

## A Desire to Disfigure: Acid Attack in India

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### **Abstract**

Girls are dying or disfigured everyday due to acid attacks. Girls have lost their lives while many are struggling with wounds who have survived from these vicious attacks by thwarted lovers by those seeking revenge against another family by jealous colleagues. This paper is an attempt to understand the reasons for the attacks and ways used for their disfigurement. News paper reports from January 2009 to December 2013 have been the source of the study. Thus the method of content analysis was adopted for this purpose. The findings reveal that total 58 cases have been reported during this period. Of these 65.49% cases were found under the age of 27 years. This problem has also been reported from rural area (15.51% cases). The result also shows that most of the girls were suffering from psychological trauma and expenses of reconstructive surgery. To put a stop to the growing number of acid attacks the Supreme Court clamped down on the sale of the toxic liquid and also ordered higher compensation to acid attack victims. Illegal sale and purchase of acid to be consider as non- bailable offence.

### **Introduction**

In South Asia, disputes over land, inheritances, dowries, and declined marriage proposals often arouse jealousy, which lead to acid violence and women becomes the first victim of it. Acid attacks are intensely inhuman crimes because the perpetrators plan to disfigure the victims rather than kill them. Acid is also easily available and cheap, which is thrown at women. These attacks make them disfigured, often blinded, and severely traumatized. The lives of many women, deprived of free choice and independence in this way, have been destroyed ([www.impression50webs.org](http://www.impression50webs.org)).

Women in different parts of India have faced acid attacks from men for several reasons, most common among them being refusal of proposal. Men track down these women, accost them and attack them with acid leaving them severely scarred. Though the physical injuries may heal after laborious and multiple operations, the mental injuries remain for life ([www.stopstreetharassment.org](http://www.stopstreetharassment.org)).

Acid violence is the deliberate use of acid to attack another human being. The victims of acid violence are overwhelmingly women and children, and attackers often target the head and face in order to maim, disfigure and blind. The act rarely kills but causes severe physical, psychological and social scarring, and victims are often left with no legal recourse, limited access to medical or psychological assistance, and without the means to support themselves. Acid violence is a world- wide phenomenon that is not restricted to a particular race, religion or geographical location ([www.acidviolence.org](http://www.acidviolence.org)).

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## **Meaning of Acid Attack**

Acid throwing is called an acid attack. Defined as the act of throwing acid or a similarly corrosive substance on to the body of another within the intention to disfigure, maim, torture, or kill. Perpetrators of these attacks throw acid at their victims, usually at their faces, burning them, and damaging skin tissue, often exposing and sometimes dissolving the bones. The most common types of acid used in these attacks are sulfuric, nitric, or hydrochloric acid. The long term consequences of these attacks may include blindness, as well as permanent scarring of the face and body, along with far-reaching social, psychological, and economic difficulties ([www.wikipedia-acid attack](http://www.wikipedia-acid-attack.com)). Acid attack can be viewed to mean “any act of throwing acid or using acid in any form on the victim with the intention of or with knowledge that such person is likely to cause to the other person permanent or partial damage or deformity or disfiguration to any part of the body of such person (National Commission of India, July 2009). Though acid attack is a crime which can be committed against any man or woman, it has a specific gender dimension in India. Most of the reported acid attacks have been committed on women, particularly young women for spurning suitor for rejecting proposals for marriage, for denying dowry etc. (Law Commission of India, July 2009).

## **Effects of Acid Attack**

The most notable effects of an acid attack are the lifelong bodily disfigurement. According to the Acid Survivors Foundation in Pakistan, there is a high survival rate amongst 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 counselors at each stage of physical recovery. These far-reaching effects on their lives impact their psychological, social and economic viability in communities ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)).

### ***Medical***

The medical effects of acid attacks are extensive. As a majority of acid attacks are aimed at the face. Severity of the damage depends on the concentration of the acid and the period of time before the acid is thoroughly washed off with water or neutralizing agent. The acid can rapidly eat away skin, the layer of fat beneath the skin, and in some cases even the underlying bone. Eyelids and lips may be completely destroyed, the nose and ears severely damaged. Acid attack victims also face the possibility of septicemia, renal failure, skin depigmentation, and even death (Mannan, A., et.al, 2005).

### ***Psychological***

Acid assault survivors face many mental health issues upon recovery. Acid attack victims reported higher levels of anxiety, depression, due to their appearance. Additionally, the women reported lowered self-esteem according to the Rosenberg Scale and increased self consciousness, both in general and in the social sphere.

### ***Social***

Many social implications exist for acid survivors, especially women. Such attacks usually leave victims handicapped in some way, rendering them dependent on either their spouse or family for everyday activities, such as eating and running errands. These dependencies are increased by the fact that many acid survivors are not able to find suitable work, due to impaired vision and physical handicapped. As a result, divorce, abandonment by husbands is common in the society. Moreover, acid survivors who are single when attacked almost certainly become ostracized from society, effectively ruining marriage prospects.

### **Acid Survivors Trust International**

Acid Survivors Trust International (ASTI) is the only organization whose sole purpose is to work towards the end of acid violence across the world. Recognizing the need for local knowledge and expertise in order to combat acid violence effectively, ASTI founded and continues to support the development of six partner organizations in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Pakistan, Nepal, Uganda and India. It also works with UN agencies, NGOs and strategic partners from across the world to increase awareness of acid violence and develop effective responses at the national and international level ([www.acidviolence.org](http://www.acidviolence.org)).

### **Statistical Overview on Acid Attack**

Acid attacks are carried out because of discriminatory attitudes. There is no national database to statically track cases of acid violence. Many cases go unreported. To combat acid violence on a sustained basis, reliable statistics are necessary. Estimates vary from 500 to 1000 cases a year in India, based on research conducted by Acid Survivors Foundation India. In India, there are 28 states and 7 union territories; it gives a figure of about 350 cases per year, excluding unreported incidents. These underlying reasons need to be addressed if acid attack and indeed other forms of violence against women and girls are to be challenged and eradicated ([www.acidviolence.org](http://www.acidviolence.org)).

### **Public Interest Litigation by the Victim**

Many recent incidents highlight that the jilted lovers were going beyond the more common practice acid attacks. The past few years there has been an alarming rise in cases of savage attack on girls in an around the country (TTI, Feb.23,2013). Fight started for rights when a minor, Laxmi was waiting for a bus in Delhi in 2005 when two men poured acid on her after she refused to marry one of them, leaving her disfigured. The order came seven years after Laxmi, 22- year- old, an acid attack survivor moved the court, citing loopholes in the law and inadequate government policies. Laxmi 'Public Interest Litigation' also demanded compensation. To put a stop to the growing number of acid attacks, the Supreme Court, clamped down on the sale of the toxic liquid and also ordered higher compensation for the victims (HT, July19, 2013).

### **About the Acid**

Sulfuric, nitric, and hydrochloric acid are most commonly used and are all cheap and readily available in many instances. Since acid is used as a low cost cleaning agent, buying acid hardly ever raises suspicion. It is sold openly over the country, in neighborhood markets and hardware stores for as cheap as Rupees 30 for 750 ml (TTI, July 15, 2013).

### **Legislation in India**

1. Grievous hurt, Section 320 in Indian Penal Code, 1860. In Indian Penal Code, permanent disfiguration of the head or face comes under grievous hurt (<http://indiankanon.org>).
2. The National Commission for Women (NCW) came up with a draft of the Prevention of Offences (by Acids) Act, 2008.
3. The draft Bill proposed by the NCW suggested that a national acid attack victims' assistance board be set up to recommend to the government strategies for regulating and controlling the production, hoarding, import, sale and distribution of acids.
4. The Cabinet has passed the Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill, 2012, with special provisions for acid victims. For the first time, acid attacks have been included under a standalone provision in the Indian Penal Code (IPC).

5. It has been proposed that two sections — 326A (hurt by acid attack) and 326B (attempt to throw or administer acid) — be added to the IPC. This is a non-bailable offence. The proposed law states that the attacker could get a jail term of 10 years to life for causing hurt by acid. He or she could be sent to jail for up to seven years for attempting to do so ([www.justiceforwomenindia.com](http://www.justiceforwomenindia.com)).

### **Supreme Court Direction**

Supreme Court of India has directed to States to pay Rs. 3 lakh compensation to acid attack victim and Rs.1 lakh to be paid within 15 days of incident. Photo I card with residential address must for acid buyer. Seller will need a license and will have to keep record of sales. Acid will not to be sold to minors. Illegal sale and purchase of acid is to be a non-bailable offence. Undisclosed stock to be confiscated, seller will be fined Rs. 50,000(HT, July 19, 2013). The latest ordinance amending certain sections of the Indian Penal Code also included identifying acid attacks as a standalone criminal offence. Under the new provision a person shall be punished with life imprisonment if found guilty of acid attack. The minimum sentence of 10 years and fine of Rs. 10 lakh has also been prescribed in the amendment (HT, February 7, 2013).

### **Victims of Acid Attack are Attacked for May Reasons**

Unlike other weapons such as guns, knives and grenades that are illegal, hard to find, or too much expensive, acid is easy to acquire. There are main four reasons behind attacks:

- *CULTURAL*- Cultural attacks stem from gender, economic, or class inequalities, the culture of revenge, to calm misogyny.
- *SOCIETAL* – It stem from impunity toward perpetrators, social permissiveness, history of punishment towards women, male dominated resources.
- *SITUATIONAL* - Situational attacks are seen with family conflicts, low family education, geographic situation, the emotional state of individuals, peer association, cost of acid.
- *PERSONAL* – It start from interpersonal feelings like male shame, powerlessness, the age of the perpetrator or victim, poor anger management skills, childhood neglect, antisocial behavior etc (Finley, L., 2013).

### **Literature Review**

Acid attack is a global phenomenon that is not restricted to a particular age, caste, religion, gender, or geographical location. Acid attacks are form of gender based violence aimed at silencing and controlling women. Their use as a weapon against women who refuse sexual or other advances is on the rise in India ([www.hirn.org](http://www.hirn.org)). The use of acid as a weapon began to rise in many developing nations, specifically in South Asia. Since acid can be easily purchased in these countries and is relatively cheap as compared to weapons like guns, it was a preferred weapon. The first recorded acid attack occurred in India in 1982. Since then, research has witnessed an increase in the amount and severity of acid attacks in the region ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)). In many countries acid attacks constitute a hidden form of violence against women and children that often go unreported and the true number of horrific attacks taking place has only come to light after in-depth research ([www.dailymail.co.uk](http://www.dailymail.co.uk)). Acid attacks have a catastrophic impact on the lives of the victims physically, psychologically and financially. Victims usually do not die the aim of nearly all acid attacks is not to kill but to injure and disfigure (Finley, 2013).

The importance of women's physical beauty as a means to social acceptance cannot be overstated. Reports of acid attacks as a means of retaliation by rejected suitors demonstrate the importance of physical beauty in women's acceptance (Andrea Parrot, et.al. 2006). Many countries have begun pushing for legislation addressing acid attacks, and few have recently

employed new laws against the crime. India introduced amendment to the Indian Penal Code through the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013; making acid attacks a specific offence (Government of India, 2013). The acid attack is not a new concept but this area was largely unexplored by the researchers and the rises in such brutal incidents are a cause of concern.

### **Objectives**

The present study was undertaken by the researcher, with the following objectives:

- 1 To know the reasons for acid attack by the perpetrators.
- 2 To find the different types of problems face by the victims, after acid attack.
- 3 To determine the relationship between perpetrators and victims of acid attack.

### **Methodology**

For the present purpose newspaper reports from January 2009 to December 2013, Hindustan Times, Bhopal edition (M.P.) and The Times of India, Kanpur edition (U.P.) have been the source of data. Five years of cases reported in print media were taken for the study. Reported cases across the country were searched year-wisely. The news items relating to the acid attack were systematically collected and their content has been analyzed. 58 cases of acid attacks have been found reported in print media and were presented in tabular form. Thus the secondary data was the main source of the study. The study has been carried on the basis of victim's gender, residence, age, number of victims, perpetrator's gender, victim perpetrator relationships, reasons for attack, and ways of acid attack.

### **Results and Discussion**

The first recorded acid attack happened in France during the seventeenth century. There are anecdotal cases of acid attacks in around the globe. In each country, the reasons behind these attacks, the perpetrator, and the victims are different in each case (Finley, L., 2013). The result of the study is found as per the analysis of the data.

#### **Injured victims**

Total 58 cases have been found reported from year 2009- 2013 in print media. Of these 58 cases, 58 victims were grievously injured by acid attack whereas other family members (30) were found minor injured by attack.

**Table 1: Victims’ age**

VICTIM AGE	NUMBER OF CASES	PERCENTAGE
Less than 18	12	20.68
18-22	14	24.13
23-27	12	20.68
28-32	02	3.44
33 and above	08	13.79
Not mentioned	10	17.24
Total	58	100.00

It was found in Table 1, that in 20.68% cases, victims were minor (less than 18 years). In 24.13% cases victims were between the age group of 18- 22. In 20.68% cases age group was 23-27 year, 3.44% victims were between 28-32 years, and 13.79% victims were age of 33 and above years. In 17.24% cases, victims’ age were not found mentioned.

Case – Police arrested a 20-year old youth for his alleged involvement in hurling acid on a teenage girl. The accused was apprehended after the girl’s family filed a complaint saying that she was regularly harassed by accused, who was forcing her to marry him (The Times of India, Jan 6, 2012).

**Table 2: Victim’s gender**

GENDER	NUMBER OF CASES	PERCENTAGE
Female	48	82.75
Male	10	17.24
Total	58	100.00

In Table 2, Majority of the victims of acid attacks were female (82.75%) and 17.24% victims were male. It shows that males were also targeted by the perpetrators for different reasons.

Case – An eight-year-boy is victim of an acid attack in Kanpur city. The boy was attacked with acid when he had gone to get water from a nearby tap. Sources said that the accuser’s family members have had arguments with victim’s family over petty issues in the past (The Times of India, August 5, 2010).

Case – A 35 –year-old man suffered stab wounds and burn injuries after being attacked by assailants. According to the police, victim had become a witness into a property dispute which was opposed by rivals. Accused and his friend thrashed the victim over the issue and threw acid on him before (The Times of India, August 22, 2011).

**Table 3: Victim’s residence**

RESIDENCE	NUMBER OF CASES	PERCENTAGE
Urban	49	84.48
Rural	09	15.51
Total	58	100.00

The cases of acid attacks have been found committed more in urban area than in rural area (84.48% and 15.51%). Though the number of cases in rural area is less yet remote areas are not left by this menace of acid attack (Table 3).

Case – Infuriated over rejection of her marriage proposal, a 20-year old girl allegedly threw acid on her lover in padhni village in Basti. The girl threw acid on victim in afternoon, they said, adding that she had been angry with her lover ever since he had refused to marry her (Hindustan Times, October 2, 2013).

#### **Number of victims in each case**

In 81.03% cases, one victim was affected in each case; in 12.06% cases two victims, rest of the other cases three in 03.44% cases, four in 01.72% cases and five and more (seventeen) victims were found affected by acid attack.

Case – Four sisters walking home in New Delhi have suffered severe burns after being attacked with acid by two men on a motorbike, police said in a brutal example of a growing problem in south Asia. The victims were walking together when two men on a motorbike made lewd remarks and the man who was riding pillion splashed acid on all of them. The youngest sister suffered maximum burn injuries and she had to be rushed to a hospital (The Times of India, April 4, 2013).

#### **Number of perpetrators in each case**

In majority of the cases (63.79%), one perpetrator was guilty of crime in each case. In 17.24% cases two perpetrators were involved in splashing the acid on the victim, in 5.17% cases three perpetrators, in 1.72% cases four perpetrators, in 6.89% five and more perpetrators were found involved in acid attack. In 5.15% cases number of perpetrators were not found mentioned.

Case – A man lost sight of both his eyes after two men threw acid at him. A case has been registered by police, but under very mild sections 294, 323, 342, 190, 506 and 34 of IPC. The victim was drinking with two persons. They entered into a quarrel over drinking and one aunty, who lives in the neighbourhood provided both accused persons with acid and they threw it at victim's eyes and damaged them (Hindustan Times, July 21, 2013).

**Table 4: Perpetrators' gender**

GENDER	NUMBER OF CASES	PERCENTAGE
Male	49	84.48
Female	02	3.44
Both (male and female)	04	6.89
Not mentioned	03	5.17
Total	58	100.00

In highest number of the cases (84.48%) males were the perpetrators of the acid attack whereas in 3.44% cases females were involved for the attack (Table 4). In 6.89% cases, both male and female perpetrators were involved in acid attack. In 5.17 cases perpetrators were not mentioned.

Case – In fallout of an old enmity, a couple in Bhopal became the victims of acid attack on night, Sanjay Singh (37) and his wife Mona (35) sustained burn injuries on their face and hands when another couple – Rajkumar and his wife Radha – threw acid on them after a heated row in Bhopal city (Hindustan Times, September 8, 2013).

**Table 5: Victim perpetrator relationship**

RELATIONSHIP	NUMBER OF CASES	PERCENTAGE
Known	43	74.13
Unknown	12	20.68
Not mentioned	03	5.17
Total	58	100.00

In 3/4<sup>th</sup> of the cases (74.13%) perpetrators were known to the victims (Table 5). These were mother, daughter, father, husband, lovers, neighbor, friend, relatives etc. Only 20.68% perpetrators were not acquainted to the victims. In 5.17% cases perpetrators were not mentioned.

Case – In an inhuman attack, a man on late night killed his three year old daughter and injured others including his wife and son by pouring acid on them. The police said that the accused, which had allegedly developed illicit relations with another woman in his relation, was living separately and planning to give divorce to his estranged wife (The Times of India, May 28 2009).

**Table 6: Reasons for attack**

REASONS	NUMBER OF CASES	PERCENTAGE
Thwarted lovers	11	18.96
Seeking revenge	05	08.62
Family/Neighbor dispute	08	13.79
Resisting sexual assault	05	08.62
Refused to sex determination test	01	01.72
Refused to go for sex trade	01	01.72
Husband had illicit relation with other woman	01	01.72
Old love affair of girl	01	01.72
Dowry menace	01	01.72
Lady was divorcee, taking advantages	01	01.72
Witness of property dispute	01	01.72
Giving birth to girls	01	01.72
Boy refused to marry	01	01.72
Others	15	25.87
Not mentioned	05	08.62
Total	58	100.00

In majority of the cases, the victims were attacked by the thwarted lovers (Table 6). When they were not succeeded in their activities they splashed the acid on the victims. In 17.39% cases, family or neighbor's dispute were the reasons for the attacks. In 8.62% cases for seeking revenge from victims, 8.62% resisting



sexual assault, 1.72% refused to sex determination test, 1.72% cases refused to go for sex trade, 1,72% husband had illicit relation with other women, 1.72% old love affairs of girl, 1.72% dowry menace, 1.72% taking advantages by divorcee lady, 1.72% witness of property dispute, 1.72% giving birth to girls, 1.72% boy refused to marry, 25.87% were attacked for other reasons like cattle’s grazing in the field, taking water from the tap etc.

Case - A woman allegedly threw acid on her mother’s face following a family dispute. The incident occurred when the two had a disagreement over some property related matter after which the accused, in a fit of rage, threw acid on her mother’s face. The woman, who suffered serious burn injuries, has been admitted to private hospital (Hindustan Times, 9 September 2012).

Case – A man threw acid on his wife and two other members of the family, and took his own life by consuming poison. The three acid attack victims are battling for life in a hospital (The Times of India, December 19 2010).

**Table 7: Main physical/ psychological harm by acid attack**

HARM BY ATTACK	NUMBER OF CASES	PERCENTAGE
Disfigured face	22	37.93
Vision lost	05	08.62
Hearing lost	01	01.72
Victims’ death	04	06.89
Committed suicide	01	01.72
Lost job	01	01.72
Abandoned by husband	01	01.72
Ostracized by society	01	01.72
Effect on private parts of body	05	08.62
Throat burnt	01	01.72
Others	16	27.58
Total	58	100.00

In Table 7, it was found that many problems faced by the victims after acid attack. These problems are 37.93% disfigured face,8.62% vision lost 1.72% hearing lost,6.89% victims’ death, 1.72% lost of job,1.72% abandoned by husband, 1.72% ostracized by society, 8.62% effect on private parts of body, 1.72% throat burnt, and 27.58% others (chest, neck, and hands burnt seriously).

Case – Acid attack victim remained unconscious at the burns injury department of medical college with deep wounds on her face and chest. Doctors declared her out of danger, but were worried about permanent damage from the injuries (Hindustan Times, January 1, 2013).

Case – A woman school teacher, was the victim of an acid attack last year, has lost vision in one eye apart from sustaining scars on the face. The victim was on her way to work when a person threw acid on her and fled. The acid fell on her chest, face and hand. Apart from the physical injuries sustained in the incident, the victim has lost b and has been abandoned by her husband. Further, she can’t step out because of the scars on her face and now remains confined to her house (Hindustan Times, 25 March, 2013).

In the past few years the cases of acid attack have been increasing and leaving the people in shocking state. It is an act of revenge by the perpetrator of the crime and is the heights of hatred for the victim.

Psychiatrists term the situation as alarming and say it is due to the psychopathic tendencies in man. Man has turned so intolerant and barbaric that he finds nothing wrong in avenging himself by pouring acid on those he considers his enemies (The Times of India, August 19, 2010).

Most acid victims suffer permanent damage because they don't get treatment in time, especially rural victims. The problem is that we hardly have any medical facility which has the equipment or trained personnel to treat acid victims. It requires extensive reconstructive surgery and psychological counseling both of which are in short supply and less in numbers. The acid victims then find that they become an economic, psychological, and social burden on their own families.

Little attention has been given to the psychological trauma that an acid victim suffers. Then there is the constant fear of going out, in public not least because of offensive stares and taunts. In a society which sets great store by looks, the acid attack victim is not likely to find integrating back into society, leave alone leading a normal life. Feelings of insecurity come in their minds are natural process.

There are no records of the number of acid attacks on women in India, the law having recognized it as a separate crime only this year. Many die, and hundreds are disfigured in acid attacks every year. Despite Supreme Court directions, sale of acid remains unregulated; the law is yet to prove its mettle, while compensation is tardy. Treatment is prolonged and expensive. The top court this year also directed states to speed up compensation to victims, who end up running pillar to post to raise money needed to bear the cost of treatment (The Times of India, 29 December, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

An acid called "Tezab", which is designed to clean rusted tools but it often used in the attacks can currently be bought across the counter ([www.informationing.com](http://www.informationing.com)). In February 2013, Supreme Court has directed the centre that enacting a law to regulate the sale of acids and a policy for treatment, compensation and care and rehabilitation of acid attack victims. A couple of lakhs of rupees in compensation is simply nowhere near enough to deal with the unending trauma that a victim has to face. This is an insidious crime reflecting the deviant behavior. Time has changed, Laxmi, a victim of acid attack has been selected by the US for the prestigious International Women of Courage Award. Ms. Laxmi would receive the award from First Lady Michelle Obama at an awards ceremony in Washington ([www.thehindu.com](http://www.thehindu.com)). Now acid attack has become a global problem but strict law and society norms can change the scenario.

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