Acid sales in Delhi’s retail market continue

Shops openly flout apex court order imposing restrictions on sale, police say not possible to track every store

Mayank Manohar

According to the home ministry, the number of cases of acid violence has been steadily increasing—from 57 cases in 2010 to 83 in 2012. Photo: Hindustan Times

New Delhi: More than 40 shops this correspondent visited on 29 December—less than a week after a woman doctor suffered 50% burn injuries to the right side of her face after an acid attack—were still selling the chemical, almost no questions asked.

In Delhi’s Chawri Bazar, a specialized wholesale market for brass, copper and paper products, acid was available at each of the 10 hardware stores visited. Not one shopkeeper asked for the reason for purchase, proof of identity or age. The only question: “How many bottles do you need?”

It was pretty much the same story in the markets of Chandni Chowk (Old Delhi), Trilokpuri (East Delhi), Mohammadpur (South Delhi), Kamla Market (North Delhi) and Seelampur (North-West Delhi).

The stores do not maintain records that should list the name of the buyer along with proof of identity and why acid is being bought.

The exception was Rajouri Garden in West Delhi, where the sale of acid stopped following the 23 December acid attack on the 30-year-old doctor, who was attacked by two juveniles in a plot that the police said had been hatched by a male doctor whose marriage proposals she had rebuffed.

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Institute of Medical Sciences.

At most stores in Rajouri Garden, shopkeepers were afraid to even talk.

Prior to the attack on 23 December, hardware and sanitary stores in Rajouri Garden used to stock and sell acids, commonly used to clean toilets or clear blocked sewage lines. The corrosive chemicals are easily available at most hardware stores in the Capital, priced at ₹30 for a one-litre bottle of hydrochloric acid to up to ₹50 for a similar-sized bottle of sulphuric acid. The unbranded plastic bottles do not carry any warning or information about their dilution, or even instructions on what to do should it come into contact with skin.

A June 2013 Supreme Court order imposed restrictions on the sale of acids. The order prohibited their sale unless shopkeepers maintained records that showed the proof of identity of buyers, reasons for their purchase, and a declaration of all acid stock to the local sub-divisional magistrate (SDM). Sale of acid to minors was prohibited. SDMs were empowered to impose a fine of up to ₹50,000 on shopkeepers who violated these rules.

The home ministry reaffirmed the rules after the latest attack. The ground reality, as is evident from how easily acids can be still purchased in areas other than Rajouri Garden and some tony neighbourhoods, is different.

“We used to sell acid before, but the recent attack has created a lot of problems and it is not easy for us to maintain a record for everyone who is buying it; so we have stopped selling it now,” said a shopkeeper in Keshav Puram who didn’t want to be named.

The Rajouri Garden SDM said a routine check on acid sales was being done once in 15 days after which a report was being submitted.

When told about the availability of bottles of acid for sale at other markets, he replied: “It is quite unfortunate to know, but it is not possible to track down every shop.”

Acid continues to be sold in the interior parts of Delhi even if it has disappeared from the posher areas. In markets such as Tilak Nagar (West Delhi), Keshav Puram (North-West Delhi) and Bhikaji Cama Place (South Delhi), too, shop owners said they are scared to stock acid. But few have heard of the Supreme Court order.

“Earlier, what was available in the market was concentrated acid,” says Alok Dixit of the campaign Stop Acid Attacks. “Now, what is available is diluted acid, which is still very harmful.”

Agrees Rahul Varma, national director of the Acid Survivors Foundation of India (ASFI), “Acid sale continues more or less unrestricted all over India. Even if any directions have been issued by any of the state governments or union territories, the implementation has not been satisfactory at all.”

In the few cases where sellers have been booked, they have been booked only following reports of an acid attack, says Varma.

Despite evidence to the contrary, the administration claims regular checks. “Not all sellers are selling from stores,” says Manoj Kumar Sharma, SDM, North-West Rohini. “But we do check regularly. Some vendors sell them as toilet cleaners and others go about on bicycles. We have asked station house officers to monitor such sales.”

The easy availability of acid has led to an increase in acid violence in India, notes a 2011 report by the Avon Global Center for Women and Justice at...
Cornell Law School. By the home ministry’s own admission in Parliament, the number of cases of acid violence has been steadily increasing—from 57 cases in 2010 to 83 in 2012.

Even as the graph in India continues to rise, neighbouring Bangladesh brought down incidents of acid attacks by 80% after the government enacted two laws in 2002, says ASFI’s Varma. The first law increased criminal penalties for acid violence, while the second mandated the licensing of all acid producers, importers, distributors and users.

“Stringent regulation, control on sale of acid, and fast-track prosecution and punishment” are measures taken by Bangladesh in its fight against acid violence, says Varma.

But in India, despite court orders, apathy continues. That apathy comes at a terrible price, as victims of acid violence have tragically found out.

Monalisa contributed to this story.

This is the second in a series.
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