Acid Attacks in India – A Growing Crisis and the Struggle for Justice

Mains: *GS IV – Ethics*

Why in News?

Acid attacks in India continue to be a horrific form of gender-based violence that leaves victims physically and psychologically scarred.

What are Acid Attacks?

- **Definition** – An acid attack is a violent assault in which a corrosive substance, typically *sulphuric, hydrochloric, or nitric acid*, is thrown onto a person, often targeting the face.
- **Effects** – These attacks can cause devastating physical injuries, including severe burns, scarring, blindness, and permanent disfigurement.
- The victims often endure not only physical suffering but also intense psychological trauma and social stigma.
- **Motivation for such attacks** – Acid attacks are frequently motivated by personal grievances such as rejection of romantic or sexual advances, dowry disputes, suspicions of infidelity, or domestic abuse.
- While women and young girls remain the primary victims, men are not exempt from these attacks.
- **Vulnerability** – The attacks disproportionately affect those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as they may lack the resources to seek medical treatment or legal recourse.

What is status of prevalence of acid attacks in India?

- **NCRB report** – According to data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), India saw 207 reported acid attack cases in 2023, marking an increase from 202 in 2022.
- Additionally, 65 cases of acid attack attempts were recorded.
- Despite the high number of reported cases, experts believe the actual number of incidents is significantly higher, with many going unreported due to societal stigma and fear of retaliation.
- **Geographical variations** – Acid attacks are particularly prevalent in certain regions of India, including West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Gujarat, where industries using acid are located.
- The geographical spread of acid attacks is linked to the easy availability of acid in

areas where industries such as textiles and rubber are prevalent.
- This raises concerns about the implementation of regulations on acid sales.
- **A Comparative Perspective –** In contrast to India, neighboring Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in reducing acid attacks through stringent laws and proactive measures.
- Since the passage of a comprehensive law in 2002, which includes a complete ban on the open sale of acid, and public awareness campaigns, the number of acid attacks has drastically reduced.
- From 494 recorded attacks in 2002, Bangladesh reported only 13 attacks in 2024.

What are the legal framework and judicial challenges?

- **Laxmi vs Union of India –** The ruling resulted in amendments to the Indian Penal Code (IPC), criminalizing acid attacks and moving the crime out of general injury sections.
- **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita of 2023** – Acid attacks are punishable by a minimum of ten years to life imprisonment and a fine to cover the victim's medical expenses.
- The law also mandates that all hospitals provide free medical treatment to acid attack survivors, and the sale of acid must be regulated by requiring photo identification for buyers and maintaining records by sellers.
- **Weak implementation** – However, the implementation of these provisions is often weak, with cases of illegal acid sales and lenient enforcement of regulations remaining widespread.
- **Institutional delays** – Despite these legal provisions, survivors like Shaheen Malik continue to face long delays in trials, lack of judicial sensitivity, and an overreliance on out-of-court settlements.
- The case against her assailants dragged on for 16 years, and even after her personal fight for justice, she has yet to see a conviction.

What are the struggles faced by survivors?

- **Struggle for survival** – Survivors of acid attacks often find themselves in a battle not only for justice but also for survival.
- **Legal battles** – The legal process is slow, and victims frequently encounter shoddy investigations, insensitive judicial treatment, and insufficient legal support.
    - **For instance,** in 2023, the NCRB reported that of the 113 acid attack cases under investigation, only 16 resulted in convictions, and 27 were acquitted.
- **Other concerns** – The system is burdened by judicial delays, poorly handled cases, and a culture of victim-blaming that only worsens the plight of survivors.

What are the steps needed to combat acid attacks and support survivors?

- **Strengthening Acid Sale Regulations** – The sale of acid must be better regulated, and more stringent penalties should be imposed for illegal sales.
- Local authorities should be held accountable for failing to enforce these regulations, as is the case in Bangladesh, where swift action is taken against shops selling acid without proper documentation.
- **Judicial Reforms and Fast-Track Courts** – To ensure timely justice, the government

must establish fast-track courts for acid attack cases and introduce harsher penalties for judicial delays.
- Judges should be sensitized to the unique challenges faced by survivors, and prosecutors must be trained to handle such cases with the seriousness they deserve.
- **Support and Rehabilitation for Survivors** –Survivors need access to prompt compensation, medical treatment, and psychological support.
- The Justice J.S. Verma Committee's recommendation for a national fund to cover lifelong medical, psychological, educational, and vocational rehabilitation for survivors must be implemented immediately.
- **Public Awareness and Education** – Public awareness campaigns are essential to changing societal attitudes toward acid attack survivors and reducing the stigma they face.
- Education about gender-based violence and the severe consequences of acid attacks must be integrated into school curricula and public discourse.
- **Legal Aid and Counseling** – Survivors should have access to free legal aid, counseling services, and shelters where they can find refuge.
- This support will empower victims to seek justice without fear of reprisal or social isolation.

What lies ahead?

- The battle against acid attacks in India is far from over. While legal reforms have made strides, the implementation of these laws remains inadequate.
- The persistence of acid attacks and the low conviction rates are a testament to the deep-rooted challenges faced by survivors and the systemic failures of the justice system.
- A comprehensive, multi-pronged approach is needed, combining stringent regulations on acid sales, judicial reforms, victim support, and public education.
- Only then can India hope to reduce the incidence of acid attacks and ensure justice for its survivors, like Shaheen Malik, who continue to fight for their rights.

Reference

[The Hindu| Acid Attacks in India]

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