

**A**LTHOUGH it should have been a day of celebration for a 14-year-old girl returning home after five turbulent and traumatic years in a foreign country, there is so much uncertainty about her future that even Roma Debabrata, the Delhi University Reader who is accompanying her back to Bangladesh is worried about what ordeals await her there.

We were able to meet Hamida at the Bangladesh High Commission in Delhi the day she was scheduled to leave for Bangladesh. We asked Hamida what she planned to do when she returns to her country. She said, "I will live with Baba (father) and I will cook rice and *dal*."

Understandably, after having lived in an institution since she was 10 years old, she is determined to live with her family again. However, Roma and the members of the Bangladesh Women Lawyers' Association who wanted to reunite her with her family have been put in a very difficult position because Hamida's father has shown very little interest in taking her back. After Hamida's mother died, her father married two new wives and has children by the younger wife, who is only two years older than Hamida. When he was initially contacted he said that he wanted his daughter back, but soon afterwards, he said he really can't afford to keep her, nor could he bear any of her travel expenses to bring her back to Bangladesh. Subsequently, he has signed complete authorisation papers giving his consent for her to live permanently in the home for girls run by the Bangladesh Women Lawyers' Association.

Hamida, however, is convinced that the only reason her father hasn't come for her yet is because he doesn't know anything about what happened

## FOLLOW UP

# Going Home At Last

## Recent Developments in Hamida's Case

*In Issues 88 and 89 of **Manushi**, we reported on the case of "Hamida", a 10-year-old Bangladeshi girl who was brought to India in 1993 by an acquaintance of her father, Rashid Khan. Once in India, Khan repeatedly raped her and then allowed seven other men, including five members of the Delhi Police, to gang rape her. Though the evidence supported her statements, the inept handling of the case led to more trauma for the child and allowed all of the accused men, except for one, to go free.*

*A review of Hamida's case is still pending in the High Court. But thanks to the efforts of Delhi University Reader Roma Debabrata and others who befriended her, as well as the members of the Bangladesh Women's Lawyer Association, Hamida's wish to be repatriated has finally come true.*

***Manushi** again wishes to extend our sincerest thanks to all of our readers who took personal interest in Hamida's story and sent letters of protest to the judge who attempted to protect the accused.*



to her. Hamida says, "Baba never gave Rashid permission to bring me here. Rashid did that forcibly." But this is not likely because her father said nothing about his daughter being kidnapped when he was contacted by the High Commission. Roma and others believe that it is more probable that he sold Hamida to Rashid.

To be fair to Hamida who desperately wants to go home, the Bangladesh High Commission has

requested Roma to accompany Hamida to her village, stay for a week or so and try to assess the situation. If, by chance, Hamida's family wants to take her back, and if Roma feels that Hamida will be well looked after there, she will stay with her family and the Bangladesh Women Lawyers' Association would keep tabs on her to make sure she is OK.

Hamida has never received any post-rape counselling, even after the appeals Roma made to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court did not even entertain the application, but advised her to take the appeal to the lower court. All that was done by the High Court was to order that Hamida be removed from lock-up at Nirmal Chhaya, the remand home for girls where she has been living for almost four years now. It was the opinion of the High Court judge that as long as Hamida was fed and clothed properly at Nirmal Chhaya, there was no need for professional counselling to help her heal from the emotional and

psychological wounds she is bound to have after what she has been through. This insensitive decision ignores the possibility that she could be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, a serious and debilitating condition that frequently follows severe trauma.

Although doctors have confirmed that Hamida's physical condition is alright, according to Roma, "she is angry most of the time. When she reacts, she reacts violently. If she is happy she is violently so, and when she cries she does so like an animal." According to the Nirmal Chhayya authorities, she threatens the other kids if they do anything that she doesn't like. But because most of the children who live there are emotionally scarred, their interactions with each other are usually volatile. Roma explains, "considering all that she has been through, including losing her mother at a very tender age, in some ways for her every little thing is like a fight for survival. She mistrusts all men and will never have a normal attitude towards them again."

Hamida herself claims that she doesn't ever want to get married. When asked why, she says, "I do not like the idea of marriage. I am not well and now I keep getting seizures." Though she never suffered from seizures before the incident, she says they now happen once every 15 days or so.

Despite Hamida's temper and emotional instability, Roma claims that she has mellowed quite a bit in the past four years. The child who at one time was frail, quiet, and "as apprehensive as a caged cat" did eventually manage to make a few friends at the home and picked up a bit of Hindi. But unfortunately, despite concerted efforts by Roma, the staff at Nirmal Chhaya, and members of Janwadi Mahila Samiti, Hamida

has resisted any attempts to be taught anything. Other than the talent she has displayed in singing, Nirmal Chhayya authorities report that Hamida shows absolutely no inclination for either studying or learning any practical skill. She has not yet achieved even basic literacy, which will make it difficult for Roma to maintain contact with her through letters.

To us, Hamida seemed depressed and disconnected from her surroundings. A dead-pan expression on her face, she answered most of our questions slowly and mechanically. She said she was happy to be going

home but the look on her face was one of indifference, as if it didn't really matter to her where she was taken. Although she is 14, she acted as though she was much younger, almost as if she had stopped growing somewhere along the line.

Another disturbing aspect of this story is that Om Prakash, one of the accused, is back in Dhaka. Roma is concerned that he may know where Hamida's family lives. Though one of the accused rapists, Mehtab, has been in jail for the last three years, the rest of Hamida's assailants were not even charge-sheeted. "But the case is not yet over. We are going to fight," says a somewhat bitter Roma. □

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## *Instruments*

*It was the Renaissance,  
then the Age of Reason.*

*Papal names included Innocent, gentle Leo,  
though some were more urbane.*

*There were more female than male witches  
because women were more lightheaded and sensual  
than men, concluded men*

*like Dominican Inquisitor Jakob Sprenger in 1487.*

*Besides, he added, women had always been  
favourite of Satan.*

*The Archbishop of Trier had 120 burned at Pfalz  
for making the cold weather  
last devilishly long in 1596.*

*And God was often graciously pleased to reveal the truth,  
If not at first, at any rate at the last, thumbscrew.*

*Hoping to be pardoned, suspects accused each other  
(our ears burn when others speak of us).*

*Even Bacon stated that the secrets of nature  
could be teased and tortured out of her.*

*By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,  
They wolde han writen of men moor wickednesse  
Than at the mark of Adam may redresse.*

*It was the Renaissance,  
then the Age of Reason.*

**Brian Pastoor**