



Anshul Kumar's mug shot at the police station in Jawan, where he faces charges of stealing cell-phones. He denies the charges. Jesse Pesta/The Wall Street Journal

A Young Mother Burns to Death; Next Generation Pays a Toll

By JESSE PESTA and PREETIKA RANA

JAWAN, India—Anshul Kumar's face is scarred from the fire that killed his mother two decades ago.

It gives him a streetwise look that echoes the difficult path of his life. "I am the one person in this village who everybody fears," says Mr. Kumar, sipping tea in a snack stall near the coal-fired power plant that towers over this hamlet in north India.

Then, last year—two decades after his mother's death—another young woman was badly burned in the same household. The two fires offer a grim portrait of the strains on Indian society as patriarchal traditions collide with changing ideas about a woman's place in the world.

Even as India rushes toward modernity, large numbers of women are killed or injured by fire as a result of domestic 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. In other cases, women burn themselves in the face of abuse.

Mr. Kumar's mother, Gayatri Devi, burned to death in 1994, when Mr. Kumar was 2 years old. He was raised by his grandfather, who was charged with, and acquitted of, murdering his mother. The grandfather, in an interview, denied killing Ms. Devi.

His mother's death left Mr. Kumar, who is in his early 20s, estranged from his maternal relatives, who still believe she was murdered.

Today, Mr. Kumar is in trouble with the law. He was arrested two years ago and jailed on allegations of stealing cell-phones. Police say he has been charged and is on bail awaiting trial.

He denies the charges. "Those were my



Mr. Kumar shows the scorch mark in the courtyard of the home where Parineeta was burned last year. His own mother died in a fire in 1994 in a bedroom off the courtyard. Jesse Pesta/The Wall Street Journal

phones,” he says. “I need phones. I’m a busy person.”

Several months ago, Mr. Kumar left the village. His relatives and the police say they have lost contact with him. Family members say they believe he moved to another state. Mr. Kumar’s phone is turned off, and efforts to reach him through WhatsApp, neighbors and a family lawyer were unsuccessful.

In the more recent fire, in January 2014, a young woman named Parineeta, the wife of Mr. Kumar’s uncle, was badly burned in a blaze in the central courtyard of the family’s village home, just steps from the bedroom where Mr. Kumar’s mother died. The same man—Mr. Kumar’s grandfather—was charged with attempted murder, along with one of his daughters-in-law.

In interviews, both maintained their innocence. The grandfather, Sukhram Singh, said last year from a rusty hospital bed that both of the burned women set themselves on fire. Shortly after the interview, Mr. Singh died.

Mr. Kumar believes in his relatives’ innocence, too. “Women are highly regarded in our home,” he says.

He notes that Ms. Parineeta has two little girls—the first daughters born into the family. “My grandfather was so happy,” Mr. Kumar says. “He would say, ‘All my life I have spent getting my sons married. Finally, I will get to do a kanyadaan,’” a Hindu wedding ceremony where a male relative of the bride asks the in-laws to care for her as their own.

He expects the murder charges to result in acquittal. “It’s no big deal,” he says. He also believes his mother set herself on fire.

During a visit last year to the village, the local police chief at the time, Suhas Yadav, sat behind a wooden desk beneath a tarp strung from two trees. The police station stands just a few blocks from the house where the fires occurred.

Mr. Yadav said he didn’t know about the fire 20 years ago, the one that killed Mr. Kumar’s mother. But he knew Mr. Kumar.



Crumbling police files describe the death of Gayatri Devi, Mr. Kumar's mother. Jesse Pesta/The Wall Street Journal

He flipped open a ledger. The young man's mug shot stared out.

The police chief was surprised to learn that Mr. Kumar was living in the home where Ms. Parineeta was burned. "I thought the house was abandoned," he said. Mr. Yadav picked up one of his two cellphones and dialed.

"Anshul, son," he said. "Where are you? We need you. Will you come to the police station?"

Mr. Kumar, a few blocks away just minutes earlier, told the police chief he was in another town.

"Ok," Mr. Yadav said, hanging up the phone.

In the year before Ms. Parineeta's burning, Mr. Yadav's station recorded 498

criminal complaints. Four were for alleged dowry death, and 22 for inflicting cruelty for dowry.

Asked last year, as the Journal investigated the burnings, whether Mr. Yadav's office still had files from the fire that killed Mr. Kumar's mother, the police chief said he doubted it. "It's impossible. That happened 20 years ago," Mr. Yadav said.

After more requests to look in his files, Mr. Yadav agreed to check.

An assistant brought out a stack of crumbling ledgers. Ten minutes or so later, the original police file, dated April 2, 1994, was found.

The file quotes the brother of the deceased. In neat Hindi script, it reads: "My sister, Gayatri Devi, was burned alive."