

VITRIOLAGE: AN OLD ABUSE IN AN UNUSUAL PRESENTATION - A CASE REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Vitriolage is a medical and legal term embodying the act as well as the purpose within itself. Put simply it means "throwing acid (notably concentrated sulphuric acid / nitric acid) on some one with the malicious intent to harm that person". It has no literary meaning, and the Websters' Third International Dictionary is silent on this terminology. However, vitriolage as a phenomenon is firmly rooted in the crucible of ages bygone. Its purpose was vitriol, i.e., hatred, then and now too. Its scope has nevertheless widened with the passage of time. Its causes' can fan out to morbid jealousy, infidelity, vindictiveness / vengeance, gangsters' internal warfare, etc. Out of all these the notable exception could be to disfigure the face of a woman with the intention to inscribe shame permanently on the woman. It is much akin to cutting the nose of the woman who has brought dishonor to the family. However, the present case report has beaten the oft. quoted reasons out-of-race, and hence merit its presentation solely because the manifestation -obvious and not-so-obvious -is unusual.

CASE REPORT

The unusual event came to notice after the victim presented himself as a medico legal case to the casualty section of J. N. medical College Hospital, AMU, Aligarh, on 13 March 2002. The victim Mr A (the identity, both personal and situational has been concealed to protect anonymity, though all other explanations are true) is a muslim male, 25 years old with a robust personality. Occupationally he was a fruit vendor. As revealed by him during the course of eliciting medical history, he had been the object of vicious hatred and vengeance perpetrated by a woman X of similar age with whom he had intimate relationship for a considerable period of time. The provocation in the form of vitriolage came when the subject tried to extricate himself from his past sins and took on a bride. The day of vengeance was the day of his wedding, an auspicious occasion turning into an ominous one. Paradoxically, the wedding attire saved him from total ruin.

INJURIES: THE MODE AND THE CAUSATION

As happen in a typical Indian wedding, more so in muslim culture, the groom Mr A, was robed in the choicest clothes wearing shervani and skin-tight pyjama. To complete the marriage attire he had planted a "sehra" comprising of several species of flowers beaded together and falling on the front of the face, neck, and chest as a majestic garland. The "sehra" in a muslim marriage is normally kept in place throughout most of the ritual performance leading up to "nikah", the sacred scriptural performance that permanently seals the nuptial bond. The nearest analogy of "nikah" is that of ambulating seven times around the sacred fire in an Hindu marriage ceremony. After the "nikah" is over, people usually come thronging the groom and offer their congratulations - mubarakbad -and, as a token of appreciative gesture give gift to the groom. Once the "nikah" is over, the "sehra" is politely shifted to one side of the face for the public to have a glimpse of the groom's face. It was this particular 'chink' in the ceremony that helped the demonic plans of the woman X to be carried out.

The woman X attired in "burqa", the "head-to-toe" black veil, came to offer her congratulation. The groom was unsuspecting. The woman carried concentrated sulphuric acid in a bulb. As Mr A readied himself to receive the gift envelope she took out the bulb and threw it directly on his face. However, as luck would have been, at the same time the acid was thrown, the heavy beaded garland jerked forward, and thus an unusual presentation of injuries due to vitriolage came into being.

Few people sitting around the groom got injuries due to sprinkling of acid.

The need for detailed presentation of the eyent was felt to appreciate the pattern of injury resulting thereof

The case came to the notice of the authors three days after the vitriolage. The victim was admitted in the casualty section of the hospital. Photographs 1 (of lateral profile) & 2 (of front profile) of the victim are enclosed for visual elucidation. However it may-be argued that oedema and blackening evident in the photographs masked the real pattern initially observed by the authors which had been as follows:

1. Most of the face suffered 1 & 2 burn.
2. The acid trickled down to the chest along the space provided by the multiple- spaced beaded garland giving a striped pattern of injuries to the skin. The flowers were shriveled and discoloured. Small glass shrapnels were embedded in the skin.
3. The broad band of flowers encircling the forehead along with the turban protected the eyes completely from the havoc caused by acid. Few eyelashes were found singed.
4. Over the chest confluent 1 & 2 burns were found. As evident in the front profile, the chest injury was V -shaped which could be explained by the tightness imparted by the thick coth shervani on both sides of the chest. Over the front the shervani is rather loose.
5. Blisters and peeling of skin was present at different sites of the face and chest.

It was determined by the authors that about 300 ml of concentrated sulphuric acid had been used.

PROGNOSIS

The patient stayed for two weeks and made remarkable recovery with no permanent deformity that would have needed cosmetic surgery. He however, did not report back for follow-up. A case was later registered against the woman and her accomplice for

causing grievous hurt u/s 324 IPC.

CONCLUSION

The case report presented above is unusual in the manifestation of striped facial injuries attributed directly to the shielding effect provided by the "sehra". The authors feel that this case may be recorded in the medical literature because the probability of repetition of such an event is remote. Had the patient reported for follow-up treatment, more medical details could have been brought forward.