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Sonali Mukherjee at the rented apartment in Chhatarpur gaon, Delhi, where she is staying while she undergoes medical treatment. Photo: Priyanka Parashar/Mint

True Stories | Reconstructing Sonali Mukherjee

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Pallavi Singh

She has undergone 25 surgeries in 10 years and excruciating pain just to look human again. The acid attack survivor still walks a tightrope between life and death

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[Sonali Mukherjee](#) lives in a world of difficult extremes.

It's a drizzly evening in Delhi and her thick fingers, a hesitant, trembling bunch, roll over a stack of medical prescriptions she is trying to arrange in a fluorescent-pink plastic file. Suddenly, she feels cold. She asks her mother for a sweater, shivering. It's the middle of June.

Ten years ago, before three men poured acid on her, she felt the seasons like everyone else. And she could see dense fog and the summer sun. With more than 60-70% of her skin burnt, she now feels the chill at 22 degrees Celsius and cannot bear the heat beyond 25 degrees.

"There is always a difference of 6-7 degrees in temperature between what's normal for her and what's normal for us. The skin that regulates body temperature is damaged in her case," explains [Avtar Singh Bath](#), a plastic surgeon at central Delhi's BLK Super Speciality Hospital, where Sonali is currently undergoing surgeries to reconstruct her face. "In other words, what's pleasant for us is unbearable for her."

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Sonali now is a far cry from her past as an NCC cadet. Photograph: Priyanka Parashar/Mint

Sonali now is a far cry from her past as an NCC cadet

Dr Bath and his team at BLK are trying to restore some of her past. His work as a plastic surgeon is in essence the measure of medical science in human life—its role in making it better. In Sonali's case, living better is relative. "She will never look normal. Our aim is to give her functional utility in life in which her vital organs work," [Sanjeev Bagai](#), a senior doctor at the hospital who is supervising Sonali's surgeries, says.

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do was dress my wounds. My body was on fire," Sonali recalls.

I shouldn't be sweating much, you know. It will affect my scars and wounds.

At his chamber in the hospital, cosmetic rehabilitation can mean a range of expensive treatments—from tummy tucks to liposuction and botox, these medical interventions are marketed to men and women to better their appearances. A board outside points to his clientele: photographs of a woman with clear cheeks after acne scar correction; a grinning man with his double chin removed; a woman with a sharp nose.

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Dr Bath shows one of the images from her scalp surgery. Photo: Priyanka Parashar/Mint

Fate intervened in Sonali's life when three men whose sexual advances she resisted in Dhanbad, attacked her. Sonali's surgeries were made possible by generous donations from non-governmental organizations, individuals, corporate firms and media houses, apart from the prize money of ₹ 25 lakh—about ₹ 16 lakh after income-tax deduction, which she won at the popular quiz show Kaun Banega Crorepati—in November. For the treatment at BLK, Beti, a Mumbai-based NGO working for girls, offered to meet a chunk of the medical expenses. Dr Bagai says Sonali's treatment at BLK will cost ₹ 25-30 lakh and more than half the amount has already been sent by Beti.

Before her treatment at BLK began last year, Sonali had undergone 20 surgeries, mostly free of cost, at the government-funded Safdarjung Hospital in south Delhi. Bleeding from her wounds and in pain, her father and she would queue up at the hospital in 2003, when she came to Delhi.

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Sonali collecting awards for college-level dance and debate performances in 2002 from the then Jharkhand chief minister Babulal Marandi

Sonali collecting awards for college-level dance and debate performances in 2002 from the then Jharkhand chief minister Babulal Marandi

Back home in Dhanbad, [Chandi Das Mukherjee](#) lost his job as a guard at a local dal mill and had to sell his ancestral house. Sonali's younger siblings dropped out of school. Her mother suffered prolonged depression and refused to see Sonali for many years after the incident. Distressed, Sonali appealed for euthanasia in July 2012, a month before she enrolled for further treatment at BLK. "I had begun holding myself

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direct impact on her skin tissues. She had practically no tissue on her face. Whatever reconstruction of the scalp was done, it was giving way. She had no ear lobes, ear drums, no external ears. She couldn't hear. She had lost practically all vision—in one of the eyes, the optic nerve that carries the impulse to the brain has been damaged. She had no neck tissue, no armpits," Dr Bagai recalls. Worse, Sonali's burnt skin had developed severe contractures—hardened tissues after burns, the affected body parts immobile. So she couldn't lift her hand, couldn't smile, couldn't speak, couldn't bat eyelids, couldn't move her neck and couldn't walk freely. She had shrunk from 50kg to 26, indicating acute protein malnourishment.

Sonali now is a far cry from her past as an NCC cadet

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But there is nothing cosmetic about it in Sonali's case. Her arms and legs are thin, with dark patches wherever flesh was sliced for grafting. She is constantly trying to gain weight so that the surgeries can continue. Dr Bath does most of the grafting with silicon balloons that are inserted beneath Sonali's skin, which needs to be expanded and inflated with saline water. The surgeon, who spent years in the army, compares the expanders to invincible entities, "just like fighter aircraft". "It never leaks, however much you poke it. Have you seen fighter aircraft whose petrol tanks don't burst however lethal the attack?" he asks, forwarding a sample of a scalp expander. It's imported, he adds, and each costs ₹ 50,000-60,000.

For reconstruction of the right portion of her scalp, which kept breaking down despite three surgeries at Safdarjung, Dr Bath inserted an expander beneath the skin on her left scalp. Over the next four months, the skin formed a bulge as big as a football. Expanders make normal skin of 1x1cm expand up to 3x3cm over a period of three-four months, depending on the elasticity of the skin. "It's like what happens in pregnancy when the uterus grows and skin on the stomach expands. After the baby is

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With her 'talking' phone at her Delhi residence. Photo: Priyanka Parashar/Mint

The frequency and scale of surgeries have put severe strain on Sonali. Besides the excessive and prolonged medication that keeps her away from infections, the cosmetic surgeries demand unusual mental strength. Chandi Das Mukherjee, in his 10 years in Delhi's hospitals looking after his daughter, has seen many give up, such as an 18-year-old boy he knew who died after an ear surgery simply because he couldn't take the shock. Not his daughter, he says.

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blood pressure, blood count, sugar levels and a well-functioning thyroid, apart from steering clear of viral attacks and other casual infections. The period after surgery is often more painful.

Sonali is quick to remember the painful exercises that finally helped her to open her mouth. "After my lips were reconstructed, I was given a dozen ice-cream sticks to insert in my mouth which was practically sealed by the lips. I would insert sticks every hour for the next two months to create a gap, and gosh, it hurt so much," she says.

After a few surgeries at Safdarjung Hospital and a happy image from the album

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How does she do it? "I take extra care. I follow rules to the book. I tell myself that I have to do this. I know if I don't, the surgeries that have taken 10 years would take 20!" Sonali says.

We met Sonali inside her room at BLK last month. It was time for another surgery—the 25th in 10 years. Chandi Das Mukherjee signed the medical undertaking form taking responsibility if she died after the surgery, a ritual before every surgery. "With every surgery, she is born again," he says, looking at his daughter lying on a bed covered by a spotless white bedsheet.

After the surgery, Sonali will have to sleep on one side for six weeks, as she has several times in the past, so her reconstructed external ear doesn't break. To look human again, she willingly bears the pain and prays for more money to fund her remaining surgeries.

"What worse can happen?" she says.

Sonali's attackers have been out on bail for the last 10 years.

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