

Nasty scars fail to singe their determination

Ritwika Mitra, New Delhi, Jan 18, 2015,



She was one step away from being an air hostess with a major airline carrier. Eleven years on, her dream still remains to be achieved. Though she could not achieve her “goal”, she feels happy to lead an “almost normal” life now. She has accepted that she will never look the same.

Soniya, 30, now runs a salon out of home. At 19, she was attacked with acid on her way back from work. “I did not even know then what an acid attack was. I screamed thinking the guy on the motorbike had thrown boiling water at me. I passed out at hospital. When I regained consciousness a day later, I realised my life had changed.”

Soniya was attacked by a guy in the neighbourhood who wanted to settle scores after having spent a few days in a jail. “I had bought a phone from him. A few days later, the police called me and asked from where I had bought the phone. They told me it was a stolen phone. I told the police the name of the person from whom I had bought it.

Following this, he was in jail for a day or two,” says Soniya. Once out, the guy repeatedly threatened Soniya with “dire consequences” if she did not apologise in public. She refused. One and a half months later, she was attacked. While Soniya worked at a VLCC salon at Ghaziabad in Uttar Pradesh before the attack, her father ran a kirana store. The family ran into debt while trying to meet medical expenses. After being treated in Safdarjung and Lok Nayak Hospital (LNJP), Soniya underwent treatment at home. Despite several surgeries, Soniya’s face remains disfigured today and her eyesight affected.

Cosmetic surgeries for acid attack survivors take a few years. While most cannot meet medical expenses, life of survivors often comes to a standstill with no support from family or their workplace. A rounded rehabilitation programme for acid attack survivors is currently missing.

“Plastic surgeries for acid attack survivors are very expensive. The survivors also have to spend a significant amount on visiting hospitals. The need for physiotherapy and psychological care is largely overlooked. In several cases, it is important to provide the survivors with housing and jobs as the perpetrators continue to harass them or the family withdraws support,” says Kerry Mcbroom, a lawyer at the Human Rights Law Network (HRLN).

Recently, HRLN has come out with Burning Injustice — a manual for lawyers, activists and acid

attack survivors in the country. The manual has not been priced. “It is a comprehensive guidebook which talks about the laws, amendments and the different types of injuries,” says Mcbroom.

In most cases, the face and eyes of the victims bear the brunt of the attack. “The attacker’s intention is to disfigure the person. So eyes and face suffer severe injuries. In some cases of disfigurement, it may not be feasible to carry out a corrective surgery,” says Dr K Agrawal, head of the department, burns plastic and maxillofacial surgery, Safdarjung Hospital. Safdarjung sees roughly between 25 and 30 cases of acid attack victims in a year, he adds. LNJP, which has over 100 beds for burns, sees at least one case every month. “It depends on the extent of damage how many corrective surgeries a patient will need. It may range up to 15 in some cases,” says Dr Rajeev B Ahuja, head of the department, burns & plastic surgery, LNJP.

According to figures compiled by Acid Survivors Foundation India (ASFI), an NGO headquartered in West Bengal, 130 cases were reported in 2014. In 2013, 122 cases were reported. “The cases have exponentially increased in the past few years. The attacks are not specific to urban areas. In unorganised sectors like jewellery trade, dyeing of cotton fabric where strong acids are available, people often use them to settle personal scores,” says Rahul Varma, national director and chief executive officer, ASFI. According to activists, the number of cases in the public domain is under reported. “It is often not reported when a victim dies after the attack. Also, in several cases of acid attack, FIRs are not lodged,” says Mcbroom.

She says Rs 3 lakh recommended to the victim by the Supreme Court is not enough as corrective surgeries cost till Rs 30-40 lakh, say activists. Most of the corrective surgeries cannot be conducted in the government hospitals with a long waiting period and inadequate facilities, say victims.

Vulnerable to attacks

The most common age group vulnerable to attacks is between 11 and 30 years, says Varma. This is because in most cases men attack women with acid to avenge rejection of marriage or relationship proposal. Attacks due to property dispute, marital discord, political rivalry and refusal to pay dowry are also common, he adds.

However, the case of 23-year-old Piyali Dutta doesn’t fit into any of the categories. Piyali was unlucky as she was standing next to a woman when her husband threw acid on his wife in Shyamnagar, West Bengal. While the woman died, Piyali suffered injuries on her face, neck, arms and legs. “I was in Class 8 at that time. Next two years were like a blur. When I started attending school after over two years, stares bothered me. But I realised I cannot let it affect my life,” says Piyali.

Now a final year student in a Bachelor of Arts course, Piyali wants to be a primary school teacher. “Since my father suffered a stroke, my mother has run around to raise a lot for my treatment. I cannot let her down.” Piyali is among many other victims who have decided to get on with “normal lives”. Ritu, 19, along with four others runs Sheroes Hangout, a cafe in Agra after she came in touch with Stop Acid Attacks, an NGO campaigning for such victims. Her cousin masterminded an acid attack on her in connection with a property dispute.

“I manage the finances at the cafe. But with my left eye damaged, I miss playing volleyball like before.”

Ritu, who is from Rohtak in Haryana, now stays in an apartment in Agra along with her colleagues. Lately, she has taken an interest in painting. Her colleague Rupa designs clothes as well. Soniya, who could not attend her last round of interview at the airline, has a new dream now — to bring up an eight-year-old girl. She adopted her sister’s daughter when the child was a few days old. “She calls me mamma and is very attached to me,” says Soniya. Over the years, she feels confident of herself.

“I recently visited Pune and Gujarat... I felt so confident about myself. But I cannot get back my eyesight. A hospital in Hyderabad said the eye operation would cost me Rs 3.6 lakh. I cannot raise the amount by running this salon,” she adds.

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