Anyone buying acid will need to furnish government-approved identity proof and state the reason for the purchase, which has to be recorded by the seller, the Supreme Court said. Photo: Sanjeev Verma/HT

For the 30-year-old woman doctor, it started like any another work day.

On a cold December morning, she was riding to work at the Employees’ State Insurance Hospital on her scooter when she was intercepted by two young men on a motorbike in west Delhi’s Rajouri Garden neighbourhood. One of them snatched her handbag, the other splashed acid on her face.

The woman, whose identity has been withheld, is now being treated at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) for 50% burn injuries to the right side of her face; she could lose sight in her right eye, doctors said.

Because the attack was captured on two closed-circuit television cameras installed on the street, it was just a matter of time before the police caught up with her assailants.

The two were juveniles who, it turned out, had been hired for ₹25,000 by someone the doctor thought of as her “best friend”—another doctor, male, who had a crush on her, had proposed to her in the past and whom she had rebuffed.
The doctor, identified as Ashok Yadav, had hatched the plot after coming to know that she had been considering marriage proposals from other men, the police said. He went about it with clinical precision, even performing a rehearsal, using a syringe filled with water, with the hired juveniles.

But for the rare fact that both the main accused and the victim are doctors and so were highly educated, the attack followed an all-too-familiar pattern—the man’s unrequited love, the fear of losing the woman he loved to someone else and the perverse determination that if he couldn’t have her, he would exact a terrible revenge.

Hours after the attack, the home ministry swung into action, announcing measures to regulate the sale of acid, time-bound investigations into such attacks, and paid-for treatment of acid burn victims—all these had already been laid by a July 2013 Supreme Court ruling.

The incident came as the latest reminder of the horrific acid attacks on women that have become increasingly common in India in recent years despite action taken by the law to deter them. A June 2013 report in Mint said the home ministry estimated that 500 such attacks had taken place over the past four years. Many of the attacks were carried out by men who had had their advances or proposals for marriage spurned by the victims, or by stalkers.

In July 2013, the Supreme Court cracked down on the sale of acid when a bench of justices R.M. Lodha and F.M.I. Kalifulla imposed strict restrictions on the sale of the chemicals, castigated state governments for not providing enough compensation to victims and stipulated the amount of money that should be given to them. Apart from this, suspects can also be arrested without a warrant and bail will be up to the court, it ruled.

Anyone buying acid will need to furnish government-approved identity proof and state the reason for the purchase, which has to be recorded by the seller, the court said. The court set compensation for victims at ₹3 lakh to facilitate immediate medical attention and relief.

Out of this, ₹1 lakh will be paid to the victim within 15 days of the incident and the rest will be paid “as expeditiously as possible” and possibly within two months, it added.

A petition filed by an acid attack victim in 2006 had sought the regulation of acid sales as well as adequate compensation for and rehabilitation of acid attack victims.

The easy availability of acids for a few rupees—they are used as household cleaning agents, for instance—combined with the appalling attitude towards women in India and other parts of the subcontinent—has made the corrosive agents a handy weapon for attackers, rights groups said.

“We have received more than 300 calls since the inception of the helpline in 2012, where threats were given that such attacks will be carried out, where attacks were attempted and where they were actually carried out,” says Khadijah Faruqui, a consultant with 181, a telephone helpline for women in distress, in New Delhi. “The police may be sympathetic to survivors but where threat of acid attack is issued, it is not taken seriously.”

India, along with Bangladesh and Cambodia, has one of the world’s highest incidence of acid attacks.

The easy availability of nitric, hydrochloric and sulphuric acids, as well as a sense of impunity, have led to a sharp increase in acid attacks, said a 2011
Acid attacks | When Supreme Court on your side is not enough - Livemint

report, *Combating Acid Violence in Bangladesh, India and Cambodia* by Avon Global Center for Women and Justice at Cornell University Law School in the US.

“Acid attack perpetrators do not usually intend to kill their victims, but to cause long-lasting physical damage and emotional trauma,” according to the report.

Until 2013, acid attacks in India were seen under a broad category of crimes that caused “grievous harm”. But after a 2013 criminal amendment Act, they are now a distinct criminal offence that carries a maximum punishment of imprisonment and a fine.

The Supreme Court’s July 2013 ruling came in response to a public interest litigation (PIL) filed in 2006 by an acid attack survivor, Laxmi, who uses only one name.

“We were confident that change will follow. At least there was hope,” says Laxmi.

However, “hardly anything has changed”, said Alok Dixit, who runs the Stop Acid Attacks campaign, of which Laxmi is a part.

“The state governments are yet to plan regulation of acid sales, as our RTI (Right to Information) queries reveal. We have been filing RTIs across Uttar Pradesh and Delhi asking questions like how many raids were conducted, how much fine has been imposed, but there are either no responses or only inadequate ones.”

The 2013 Supreme Court order is only an interim one and Laxmi’s PIL has now entered its ninth year of litigation. Spanning eight years of hearings before more than 15 judges and 19 orders, the PIL offers a fatigued narrative of sheer apathy: the government seeking time to file documents, adjournments for months together, the court’s repeated directions to the government asking it to convene meetings of bureaucrats and taking measures for controlling such attacks and, on three occasions, orders issued at intervals of nearly one year.

While the acid that’s available for sale in the retail market is now diluted rather than concentrated, there is still no control or regulation or even the means of finding out the level of dilution and determining safe levels.

“Earlier concentrated acid was sold in glass bottles. Now there is more awareness and fear of consequences in Delhi and acid is being sold after dilution. However, there are many markets even now where you can buy concentrated acid,” Dixit says.

A 31-year-old acid attack survivor, who asked not to be named, says that vendors openly sell acid in her neighbourhood. “I called the police but, predictably, nothing happened. There is a normalcy around sale of acids which is chilling,” she says.

But a sub-divisional magistrate (SDM) who, under the Supreme Court order, is responsible for monitoring the sale of acid, says that random checks are conducted regularly. “Kirana (grocery) stores and other places are regularly checked. We are also filing reports where acid is found and action is being taken when we find defaulters,” he said on condition of anonymity.

Another SDM in west Delhi says loopholes are inevitable. “There are those who are authorized and they maintain records. But there are some who sell it illegally. We go to outlets and check them but 100% policing is not possible. You cannot control everyone at all times,” he said, also on
condition of anonymity.

In December 2013, the Supreme Court followed up its July order by mandating that the police must inform SDMs about acid attacks when first information reports are registered. The SDMs are required to carry out an enquiry into the procurement of acid and take action.

But conversations with both police personnel and SDMs reveal that there is no clarity whether such instructions have been issued by higher authorities.

Kiran Walia, who served as Delhi’s minister of health in the Congress-led government ousted in the December 2013 elections, said: “We have not been able to regulate it. It is the issues of such easy availability (of acids). I do know that we have hardly made headway.”

The battle against acid attacks continues. But for the woman doctor who is being treated at AIIMS and risks losing an eye and being disfigured for life, it is already too late.

This is the first in a series.
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Rational_Human  ·  a day ago

Shows the impotence of stupid laws to ban the sale of acid. Because some acids may be used for nefarious purposes, the stupid decision to regulate the sale of them all is stupefyingly authoritarian. The legitimate users of acid now face checks while the illicit users will violate the law with impunity as they have always done.

What will the SC ban next? kitchen knives since they may be used in stabbings?

ds  ·  Rational_Human  ·  15 hours ago

Why shouldn't all acid be regulated? Which regular man needs acid? The only people who need it are industries and labs. Let them get it with a licence. No reason why anyone should be able to walk into a store and buy some acid.

Rational_Human  ·  ds  ·  15 hours ago

Why should they have to get a license? Why should we increase the burden on industry because of a few criminals? Because a few people misuse it is no reason to ban something. Do we ban knives because a few murderers kill people with them? Do we ban sickles because they are used by miscreants for murder?

No consistency! And as the article clearly reveals - those who want acid for illegal purposes are able to get it despite all the bans and licensing. The only people you are burdening are legitimate industry.

Rational_Human  ·  ds  ·  10 hours ago

It's you who lacks consistency. Knives are required by ordinary people to cut stuff. Acid is not required by the majority of citizens.

Rational_Human  ·  ds  ·  10 hours ago

Who are you to decide who needs acid and who doesn't? And you blatantly ignore that the regulation is pointless - those criminals who want acid are obviously able to get it (did you even read the article). After all they require no bill and can just slip someone cash.

The legitimate industry, hobbyists, budding chemists all have to suffer because of over regulating busybodies like you. No wonder there is no thirst for knowledge in our country. People like you kill it in your sanctimonious over regulated hellhole.