



Parineeta with her husband, Sudhir Kumar, early in their marriage, before the fire. 'I want to have the good memories again,' Mr. Kumar says today. JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

In Indian Families, the Dangerous Meeting of Women and Fire

A young wife, Parineeta, is burned, and the scars span generations; a national phenomenon of women set alight

By JESSE PESTA and PREETIKA RANA

JAWAN, India—Parineeta screamed as fire engulfed her kerosene-soaked leggings and long, green blouse.

"I saw her spinning in the courtyard," says Zahid Khan, a neighbor. "The flames rose higher and higher." The blaze burned Ms. Parineeta, a petite, 26-year-old mother of two, over some 40% of her body, including her legs, torso and the left side of her face.

Even as India rushes toward modernity, the country still sees unusually large numbers of women killed or injured by fire as a result of family conflict, a problem with deep cultural roots.

Sometimes, relatives set the fire as pun-

ishment for perceived affronts to family honor or in quarrels over dowry gifts in marriage deals. According to government figures, one woman dies roughly once an hour in a dowry dispute. In other cases, women burn themselves in desperation to escape abuse.

Fires like these offer a grim measure of the strains on Indian society as patriarchal traditions collide with changing ideas about a woman's place in the world.

The phenomenon spans generations. In fact, Ms. Parineeta isn't the first woman to burn in the pastel home where she lived. Twenty years earlier, a young woman burned to death within the same walls—a sister-in-law Ms. Parineeta



Anshul Kumar shows the scorch mark in the courtyard of the home where Ms. Parineeta was burned last year. His own mother died in a fire in 1994 in a bedroom off the courtyard. PHOTO: JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

never knew.

Ms. Parineeta, who uses a single name, says that in January 2014, her sister-in-law doused her with kerosene, then lit a match, culminating years of struggle with her husband's family, who wanted her to live a traditional, cloistered life, something she resisted.

They barred her from working in her friend's beauty salon, a job she calls "my lifeline." And they didn't like that she had given birth to two girls.

"When women bear daughters, and not sons, this is what's done to us," she says.

Ms. Parineeta's sister-in-law and father-in-law have been charged with attempted murder. They say they are innocent.

Ms. Parineeta's husband, Sudhir Kumar, agrees. "She set herself on fire," he says.

The Wall Street Journal spent months examining Ms. Parineeta's case and interviewing dozens of people, including all six witnesses to her fire. Their accounts clash in fundamental ways, yet

a powerful reality unites them: In rural India, rigid social rules can turn familiar and seemingly solvable family questions—where to live, whether a mother should stay home and care for the children—into matters of life and death.

Ms. Parineeta grew up in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh near the town of Bulandshehr, a cluster of drowsy bazaars, dangling electrical wires and occasional horse-drawn taxi-carts. Her father, who died when she was little, nicknamed her "Baby," and it stuck.

Ms. Parineeta married at 21. Her family chose her husband, whom she met for the first time at their wedding. Keeping with custom, the newlyweds moved in with his family.

In traditional Indian households, where several generations live under one roof, a wife is expected to be devoted not only to her husband, but to her in-laws too. She is expected to abide by the rules of their house. And she is expected to bear a son to carry the family name.

This, Ms. Parineeta says, is where conflict



Ms. Parineeta, in the burn unit at Safdarjung Hospital in New Delhi, gives her statement about the fire to the police, with her mother looking on. PHOTO: JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

grew. “I have two daughters. That’s why they used to trouble me,” she says, referring to her father-in-law, Sukhram Singh, and her sister-in-law, Sangeeta. Ms. Sangeeta has a son, Ms. Parineeta says, so she was favored in the house.

Ms. Parineeta says her father-in-law would hit her older daughter, Shubhanganana, now 5 years old. “He didn’t see her as a child.”

She says her father-in-law also demanded payments and gifts as compensation for bringing two girls into the family. Ms. Parineeta’s daughters represent a future financial strain: Someday the girls might require dowries of their own. “They used to say, ‘You have two daughters. Who will bear their expenses?’” Ms. Parineeta says of her in-laws.

Mr. Singh, who died late last year at age 80 while being treated for heart trouble, denied in an interview demanding dowry or striking the children.

Ms. Parineeta’s personal escape, she says, was the beauty parlor where she worked, a tiny, open-air storefront next to the family’s house. Run by a woman named

Durga, it held a few chairs, a mirror and a shelf stocked with beauty creams and “boxes and boxes of nail polish,” Ms. Parineeta says. “Red, pink, blue, yellow, just name it.”

Ms. Durga, a 30-year-old mother of two, says she saw tension in the home. “Lots of fights,” she says. “The father-in-law would never accept her daughters.”

Ms. Parineeta wanted independence, says Ms. Durga, who also goes by one name. “She used to say, ‘Teach me how to run the parlor. I’ll be grateful to you for life.’”

Ms. Parineeta’s personality changed in the salon, Ms. Durga says. She became outspoken and funny.

She recalls one day when a customer was disappointed in Ms. Parineeta’s eyebrow-trimming skills and insulted her work. To make amends to the customer—or, at least, so it seemed—Ms. Parineeta offered her a face massage.

“But there was no massage that day!” Ms. Durga says, laughing at the memory. Instead, Ms. Parineeta started vigorously slapping the woman’s cheeks. “This is



'She set herself on fire,' says Sudhir Kumar, Ms. Parineeta's husband. He stayed with their two daughters in a slum area on New Delhi's outskirts during her recovery in the hospital. PHOTO: JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

how you get that rosy glow," Ms. Parineeta assured the startled client, Ms. Durga says.

A little more than two years ago, Ms. Durga left the village and gave Ms. Parineeta the salon as a gift. But Ms. Parineeta didn't keep it open.

Her husband and his family were opposed. "I told her, 'You'll not be able to take care of the kids if you run the parlor,'" Mr. Kumar says.

"She was upset," he says. "She said she would multitask. 'I'll manage everything—the home, the kids, and work. Just let me run it,' " she said, he recalls.

Mr. Kumar says he told her no. "Men hung around the parlor," he says. "I didn't like that."

Ms. Durga says her theory is that Mr. Kumar's family feared Ms. Parineeta would "become independent and earn her own living."

From her hospital bed in New Delhi last year, Ms. Parineeta said she missed the

beauty parlor. "But some things are best forgotten," she said.

On Jan. 25, 2014, the day before Ms. Parineeta was burned, she says, she fought with her father-in-law, Mr. Singh. She says he wouldn't let her or her daughters eat. "He had thrown the cooked vegetables to the cows," she says, to prevent their having a meal.

Two neighbors describe hearing another fight that day, too. It was a foggy winter's morning, they say, and a clash broke out over heating water to bathe Ms. Parineeta's daughter. It was "a big fight with a lot of screaming," says Mr. Khan, the neighbor who saw Ms. Parineeta on fire.

"Don't you know how expensive a gas cylinder is?" said Ms. Sangeeta, the sister-in-law, according to Mr. Khan. He says she told Ms. Parineeta that she needed to get her own gas, and not use the family's gas.

Ms. Sangeeta "picked up the pot of water and plonked it outside," Mr. Khan says. "We were startled."



Ms. Parineeta's husband feeds their younger daughter in the common area outside the one-room apartment where he and his two girls were staying near New Delhi. JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The next morning, Ms. Parineeta says, she woke up early, swept the house and washed clothes. She had just hung them to dry in the courtyard when Ms. Sangeeta, she says, splashed her with kerosene.

"I thought it was water," says Ms. Parineeta. Her sister-in-law struck a match, she says, and told her to die. She says her husband, Mr. Kumar, extinguished the flames, saving her life.

Mr. Kumar, Ms. Sangeeta and Mr. Singh narrate a different version of events.

In Mr. Kumar's telling, he and his wife were chatting on a staircase near the courtyard when their conversation was interrupted. "Papa started screaming from downstairs," Mr. Kumar says, demanding that someone serve tea to a visiting aunt.

A few minutes passed, Mr. Kumar says, and everyone gathered in the courtyard. As he describes it, Ms. Parineeta walked over to her father-in-law, who was sitting on a rope cot.

"I'm packing my bags," Ms. Parineeta said

to her father-in-law, Mr. Singh. She said she wanted to move to another house the family owned, in the town of Aligarh. Mr. Singh said she couldn't move there.

"Everybody fights with me here," Ms. Parineeta said.

"Of course everybody fights with you," Mr. Singh replied, with sarcasm. "You don't fight with anyone."

Mr. Singh, in an interview, said Ms. Parineeta also made this comment: "If you don't give me the house that way, let's see if you give it to me this way."

Next, both men say, Ms. Parineeta turned and walked into a storage closet directly off the courtyard, and locked herself in.

"Baby, open the door!" Mr. Kumar says he shouted.

A few moments later she opened the door and stepped out, Mr. Kumar says, with her clothing ablaze.

"I started ripping her clothes off. I thought the fire would go out if I tore the



Vegetable seller Harprasad, the brother of Gayatri Devi, says he has had no contact with his sister's in-laws since she burned to death in 1994, nor with his sister's son, Anshul Kumar. JESSE PESTA/ THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

clothes," he says. "It didn't work."

Ms. Sangeeta smothered the blaze, he says, by draping Ms. Parineeta with a blanket.

Mr. Kumar says he thinks Ms. Parineeta wanted to frighten the family to get her way in the dispute over where to live. "She only did it to scare my father," he says, without imagining that the fire itself could "spiral into something big."

Ms. Parineeta says she didn't set herself on fire. She says she thinks her husband is trying to protect his relatives.

Along with attempted murder, Ms. Parineeta's father-in-law and sister-in-law, Mr. Singh and Ms. Sangeeta, were charged with demanding dowry and inflicting cruelty over dowry payments and jailed. Both denied the charges. They also denied, in detail, the claims of troubled family life described by Ms. Parineeta and others.

In an interview at the prison last year where she was being held, Ms. Sangeeta, who is in her early 30s, denied burning Ms. Parineeta. When the commotion

started in the courtyard that morning, she said, she was in a bedroom. "I ran outside," Ms. Sangeeta said. "That's when I saw Baby on fire," she said, using Ms. Parineeta's nickname.

Describing her relationship with Ms. Parineeta, she said, "I won't say we were friends, but we weren't enemies either. There was no friendship, but there wasn't animosity." Ms. Sangeeta is currently out on bail.

The father-in-law, Mr. Singh, was released on bail last August. Shortly thereafter, he checked into a hospital suffering from heart trouble.

Reclining on a rusty steel bed in a dim hospital ward that same month, he said of the charges against him: "How much did I sin in my past life to deserve this? Maybe this is what kismet had in store for me."

A few days later, he died.

Ms. Parineeta's husband, Mr. Kumar, says his father was deeply concerned before his death that nobody would believe his innocence. And "why would they?"



A wedding-day snapshot of Gayatri Devi, who burned to death in the same house in 1994, held by her brother, Harprasad. PHOTO: JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Kumar says. After all, “This happened 20 years ago, too.”

He was referring to April 1, 1994, the day Gayatri Devi, another daughter-in-law of Mr. Singh’s, burned to death in a bedroom in the same home. The fire also injured Ms. Devi’s baby boy, who survived. Mr. Singh and two other men were tried on charges of dowry death in the case. All were acquitted. Mr. Singh, in his hospital-bed interview, said Ms. Devi burned herself because she had cancer.

Ms. Devi’s brother, Harprasad, a fruit seller in a village an hour’s drive away, says he believes his sister was murdered. He says she didn’t have cancer. He says the in-laws were dissatisfied with her dowry and demanded more from the family, including a motorcycle.

“‘We are poor people,’ we told the father-in-law,” Mr. Harprasad says. “Where will we get the money?”

Since the fire, Mr. Harprasad says, the two families have had no contact—not even with his sister’s son, the child who was burned in the fire that killed Ms. Devi. “We haven’t seen the boy since that day,” he says.

Today that son, Anshul Kumar, is a slim, swaggering 22-year-old. Last summer he was the only person living in the pink-and-green pastel home where he, his mother and Ms. Parineeta were burned.

Standing in the home’s open-air courtyard, he pointed to a soot stain on the wall. “This is where the fire happened,” he said. Nearby was the door to his bedroom. It is the room where his mother died.

Mr. Kumar says he believes his mother killed herself, and that his grandfather wasn’t involved. Asked how two women, Ms. Parineeta and his mother, both came to be burned in his grandfather’s home, he says, “It’s just a coincidence.”

There are three more people who saw Ms. Parineeta on fire: the visiting aunt, and the two neighbors who heard the screaming. The aunt says Ms. Parineeta burned herself.

The two neighbors—Mr. Khan, who owns a hardware store, and Shafiq Ahmed, the furniture maker—have lived next to Ms. Parineeta’s in-laws for years. They remember Ms. Parineeta’s arrival partly



The jail in Aligarh, in rural India, where Ms. Parineeta's father-in-law and sister-in-law, Sukhran Singh and Sangeeta, were held. Both have been charged with attempted murder, demanding dowry and inflicting cruelty over dowry payments. Both proclaim their innocence. Mr. Singh was released from jail complaining of heart trouble, and died shortly thereafter. JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

because she knows how to make good tea. "We used to joke around, 'Good that they've gotten a new daughter-in-law, at least the quality of tea has improved!'" Mr. Khan says.

Both men suspect Ms. Parineeta set herself on fire, although they are quick to say they can't be sure. Neither saw the fire start. Both agree they heard her husband shout, "Baby, what did you do to yourself?"

Messrs. Khan and Ahmed say they think Ms. Parineeta was forced into a desperate act. "Everyone in the village thinks she had no other option," Mr. Khan says. "Baby was being mentally tortured in that home." He says, "What could anyone have done?"

There is a complex history of fire and women in India. In Hindu mythology, the goddess Sati set herself alight in a family dispute centering on preserving her husband's honor. That story is tied to a centuries-old historical practice, also known as sati, in which widows would immolate themselves—or be forcefully immolated—on their husbands' funeral

pyres. India outlawed sati in 1987. Mr. Ahmed draws a distinction between history and Ms. Parineeta's circumstances. "Sati was forceful," he says. "Women were forced to immolate themselves. Today, women immolate themselves voluntarily."

Mr. Khan sees a more direct link to the past. "Tradition plays a very important role," he says. "Women were burned in India back in the day. Maybe this idea of burning came from there."

Then, he makes a practical point. "Kerosene is available in every household," he says. "Burning becomes convenient."

The two men believe Ms. Devi also set herself on fire, an event they remember from childhood. "She, too, saw no other choice," Mr. Ahmed says.

With Ms. Parineeta, they say, history simply repeated itself.

At Safdarjung Hospital in New Delhi, where Ms. Parineeta was treated for months, the burn unit sees one or two cases a day where a young woman says



Ms. Parineeta reclines in the living room of her mother's home in rural India, where she is recovering from burns over 40% of her body. JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

she was burned in a family dispute, according to Dr. Shamandra Sahu, a senior resident there.

“At least one patient, always,” he says, “who has a quarrel with the in-laws.”

These injuries often go by the euphemism “kitchen fire,” doctors and police say, because it is common in India for women to be injured while cooking. Open flames and traditional, flowing Indian garments can be a dangerous mix.

“A lot of women say they were burned in kitchen fires, but the real story is something different,” says Karoon Agarwal, the doctor who heads the burn unit.

One of the senior physicians on Dr. Agarwal's staff, Upendra Kumar, says it can be difficult to know precisely how a woman was burned without a police investigation. But there are hints. In cases of intentional burning, he says, some patients arrive at the hospital “reeking of kerosene.”

“Most of them, they lie about the injury,” Dr. Kumar says.

Ms. Parineeta is expected to recover, her doctors say. She has undergone about five surgeries, including two skin grafts.

Things haven't gone smoothly, though. She lost an eye to infection. And her injuries are taking a toll across her family, and across generations.

Ms. Parineeta's elder daughter hasn't returned to school since the fire. That is because Ms. Parineeta's husband had to quit his job to care for the girls, which meant he couldn't pay rent, which meant he had to move several times. Something had to give, and it was his daughter's education.

After spending months in and out of the hospital, Ms. Parineeta is back in Bulandshahr, convalescing at her mother's house. Her sister, Ruby, helps care for her. This month, she received an artificial eye—a “stone eye,” Ms. Parineeta calls it.

What comes next for Ms. Parineeta is uncertain. Her father-in-law, Mr. Singh, said before his death that he wanted to see Ms. Parineeta drop her case and state that she set herself on fire. Asked if his family could live together again under the same roof, he said, “I've left it to the one above. It's all in his hands.”

Ms. Parineeta's husband feels pressure to pick a side. “On one hand there is my family,” he says. “On the other is my wife and kids.”



Ms. Parineeta last month at her mother's house. She uses a reporter's cellphone to speak with her older daughter, whom she hasn't seen for a year. She has no phone of her own. PHOTO: JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"Who do I choose?" Mr. Kumar says. "Either way, I lose someone."

Ultimately, though, he wants his wife to come home. "I want us to be family once again," he says. "I want to have the good memories again."

Ms. Parineeta calls her husband a "sim-

ple man. Too simple." It angered her when he visited the hospital while she was there. As the months passed, he visited less often.

Still, Ms. Parineeta says, she knows what the future holds. "I'll have to stay with him," she says. "I have no choice. I have two daughters."