

# **SAVE THE FACE**

INTRODUCTION

TO

ACID BURN

Acid-throwing Offence

Impact on Women

Prevention of Offences (By Acids) Bill, 2013

Inclusion in Disability Group (By Acids) Bill, 2016

## Preface

It is disheartening to note that certain sections of society are still living with the viciousness of cruelty, causing physical and social disfigurement by throwing acid on women which causes grievous damage to their personal and professional lives.

This project is undertaken to draw the attention of the competent authorities towards the problems associated with acid throwing (vitriolage) incidents, as also to highlight the laxity of the rules and certain sections of the law, which allow the offenders to walk away with minimal punishment.

As a leading PLASTIC AND RECONSTRUCTIVE SURGEON, it is my attempt to provide access to professional help and to stress upon the importance of suitable primary treatment as well as definitive reconstructive procedures to these victims.

Relatively insufficient infrastructural support at some of the most remote villages and non-metropolitan cities does not allow these victims to get quality treatment which can not only reduce the complexities of deformities, but also help save some of the vital structures like vision, thus improving quality of life.

As an expression of responsibility to the community and to extend the benefit of scientific advancement in the field of Reconstructive Plastic Surgery, it is proposed to offer **Voluntary Service** to the needy at certain designated medical institutions. Highly experienced surgeons in this field across the country would be happy to extend these benefits to the Acid Burn Victims through the courtesy of Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, non-government organizations (NGOs) and other such institutions.

Often these victims need multiple stages of painstaking reconstructive surgeries over and above a prolonged professional and personal rehabilitation program and needs continuous backing through the manpower / financial support. A well-coordinated effort between various NGOs and the Union Ministry in terms of directives will go a long way in preventing occurrences of such incidences by implementing a two-pronged approach -

1. Creation of deterrence: Enhancement of the duration and intensity of the punishment of the offender.

2. Nip in the bud: Stringent action against source and supplier of the deadly weapon.

It is interesting to state some of the cases and statistics from India and the neighbouring countries with regard to acid throwing incidents, also known as vitriolage.

**Dr. Ashok Gupta**

## **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:**

### **1. Creating awareness:**

- To prevent severe deformity following acid burn by early, primary definitive and reconstructive treatment through plastic surgery.
- To make the society aware of the hardships faced by these young victims of vitriolage having facial disfigurements.
- Encouraging NGOs and other groups to come forward and participate in rehabilitation of these victims through charity.
- Early help to the victims of acid burns by the plastic surgery will help in preventing permanent deformities to the patients.
- To include the source and the supplier of the acid into the category of the "Offender". Not only the person throwing acid but also the person making the acid available along with the dealer are partners in crime and should be included in the category of "Offender".
- To enhance punishment to the "Offender" in proportion to the permanent/ functional loss/ facial disfigurement caused by Vitriolage / Acid burn injury. Appropriate punishment should be given to the "Offender" with respect to the injury/ harm s/he has caused to the victim.

### **2. Rehabilitation:**

- To enhance the existing plastic surgery setup at recognized medical colleges/ teaching hospitals/ private hospitals in the country.
- To provide specialized treatment to acid burn victims with moderate to severe facial disfigurements.
- To provide proper psychological counselling to the acid burn victims and to rehabilitate them physically/ psychologically/ socially.
- Guiding physicians to providing appropriate primary treatment to the victims of acid burn.
- To encourage the concerned departments to improve the reconstructive surgery facilities at various hospital in country.
- To educate people in rural areas regarding the reconstructive treatment available.

## **ISSUES & CHALLENGES:**

### **Acid Throwing / Vitriolage is a form of Violent Assault**

Sexual assault, Molestation and Acid Attacks on young girls have become a common story these days:

- Why do you think these incidents are recurring?
- Are culprits being punished appropriately or is the government lax?
- Shouldn't the law be amended to give immediate punishment to such offenders who wash away bright futures of young girls just because the girls are not subservient to them?
- The citizens in India are pledging to fight against global warming, nuclear war-heads corruption, terrorism etc.
- Why has no one ever called for a war against the kind of terror caused due to Acid Throwing?
- When an acid is thrown on a person, the results can be horrifying.
- Nitric, hydrochloric, or sulfuric acids all have a catastrophic effect on human flesh.

Definition: Vitriolage is a medical and legal term embodying the act as well as the purpose within itself. It means "THROWING ACID (NOTABLY CONCENTRATED SULPHURIC ACID / NITRIC ACID) ON SOMEONE WITH THE MALICIOUS INTENT TO HARM A PERSON".

Vitriolage as a phenomenon is firmly rooted in the crucible of ages bygone. Its purpose was vitriol, i.e., hatred, and has continued to be so. Its scope has nevertheless widened with the passage of time. Its causes can range from morbid jealousy and infidelity to vindictiveness/ vengeance, gangsters' internal warfare.

Another face of violence - Innovation is never in short supply when it comes to cruelty. Corrosive acid has now become the weapon of choice for a wide range of individuals determined to inflict life-long suffering on their victims. And, as usual, women are prime targets due to their vulnerable position in society.

Perpetrators of these attacks throw acid on their victims (usually at their faces), burning them, and damaging skin tissues, often exposing and sometimes dissolving the bones. The consequences of these attacks include blindness and permanent scarring of the face and body. Acid violence seems to be almost unique to South Asia, with most incidents occurring in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Easy accessibility of acid at low rates without any responsibilities (i.e. licence or legal permission) is one of the chief reasons that these countries are the hotbed of such attacks.

Acid burn occurs when living tissue is exposed to a corrosive substance such as a strong acid or base. The main types of irritant and / or corrosive products are: acids, bases, oxidizers, solvents, reducing agents and alkylants. Additionally, acid burns can be caused by some types of acid weapons e.g. Vesicants (a substance that causes blisters; used in chemical warfare), Mustard Gas and Lewisite (a colorless or brownish oily poisonous liquid; used in the gaseous form in chemical warfare during World War I) or Urticants (producing wheals and itching) and phosgene oxime.

Acid burn may:

- Need no source of heat
- Occur immediately on contact
- Be extremely painful
- Not be immediately evident or noticeable

When acid is thrown, it mostly damages the face, including the eyes, nose, lip, neck, throat, and sometimes the trunk or other body parts. It leads to deep burns and contractures of the affected area usually causing permanent damage of vital organs. Many acid attack survivors have lost either one or both the eyes. Due to this the victim is traumatized physically, psychologically and socially. Despite excellent medical care, the best that most of these women can hope for is survival. If not treated immediately, can lead to permanent disfigurement and victim spirals into depression.

Most survivors of an acid attack are forced to give up their education, occupation and other important activities in their lives stemming from time-investment for recovering from the trauma. Additionally, disfigurement puts them through difficulties which debilitate and handicap them in every conceivable way.

The scars left by acid are not only skin deep, but also soul-deep. Victims are most often faced with social isolation and ostracism that further damages their self-esteem and self-confidence, seriously undermining their professional and personal future. Women who have survived acid attacks have great difficulty in finding a job and if unmarried, as many victims tend to be, they have very little chance of ever getting married.

**HOW DISGUSTING!! WITH JUST A FEW RUPEES, ANYONE CAN BUY A WEAPON THAT CAN RUIN ANOTHER PERSON'S LIFE IN A FEW SECONDS.**

## Background:

- In 12th century pirates threw acids on the decks of the royal ships in order to raid and steal the belongings of the ship.
- During the Roman Era in 16th century, people who were supposedly rejected by God and doomed punishment began ravaging the people at the country side. They started throwing acid in the eyes of Church Bishops as an act of revenge.
- British who controlled India in 19th century defeated Turks and opposed the government of Mughals. The assailants started throwing acid on the faces of numerous women and children.

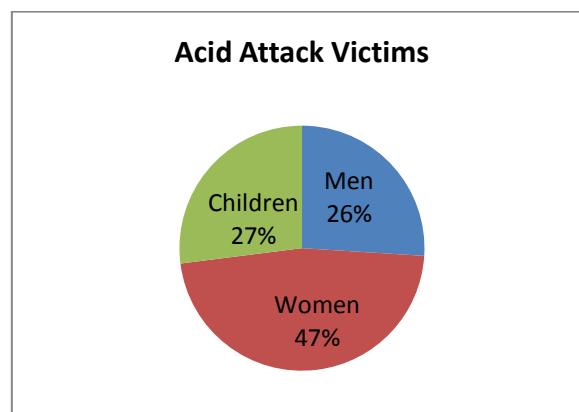
## Why it happens?

The victims are attacked for many reasons. In some cases, the attack takes place because a young girl or woman has spurned the sexual advances of a male or has rejected a proposal of marriage. Recently, however, there have been acid attacks on children, older women and sometimes also men. These attacks are often the result of family or land disputes, dowry demands or a desire for revenge.

Reasons for acid attacks during the years and the highest rate of occurrence took place over land disputes and family dispute. The next highest rate of these brutal incidents is due to refusal of relationship/ sex throughout the country.

## Who are the victims?

The victims of acid attack are Women (47%), Men (26%) & Children (27%). Sometimes domestic animals or birds are also victimized. Also, the problem of husbands and in-laws disfiguring women while attempting to secure higher dowry payments is well documented.





## Frequency of these attacks

The first documented case of acid violence was in 1967, where a young girl had acid poured on her by her admirer when his proposal of marriage was refused by her mother. Incidents of acid throwing are also on a rapid rise in Punjab, with over 50 women having suffered from acid burns on their faces or other parts of their bodies in the year of 2012. The New York Times (Dec, 26, 2001) reported that kerosene as well as acid has fast become the weapons of choice for attacks on wives in India. The numbers reported above may appear insignificant with respect to a population on over a billion people who live in South Asia today. But these numbers are only the tip of the iceberg, considering that most incidents in rural areas go unreported.

What makes the case of acid throwing more heart wrenching are the gory pictures of disfigured women who are now struggling to survive in society.

As per the statistics at Bangladesh:

- In 1996, there were 47 reported cases of acid violence.
- In 1997, the number rose to 130.
- In 1998, there were over 200 reported cases. It is likely that the number of actual cases is considerably higher.
- In 1999, the Acid Survivors Foundation started collecting data and in its first year documented 139 known cases.
- In 2000, 226 cases were documented by the Acid Survivors Foundation.
- In 2001, 343 cases were documented.
- In 2002, the highest number recorded as 484.
- In 2003, the number was 410 cases – a figure only slightly lower than the previous year.