

ADDRESSING THE PLIGHT OF ACID ATTACK SURVIVORS IN INDIA: A SOCIO- LEGAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Over the last decade or so, acid attacks have come to be recognised as one of the more disturbing crimes against the person in India, with hundreds of women—and a smaller number of men—bearing the brunt of this form of brutality. Various described as “acid throwing” or vitriolage, the offence is essentially the deliberate use of a corrosive substance to maim, scar or disfigure another human being. What it leaves behind is rarely confined to the wounds themselves: survivors are forced to live with permanent scarring, in many cases lifelong disability, and a layered burden of physical and psychological damage that follows them well into the future. Domestic abuse, jilted egos and personal rivalries continue to make up the bulk of the precipitating causes in the Indian context. Reports indicate that nearly 78% of these incidents arise from intensely personal triggers—spurned romantic advances, refused marriage proposals, or strained domestic relationships. The victims, alarmingly, are most often young women between the ages of 11 and 30, and the upward trend in such cases shows little sign of abating. The fact that concentrated acid can be purchased for a pittance in ordinary kirana shops, hardware stores, and supermarkets—in towns and villages alike—turns this everyday commodity into a chillingly accessible weapon, even though unregulated sale and possession have been brought within the ambit of non-bailable offences.ⁱ Against this backdrop, the present paper undertakes a critical assessment of the lived realities of acid attack survivors in India and interrogates how far the existing statutory and policy framework actually delivers on its promises.

Key words: Acid, Women, violence, Injuries, disability.

I. INTRODUCTION

*“You hold the acid that charred my dreams Your heart bore no love. It had the venom stored There was never any love in your eyes They burn me with caustic glance I am sad that your corrosive name will always be part of my identity that I carry with this face. Time will not come to my rescue Every surgery will remind me of you You will hear and you will be told that the face You burned is the face I love now. You will hear about me in the darkness of confinement The time will be burdened for you Then you will know that I am alive Free and thriving and living my dreams”.*ⁱⁱ

These lines are far more than verse penned by a courageous survivor. They lay bare, in unflinching terms, the lifelong burdens that an acid attack leaves behind—the searing physical

pain, the quiet erosion of mental health, the indifference of those around her, the stigma that follows her wherever she goes, and a thousand smaller cruelties that resurface long after the perpetrator has walked away.

An overwhelming share of those who suffer such attacks are women, and the assailants are usually not strangers but persons in close proximity—husbands, estranged partners, or members of the extended family. A patriarchal social order, the dirt-cheap availability of corrosive substances, simmering envy among acquaintances, and the wounded ego of a rejected suitor frequently combine to turn acid into a tool of retribution wielded against women.

Figures put out by the National Crime Records Bureau paint a sobering picture: in 2023 alone, 207 acid attack cases were registered across the country, and the period from 2017 to 2021 saw over a thousand such incidents being placed on record. While the numbers do show some movement—249 attacks with 67 attempts in 2019 came down to 176 attacks and 73 attempts by 2021ⁱⁱⁱ—practitioners and officials caution against reading the dip as real progress. A good number of incidents never enter official records at all, deterred by the fear of social shame, the dread of further reprisal from the accused, or the simple lack of confidence that the criminal justice machinery will deliver. There is also the problem of inconsistent classification: what one State's police treats as a clear acid attack, another may book under a different head, distorting the comparative picture. Looking at the geographic spread, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal continue to lead by a considerable margin, between them accounting for roughly half the cases reported nationally in any given year.^{iv} In When the data is disaggregated by sex, the gendered nature of the crime becomes hard to miss—women accounted for 107 of the 176 cases recorded in 2021.^v

Conviction rates, however, tell a far less encouraging story. Even though chargesheets were filed in some 89% of the registered acid attack cases in 2021, only one in five ended in conviction, going by NCRB figures. Despite the slew of legislative interventions undertaken since 2013—most notably, the introduction of specific provisions in the Indian Penal Code, 1860 to deal with the offence—the curve of acid attacks has barely flattened. It bears mention that the Ministry of Home Affairs, by way of an advisory in 2015, called upon every State to fast-track the prosecution of such cases.^{vi}

The toll that an acid attack exacts on its victim is nothing short of catastrophic. Few crimes can rival it in the way it dismantles a person's body, livelihood, and standing in the community all at once.^{vii} Survivors are frequently left contending with deep tissue burns, partial or complete loss of vision, and disfigurement so severe that ordinary social life becomes nearly impossible—losing their jobs, their friendships, and the ability to fend for themselves financially. Beyond the visible wounds lies an equally heavy psychological burden, with many battling persistent anxiety, depressive episodes, and the symptoms typically associated with post-traumatic stress. The economic dimension is no less daunting: the road to recovery usually involves a long string of reconstructive surgeries, skin grafts, prolonged medication courses, and follow-up consultations, each of which puts further pressure on already strained household finances. Where the resulting impairment limits mobility or eyesight, returning to the workforce becomes an uphill task—and even when survivors are willing and able to work, prospective employers, however sympathetic they may sound in conversation, often quietly look the other

way.

Once the scars settle and the face that the survivor knew is altered beyond recognition, society's response is rarely kind. Friends and neighbours quietly distance themselves, and survivors, sensing this withdrawal, often retreat into themselves. Education that was once on track is abandoned mid-way; jobs are quit or lost; even the routine errand of stepping out for groceries becomes a daunting prospect. The cruellest part of all this is the invisible verdict society passes—that the survivor must hide her face and cover her scars, as though she were the one in the wrong. Stares, whispered remarks, and the involuntary recoil of strangers become daily company, leaving survivors to navigate the world in a perpetual state of unease.^{viii}

Successive governments at the Centre have responded by tightening the statutory and regulatory framework around acid attacks. In 2013, the Supreme Court directed every State Government to bring the over-the-counter sale of acid under effective control—mandating, among other things, that buyers furnish proof of identity and a credible reason for the purchase. Hospitals, both public and private, were also brought under an obligation to extend immediate medical treatment to survivors free of charge.

II. LAWS AND POLICIES TO COMBAT ACID ATTACKS

2.1. The Constitution of India:

Article 21 of the Constitution, which secures the right to life and personal liberty, has been judicially expanded over the decades to read into it the right to live with human dignity—a guarantee that necessarily covers survivors of acid attacks as much as any other citizen. Read alongside it, Article 41 places a duty on the State, “within the limits of its economic capacity and development,” to make effective provision “for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement, and in other cases of undeserved want.” Together, these provisions furnish the constitutional bedrock on which the State's obligations towards acid attack survivors—medical, rehabilitative, and economic—ultimately rest.

2.2. 226th Report of Law Commission of India:

The Law Commission of India, in its 226th Report, drew pointed attention to the offence of acid violence and observed that while the crime is not, in strict legal terms, confined to women alone, in the Indian setting it bears an unmistakably gendered character. Until the **Criminal Law Amendment Act (2013)**, was brought in, India had no stand-alone provision dealing with acid attacks. Such cases were prosecuted as ordinary instances of **grievous hurt**, a category now mapped onto Sections 114, 117 and 118 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023. Of these, Section 118 expressly contemplates grievous hurt caused by a dangerous weapon or instrument, an umbrella term that takes within its sweep any “corrosive substance.”

The 226th report of the Law Commission observed,

“victim of acid attacks suffer a great deal due to slow judicial process, inadequate compensation and obviously from the after effects of the acid attack itself. Thus, there is an urgent need to legislate distinct sections in the IPC to deal with acid attack and to set up a Criminal Injuries Compensation Board in India to deal with such cases in an effective and efficient manner, to help the victims of acid attacks to get compensation for medical expenses and rehabilitation

apart from making Section 357 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 mandatory in certain respects.”^{ix}

In practice, however, the omnibus provisions on grievous hurt proved to be a poor fit for the peculiar pattern of injuries that an acid attack inflicts on a woman’s body—to her face, her chest, her arms, often to her eyes. Just as significant was the inability of those provisions to underwrite compensation of any meaningful sort: there are reported instances of survivors walking away with nothing at all, and others in which the sum awarded was as paltry as Rs 1,000 or Rs 5,000—figures that, even at the time, bore no relation to the medical and rehabilitative costs they were left to meet.

2.3. Justice Verma Committee Report:

The Justice J.S. Verma Committee, set up in the wake of the December 2012 Delhi gang-rape, took up the gaps left by the prevailing legal regime and recommended that “acid-attacks be made a specifically defined offence under IPC, and that the victim be compensated by the accused.” In the words of the Committee:

“The gender specificity and discriminatory nature of this offence does not allow us to ignore this offence as yet another crime against women. We recommend that acid attacks be specifically defined as an offence in the IPC, and that the victim be compensated by the accused. However, in relation to crimes against women, the Central and State governments must contribute substantial corpus to frame compensation fund. We note that the existing Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill, 2012, does include a definition of acid attack.”^x

2.4. Insertion of new provisions in Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 :

The 2023 overhaul of the criminal codes carried this protective architecture forward. Section 124 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023—which traces its lineage to the now-repealed Sections 326A and 326B of the Indian Penal Code, 1860—criminalises the deliberate use of acid to inflict grievous injury and prescribes a minimum sentence of ten years’ imprisonment for the offender. The corresponding provision dealing with the attempt to throw or administer acid (the erstwhile Section 326B IPC) carries a floor of five years.

Apart from this, “Section 396 Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023” lays down the framework for the Victim Compensation Scheme. The provision places a positive obligation on every State, acting in consultation with the Centre, to constitute a dedicated Victim Compensation Fund out of which monetary relief is to be disbursed. The actual modalities—quantum, eligibility, and procedure—are governed by the scheme that each State has chosen to frame for itself. The relief is not confined to the victim alone; where the crime has caused loss or injury, dependants who need rehabilitative support can also draw upon the fund.

2.5. Central Victim Compensation Fund (CVCF):

Layered over this State-level architecture is the Central Victim Compensation Fund (CVCF), which the Ministry of Home Affairs operationalised with a seed corpus of ₹200 crore. The animating idea behind the CVCF is to plug the wide disparities that have crept into the compensation amounts notified by various States and Union Territories, by supplementing—rather than supplanting—the State schemes already in place. Survivors of acid attack, rape, human trafficking, and victims who have suffered burns or permanent disability, along with the dependants of those who have lost their lives, fall within the protected categories. Eligibility,

however, is not automatic; the survivor must accompany the application with a declaration that no compensation has been received from the Central or State Government, and must show either a substantial dent in family income that makes daily survival difficult, or medical expenses that have crossed the household's financial breaking point. Importantly, the cover extends to survivors and dependants under Section 357A(4) CrPC even where the offender remains untraced.

The ceiling under the scheme is fixed at ₹3,00,000. Where the survivor happens to be under fourteen years of age, the scheme contemplates an additional grant of ₹1,50,000 over and above the basic amount.

2.6. Non-registration of FIR:

The statutory framework also goes a step further by criminalising institutional failures. A police officer who declines to register an FIR in an acid attack matter, or who fails to record material evidence, exposes himself to imprisonment of up to two years for dereliction of duty. In parallel, any hospital—whether run by the State or in the private sector—that refuses to treat a survivor faces criminal liability with imprisonment that may extend to one year.^{xi}

2.7. National Commission for Women (NCW) - Scheme for Relief and Rehabilitation of Offences (by Acids) on Women and Children':

At its core, the NCW scheme is geared towards ensuring that survivors of acid violence receive the trinity of supports that recovery demands—timely medical intervention, sustained psychosocial care, and a measure of financial backing to tide over the long road ahead. The scheme also mooted the idea of setting up Criminal Injuries Compensation Boards at the central, State, and district levels, conceived as specialised forums that would primarily deal with cases of acid-related violence.

2.8. NALSA (Legal Services to Victims of Acid Attacks) Scheme 2016:

The principal goals that animate the NALSA scheme can be summarised under five heads:

1 Reinforcing legal aid frameworks from the national level right down to the taluka, so that survivors can in practice access the statutory protections and relief schemes available to them.

2. Securing meaningful access to medical care and rehabilitation for those who have suffered acid attacks.

3 Building awareness among survivors regarding what the law actually offers them, working through Legal Services Authorities, empanelled lawyers, para-legal volunteers and the network of legal aid clinics.

4 Training and sensitisation of every stakeholder who comes into contact with survivors—empanelled advocates, para-legal volunteers, civil servants, police officers, NGOs and frontline service providers—through structured training programmes.

5 Encouraging empirical research and documentation to surface the gaps in existing statutes and schemes, and to channel concrete reform proposals to the authorities concerned.

2.9 The Victim of acid attack, rehabilitation, support and healthcare Bill, 2022

It focuses on aims at putting in place a comprehensive scheme of rehabilitation and relief for survivors of acid attacks, and incidentally, to address matters that necessarily go with such relief. To that end, the Bill envisages the creation of two parallel bodies—a Central Authority and corresponding State Authorities for the rehabilitation of survivors of acid violence. At the

State level, the Authority is conceived as the nodal agency on the ground: a single window through which a survivor can access every compensation scheme she is otherwise scattered across, and a body that is meant to drive the day-to-day implementation of the Act, including all aspects of rehabilitation and relief. The functions assigned to such Authority cover the following ground:

- (1) Working in tandem with the relevant Ministries, departments, statutory bodies and other competent authorities to secure for the survivor monetary relief, social reintegration, personal safety, protective measures, dignified treatment, and a meaningful guard against re-victimisation or the repetition of any further attack;
- (2) Ensuring that the various agencies involved in the rehabilitation and support process work in a coordinated manner rather than at cross purposes;
- (3) Initiating its own enquiries and constituting fact-finding teams whenever an incident of acid violence demands closer scrutiny;
- (4) Keeping track of how the funds placed at the Authority's disposal are sanctioned and ultimately spent;
- (5) Working closely with the District and State Legal Services Authorities to ensure that survivors receive timely and effective legal assistance;
- (6) Advising the appropriate Government on the empanelment of hospitals and other service providers, and on the broader question of what psychological, vocational and ancillary support a survivor is likely to need;
- (7) Suggesting to the State concerned the policy measures necessary to police the import, manufacture, movement, storage, sale and distribution of acid and other corrosive substances;
- (8) Making recommendations to the State Governments on how to operationalise, with greater effect, the various rehabilitation programmes already on paper and on what preventive steps may help check fresh attacks;
- (8) Organising training and sensitisation modules for functionaries drawn from both governmental and non-governmental settings;
- (9) Forging working partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organisations that can extend specialist services and technical inputs—ranging from vocational training and education to healthcare, nutrition counselling, mental health support, and legal aid;
- (10) Generating public awareness about the provisions of the Act and the rules made thereunder; and discharging such other functions as the Authority may consider necessary or as may be prescribed.

2.10. Provisions under the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023:

In acid attack prosecutions, Sections 119 and 124 of the **Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023** occupy a position of considerable importance. Section 119 is essentially an enabling provision: it permits, but does not compel the court to draw certain presumptions of fact. The phrasing is “may presume,” not “shall presume,” and the discretion lies entirely with the judge depending on the texture of the evidence on record. The provision allows the court to take into account,

among other things, the ordinary course of natural events, the conduct of the parties before and after the incident, and the manner in which public and private affairs are typically transacted, weighing all of these against the specific facts and circumstances placed before it.

Stepping beyond the Evidence Act, the retail sale and stocking of acid and similar corrosive substances caustic chemicals is governed in India by the Model Rules (Possession and Sale), 2013 issued under the Poisons Act, 1919. The parent statute itself spells out a graduated penalty regime for those who deal in acid or similar corrosive chemicals without proper authorisation: a first-time offender is liable to be imprisoned for up to a month, and any subsequent contravention attracts a longer sentence of up to six months.

Taken together, these statutes, rules, schemes and policy interventions add up to what looks, on paper, like a fairly thick architecture of protection. The candid assessment, though, has to be that despite all this institutional scaffolding, acid violence has not been displaced from Indian social life—it has merely had to find ways around the new safeguards.

III. ADDRESSING ACID ATTACKS: JUDICIAL INTERVENTIONS

Where the legislature has, at times, dragged its feet, the higher judiciary has stepped in to fill the breach. A series of decisions over the last decade has helped translate constitutional commitments into workable directions for the State, the police, hospitals and acid retailers—and, more importantly, has begun to give the survivor a recognised seat in the conversation. A few of these rulings deserve closer attention:

3.1. *Laxmi v. Union of India*^{xii}

This case marks a watershed moment in Indian acid-attack jurisprudence. The petitioner, a girl of just fifteen, was set upon by three men on a Delhi street—the attack a direct retaliation for having spurned the marriage proposal of the principal accused, who, the police investigation later established, had orchestrated the entire assault. The injuries left her with serious physical and mental trauma—life-altering physical wounds and equally deep psychological scars. In 2006, she moved the Supreme Court under Article 32, urging the introduction of a dedicated statutory regime to address acid attacks and pressing for corresponding amendments to the Indian Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Indian Evidence Act. Until the 2013 amendments, the criminal law had no provision that treated acid violence as a stand-alone offence; offenders were therefore prosecuted under Section 320 IPC (grievous hurt) or allied provisions, none of which carried penalties remotely commensurate with the gravity of the crime. The petitioner's prayers before the Court can broadly be grouped under four heads: first, that the Court issue binding directions to regulate the open-market sale and purchase of acid; second, that acid attacks be recognised in the criminal codes as a discrete offence in their own right; third, that a framework be put in place to compensate survivors adequately; and fourth, that the punishment prescribed for the offence be made commensurate with its enormity. The Supreme Court eventually disposed of the petition in 2013 by handing down a series of directions, the more significant among them being these:

“no shopkeeper may sell acid to anyone below the age of 18; every retail sale must be backed by the production of a photo identity card by the purchaser, which the shopkeeper is duty-bound to record; the floor for compensation payable to an acid attack survivor is to

stand at not less than ₹3,00,000 as against the earlier ₹50,000; and the entire cost of the survivor's medical treatment must be absorbed by the State concerned."

Although these directions have technically held the field since 2013, the unhappy truth is that acid attacks continue to be reported with disturbing regularity. The reason is no mystery—regulation of retail acid sale has remained largely on paper, with the result that, in case after case, the accused has had no difficulty procuring the substance over the counter. What is therefore urgently called for is genuine, on-the-ground enforcement of these guidelines by the State machinery, and a willingness to act with firmness against authorities that fail to do their bit. Anything short of that will leave us going around in circles.

3.2. Parivartan Kendra and Anr. V. Union of India and Ors^{xiii}

Through this judgment, the Supreme Court directed both the Union and the State Governments to extend the bouquet of disability-related entitlements—including reservation in public employment and access to other welfare programmes—to survivors of acid attacks. The directions came in a petition arising out of a 2012 attack on two young women from Bihar, the matter having been brought to the Court on their behalf by Parivartan Kendra, a Patna-based NGO. The Court urged every State and Union Territory to include survivors of acid violence in their official disability rolls so that the resultant benefits are not denied to them in practice. It also called on the States and Union Territories to come down firmly on persons engaged in the unlicensed sale of acid, and warned that authorities that failed to implement these directions in earnest could themselves be made accountable.

3.3. Hakim & Anr V. State (NCT of Delhi)^{xiv}

Here, the Court was called upon to lend interpretive flesh to the term "acid" as used in the Explanation appended to the provision that criminalises the offence. The Explanation defines "acid" to mean "any substance which has acidic or corrosive character of burning nature capable of causing bodily injury leading to scarce or disfigurement or temporary or permanent disability". On a closer reading, the Court identified two distinct elements packed into this legislative definition:

The first element looks to the inherent nature of the substance: it must, in chemical terms, exhibit acidic/corrosive/burning properties. The second element is functional: such substance must be capable, on contact, of inflicting bodily injury on a person which manifests itself in scarring, disfigurement, or any form of disability, whether transient or permanent.

3.4. State of Uttarakhand v. Ajam^{xv}

The victim and the accused were already known to each other; the latter had for some time been making unwelcome advances. The victim's brother had at one point warned him off, after which he stopped showing up at her house. The matter, however, did not end there—one afternoon, as the victim was making her way home from a tuition class, the accused waylaid her and threw acid on her face. The Uttarakhand High Court convicted the accused under Section 307 of the Indian Penal Code and, going beyond the case at hand, issued the following directions to the State Government:

- Constitution of a Criminal Injuries Compensation Board, vested with the authority to fix a reasonable quantum of compensation in acid attack matters.

- A binding obligation on all private hospitals to admit survivors of acid attack the moment they are brought in, and to provide the requisite emergency care without charging a paisa.
- The retail trade in acid is to be confined to outlets holding a valid licence; where any person is found dealing in acid outside this framework, an FIR shall be registered against him forthwith under the relevant provisions, including Sections 326A, 326B, 354A, 354B, 354C, and 354D of the IPC.
- The investigation in an acid attack case is to be wrapped up within seven days from the registration of the FIR, and the charge-sheet placed before the trial court within the timelines fixed by the High Court in its judgment.

3.5. State of Maharashtra v. Ankur Panwar^{xvi}

The accused, Ankur Panwar, hurled acid on a 23-year-old young woman because she had turned down his proposal of marriage. The intensity of the attack was such that the survivor eventually succumbed to multi-organ failure brought on by extensive respiratory damage—an outcome that the post-mortem report traced directly to the corrosive exposure. The accused was convicted under Sections 302 and 326A of the Indian Penal Code, sentenced to death, and saddled with a fine of Rs 5,000 in addition to the capital sentence.

3.6. Gulnaaz Khan v. State of Uttarakhand and Others

In this notable ruling, the Uttarakhand High Court ordered the State to pay an additional sum of Rs 35 lakh to the acid attack survivor, over and above whatever had already been disbursed earlier. The Court took the considered view that this figure represented a fair and adequate measure of compensation in the facts of the case. It went on to suggest that, if the survivor were willing, the State authorities could also extend appropriate vocational training to help her find her feet again. The State had pleaded that since the attack had occurred in 2014, the survivor was entitled only to relief under the older compensation scheme and not the more generous 2018 framework. The Court declined to accept this. It pointed out that the process of fixing compensation was, in this very case, still under way, and more importantly, that the consequences of the attack were ongoing—the survivor continued to undergo reconstructive surgeries and other procedures. To shortchange her now would, in the Court's view, amount to a constitutional violation of her fundamental rights. The Court was also categorical that the State's obligation did not end with the cheque: "In addition to the aforementioned compensation and vocational training, the State Government is obligated to provide free medical treatment to the petitioner, as further surgeries requiring skin grafting are necessary. Should hospitals within Uttarakhand lack the requisite technology, equipment, or medical expertise, the State is obliged to facilitate her treatment at a hospital in New Delhi or PGI, Chandigarh." The travel, lodging and incidental expenses of the survivor and her attendant were also to be borne entirely by the State.

IV. FROM VICTIMHOOD TO VICTORY: CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

For all the legislative and judicial scaffolding put in place over the years, the menace of acid violence has refused to recede meaningfully, and a great deal more remains to be done if we are serious about prevention. A useful starting point lies in sustained education and public

awareness campaigns being run consistently in cities and villages alike. The thrust of such campaigns messaging needs to lie squarely on gender equality, and on unpicking the entrenched social attitudes that quietly enable violence against women in the first place. Equally indispensable is a robust ecosystem of support and rehabilitation that gives survivors a real chance to rebuild their lives and stand on their own feet again.

India is hardly short of legislation; where we have consistently fallen short is at the implementation stage. A telling illustration is the fate of the Supreme Court's 2013 directions on the regulated sale of acid—more than a decade later, those directions are honoured more in breach than in observance, which is precisely why most accused persons continue to procure acid without breaking a sweat. The need of the hour is for our enforcement agencies to put these directions into actual practice on the ground, and for the system to come down strictly on functionaries who treat them as advisory. Visible, exemplary action against errant officers is the only thing that will work as a real deterrent.

A further hurdle that survivors routinely encounter, and one that has only recently begun receiving the attention it deserves, is the inaccessibility of digital Know-Your-Customer (KYC) processes—an inevitable consequence of attacks that leave the face and the eyes scarred or impaired. A division bench of the Supreme Court has lately addressed this very issue, laying down twenty specific directions calibrated to ensure that digital KYC, which has by now become the gateway to nearly every banking, telecom and welfare service, is rendered usable by persons with disabilities, including survivors of acid attacks. The Court traced the problem to two recurring design flaws: information is routinely presented in formats that assume sighted users, with no alternative text to fall back on, and many of the digital platforms in question simply do not work well, or at all, with screen readers. The cumulative effect is that persons with disabilities are squeezed out of opportunities to earn, study, transact and participate in everyday social life. The Bench went on to hold that such inaccessibility offends two of the core entitlements recognised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)—namely, the right to equal opportunity, the right to accessibility, and the right to full and effective participation in society. Parallel guarantees are written into the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPWD Act) in respect of acid attack survivors whose facial features or vision have been impaired by the assault. It is therefore imperative that the executive translate the twenty directions issued by the division bench into actual administrative practice, lest survivors find themselves economically and socially relegated to the margins. Bridging this digital divide is, in real terms, the means by which survivors can claim what the Constitution promises them: the right to life, personal autonomy, equality of opportunity, and full participation in civic life. Reading the line of decisions cumulatively, one the right to digital access is hard pressed to escape the conclusion that meaningful digital access has now become an inseparable facet of the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21 of the Constitution. If this constitutional promise is to be made good, the State must build a digital ecosystem that is inclusive by design—one that serves not only those for whom the existing platforms were tacitly built, but also those on the margins, such as acid attack survivors^{xvii}.

Statutes and judgments, important as they are, can only do so much. Real change for survivors

will remain elusive until society itself is prepared to look at them differently. Even now, well into the 21st century, large parts of India still operate on the unspoken assumption that men stand above women in some natural hierarchy, and that a woman's "no" is something to be argued with rather than respected. Women who push back against received ideas, or who refuse to accept inherited customs and long-standing taboos dictated by community elders, often pay an enormous price for that refusal. What is overdue is a genuine shift in social outlook, particularly among men, who need to learn that a woman's "no"—to a marriage proposal, to a romantic overture, to any number of unreasonable and patriarchal expectations placed upon her—is an answer in itself, not a starting bid for negotiation. The right to make one's own choices and to live a life of self-respect is hers as much as anyone else's.

Compensation schemes that already exist must be administered with the seriousness they deserve and made genuinely easy for survivors to navigate, not buried under bureaucratic indifference. They also need to be revised upward—reconstructive surgery and prolonged rehabilitative care do not come cheap. Media houses have a corresponding role to play in keeping this issue in the public conversation rather than treating it as episodic news. Academic conferences, professional seminars and grassroots workshops can in turn ensure that more people understand, in human terms, what a survivor of an acid attack actually lives through, and what reintegration into a society that often turns its back on her really demands.

To conclude, an acid attack is a particularly cruel offence—one that does not stop with the survivor but spreads its shadow across her family for years on end. The Union and State Governments will have to act with much greater conviction than they have so far, both in preventing these crimes and in standing meaningfully alongside those who have already lived through one. Sustained work towards gender equality, and a willingness to confront the social mores that allow violence against women to flourish, are not optional add-ons; they are the heart of the matter. The road to a safer, more humane and more equal society is one that we can only walk together.

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