

# Mystery of a burnt body

## Abstract

It is very often revealed, homicide by poisoning, strangulation, torture, rape, bride burning cases are suppressed to present the crime as suicide burning. Such modus operandi is adopted by perpetrators to conceal the facts and misguide the investigation. In order to investigate burning cases, it is very much essential to visit the undisturbed crime scene to ascertain homicide/suicide burning since many post incident evidence are helpful to distinguish between homicide and suicide burning, further supported by autopsy findings. In one case, the husband, wife and kid were staying together at their own house. One day, the neighbours observed thick smoke was coming out from the roof top of the house. They screamed, forcibly entered and could find a burnt body lying on the roof top with a deformed plastic jerrycan nearby. The police was informed and immediately forensic team and police started the investigation. There was still presence of residual fire and smoke and many other post burning peculiarities were observed on the burnt body and the crime spot. The deceased's body was sent for autopsy. The different post burning features observed on the crime spot, autopsy findings and criminal profile have been discussed and the mystery of death has been revealed.

**Keywords:** family feud, burnt body, deformed plastic jerrycan, tied leg, carbonaceous residue, autopsy findings

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## Introduction

The crime scene management of burnt cases either suicide/homicide/or accidental are frequently encountered by the police/forensic team to establish the fact for further investigation. The examinations of such cases are very difficult considering the damage caused by high temperature altering the morphological indicators. But the bones of unidentified burnt body sometimes help the forensic experts to establish the identity by matching through forensic tests except charred bones. As per National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), MHA, Govt. of India's data, there are 163,533 number of crime cases under the heads of both homicide and suicide reported in the year 2018.<sup>1</sup> In many unnatural death cases, suspicion is raised by the press, public and relatives alleging to be homicide. In such situations, forensic investigation of crime scene and inquest by the investigator followed with autopsy of the victim invariably help to establish whether the case is a homicide, suicide or an accident. In India, suicide by self immolation (bride burning) and homicide burning are frequently reported, but sometimes evidence are destroyed by the perpetrators to misguide investigation. The cases of burn, either indoor/outdoor, the crime scene should be thoroughly examined followed with autopsy to rule out the possibility of any foul play to establish the fact. During the investigation of burnt cases, the investigators and forensic team are required to analyze the undisturbed crime scene at the earliest possible time to collect the physical evidence. The following points are required to be taken into consideration for successful investigation of burnt cases.<sup>2-4</sup>

### Observation at scene

- Crime scene be protected till the arrival of investigator and forensic team
- Photograph/sketch be recorded
- Condition of wearing apparel
- Position of footwear

- Sign of scuffling on spot
- Fire point of origin
- Size of fire upon discovery
- Smell on the crime scene
- Type of accelerant used
- Ignition source
- Presence of container
- Examination of fingerprint on different articles
- Presence of bloodstain on the crime scene
- Deposition of soot
- Match box/lighter
- CCTV footage, if available

### Observation on victim's body

- Percentage of burn
- Position of the dead body
- Any peculiarity observed (tying of hand/leg/gagging of mouth etc.)
- Smell on the body
- Torture mark on the body
- Wearing apparel sticking to the body
- Oozing of blood from nose/or any other part of the body and colour of the blood
- Colour of the periphery of the blisters

### Collection of evidence during autopsy

- Viscera/urine/blood
- Vaginal swab/pubic hair (female)
- Wearing apparel
- Nail clippings of the deceased

### Available resources and criminal profiling input

- Family history
- Past activity of the victim/suspect
- Suicide note/diary
- Mobile telephone of victim/suspect (for analysis of call records)
- Intelligence input

### Case report

In one case, a middle-aged person was staying with his wife and kid in a locality. The wife was not happy since conjugal life was disturbed due to extra marital relation of her husband with another woman. Further, the wife was tortured frequently on petty matter and family life was miserable. One day, thick smoke was seen coming out from the roof top of the house and neighbourhood people were curious to know the cause of smoke and forcibly entered to know the fact. They could see one burnt body was lying on the roof top with a deformed jerrycan nearby. The residual smoke was still coming out from the burnt wearing apparel showing sign of fire. They could also feel the smell of kerosene coming out from the crime spot. The forensic team and police immediately visited the undisturbed crime scene and collected the physical evidence along with family history of the deceased/suspect. The deceased's body was sent for autopsy and a case was registered under different sections of Indian Penal Code for investigation.

### Observation

The burnt body and other post incident features found are shown in Figures 1–6.



**Figure 1** Burnt body on the spot; a deformed plastic Jerrycan lying nearby.



**Figure 2** Burnt body with protruded tongue and oozing out of blood from the nostrils.



**Figure 3** Close up view of tied leg of the deceased.



**Figure 4** Both hands showing mark of post residual burn (encircled).



**Figure 5** Half burnt piece of cloth, used for tying leg of the deceased taking support from the steel bar on the roof top.



**Figure 6** Showing articles (bed/chair) scattered inside living room of the victim.

### Autopsy findings

**External:** The deceased is a woman of average body built; rigor mortis is present all over the body. Kerosene like smell is coming out from all over the body. Both the eyes are closed and the mouth is partially open. Tongue is protruded out and caught in between teeth of both the upper and lower jaws. External genitalia are burnt; black colour soot present in all other external orifices. Faecal matter is present in the anal orifice. About 100% of the body surface area is affected by burn injuries.

**Injuries:** Epidermal, dermo-epidermal to deep burn injuries are present all over the body. Deep burns are present on the neck, upper chest, upper half of abdominal wall involving back of the trunk. Charring of the underlying muscle is present in and around the site of deep burns. Heat ruptures present on the right axillary region. Multiple abrasions are present on the forehead; one reddish colour graze abrasion is present on the postero-lateral aspect of the right

forearm; another reddish colour graze abrasion is present on the back of right elbow; multiple scratch abrasions are present on the postero-medial aspect of the left arm and forearm, which are caused by the impact of blunt force.

**Internal:** Mucosa of trachea and bronchi are congested. Black soot particles are present inside the trachea and bronchi. Brain as a whole is oedematous and congested. Larynx, nasal mucosa, both lungs, large intestine, appendix, mesentery, pancreas, liver, gall bladder, spleen, kidneys, ureters, renal pelvis are found congested. No abnormality is detected in diaphragm, oesophagus, pleural cavities, peritoneal cavity, heart, pericardial sac, large blood vessels, small intestine, pelvic walls, urinary bladder and urethra. All the burn injuries are ante-mortem in nature and fresh in duration at the time of death. The cause of death is shock resulting from total body surface area burn injury which is caused by flame.

### Where forensic analysis stands now

The forensic evidence analysis based on crime scene management, laboratory examination and autopsy findings are:

- Victim and offender exist at the same place
- Thick black smoke was coming out from place of fire suggesting use of hydrocarbon
- One plastic jerrycan (deformed) lying near the dead body emitting smell of kerosene was a hydrocarbon container
- The crime spot was emitting smell of kerosene
- The different house hold articles inside bedroom were found disturbed suggesting scuffle before the incident
- Intact pre-fire position of the body on the roof floor suggests the body was without any movement during burn being tied the leg with cloth
- The victim was stupefied and lifted to the roof top by tying of leg supported the post burning features
- The analysis of sequence of events suggests kerosene was poured from jerrycan after tying leg/hands and set the unconscious body afire
- There was presence of soot in the trachea as per autopsy study suggesting victim was alive at the time of death
- The autopsy result revealed that death was due to shock from 100% burn injury by flame
- The colour of blood coming out from nose was cherry red suggesting anti-mortem burn
- The viscera analysis report ruled out presence of toxic drug/sedative suggesting the victim might have been made semi-unconscious by the perpetrator
- The examination of the wearing apparel revealed the presence of residues of kerosene
- Examination vaginal swab ruled out sexual assault before death
- The blood group of the deceased was established for matching

### Discussion

In this case, the mode of killing the wife by her husband having a kid is unusual, indicating less family attachment, remorse and

psychopath. Moreover, love was cold and bond between husband and wife was lost due to extra marital relation with another woman. This is an organised crime without any fear psychosis where the suspect controlled the mood during such heinous crime, precipitating all situational stress.<sup>5</sup> From the profile input of the suspect and physical evidence observed on the crime spot, it appears that the suspect tried to destroy the evidence and suppressed the crime to present as suicide burning to misguide investigation. But the nature of physical evidence detected on the crime spot and autopsy findings revealed that the offender had full knowledge about the crime and committed all alone by self. Further, during the interrogation by the police, many confessional statements (preparatory activities) were revealed by the offender, corroborating to the findings of forensic/medico-legal experts. The report of medico-legal/forensic experts coupled with circumstantial evidence could help to establish the crime and nab the suspect.

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### Ethical consent

None.

### Conflicts of interest

The author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

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