

'I NEVER THOUGHT I COULD CREATE SOMETHING SO BEAUTIFUL'

Acid-attack victim Laxmi Agarwal, 27, opens up about her horrific ordeal – and how her daughter brought life new meaning *By Helen Roberts*



Laxmi and daughter Pihu

Looking in the mirror, I couldn't believe the monster staring back at me was my own reflection. One ear had been reduced to a lump of flesh, while my lips were swollen and purple. My face had turned into a disgusting mass of pink and black tissue. I thought that everything was over. What chance did I have of a normal life? My future in tatters, I wanted to close my eyes and die.

My whole life had changed a couple of months earlier, on April 22, 2005. I was just 16, a schoolgirl, with dreams of becoming a singer or dancer. That morning, I was browsing in a bookshop in my hometown of

New Delhi, India, when I noticed 32-year-old Naeem Khan, one of my friend's brothers. I'd known him for a couple of years, but he'd recently begun stalking me – often texting and even badgering me to marry him. It sounds shocking, but it can be commonplace for older men to harass young girls and women in India, so I wasn't particularly frightened by his behaviour.

When I saw him outside the bookshop, I tried to ignore him and I walked in a different direction. But, suddenly, the woman he was with pushed me to the ground and I felt cold liquid splash across my face, causing an unimaginable

burning sensation. I began rolling around on the dirty city street in a desperate bid to stop the pain. I don't know how long I was there for – probably only a few minutes – but it felt like hours and I remember people staring as I flailed about, screaming.

A local taxi driver eventually came forward to help, throwing water over my face. But the pain didn't stop and my skin continued to burn. I could only watch in horror as parts of my hands melted away.

The taxi driver rushed me to nearby Safdarjung Hospital, shouting at people to move out of the way as I'd been attacked with acid. It was only then that I realised what had happened.

As nurses hurried to treat me with more water, I let out a cry, terrified they were throwing acid on me. They used 20 buckets of water to wash off the burning liquid, but even after that leftover acid burned my father's shirt later when I hugged him from my hospital bed.

I ended up staying in hospital for two months, where I had two major skin-grafting surgeries as my nose, mouth and neck had all melted away. I was fed through a drip, but slowly began to eat mushy

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vegetables. There were no mirrors on the ward or in the washroom, and the nurses refused to let me see my face, which was bandaged up.

One mealtime, I remember trying to see my reflection in a bowl I'd been given, but I was unable to. Two months after the attack I was given a mirror after begging the nurses. Looking at my ravaged face, I was horrified. I wished my life would end.

When I returned home, I was too ashamed to show my face to anyone. I dropped out of school and refused to leave the house. I always kept my head covered with a scarf so no one could see the extent of my injuries.

A steady stream of neighbours visited, but they would make insensitive comments to my parents as though I wasn't there, like: 'It would've been better if she'd been killed.' Still, my family tried to build up my strength, telling me that in time I would manage to do things I didn't think possible. I clung to those words.

Over the next four years, I endured a further nine operations on my eyes, nose, ears, throat, lips and hands. In 2009, I had my last surgery – another operation on my face – which left me in a critical condition on a ventilator for four days.

I tried hard not to hate my attacker, as I knew it wouldn't change anything. Although the police were really supportive, and Naeem had been arrested straight away, and his accomplice – a female friend called Rakhi he'd roped into helping him – shortly after, it took five

years to convict them. In 2010 they were sentenced to 10 and seven years in prison, respectively. I was so relieved, but it didn't make life any easier.

Unfortunately, due to huge hospital bills, my family fell into debt. Then, in 2012, my father suffered a heart attack and passed away. I was devastated and worried – how would we survive financially?

I immediately began applying for jobs – anything I could find. I still felt so self-conscious, though, that I covered my face with a scarf whenever I could. One recruiter even told me he wouldn't be taking my application further as my appearance would scare other employees.

I was heartbroken but soldiered on, knowing I could use my experience to help others, especially as acid attacks are a problem all over India – last year 349 people, mostly women, were injured or killed as a result.

I finally had some good news in March 2013, when the Supreme Court ruled on a petition I'd filed seven years earlier saying that acid should not be sold to individuals under 18 in India. This was an issue that had no regulation before, so I was ecstatic that I was able to change something.

A couple of months later, I was approached by Alok Dixit, 28, the founder of Stop Acid Attacks, a charity that helps victims in India. He'd heard about my petition and offered me a job as a campaign coordinator.

We worked closely together and, over the months, my feelings for Alok grew. At first I saw him as a really good friend, but I soon realised I was falling in love with him. He wasn't like other men my age – he was

completely committed to the campaign and making a change in life, and I fell for that. I never told him, though, as I just couldn't imagine anyone wanting to be in a relationship with me. But then in August 2013, three months after we first met, while we were working one afternoon, Alok admitted he had feelings for me, too. He said he'd fallen for my courage and spirit.

I'd never believed I'd find somebody who would love me after the attack, so knowing he felt the same way as I did brought huge joy and strength.

From that moment, my life took on a new meaning. Not only was I in a loving relationship, but the charity work I was doing was gaining recognition.

In March 2014, I was invited to the International Woman of Courage Celebration in Washington D.C. by Michelle Obama. I was one of 10 women being honoured for their courageous and selfless efforts advocating for peace, justice, human rights and women's equality – often in the face of great personal risk.

On my return home, I was offered my own weekly talk show for acid-attack survivors on Indian TV channel News Express. I couldn't believe how much my life was changing.

Alok and I moved in together, and in June 2014 I was thrilled to discover I was pregnant. However, I started to worry – how would my child react to my face? Would they be scared of me, or find it difficult to bond with me?

My fears were unfounded, when our daughter Pihu was born the following April. The moment we locked eyes, I loved her more than anything in the world. Sometimes I struggle to believe something so beautiful is a part of me – it's a happiness I never thought I'd feel.

I've already decided that, when the time is right, I will tell Pihu about what happened to me. I don't want her to hear about it from anyone else. It's my story. I just hope my charity work will help protect my daughter from such attacks in the future.

I'm determined to continue to reflect on my experience and use it to help other acid-attack victims. I want to reform India's education system so that boys are taught at school how to respect girls and women.

I also hope to let people know that just because they've suffered an acid attack, it doesn't mean their life is over – as I've found, it can be a new beginning." **✂**

● For more information and to support the Stop Acid Attacks campaign, visit Stopacidattacks.org.



Laxmi before the attack



With her partner Alok

Photography: Faisal Magray/Cover Asia Press