

Acid victim to undergo surgery for the ninth time in two years

By Nina Martyris

MUMBAI: For two years now, Aparna Prabhu has not been able to close her right eye. It has dried up and is almost non-functional. On June 7, her eye will be operated for the third time in a bid to save it, the last two attempts having been unsuccessful.

Prabhu is the victim of a crime that is showing disturbing signs of being on the rise—acid attacks. “Two weeks ago, a girl in Borivli lost both eyes when acid was flung on her,” says Prabhu, who follows such cases closely. “I consider myself lucky.”

That’s a brave way of looking at life. Aparna Prabhu’s case is an all-too familiar one now—that of spurned lover/stalker/violent husband getting what they think is their revenge by flinging acid on the girl’s face. The first major acid case to grab public attention was that of Deepti Khanna in July 1995. The 19-year-old’s case made headlines in both the electronic and print media. So much so that Sanjay Dutt visited her on his way home from Arthur Road Jail. Money poured in for her treatment—but, no one knows what happened to the attacker.

Since 1995, there have been so many cases of acid being flung on women that they make no impact any more. Prabhu’s case falls into the pattern. On March 11, 1999, Sunil Kashekar, who had been stalking her for almost eight years asked her to marry him. When she walked on ignoring him, he unscrewed a bottle and flung its contents on her back. Then he ran be-

hind her emptying the rest of the bottle on her face and neck, and followed this by consuming a bottle of Tik 20 himself.

Both were rushed to hospital, both survived. Kashekar was briefly in custody before being let out on bail. Prabhu was in hospital for four months during which she needed 43 bottles of blood and plasma, had to undergo five life-saving operations and for more than a month had to lie on her stomach because her back was a mess. In the past two years, she has

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gone through eight surgeries, her life has been stood on its head, and today she says quite matter-of-factly that she doesn’t know how many more operations she will have to go through. The operations were bad enough, she says, but what was really excruciating was the dressing of the wounds.

Throwing acid on someone is a crime that can be charged under Section 307 (attempt to murder) or Section 326 (attempt to cause grievous injury). However, thanks to the huge backlog of cases in court, acid-attack cases get stuck in queue and years lapse before they come up for hearing. In Prabhu’s case, for instance, she has not heard from the Khar police since the day of the attack. Her family has been too busy caring for Aparna to follow up with the police.

Khar police inspector Jambulkar, however, maintain that the police has done its duty by gathering evidence and submitting a

chargesheet to the court. “Now we are waiting for the court to send the summons,” he says.

As a result of legal delays, no loud and clear message is sent out to the public that an acid attack will result in severe punishment. Shirin Juwaley, an acid victim pointed out in an interview last week that these attacks continue because the law does nothing. Indeed, we hear of so many cases but we rarely hear of convictions. If our laws were more stringent and there were less delays, as Juwaley emphasised, it would definitely serve as a deterrent to men from committing such crimes.

Meanwhile, the Prabhus have shifted residence from Malad where they lived largely because Sunil Kashekar lived in the vicinity and the sight of him was too much for Aparna to deal with. So far, her family has spent almost Rs 10 lakh on her surgeries, and they don’t know how much more they will have to spend.

Though donations towards her treatment have come in—the latest being an impromptu effort by the students on the University campus at Kalina to raise funds for her June surgery—the family is financially exhausted.

Emotionally drained by the past two years, Aparna’s father Anil Prabhu, who works in a sound recording studio, says, “While my daughter is suffering, the person who has caused her so much suffering is walking around free. We want that he should be punished for doing this. You can’t throw acid on someone’s face and get away with it.”