

ACID ATTACK

When Will Women Feel Safe?

Tough laws, including provision of death sentence, have failed to protect innocent girls and women from acid attacks. The number of victims is growing every day prompting the government to go for more stringent laws. Will that help? What else can be done? News Network's Rehana Parveen Ruma investigated the crime to find out an answer.

AT 16 Nurunnahar blossomed into a beautiful young woman. She was delicately slender with her long hair falling down to her waist. Her good-looking face with large dark eyes made her the princess of her town. She was the darling of her family who thought they never would have to worry about her marriage.

The family was wrong. And Nurunnahar wished she were never a girl. She cursed the beauty she once had. Today's Nurunnahar is ugly, despised by the men who once used to flood her with marriage proposals or love letters. She is ugly not by any accident but because of a heinous attack on her by a man whose marriage offer she had rejected. She had been the victim of an acid attack, one of the many in Bangladesh.

"I hate myself for becoming the beautiful girl that I was," said Nurunnahar, her face covered with a headscarf to hide the ugliness caused by acid burns. She described her miseries as manifold.

The pain of losing her beauty and the sufferings caused by a social rejection. "At first there were people who used to show sympathy. The same people turn their faces from me. My family feels humiliated," moans the girl, tears welling up in her eyes.

If you have daughter you have lots of things to worry about her apart from the hazards of everyday life. You can't be sure if she will be back home safe from her school or work place. Because women are almost always going to be harassed, this way or that way. They are being teased by wayward boys, being raped or killed at home or on the streets. They are being kidnapped and trafficked to brothels abroad. And they are being attacked by acid, a chemical that burns and disfigures the face causing death in some cases.

In case of acid attacks the culprits are mostly the majnuis — the lovesick youngsters whose love or marriage offers are rejected by girls. In many cases the victims are school or college girls, the budding beauty. In most cases the attackers are neighbours.

Recalling her tragedy, Nurunnahar said, "In 1995 when I was at class ten a young boy of my village told me he is in love with me, but he got angry as I refused him. One day at the dead of night the boy along with 10 friends stormed into our house and threw acid at my face. I was rushed to Barisal Medical College and three days later shifted to Dhaka Pangu Hospital. I underwent treatment there for seven months."

"It was so painful. My face was burning like a hell," she recalled. "It shattered my dreams. But I did not give up. I resolved to start a new life no matter I'm beautiful or not."

Now a student of Dhaka Commerce College Nurunnahar thinks of starting a career. She hardly dreams of marriage, even though her aging and ailing mother pass sleepless nights worrying about her.

Nurunnahar is no exception. Hundreds of girls and women are falling prey to acid attack every year. Some of the incidents are known while many others go unreported.

While investigating the crime, a relatively new phenomenon in Bangladesh society, this correspondent had found a number of acid victims in the office of Naripakha, a women rights organisation, and at the centre of Women Directorate. Nurunnahar, Beena and Farul Akhtar are among them.

"It's not possible to reduce the crime by only enacting tougher laws...we need proper execution of laws to bring the situation under control," said Advocate Salma Ali of Bangladesh Mohila Ainjibee Samity.

Beena fell victim to acid attack when she tried to save her younger sisters from the hands of miscreants at Hajaribagh in the city. Her mother and sister also suffered burn injuries in the attack, but the damage caused to Beena is most severe.

She has now recovered well after seven operations in eight months. But the acid burn has destroyed her face, neck and part of her chest. In the beginning, she used to feel shy to come out of her house, now she is desperate. "Why should I feel shy for the crime of the derailed and ruined youths?" she said.

Beena, now a worker of Naripakha, passes her time chatting with acid attack victims at hospitals. This is one way of sharing their miseries and comforting each other.

Parul Akhtar, a housewife, came under acid attack while she was sleeping along with her minor son Shuman. Her son also suffered burn injuries in the attack. Her left eye, face and

entire chest were burned. According to statistics provided by Bangladesh Mohila Ainjibee Samity, a total of 174 women fell victim to acid attack in nine months since April, 1998. Among the victims, there were 10 girls under 10 years old, 79 between ages 11 and 20 and 15 from age 20 through 30. The number of victims aged above 30 is not many which means majority of the victims are adolescent and young girls.

In one of its reports, Bangladesh Manabadhikar Samannaya Parishad showed that a total of 89 incidents of acid attack occurred in 1996 while 181 in 1995. The report also found most of the victims as teenage school girls.

An investigative report, conducted to identify the reasons behind the incidents of

day this year, reports occupying the newspaper front pages. According to the leading vernacular daily Ittefaq, at least six incidents of acid attack were reported in January while two in two weeks of February this year.

From where the criminals collect this deadly acid? Acid is an easiest weapon of attack and it is very much available too. It has its widespread industrial use in school laboratories, medical college and hospitals, pathological lab, textile mills, tannery, battery manufacturing industry, fertilizer factory and so on.

There are some shops in the city's Hathkholra road which sell acid through tender. Nazmul Islam is the salesman of such a shop in the area.

He said people who buy acid from these shops buy the whole composite and the price of acid depend on its quality and property. The acids which are harmful to human skin are sulfuric, hydrochloric and nitric. Prices of these acids range from Tk 900 to 1800 per containers of two and half litres. "I don't think that there is any possibility for the criminals to buy such a sealed container of acid to throw on any one," he said.

According to a report, carried by the Daily Janakantha, Shahidul and Nazrul, who hurled acid on one Rahima Begum at Nayamat village in Fatullah thana of Narayanganj on January 1 this year, had collected acid from a factory of which they were the workers.

Acid victim Beena also said that anyone can collect acid from Hazaribagh tannery. Besides, acid is openly sold in some areas of the city's Nawabpur, Armatola and Mogultilla areas. One litre of nitric acid is sold in these areas at Tk 40, hydrochloric at Tk 12, sulfuric at Tk 11 and hydrogen per oxide at Tk 35.

However, the shopowners of these areas claimed they do not sell acid to just anybody and everybody. Usually goldsmiths

and battery manufacturers buy acid, they said. When contacted acting Director General of Drug Administration Abdul Malek said although there is a ban on open sale of acid, some industries and chemical laboratories need acid regularly. So, the chemical traders, selected by the Administration, can sell acid.

"There is no guarantee that the trend of acid attack will stop with the closure of acid shops. To cause harm to one's body, the acid available from used and old batteries is more than enough," the DG said.

Is there any effective treatment for the burned patients? The chemical burn of acid, in fact, damages the tissues of the human skin that creates a cover on the human body. When the wounds dry up, the folds of skin get pasted, creating a hard scar on it. It's caused by Fri Brin metals. There is a chance to get full recovery of burn on the skin's upper layer; if it affects the inner layer the chance of recovery is slim.

Describing various methods of treatment, Dr Shafat Hossain of Dhaka Pangu Hospital emphasised on the will power of the patients, atmosphere and temperature to ensure better recovery. He also stressed the necessity of maintaining some restrictions by the doctors themselves.

Responding to a question whether an acid patient can regain his previous state through plastic surgery, Dr Shafat said, "not fully, but one can get back a condition which is enough for free movement in society."

Dr Nowsher of Mumbai Hospital, India visited Bangladesh in 1997. During his visit, Dr Nowsher, also the president of International Plastic Surgery Association, had laid

emphasis on indigenous treatment methods instead of depending on highly expensive foreign treatment. In Bangladesh, there is only one Burn Institute at Dhaka Medical College Hospital which was earlier known as Plastic Surgery unit. Unfortunately, the unit has got only eight beds which is too inadequate to meet the growing need.

Has the country any effective law to control the growing incidents of acid attack? In wake of rising incidents of rape, acid attack and repression on women, the government had enacted a law, "The Women and Child Repression Control Act-1995", that provided for death sentence as maximum

tougher punishment. Nurunnahar, the acid victim, said: "In my case, six of the accused, out of 11, had been acquitted by the court while two were sentenced to death. But they (the two convicts) are planning to appeal to the High Court. I don't know what will ultimately happen, but the acquitted persons are now threatening to kill me."

When contacted Dr Laila Khan of Sammilita Nari Samaj was rather angry against the political parties saying that, "we a small number of organisation are doing movement against acid attacks, but the political parties are doing nothing in this regard."

Who are working with the acid victims? The Women Repression Control Cell of Bangladesh Women Directorate, Nari Pakkha, a non-government organisation, and Bangladesh Mohila Ainjibee Samity are helping acid victims.

Shamim Akhtar, a research officer at the Directorate, said it has a center to provide shelter to the acid victims and "we are entrusted to put forward recommendations on acid import, production and its use and control."

What is the psychological perspective behind the crime? There was a time when psychologists used to think that urban youths indulged in various crimes, including attack on women, due to lack of education, unemployment and family troubles. These ideas have been proved wrong in the course of time.

Modern psychologists have identified three reasons behind the crimes done by youths: socio-genetic, psychogenic and biogenic. Socio-genetic: Poverty, illiteracy, acute unemployment and lack of habitats may lead the youth to the path of destruction. As a result of which, the youths, particularly the younger ones, lose their affection for others and moral values. But there may be exceptions; with the same social background one may become a good person while another a criminal.

Psychogenic: One's attitude towards truth and falsehood may beget crime. This theory holds a person responsible for his behaviour and it says that one may indulge in offence driven by his or her personal mental unrest. Continued criminal incentives may also lead a person towards offence.

Biogenic: Many a psychiatrist think that crime is a genetic problem. The theory involves the biological process of the human being. According to the theory, brain tumor is the result of organic faults. The endocrine and neurological faults which develop during pregnancy or the childhood may also create the tendency of crime.

After the analysis of various acid attacks, it was found that most of the acid attackers are formerly involved in criminal acts.

Ms Hamida Begum, a teacher of Dhaka University's Psychology Department, said the acid attackers are not mental patients because they carry out their crime very carefully.

As the existing law failed to combat the crime, the present Awami League government is considering to further toughen the law and plug some loopholes. The law is now under consideration in Parliament.

"It's not possible to reduce the crime by only enacting tougher laws...we need proper execution of laws to bring the situation under control," said Advocate Salma Ali of Bangladesh Mohila Ainjibee Samity.

According to media reports, the government meanwhile has constituted a six-member task force, headed by Joint Secretary of the Home Ministry Janabul Haque. The task force has been

also carrying out a campaign through radio and television to raise the social awareness against the crime.

In April, 1997, Nari Pakkha had organised a workshop on acid attack and its victims, discussing the nature of acid attack, social perspective, behaviour to acid victims and legal process.

Dr Salma Ali of the Mohila Ainjibee Samity said her organisation is always ready to render legal service to the acid victims.

Unborn Clash with the Dead over Dam Project

To boost industrialisation, the Namibian government is planning to construct a hydroelectric power station on the Cunene river. But some of the people facing resettlement are opposed to the project. They are particularly concerned, reports Gemini News Service, about the threat to their ancestors' graves.

NAMIBIANS who have yet to be born stand to benefit from a proposed hydroelectric dam project. But it is the dead who are holding up construction.

"This is the place where my people are," says Hepu Muhenje, an elder from Ete village close to the Epupa Falls. "I struggle and choke to think that this area may be covered with water."

The government is determined to go ahead with the Epupa scheme, which it sees as crucial to future industrial development. It has promised to relocate the families directly affected, as well as the grave sites. But many of the local Himba people are unhappy about the plans.

Muhenje argues that it is not by chance that their ancestors were laid to rest at sites dotting the Epupa landscape, but because this is where the deceased chose to be buried.

As a dead person is carried on two poles for burial, he explains, their spirit indicates the direction the carriers should take and where they should stop.

The dead should be respected so that you can prosper," says Muhenje. "If you do them wrong — and to move them is to do them wrong — they will come back to you and cause mislapses."

But the Himba's less-traditional neighbours, the Herero, show little sympathy for the concern over graves, and are more enthusiastic about construction of the dam.

Mika Muhentye, adviser to Chief John Thom, from the Herero village of Ohandungu, dismisses the importance of the issue.

"There is no reason why people cannot go to the place where graves have been moved and pay traditional homage there," he argues.

The two groups, who speak the same language with minor differences in vocabulary, have always disagreed over their approach to burial sites, and Epupa will not be inundated by the Epupa dam.

However, Muhentye says: "Those people who are against the building of the dam are against development. This is the government's decision.

Christ of Maletsky writes from Windhoek

Power for Namibia

Area: 824,000 sq km
Pop: 1.5m
GNP per head: \$2000
Life expectancy: 59
Avg. annual GNP growth 1985-95: 2.9%

Epupa
Otiwarongo
Okahandja
Windhoek
Walvis Bay
Mariental
SOUTH AFRICA

Proposed site for \$650-900m dam - an extension of infrastructure on the river

Epupa area produces special fruit which sustain our way of life.

The Himba believe that the dam will sever the bond between the people, their ancestors and the land, which, they say, amounts to the Himba way of life — the core of their identity.

"If the Government goes through with the dam then the bond will be cut. I will be cast away. There will be no life," says Kapika. "I never want to go away. They will have to build it over my dead body."

He wants a more community-based, environmentally sound style. "Through our community-based programme, tourists will come and live with the people and not rush in, take pictures and leave," he says.

The writer is Assistant News Editor of The Namibian newspaper.

Children Bring Healthcare to Mumbai Shantytowns!

PEOPLE living on the streets and in shantytowns in the western Indian metropolis of Mumbai are getting medical succour from extraordinary, though familiar, quarters: street children.

Armed with first-aid kits, street children trained in the basics of medicine are doing 'medical' rounds to bring healthcare to people who, like them, live on the fringes of society. They also bring immediate medical attention to rail and road accident victims.

The innovative programme introduced by the non-governmental organisation Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA) has already trained 23 street children for the purpose.

The 'child doctors', as they are called, have been equipped with a first-aid box and an identity card, a newspaper has reported. A number of these child doctors are reformed drug addicts.

The children were recently trained at a five-day workshop. YUVA representative Abbas Rangwani told the Indian Express. For the moment, the trained child doctors are concentrating on road and train accident victims.

One of the child doctors deputised at the railway station finds the job challenging but asks for more power. At present he can handle railway accident victims only after getting clearance from the railroad police and the head of the railroad station.

This could be anywhere up to three hours after the accident. If 'bal (child) doctors' are given power, we could swiftly take the injured to the nearest hospital," Gopal, one of the child doctors, was quoted as saying.

The child doctors working in the shantytowns feel the need for medical facilities here. "Reti Bunder in Mahim has over 5,000 homeless people including 400 home children. They ignore all common ailments and visit municipal hospitals only when the patient's condition is critical," Bijay Singh Chauhan, a 19-year-old 'doctor' said.

The only problem is that they are not always taken seriously by the people or the hospital staff. Narrating one such experience to the paper, Dutta Jadhav, a child doctor: "A few days ago, we found a sick man on the platform at Dadar railway station. We carried him outside and gave some food. When we approached the station master for help, he fired us saying that the food we gave him was responsible for his condition."

Colonial Rule Helped Improve Women's Status

By Frederick Noronha

In her book 'Kaleidoscope of Women in Goa', Gracias looks at how the situation of women changed here between the early 16th century and 1961, when the Portuguese were ousted from here. Under the Portuguese Civil Code of 1867, still in force in Goa, on the death of the husband, half the property of the family goes to the wife and the remaining half is divided equally among his children irrespective of gender.

COLONIAL rule may actually have helped improve the status of women in a tiny Indian state, a researcher has suggested. According to the historian Fatima Silva Gracias, the early arrival of the Portuguese in Asia's first European colony Goa, which was conquered in 1510, changed some of the retrograde practices that earlier affected women.

Earlier, says Gracias, women were a dominated lot, the birth of a daughter was not always welcome and pre-puberty marriages were common. Seclusion, polygamy and widow-immolation prevailed. Widow remarriages were not permitted, women had no property rights.

In her book 'Kaleidoscope of Women in Goa', Gracias looks at how the situation of women changed here between the early 16th century and 1961, when the Portuguese were ousted from here.

"Portuguese rule made a difference to the status of women in Goa," asserts Gracias, though her book also highlights the harshness of colonial rule here.

Before the Portuguese conquered Goa, this region was under the control of various Hindu and Muslim rulers. Gracias feels that Alfonso de Albuquerque, who laid the foundations of the Portuguese empire in India, showed "some concern" for the position of women in Goa.

Goan women were given the right to a share in their father's property in the first century of the Portuguese rule in Goa. In the rest of India women had no such corresponding right until the middle of the 20th century, she notes.

Gracias concedes that some of the Portuguese measures were prompted by the motive of having more conversions. In the earlier centuries of Portuguese rule, economic incentives were provided to "persuade" women to convert to Christianity.

Sops for conversion included property rights. Hindu widows and orphans were at one stage not entitled to property of their dead husbands and fathers unless they converted to Christianity.

But liberal and revolutionary ideas from the rest of Europe also influenced Portugal, thereby making changes in Goa. Under the Portuguese Civil Code of 1867, still in force in Goa, on the death of the husband, half the property of the family goes to the wife and the remaining half was divided equally among his children irrespective of gender.

But, Gracias concedes that, though daughters were granted property rights — by law and on

paper — fathers and brothers found ways of denying daughters and sisters of their rights. This happens in today's Goa too, where women often "voluntarily" give up their claim to family properties. Wealthy families also found ways of depriving daughters-in-law of family property by making them sign a contract before marriage agreeing to forgo their claim to half the property of the husband, she says.

Sometimes, the laws were not effectively implemented. Goa's colonial rulers were at times reluctant to impose strict measures against some customs of Goan society, fearing they might provoke resentment or revolt.

Measures to curb prostitution were not strictly implemented. Prostitution was responsible for the large-scale spread of venereal disease in Goa and adjoining areas. Goa's Portuguese rulers failed to end the slave trade until the second half of the 19th century, she notes.

Education for women was neglected. In Portugal, where conservative politics also held sway over certain periods, a woman's only purpose in life was considered to be the bearing and rearing of children.

Despite this, many women distinguished themselves in the last five decades of Portuguese

rule in Goa, early this century. They boast of achievements in the fields of nursing, teaching, creative writing, music and politics, says the historian.

Goa's poor economy compelled many to migrate and their womenfolk nurtured children single-handedly, as "economic-widows" of sorts, says Gracias.

In the absence of the husband due to migration, the workload of the wife naturally increased. Currently too, Goa has a high rate of emigration and many from here are settled abroad, including in West Asia.

She also looks at the trends in "feminine migration" — mainly to major cities like nearby Bombay. Women worked in offices, schools, hospitals factories or as maids in the homes of British or Parsi families. Life was hard, but remittances sent back could be invested in jewellery, land or houses.

High literacy in recent years is another factor that helped boost the condition of women.

Yet, discriminatory attitudes are deeply entrenched. Boys are still valued more highly than girls, despite the latter faring well in education. There are very few women holding important posts at the top levels.

— India Abroad News Service

