated form of violence in which an individual throws acid on another individual, resulting in severe injuries and disfiguration. Those who are attacked find themselves navigating through a new life that leaves them isolated and ostracized. Worldwide, the majority of these attacks are directed against women who are perceived to violate honor codes and prescribed standards of female behavior. They are often perpetrated by family members or close relations. Approximately 1,500 acid attacks are recorded worldwide annually. Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Cambodia and Uganda are countries with the highest reported rates.

Acid attacks generally are designed to maim and humiliate the victim not kill her. There are numerous physical, psychological and socioeconomic effects of acid attacks. Instantly, pain and shock sets in. The eyelids may be burned off, hearing loss is a possibility, and many are diagnosed with respiratory failure from inhaling the acid vapors. During the recovery process, the trauma can lead to depression, paranoia, and fear. Victims are then faced with social isolation

and ostracization. Their self-esteem, self-confidence, and professional and personal futures are damaged. The medical expenses add up and place a burden on the families, and victims find it impossible to make a living, or even get married.

Statistics show that 80% of all acid attack victims in the Indian subcontinent are women. In developing nations, acid attacks against women are frequently identified as crimes of passion, such as refusal of a marriage proposal or extramarital affairs. Male attackers use acid to exhibit their perpetual control over a woman's fate, to humiliate her, or to keep her in a perpetual state of fear.

Such attacks are further perpetuated by the lack of clear regulation of acid sales. There is an absence of law regulating the sale of acid, resulting in the purchase of acid accessible and available to anyone. Dr. Nehaluddin Ahmad proposes that the government should hand out acid licenses so that only those who have the clearance and licensing can receive access to purchasing acid.

For many, acid attacks go unreported for fear of reprisal. For cases that are reported, a small number of those proceed to trials with verdicts. Currently, there is no specific legislation on the subject. The Indian Penal Code, 1860 (IPC) does not specifically outline charges for acid attacks. The charges are highly generalized, and a perpetrator can be charged under one of four sections. One of those sections is Section 320, which only states "grievous hurt." Section 320 does not account for the injuries deliberately inflicted by acid attacks. But acid attacks are deliberate. Acid attacks require the perpetrator to purchase acid, knowing it will be used to destroy the primary constituent of a woman's identity.

The IPC is 158 years old, so it is time for it to be revised by incorporating new sections. These new sections should be unbiased and specific to acid attacks. It should lay out the

regulation of purchasing acid by individuals or corporations that have clearance and licensing.

All perpetrators should be taken to court, where rulings should be harsher. Perpetrators should be charged with fines and pay off the medical bills of their victims.

The media handle these cases with insensitivity and immaturity. They often discuss what the victim did to endure this amount of trauma. However, with the release of *Chhapaak*, more and more people are learning the realities of this act. Soon, Laxmi began a campaign against acid attacks. Along with the Chhanv Foundation, she began assisting other victims with treatment and rehabilitation. In 2006, Laxmi successfully filed a petition and the Supreme Court of India passed legislation to regulate the sale of acid, compensate victims, provide victims with treatment and rehabilitation, and access to jobs.



Hopefully, making changes to the IPC to make it more specific to acid attacks and recognizing victims, we can see a decline and eventual end to acid attacks.

Neha Kelkar is a junior at East Carolina University. She is set to graduate in May 2021 with a degree in Molecular/Cell Biology and a minor in Gender Studies. After graduating, she plans to pursue her studies in Evolutionary Biology. In her spare time, she enjoys reading.