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Trafficked with postpartum psychosis, Bangla woman now a support worker

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IN DECEMBER 2022, a Government Railway Police (GRP) team found a young woman in a long-distance train at Borivali. Bedraggled and undernourished, the woman wore an oversized green kurti and bore signs of a mental illness. The woman, a Bangladeshi national, had allegedly been illegally trafficked into India three years earlier.



The 22-year-old now wants to put her past behind and return home to her five-year-old daughter. *Express*

The team contacted Shradha Rehabilitation Foundation, a centre for the mentally-ill destitute in Karjat near Mumbai, which diagnosed her with postpartum psychosis — a rare but severe mental condition that affects new mothers.

Today, the 22-year-old has almost recovered. Now working as a support worker at the Karjat rehabilitation centre, she wants to put her past behind and return home to her five-year-old daughter. "I miss my daughter very much and want to go back to her soon. I promise to never leave her again," she told *The Indian Express*.

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• Bangla woman a support worker

The rehabilitation centre said it has approached Bangladesh High Commission to have her repatriated and is currently waiting for authorities to process her request.

When contacted, an official at the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission in Mumbai confirmed that they had forwarded the relevant documents to Bangladesh. "We are waiting for their repatriation order."

According to her doctor, an associate psychiatrist at the Shradha Rehabilitation Foundation, the 22-year-old went through a divorce in Bangladesh and was being treated for postpartum psychosis but eventually stopped taking her medicines and wandered off.

"Sensing a false threat to her life, she must have run away from her home," the doctor said.

The woman has only vague recollections of her time in India. From what doctors and support staff at the centre could gather from her inconsistent narrations — which doctors put down to post-traumatic stress disorder — during her three years in India, she travelled from West Bengal to Delhi and eventually came to Maharashtra.

What she recalls distinctly, however, was the man who promised to help her cross the border and seek the medical assistance she needed. "When we were crossing the border, all of us hid under a fence. We would cross over one by one as soon as an armed guard went to the other side," she said of that time.

She was allegedly first taken to West Bengal, where she was kept confined in a room with other women and brutally assaulted. "*Wahan par vo aadmi mujhe joote se maarta tha* (the man would brutally assault me with his shoes)," she said in fluent Hindi, breaking down at the

memory.

She was allegedly forced into prostitution, first in Kolkata and then in Delhi, but eventually escaped to a relative's house in Pune, where too, she claims, she was sexually assaulted.

For a few months after she was brought to the Karjat rehabilitation centre, she would have nightmares and anxiety attacks, waking up in a cold sweat at night, her caregivers said. She also had trust issues.

"These are classic symptoms of the trauma inflicted on her. We do not have any substantial evidence to confirm her claims but we chose not to dig further into her past as we feared that it could lead to a relapse and affect her mental health," the doctor said.

Although her memories of crossing over to India are vivid, her memories of her life in Bangladesh remain hazy, she told her caregivers that her house was close to two landmarks — Ichamati College and Ichamati river, both in Bangladesh's Jessore, a district that shares its borders with India and is a hotbed for human trafficking.

The foundation then contacted an NGO, Rights Jessore, and through this network, were able to contact her family.

When contacted, her father, who drives a cycle rickshaw, said he was happy to know his daughter had been found. "Around a year ago, a policeman had come to our house and inquired whether my daughter stayed here. I had then submitted all the documents to the home ministry in Bangladesh. I hope they speed up the process and I get to see my daughter soon," he said.

The 22-year-old is now eagerly awaiting her return to Bangladesh. But asked what she would miss most in India, she gets emotional. "I will miss the hills and the lake I used to visit here," she said.