

‘ I’M GLAD I CANNOT SEE MY FACE ’

Haseena Husain’s future was shattered at the age of 20 when Joseph Rodriguez drenched her in acid for rejecting his advances. This August, he was sentenced to life imprisonment, but that does not give Haseena her life back. She shares her pain with Meera Prasad. Photos by Saibal Das



Ask me my date of birth and I may fumble. But April 20, 1999 is indelibly seared into my memory. It looms large before my sightless eyes and haunts me even in my sleep. It was at 8.30.am. on the day that my life was consumed. And in minutes I was just a heap of molten flesh on the road.

I think it’s providential that the concentrated sulphuric acid flung at my face has destroyed my eyes. I will never see again, so I have no idea how gruesome I look after the acid attack. My memories are of friends and relatives saying that my name Haseena was so apt (*haseen* in Urdu means beautiful). Time stands still for me after that.

My mother, distraught and broken, helps me come to grips with the real picture. She tells me how the same people are repulsed by my frightful apparition now and shun our family. Some fear I am a bad omen. Children in the neighbourhood run away scared when they see me. I am no longer right company for some of my closest friends.

I wake up each morning, my mind a minefield of questions. I am 27, unsightly and spurned by all. Why did this happen to me? What sort of an ogre is he, the perpetrator of this crime? And the most difficult question: what is there for me now, my life black and confined to a room? I battle with the questions but the answers elude me.

I ruminate over my unfinished dreams lying in a heap. I dreamt of becoming a fashion designer when I graduated from class 12 at Kendriya Vidyalaya in Bangalore. After school I did not take the conventional route to college. While doing a B.Com through correspondence, I trained in computer operations, typing and tailoring. I am Muslim and my extended family is conservative. In many other cases like mine, after finishing school, it’s marriage and babies for the girls. But my parents braved opposition from the larger family and the community to let me pursue a career.

We are a close-knit, middle-class family – my father, mother and my

younger sister. My father works as a civilian in defence service. He has two years to retire. Our relatives questioned my father’s decision to let his daughters study after class 10. Today they blame my parents for what happened.

I started working at 18 as a computer operator in Indal. Two months later, in 1997, I shifted to Neta Computer Services as a data entry operator on a monthly salary of Rs 1,500. It was a small private firm where Joseph Rodriguez (now 33) was a co-partner and my boss. After about 18 months, the company shut down due to losses. I was relieved in a way because my boss’s behaviour disturbed me. He had become possessive about me. Later, he kept calling me, asking me to work for him.

I refused his offers and ignored him. I thought he would move on. But it was when I took up a new job towards end 1998 that he trailed me like a possessed man and professed his love for me. When that didn’t work, he dropped threats that he would destroy me if I did not marry him. I reasoned with him on how marriage was impossible, but he was beyond the realms of reason.

That fateful morning, he accosted me outside my workplace with the same passionate entreaties. When I turned him down he hurled a jug of acid at my face and sped away on his motorbike. ▶

PUNISHED FOR SAYING NO

Fifty-four acid attack cases in seven years (until September 2006) across Karnataka hide a world of excruciating pain and loneliness. Each of those women was punished for being strong and self-reliant, says Sushma Varma of the Campaign & Struggle Against Acid Attacks on Women (CSAAAW). In 2002, 17-year-old Shruthi was attacked by a man she barely knew. Two years later, a fast-track court sentenced him to seven years’ Rigorous Imprisonment and Rs 5,000 fine. Other women were not so lucky. In May this year, Hemavathi, a divorcee and a mother, died in Bangalore while undergoing treatment after an acid attack. In 2004, a jealous colleague poured acid on Tara, a teacher in Ilkal (Bagalkote). The court case is still on. It took seven years for Haseena’s attacker to be sentenced.

By Divya Sreedharan

MY MOTHER TOLD ME LATER HOW I HAD LOOKED LIKE MANGLED FLESH LYING NAKED ON THE ROAD, MY CLOTHES ALL REDUCED TO ASHES

DOCTORS HAVE PERFORMED 27 SURGERIES GRAFTING AND RECONSTRUCTING MY FACE, NECK, CHEST AND ARMS SO FAR

◁ All I remember is that I was awash with something wet that had set me on fire. I was smouldering and the pain was excruciating. I sensed I was dissipating bit by bit as the acid travelled down my face onto my body and downward. My mother told me later how I was just mangled flesh lying naked on the road, my clothes reduced to ashes.

Our ordeal, which would stretch into eternity, had just begun. My father was away and my mother and little sister soldiered on, numb with shock and anguish. I was rushed, screaming in pain, to two hospitals in the span of a day, the first turning us out when we could not pay the Rs 1 lac deposit. The next halt was at the burns ward of a government hospital in Bangalore that haunts us to this day. Nothing moved there without a bribe and the doctors didn't care. My mother said I looked like burning charcoal, my charred skin bursting now and then, revealing flesh and bones. In between, the media and the police harangued me with questions.

My father then shifted me to a private hospital with better service. Time stretched; I was eight months on nasal feeding, never able to sleep without sedation and not a shred of clothing on my still-oozing body. Doctors performed 27 surgeries grafting and reconstructing my face, neck, chest and arms. But I was hugely disfigured and there was only so much they could do.

There are deep holes where my eyes and nose were. One ear and my neck have melted. So have my arms and fingers. The burns on my chest have affected my heart. Doctors can't do anything for my eyes. The reconstructed nose looks bulbous and ugly and doctors are doubtful it will stay fixed.

My parents can no longer afford the hospital stay and treatment. The bills have piled up to a whopping Rs 8 lac. My father is heavily in debt and has no more money for my treatment.



PAINFUL PROGRESS

Waiting for justice can often be more painful than an acid attack. There are, however, signs of change. In November, the Karnataka Health and Family Welfare department announced a draft rehabilitation package providing legal aid, plastic surgery, vocational training and physiotherapy for acid attack victims as well as curbs on sales of acids/chemicals. The Women's Justice Initiative of the Human Rights Law Network filed a public interest litigation (PIL) in the Karnataka High Court urging thorough investigations of acid attack cases and faster trials. The PIL seeks stringent action against the offender under Sections 326 (causing grievous hurt by dangerous weapons or means) and 307 (attempt to murder) of the IPC. It also wants hospitals to mandatorily offer victims emergency medical services.

HELPLINES

■ Aastha, Kolkata: 033-24970155 ■ Campaign and Struggle against Acid Attack on Women (CSAAW), Bangalore: 094484-44252 ■ Criminal Justice Initiative (CJI) of HRLN, Mumbai: 022-23439651 / 23436692 ■ CJI, Allahabad: 0532 2623893 ■ CJI, Ahmedabad: 079 27475815 ■ CJI, Chennai: 044-42165131 / 42165121 ■ CJI, Hyderabad: 040-27661883 ■ CJI, Thiruvananthapuram: 0471-22460652 ■ Maadhyam, New Delhi: 011-24324503 ■ Pratyasha, Kochi: 0484-2239 0680 ■ Samvaad, Chandigarh: 0172-543689

I have pleaded with him to just finish me off and end our miseries. But he remains my pillar of strength and encouragement. "A day will dawn with the answers you seek," he reassures me.

After seven years, we had reason to smile, when on August 22 this year, the Karnataka High Court sent Rodriguez back to jail for life, stating, "it would be a mockery of justice" otherwise. He was roaming free after serving a five-year jail term awarded by a lower court. The high court also directed him to pay us Rs 3 lac as compensation.

The criminal has met his nemesis. But that does not change my plight. I remain a castaway and an object of ridicule, as people point accusing fingers at me. We are alone, ostracised by relatives and society. We find this rejection more painful to swallow than anything else.

Today, I can do no more than help with small chores in the house. But I will rise like a phoenix from the ashes and chase my dreams again. I will work on the computer. I will overcome hurdles with a vengeance, if only to show him that he has not been able to destroy my spirit. *Insha Allah.* ■