

On July 12, 2004, Shimla witnessed an atrocious incident of crime against a 19-year-old science student of a local college. It happened in the morning hours at a busy bus stop. Two young men threw acid on her face and absconded from the crowded spot. The news spread instantly, enraging all except the eyewitnesses who remained silent and stunned spectators in the wake of an inhuman and barbaric incident. Everyone knew that this was not the first case of gender violence in such a crude form, but was perhaps the first of its kind in Himachal, believed to be *Devabhoomi*—the land of gods.

The fallout of the incident was multi-dimensional. The police first assisted the victim named Ishita reach the medical centre and then started their investigation to catch the culprits, without any clue to assist their efforts. No sooner did the news reach the State Commission for Women than the chairperson visited the hospital and took up the case seriously. The emphasis was mainly on ensuring a sense of security among girls and on enhancing social sensitivity, as the societal apathy in this case was most lamentable. Important dignitaries from various corners visited the victim and were a source of moral support, reflecting the concern of the administrative authorities. The State Government also assured the grief-stricken family of the victim that it would provide financial help for her treatment. Simultaneously, there were meetings and collective efforts of various women's organizations and youth fronts in this direction.

There were protests by various sections of society in the form of agitations accompanied by slogan shouting, dharnas and blocking of traffic. The student community was actively involved as the victim was

Undeserved Stigma

Justice Eludes Victim of Shimla Acid Attack

○ A. V. Gandhi

one of them. One segment of the student community opted for slogan shouting and dharnas while the other condemned the crime with a silent procession demanding the arrest of the guilty party at the earliest, besides ensuring the safety of girls. Side by side, as a gesture of their solidarity with the cause, the students even collected a sum of a few thousand rupees to help the victim financially.

Not far behind were the front ranks of the *mahila* and *yuva morchas* protesting against police inaction and administrative lapses in arresting the culprits. Purnima Advani, the former chairperson of the National Commission for Women, expressed regret that prompt action by the police was not supplemented by timely *nakabandi*, which would have prevented the territorial escape of the culprits. Aghast at the nature of the crime, the public could not

comprehend that their actions were creating further law-and-order problems for the administration. The police and the investigating teams had their own grievances. Instead of assisting the police by providing clues and evidence, the protesters only made matters worse for them as much of the force's energy had to be spent on pacifying and controlling public reaction.

Purnima Advani had demanded a quick decision in a "time-bound framework so that there is no repeat of such a serious offence." But within a few days, another young man took out his anger against a girl from the same college who had refused his proposal, by planting a bomb in her house. And barely a year after this acid attack, yet another person, a tailor running a shop at Mandi, Shimla, went berserk in a bus on May 27, 2005 and threw acid on a girl and over ten other passengers, including a five-year-old girl, inflicting major burns on her face, arms and legs.

However, it was due to rising public impatience and intense accusations of the lack of prompt follow-up action on the part of police authorities, and their inability to maintain law and order and ensure the safety and security of women, that the police hunt yielded the desired results. Between July 16-19, 2004 the two culprits, Vijay Kumar Sandhu and Dilbagh Singh, one of them the first cousin of the victim, were arrested and remanded to judicial custody.



Meanwhile, Ishita, the promising young girl, was in the hospital in an isolated ward to avoid contamination; she endured her painful condition for almost five months, thinking and worrying about her future. The more the details of the case were revealed, the less public sympathy she retained, and the case slowly started fading out of public memory. Ishita lost public sympathy mainly because of the fact that she was the first cousin of one of the accused. This information was more than enough for the public to let their imagination run riot and indulge in character assassination and, as usual, hold the girl responsible for the whole thing. The news that the boy used to visit her home, which is quite natural as he was her first cousin, was covered by the local Hindi newspapers with headlines like, “*Rakhi ke rishte pe kalank,*” bringing to it an incestuous angle. Himachal being a Hindi state, these local newspapers are very popular and largely responsible for sensitizing the public. It was also reported that the father of the victim had agreed to take back the case under family pressure, which he has however denied. These stories and the accompanying rumours maligning Ishita’s character were very disturbing to her family.

Dr. Advani stated that it is not the physical pain that has been bothering Ishita but the societal apathy. Even while lying on the hospital bed, Ishita keeps lamenting that out of almost 100 onlookers, not a single person came forward to help. She also feels that there is definitely a need for an enhanced sensitivity on the part of society. Ishita herself cannot understand the attitude of all those who, instead of condemning the attack, are busy

consoling the accused with promises that nothing will happen and that they will be acquitted. Depressed with the turn of events, Ishita is of the opinion that murder might have been a kinder option: “*Is se acha murder hai jisme insaan mar to jata hai. Aise jine main kya hai jiska ye bhi pata nahi ki puri tarah ilaj bhi ho sakta hai ya nahi ya kab tak intezaar karna hoga?*” (Murder is better because the victim dies. What’s the point in living when one doesn’t even know if one will fully recover or not—or how long it will take me to recover).

The members of Ishita’s family still cannot come to terms with this tragic episode. They have a high opinion of her and trust her completely. So, it is impossible for them to suspect that anything might be amiss in the relationship between her and her first cousin who is one of the accused. Ishita and her two sisters, since they do not have a brother, would consider him their brother and tie *rakhis* on him, which is a common practice in most families. Her parents had always regarded their daughter as a studious child preparing for her PMT, but after the incident Ishita’s mother lamented: “*Uski khubsurti hi uski dushman ho gayi*” (her beauty became her enemy).

However, must we not review the incident and ponder over whether we have played our part in the whole incident satisfactorily? Where were the residents and eyewitnesses who protested the next day, which led to roadblocks, when Ishita was in need of assistance? It was her own quick thinking, that she jumped into a water tank and saved herself from further burns. Also, why were the police not given the much-needed assistance and information immediately? It would be wrong to say that it is a lack of education which is

responsible for this incident. The assailant in this case was a postgraduate and the event took place in a state capital that is judged to be one of the best in terms of social development.

When DGP, Mr. A.K. Puri, told media persons that Vijay, the son of Ishita’s paternal uncle, had been arrested and was being brought here, and that from the preliminary interrogation of the two accused the motive behind the crime was Vijay’s desire to develop friendly relations with Ishita, which she had resisted, the whole complexion of the case changed. However, very few actually questioned whether the throwing of the acid was justified. The reported incident was not an accident but was a pre-planned barbaric act by the accused. Until now the accused has not expressed regret or apologized for his actions. As a result, the Women’s Commission has realized the need to enhance public sensitivity, since societal apathy was deplorable.

Ishita is currently under medical care at the Safdarjung Hospital, New Delhi. Her medical expenses are partially supported by the Himachal State Government. She has appeared in court to give her statement, but the final verdict is still pending. Though she has already undergone two surgeries, Ishita is aware that the treatment is likely to take much longer. Even before the incident Ishita was a brilliant student who was preparing for her pre-medical entrance exam. Now she is even more determined to study and work harder, and to make something of herself and stand on her feet. But can she ever be compensated for the trauma she is undergoing, and will anyone take responsibility for the nightmare she has gone through? □