ACID ATTACKS ON WOMEN:
AN APPRAISAL OF THE INDIAN LEGAL RESPONSE

Nehaluddin Ahmad

1. Introduction

Acid attacks are a particularly vicious and damaging form of violence in many South Asian countries where acid is thrown on people’s faces in order to deface or kill them. The overwhelming majority of the victims are women, and many of them are in the prime of their youth.

The victims are attacked for many reasons. In some cases it is because a young girl or women has spurned the sexual advances of a man, or because she or her parents have rejected a proposal of marriage. Recently, however, there have been acid attacks on children, older women and also men. These attacks are often the result of marital disputes, family and land disputes, dowry demands, political rivalries, or a desire for revenge.

Acid attacks have been documented in many parts of the world, but the number of such incidences is on the rise in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Cambodia. With reference to the Indian subcontinent, statistics reveal that Bangladesh has the highest number of acid attacks reported annually between 1999 and 2010; there were about 2500 reported cases of acid attacks in the country. The peculiar feature of these attacks is a staggering 80% of the reported cases in the subcontinent involve women

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as victims, and close to 70% of these are under 18 years of age. The New York Times on 26 December 2001 also reported that kerosene as well as acid have fast become the weapons of choice for attacks on wives in India.

The above numbers may appear insignificant in the face of more than a billion people who live in South Asia today. But they are only the tip of the iceberg, considering that most incidents go unreported in rural areas. The incidence of such attacks is much rarer in other parts of the world, although developed nations and developing nations such as the United Kingdom, the USA, Malaysia and China have also experienced such cases in the recent past. What makes the case of acid throwing more heart wrenching are the grotesque pictures of disfigured victims who are now struggling to survive in society.

The article will examine the impact of acid attacks, both physical as well as psychological, the insufficiency of the law in dealing with acid attacks, the heinous character of this particular crime and what punishment it should deserve, and the measures that can be taken to strengthen the law to deal with these attacks. Examining and attempting to deal with these matters hold the key to better understanding acid attacks, and inching closer to the measures which can be taken to curb them.

2. The Genesis of Acid Attacks

Acid attacks, more formally known as vitriolage, is defined as the act of throwing acid onto the body of a person "with the intention of injuring or

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7 Model Katie Piper launched a foundation: Piper suffered third degree burns after her former boyfriend arranged for someone to throw acid in her face in 2008, left partially blind, BBC News UK, 14 July 2010, at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10629690.
8 CBS News National Correspondent Jeff Glor reported on The Early Show that Derri Velarde had just arrived home when she was viscously attacked with acid. For the second time in just one week, a woman was attacked by an acid-wielding stranger. 9 September 2010, at http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/09/09/earlyshow/main6849122.shtml.
9 Sim Leoi Leoi, Martin Carvalho and Rahimy Rahim, The Star/Asia News Network, 8 October 2011, Big rise in acid attacks in Malaysia. ‘The number of corrosive liquid attack cases has risen dramatically this year with 45 cases’, Deputy Home Minister Datuk Abu Seman Yusop said at http://www.asianewsnet.net/home/news.php?sec=1&id=22577.