

ON the 14th of November, 1996, Hamida and Roma arrived in Bangladesh and were met at the airport by Ms Salma Ali, Executive Director of the Bangladesh National Women's Lawyer's Association (BNWLA). Since Hamida's case had got a lot of media attention in Bangladesh, there was a press conference arranged on the 16th. Hamida's father, Abdul, who was asked prior to her arrival if he wanted to take his daughter home, initially said that he would like to but later claimed he didn't have the means to do so. According to him, Hamida's eldest sister (who is now 38 with a family of her own) is also too poor to keep Hamida. Arrangements were therefore made to house her at the BNWLA's home for children in Dhaka. Abdul agreed to come to Dhaka on the 16th and the BNWLA offered to cover his travelling expenses from his village.

Though Hamida had all the while maintained that her father had not known that she was being sent to India, on the plane journey back to Bangladesh she had a sudden recollection of a scene that took place a few days before she left her village over four years ago. She told Roma that she remembered her father's younger brother telling her father, "Why are you sending your daughter to Delhi? It will harm her reputation and the entire village will spit on you." Hamida recollected, "My father was crying when he said this but my step-mother insisted that I go." Both Roma and the members of the BNWLA believe that Hamida was most likely sold by her step-mother and stepmother's brother. This particular stepmother was the third wife of Hamida's father and was only a 14-year-old girl herself at the time of her marriage. Hamida's father is now 65 years old and is the father of six children, including Hamida, and his third wife is

FOLLOW-UP

Hamida Goes Home

*In Issues 88, 89, and 96 of **Manushi**, we reported on the case of Hamida, a young girl who was brought to India at the age of ten and suffered a series of brutal rapes at the hands of the man who brought her here, along with some of his friends, who were Delhi policemen. She then spent four years in a children's home in Delhi while her case was on. Only one of the accused men has served any jail time.*

Roma Debabrata, the Delhi University Reader who originally offered her translation services at a time when no translator was available, accompanied Hamida on her trip home to Bangladesh. She has been actively involved in efforts to repatriate her and get her settled.

hardly 20 years old.

When Hamida first saw her father she burst into tears. She ran up to him and said "*Mujhe ghar le chalo, mujhe ghar le chalo.* (Take me home. take me home.)" According to Roma, "She was so emotionally charged. Both her happiness and her anger were vivid on her face and in her actions. She sat by her father's side as she was told but she acted emotionally withdrawn."

Father and daughter required a translator to communicate since Hamida was speaking only Hindi and appeared not to understand her father, who speaks and understands only Bengali.

Roma felt that Hamida's father acted "like a seasoned actor" during his reunification with his daughter. Even while he was hugging his daughter, "he seemed more interested in posing for the camera. Since they had



Hamida with her father and Roma back home in Bangladesh

offered to reimburse him for travel expenses to come to Dhaka, it wasn't long after meeting Hamida that he said, "Could you please give me the money now since it is almost night and I have to go?"

This infuriated several members of the BNWLA and they began to question him about why he sent his daughter to India. He first claimed that he wasn't there when she left the country, but when they crossed checked his story against Hamida's, it turned out that he had simply left the house at the actual time she was taken by Rashid Khan. He then said, "We thought that she'd be well-off" because he knew of so many girls being taken to India for 'work'. At that point one member of the BNWLA became very upset with Hamida's father and told him, "I feel like punishing you very severely. What should be done with you?" Abdul replied, "Yes, I should be whipped. I am a mean person. I should be sacrificed in front of Kali." When questioned as to how many girls went to India that he knew of, he replied that after Hamida left, at different times around 15 other girls disappeared from the village. The members of the BNWLA suspect that this particular village is a source of girls for those in the flesh trade. They have decided to send an investigating team to the village to interview the families and collect data on exactly how many girls have been taken from the village.

It was discovered that Abdul's third wife had a brother who was associated with Rashid Khan, the man who brought Hamida to India. While Hamida's father denied that he was paid any money in exchange for his daughter, the members of the BNWLA found it hard to believe this story, since they saw no other reason that a family would hand over such a young girl to a non-family member to be taken out of the country for an indefinite period

of time.

Hamida is now staying in the BNWLA's home which houses 15 boys and girls, most of whom have been removed from abusive surroundings. Roma stayed in Bangladesh for nine days and met her every two to three days to see how she was settling in. According to Roma, "She seems happy with the language spoken, the food, the homey surroundings... I think she is in proper hands now." The first night when Roma left the home, Hamida was very upset but she soon started to show signs of adjusting to her new surroundings. After three days or so, she was already starting to pick up quite a bit of Bengali which she seemed to have forgotten when she was in Delhi. She was thrilled with the fact that she was no longer being fed vegetarian food, and she was back to the diet she grew up with. Now the BNWLA has arranged to have a music teacher come and give her lessons. While she hasn't showed any interest in studies, she does have considerable talent in music, and now her voice is getting polished with

proper training. Roma was happy to say: "By the last day she was speaking Bengali with a Bangladeshi accent and intonation, with only a few Hindi words thrown in."

Roma has told Hamida, "Once you are 18, if you want to return to India, I will be only too happy to adopt you." Roma had been interested in adopting Hamida before, but because she is a minor Bangladeshi, the Bangladesh High Commission told Roma that this was not possible because legally, Hamida must be repatriated. Only when Hamida turns 18 will she have the right to apply for citizenship in India if she wishes to join Roma's family. □

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