
**BANGLADESHI GIRLS SOLD AS WIVES
IN NORTH INDIA**

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Preface

The report is based on the study of 112 Bangladeshi girls and women who were purchased to serve as wives to men of Uttar Pradesh or other parts of North India. In most cases, parents had consented to the marriage but were not aware of the sale. The obligation to marry a daughter early and the impossibility for poor parents to meet dowry demands were the main push factors.

In April 2003, the War in Iraq prevented us from carrying out field work in Dubai as originally planned and a field trip to Uttar Pradesh was organized instead. The objective was to collect more information on Bengali girls who had been sold in marriage. We left with names and addresses and traveled on the bumpy roads of Basti, Gonda and Sidharthnagar. A few of the wives were found. The information heard was consistent with that collected from Bangladesh. There had been markets in Gonda, Baharni and other cities along the railway line running just south of Nepal where prospective husbands purchased Bengali girls.

Girls were not purchased to be resold, but to be incorporated into rural households as wives. Most men were widowers; others had a poor caste pedigree or some handicap. In any case, they ranked low on the local marriage market of a society where girls are missing. They could not find a wife locally.

The extent of alienation and non-belongingness of the purchased wives bears many similarities with descriptions of slave wives in 19th century Bengal. Besides heavy work and low consideration, wives were not permitted to keep in touch with their natal families. Only after several years, some of them were allowed to visit but they had to leave their children behind. These children had no known maternal relatives.

Those who acquired a wife through purchase refused to honour, let alone recognize, the wife givers as their in-laws. Contacts between wife-givers and wife-takers have been minimal or non-existent. Several girls were purchased by men of a religion other than their own. They were doubly alienated. Meanwhile, the social and religious duty to marry daughters was turned into a shameful sin.

In popular imaginings, trafficking in girls is regularly associated with brothels and prostitution. Girls purchased to be wives in long lasting monogamous marriages are not perceived to have been trafficked (unless it gets known that a Muslim girl had been taken by a Hindu man). Here the wrong done to society rather than that suffered by the individual is given the greater importance.

The study has shown that elements of trafficking can be found under the cover of the most respected and sacred institutions.

“Bangladeshi girls sold as wives in North India” provides a useful complement to our research on the cross border labour migration of women.

Mother, you may never see me again. Forget about me. Think your daughter Nazma is dead. I cannot leave my children and those children cannot come here. They will never call you grand-mother. They belong to that country. My life is hell but if 4 children come here, 4 lives will be damaged. All I have is my tears. There is nothing I can do.¹

¹ A daughter who returns to visit her mother after 11 years expresses her sorrow as she prepares to return to the husband who has bought her. This was 7 years ago. Her mother has never heard from her again.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Retrieving lost history

The story of girls who left their villages in Jessore, Satkhira or Rajshahi to be married in Uttar Pradesh or further to the west must be told, if belatedly. In several cases, these girls never returned and were lost to their families. Others came back several years later. It took 14 and 15 years before Tahomina, Feli and others could visit their families and let them know that they were alive. Their stories are presented below.

The eventual return of a daughter, or the visit of a family member to Uttar Pradesh, provided some of the missing pieces of a puzzle which took a long time to assemble. How these girls were handed over, to whom and for what purpose, their life circumstances and the reasons which prevented them from keeping in touch with their natal families were finally revealed. After several years, parents learned that their daughters had been sold in marriage to men who could not find wives locally either because they were too poor, had been married before, were elderly or had otherwise 'flawed' reputations. These men belonged to a society where females are reportedly 'missing' and where the sex ratio recorded in successive census is remarkably skewed.

Traffickers have been discreet and generally no documents and no witnesses are available to attest that a girl has been sold. But wife-takers have been keen to reiterate the purchase story to frighten the girl and impose their will upon her. They kept alive the memory of the purchase, possibly exaggerating the amount paid, to justify their denial of rights and their forbidding a wife to visit and maintain contact with her natal family. Husbands did not recognize and did not seek to know their in-laws and the children born of such marriages had no known maternal relatives. The conditions of slave-wives in 19th century Bengal are similarly defined.

1.2 A slow research process

It took considerable time for us, researcher, to assemble the stories of these women. Twenty cases of distant cross-border migration for marriage had been recorded in Jessore and Satkhira during Phase One of our research on migration and trafficking. We failed to meet the returnee women then and first hand accounts could not be heard. There were no recent cases, the practice appeared to have stopped, so the topic was not pursued.

In Phase Two, field work was extended to border villages of Rajshahi, Chapainawabgonj and Rangpur. There it was found that such marriages had been common and more information was obtained. Though less important than 10 years ago, marriages to the distant west (*dur bidesh*, *dur poshchime*) had not completely stopped and one such marriage had occurred in 2002. A few migrant women returnees were met who gave vivid descriptions of their experiences as wives in Uttar Pradesh, the circumstances which led them there and how they coped. Some retired *dalals* who had been involved in transporting and 'selling' these girls were interviewed, so were family members who had visited their daughters or sisters married in India.

In 2003, we extended our research to India. Basti, Gonda and Shidharthnagar, three divisions located in the centre of Uttar Pradesh close to the Nepal border were visited and wives from Bangladesh were met. It was found that the practice of purchasing a Bengali wife was well known in this area. Indeed, 'Bengali wife' was equated with 'purchased wife'. Bengal had the reputation of being poor and of having a surplus of girls available for marriage. Bengali wives had been procured from both, Bangladesh and West Bengal and, until recently, little importance was attached as to which side of the border the girl came from.

Research was also conducted in Jaipur, Rajasthan, where it was found that some parents from Bangladesh living in slums had handed over young daughters in marriage for considerable sums of money.

Some of the migrated wives we were able to meet in Uttar Pradesh could no longer speak Bangla fluently while others remembered their mother tongue but abstained from using it, probably to reassure their entourage. It must be said that our visits raised suspicion. Conducted in February and April 2003, there was considerable tension at the time, especially following the declaration of the Vice Prime Minister of India that some 20 million Bangladeshi were living illegally in India. The local press presented a very negative picture of Bangladeshi migrants and most of the latter kept a low profile. Why had we come all the way from Bangladesh to investigate these matters?

In Basti, a local newspaper four years prior to our visit had reported on the procurement of Bengali wives by local men. It had carried photos of 6 young wives from Bangladesh which led to police investigation and the arrest and deportation of the young women. Their husbands were incarcerated. The journalist who had written the story told us that he had been under strong pressure from the local community to drop the subject. Not surprisingly, 'Bengali' wives met in Uttar Pradesh were discreet and generally less outspoken than those met in Bangladesh.

Returnee wives interviewed on this side of the border were free to speak and their narratives are especially rich and provide interesting clues. For example, many women stated having been married to men who worked in the textile mills of Mumbai while they themselves were left behind in rural homes to look after the family and work the land. Through these women, one can follow the progressive closure of the textile mills in Mumbai and the impact this had on rural households in some parts of Uttar Pradesh.

Another survey carried in 1995 by Association for Community Development (ACD) in Rajshahi showed Bangladeshi girls/women to have been married to 'Bihari' men and taken mostly to the city of Faizabad near Agra where they worked in glass bangle factories. There is evidence of Bangladeshi girls/women being sold in marriage further west, including Pakistan. Different inquiries have revealed different destinations and more inquiries, no doubt, could reveal others.

These migrations for marriage show Bangladeshi women to be integrated in the sub-continent and to participate in the regional economy far more than generally assumed. Migration to India is insufficiently documented and too frequently denied (and decried) by governments. The present political climate makes it extremely difficult to conduct objective research on undocumented or illegal migration and disseminate findings, yet these are so necessary. Trafficking in girls and in women is a topic somewhat safer to expose – at least, the illegal migrants can be presented as victims who did not engineer their own migration. In

this study, there is no attempt to hide illegal migration. To act otherwise would misrepresent the true picture. At the same time, we regret and take the opportunity to condemn a systematic negative stereotyping of Bangladeshi migrants in India and the misunderstanding and twisting of history on which it often rests.

1.3 The purpose of the study

The study looks into the factors – economic, demographic, social and cultural - which led to the procurement of foreign wives by purchase in rural communities of Uttar Pradesh and beyond. It considers the reasons which led Bangladeshi parents to give their daughters to be married so far away. It questions the go-betweens and the traffickers (*dalals*) and tries to find out their mode of operation and the profit they derived from these transactions? How did the sending and receiving communities compare in terms of economic development, sex ratio, gender relations and marriage patterns? Do such transfers of girls and women against payment deserve the label ‘trafficking’ in human beings”? Why did this particular marriage market peak and then declined? Historical changes in migratory patterns need to be better understood for, without historical perspective, our understanding of the present lacks the necessary references to be appropriately situated in its time-bound context.

As research on women labour migration and trafficking gathers data and begins to form a fuller picture, it is important that this particular type of gender-specific migration for marriage be documented. The ways in which marriage, work and money markets interconnect, extend their networks and operate over large distances need to be appraised. The fences which nation-states erect to mark their borders have never stopped such circulation and are unlikely to do so in the future. Our research is showing that the recent tightening of the border has especially benefited shrewd dalals and go-betweens whose profits have soared to the detriment of poor undocumented migrants. As heightened tension between governments leads to exaggeration and denial, attacks and counter-attacks, the carrying out of research with a commitment to neutrality and objectivity represents a formidable challenge but, again, is more necessary than ever.

2. Tahomina’s story

Tahomina (a fictive name) is one of the few women trafficked into marriage who came back to Bangladesh to tell her story. A Muslim girl, she was sold at the age of 14 to be the wife of a Hindu man more than twice her age. This was in Bereilly, Uttar Pradesh in 1984.

Tahomina was met in her father’s village located in Kolaroa thana, Satkhira in June 2002, and 3 years after her return. Her rich narrative will serve as an introduction to the topic of this chapter.

I was first married at the age of 12 to a man who was my father’s age. I was too young. I did not know what marriage meant but the way I was brought up I did not protest my parents’ decision. We had nothing to eat. I heard people were happy after marriage. Wives got to eat.

Five months after marrying me, my husband abandoned me. My father took me back but he could not feed me. Brothers and sisters, we all did what we could to eat. We washed jute fibres in tanks, worked in the field, did anything we could find.

One day, I went to the field to gather wild greens to eat. There I met Fatima who, like me, had been abandoned by her husband. She had gone to India once but she feared for her security and came back. She said: "Come along with me. There is food there. We can beg and we can eat."

The following day, I left with Fatima without informing anyone. I had no money. She paid for me. I don't remember the road we took. This was a long time ago.

At Howrah station [in Kolkata], two dalals proposed Fatima 6,000 taka if she worked for them. She sold herself to them. Before she left, she asked a woman she knew, Aimoni, to look after me and find me work. Aimoni lived in a shack near Howrah station. I was at her place for 3 days. Then Aimoni took me to Bereilly in Uttar Pradesh. We went to a house about one mile from the railway station. There she talked to a man called Shumo Pal. I thought she was fixing a job for me. He offered her a meal. When she got ready to go, she said to me: "You stay here. I just arranged your marriage." I jumped to my feet and said I would not stay. Shumo Pal grabbed me and locked me in a room and let Aimoni go. Later, I understood Aimoni had sold me to him. I don't know how much.

For one week, I was locked in that room. Then they brought a thakur and married me to Shumo Pal according to their rite. Shumo Pal was a widower in his mid-thirties with three children. I was given only two shankhas, some shindur and clothes that had belonged to his first wife.

For one month after the marriage, I refused to go to Shumo Pal. For this, I was hit by my in-laws and by Shumo Pal. One middle-aged Bengali Muslim woman who lived nearby was called. She tried to make me understand. She said: "You have to do shongshar, you have no choice. This is your fate. If you run away, it could be worst. These people bought you and they will not accept to loose their money. If you try to run away, they could kill you. Take up the role of a wife (shongshar coro). Later, if you get a chance, you may go back home." She told me about Shumo Pal's first wife. She said she was from Jessore [district adjacent to Satkhira in Bangladesh]. Like me, she had been bought. They called her Saraswati. She had TB and she died pregnant with her fourth child. If they had looked after her, she may not have died. These people, they are only interested in the work a wife can provide.

This is how my married life started following their religion. Two years later, I gave birth to my first child. He was called Ram. I hated this, calling my son Ram, but I could not protest. This way, I gave birth to 5 sons and 1 daughter.

Only in the house of birth, I could rest. Otherwise, I worked non-stop, like a slave. Shumo Pal was the eldest of 5 brothers and 3 sisters. He had his mother and his father plus the 3 children from the previous marriage. I had to serve them all.

They had so many rules. Outwardly, I followed their religion but, inside, I called Allah. I feared them always. I could not speak freely to anyone. The children I gave birth to were taken away from me. They never offered me nice clothes or jewelry. I heard from neighbours that Shumo Pal's sisters got these but I was not offered any.

Shumo Pal married me because he could not keep me illegitimately. He purchased me for work and he used me for that purpose. I could not own any wealth. If he had truly seen me as a wife, he would have respected me and recognized me some dignity [morzada]. When he needed something, he called me like one calls a slave.

He was an old man, already dried up, when I met him. Mixing with him [sexually], I also dried up. In that family, they like a lot of children. I was not permitted to use contraceptives. I never felt happy there. When I was sick, they called no one. I never went anywhere. To them, I was like a machine good to use while it worked. When I thought that I was giving birth to Shumo Pal's children and bringing them up, then he could throw me out, I felt I should try to run away.

One day, I was alone and a beggar came. I found out the man was from Jessore. I told him about my life and said I wanted to go with him to Bangladesh. He said he would come the next day and we could go together.

I left with 1,500 taka and my youngest child. When I entered my father's village, no one recognized me although I knew quite a few of them. I heard my mother had died. She at least would have recognized me. I saw my family was poor as before. My father was sick. Brothers and sisters were all married. One brother offered me hospitality and heard my story. Many people listened. Some were sorry for me while others blamed me for having run away from my father's home. I could tell father did not have much sympathy for me. Maybe he feared I and my child would be a burden on him.

I stayed 17 days. Then, I returned to Uttar Pradesh with my younger brother. There were several reasons for my decision to go back. I felt bad about the children I had left behind. My mother had died. I was not well received and I was running out of money.

When I faced my husband again, he suspected that my brother was not my brother and he insulted him. He treated me very harshly. I had returned to my village and found no shelter there. After I came back to my husband, he and my in-laws treated me worst than before. I became very depressed and decided I had to do something to get out of this hell. I also decided to

take my children with me so that they could not benefit from them. I realized my eldest son would side with his father but I could take the others.

Everybody believed I would never leave because of the children but they would see what I was capable of. I began to sell rice, eggs and put money aside for my eventual escape. I stole a few takas which I had never done before. In this way, I saved 4,000 taka. One day, I told the children we would visit their aunt. This way, we left the house and traveled all the way to Bangladesh. This was one year after my first visit.....

Shumo Pal never tried to find his children. Why should he? These people have money. They can buy once more a poor girl from Bangladesh and replace us. We are easy to get and easy to replace, why should they feel sorry to have lost us?

(end of Part I)

Although Tahomina's story is unique, several elements are replicated in other accounts heard from, or about, Bengali girls purchased as wives in Uttar Pradesh or other parts of North India. These include a difficult situation prior to migration because of poverty, failed marriage or failure to marry and other family problems. In the receiving community (if not in Bangladesh), a marriage ceremony is performed after which confinement and close watch are imposed. For girls married into agriculturalist families, there is the obligation to engage in field labour which women in Bengal do not normally do. Other problems commonly mentioned are the obligation to bear many children and the inability to use contraceptives, the absence of health care and the low consideration offered by husband and in-laws. The right to visit their natal families is denied on the ground that the girls were purchased and, therefore, have no such entitlement. In nearly all cases, wife-takers' relationship with the wife's relatives have been minimal or non-existent.

Tahomina's story was heard three years after she had come back to her natal village in Satkhira. Having been married to a Hindu man - a fact she could not hide - her return was particularly difficult and she had many reasons to feel bitter about the marriage forced upon her. She never referred to Shumo Pal as 'my' husband or as the father of my children but used his personal name which, given local conventions, amounts to a mark of disrespect. Wives who had not terminated their marriage, understandably, were much more guarded in their statements.

3. The Trafficking of Bengali girls for marriage purposes

3.1 Existence of markets in girls/women well established in North India

The existence of markets where girls and women were (and still are) sold is well established. Some locations, such as Haridwar, Nainital, Bereilly, Gonda and others are often mentioned.

The testimony of returnees is particularly valuable to understand how the system operated 10 to 20 years ago. Let us follow Tahomina.

There is little doubt that Tahomina was sold in Bereilly. Did her village friend, Fatima, derive benefits for handing her over to Aimoni, the Howrah railway station woman is impossible to say. But Aimoni certainly did not travel all the way to Bereilly unless she intended to make a profit from the disposal of the 14 year old girl and she did so.

The story does not tell the price for which Tahomina was sold. In most cases, the amount of the sale is not known or cannot be verified. It makes little difference to the status of the girl in the buyer's home. In any case, she is known as a 'purchased wife' (*kharidan awrat*).

After a brief marriage ceremony performed by a Hindu priest, Tahomina became wife to a widower, a man more than twice her age. She protested but was frightened into submission. The Bengali neighbour called in to pacify her explained that it would be foolish to run away. "*These people bought you and they will not accept to loose their money. If you try to run away, they could kill you.*" These are words spoken to a slave. The message could not have been clearer. The announcement that she had been purchased carried a power of its own and effectively weakening Tahomina's resistance.

Aimoni could well have sold Tahomina to a brothel but she sold her to be a wife in Bereilly instead, a choice which will be discussed below. Tahomina, a Muslim girl, was married to a Hindu man and forced to follow his religion, a situation which added to her sense of alienation and made her eventual return to her natal community 15 years later problematic. In a society that values purity of caste, the consequences of such marriage with a girl of unknown antecedents, possibly across *jati*, entailed a low status in the husband's community which should not be underestimated.

In the villages we visited in Basti and Gonda of Uttar Pradesh, the idea of a 'purchased' wife was found to be remarkably familiar and village chiefs could generally identify such women in their community. Those we met were from both, Bangladesh and West Bengal. Informants there mentioned that girls brought by Bengali *dalals* (male or female) were transported by train and were taken to homes close to railway stations (in Basti, Barhni, and Gonda). Interested 'buyers' were then invited to come and pick their choice. One man mentioned that his father had chosen for him a 16 year old girl, the best looking of the three on offer. He paid 1,000 rupees. This was 20 years ago. The man added:

"Some of these Bengali girls were very good-looking, yet, they sold for very little money".

A Bengali woman doctor who worked in the town of Itwa said that she used to live near the police station and was often called by the police to serve as an interpreter when conflicts erupted. This happened when men fought among themselves over a particularly attractive girl, when girls went 'crazy', tried to commit suicide, ran away or set fire to the house. The doctor added that a majority of the girls were very young, between 14 and 16 years old.

One can only imagine how such 'markets' were held. There are stories of *dalals* who brought several girls at a time, were accused of trafficking by local chiefs and out of fear ran away leaving the girls behind without collecting payment. These girls were kept and attributed to local men by the village chief (*prodhan*). In later years, the transport of girls for sale became more risky and traveling groups became smaller.

In Bangladesh, we heard that in the early 1970's the transfer of Bangladeshi girls often took place in West Bengal.

“In Murshidabad district, in places like Ziagonj, Lalgula and Bhogobangula, boys from Bihar and from Uttar Pradesh came to marry. From 1977-78, such boys also visited Bangladesh. At that time, there was a lot of poverty here. Girls from very poor families and those abandoned by their husband were married like this. A ‘guardian’ who brought a girl received 1,000 taka but some took more.”[A 60 year old ex-dalali from Godagari, Rajshahi]

Few *dalals* now engage in this activity as profits have diminished and accusations of trafficking have increased. New girls are now procured through women already married in Uttar Pradesh who occasionally take up the role of *dalali*.

3.2 Skewed sex ratio and marriage markets

The practice of buying wives in Uttar Pradesh must be set in the context of a society where the preferred and most honorable form of marriage is for wife-givers to provide a dowry. The predominance of marriage with dowry is documented in the ethnographic literature on the region and is also confirmed by close witnesses.² Girls from Bangladesh were married to men who could not attract a dowry-providing wife or simply could not find a wife locally. Many were older men with children from a previous marriage. Others were poor or, for other reasons, were not in demand on the marriage market. This could be because of a personal handicap, a bad character, a criminal record, a faulty lineage or another reason.

Women returnees and go-betweens observed that there was a particularly skewed sex ratio and females were in shortage in the communities which purchased wives. In the villages we visited in Uttar Pradesh, the shortage of girls was strongly felt and was a regular topic of discussion. Even in remote villages, people quoted national census data and were aware of the problem. Everybody seemed to have an opinion on the subject. An ex-college principal suggested that the climate of the plains was responsible for the higher mortality of females pointing out that the sex ratio was not so distorted in the hills. Awareness about skewed sex ratio has been sharpened by local campaigns which aimed to combat the practice of female feticide made possible by access to low-cost and easy-to-use technology which detect the sex of the fetus early in the pregnancy. Walls, gates and public transport vehicles were covered with posters warning against the conduct of sex determination tests. These have been outlawed in several states, including Uttar Pradesh, but controls seem easy to evade. It should be pointed out that the technology permitting the early detection of female fetuses could not explain the purchase of Bengali wives when it peaked between 1982 and 1993. This technology came later and may only have impacted on the sex ratio of subsequent generations.

At the UNICEF office in Lucknow, the spontaneous reason offered by staff for the lesser number of females in the area was their general neglect, and this, at all ages. This

² Talk about the newspaper article from Haryana or Punjab

explanation holds. Census and surveys have measured the considerable gender gap existing in literacy, health and various other fields, a gap larger than the Indian national average.³

Interestingly, Bangladesh itself is a society characterized by a skewed sex ratio and marked gender discrimination. How could there be then a surplus of females if similar conditions created a shortage of girls elsewhere? It was pointed out that an 8 years difference in the age at which girls and boys marry in a fast growing population – which was the case in Bangladesh - could create a surplus of girls as the younger age group always exceeds the older age group. Marriage markets are certainly complex and entail much more than the matching of absolute numbers of males and females. There are many ways to create a ‘surplus’ of females of marriageable age. Excessive dowry demands, failed marriages and easily spoiled reputations created a pool of girls who were extra and had little to loose by migrating. The ‘surplus’ was created also by poverty and landlessness in an economy dominated by agriculture. The idea of a ‘surplus’ of girls was exploited by *dalals* who thus justified their trade in girls and women.

3.3 Migration for marriage and trafficking in girls: late recognition of a problem

The migration and sale of young girls and women from Bangladesh to India (mainly Uttar Pradesh) for the purpose of marriage is known to have occurred at least from the 1970's onward. The investigation revealed that in the late 1960's, girls were recruited from West Bengal. Later, the search extended across the border. Some girls were taken to Kolkata and Mumbai by *dalals* and, from there, were brought to Uttar Pradesh or other parts of north India to be sold as wives. Others were recruited directly from their Bangladesh villages by *dalals* who could be neighbours or relatives and were taken to Uttar Pradesh with parents' permission. In the 1990's, it became increasingly common for Indian men to enter Bangladesh and look for a wife with the help of a go-between. If a poor girl of marriageable age could be found and her parents convinced, the marriage was celebrated at the girl's home before migration. The latter method had the advantage of protecting the husband and the matchmaker from accusations of trafficking.

Unlike Tahomina who ran away from home and was handed over to a husband without her parents' knowledge, a majority of marriages in our sample had the assent of the parents who allowed their daughters to be taken away for marriage, or else handed them directly to a man from Uttar Pradesh who had traveled to Bangladesh to marry.

Go-betweens who accompanied prospective husbands and helped them find a wife in Bangladesh generally benefited from the ‘sale’ while parents seldom received money. Not surprisingly, for a long time, the trafficking aspects of these marriage transactions were not realized in the sending community. One had to wait until women returned and told their story many years later. As seen with Tahomina, it could take a long time before facts got known.

³ See Uttaranchal and Uttar Pradesh at a Glance 2003, Districtwise Statistical Overview, Jagran Research Centre, Kanpur, India

In 1995, Association for Community Development (ACD), a Bangladesh NGO based in Rajshahi, alerted public opinion to the problem of girls who were married to Indian men and never returned to visit their families. On that year, a study was carried out in villages along the Indian border, in Binodpur and Monakosha unions of Shibgonj thana, Nawabgonj district. It was found that female migration to India for the purpose of marriage had occurred in 180 of the 500 families surveyed. This is a very high rate indeed and the emigration concerned females only. The year of the departure was not recorded in the report but, at the time the survey was done, 84 percent of the migrated girls/women had not returned to visit their families and many had not been heard about since their departure.⁴ The authors of the report assumed that these girls/women had been trafficked and ACD launched a campaign to sensitize the community about the risks of such marriages. The NGO identified a real problem. However, the interpretation offered was perhaps too hasty.

Our data largely confirm that a substantial number of Bangladeshi girls and women taken to India to be married were actually sold and many lived difficult and unenviable lives afterwards. But there is no proof to conclude, as ACD does, that women who never returned to visit their homes in Bangladesh and never sent news were sold to brothels or otherwise took prostitution. It is possible that such girls/women were locked into marriages and could not visit, nor otherwise keep contact with their natal families, as seen in the case of Tahomina. Also, it cannot be excluded that some of those who were sold as wives had no wish to keep in touch with parents who so completely failed them. This does not mean they were living in brothels.

Sufficient proof now exist to state that a flourishing marriage market developed between the eastern part of the sub-continent (Bangladesh, West Bengal) and the north-western part of India (Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Kashmir and Rajasthan) and Pakistan. Though less active than 10 years ago, this market has not completely stopped. The possibility that some of the girls/women who migrated for marriage were in fact sold for prostitution cannot be ruled out but the existence of an important marriage market is certain.

3.4 On the constructions of marriage: debate around ‘faked’ and ‘true’ marriage, ‘wife’ and ‘slave-wife’

The association of marriage with trafficking in girls and in women introduces evil within a core institution which Bengali society posits as necessary, sacred and auspicious. That the same act of transfer could be interpreted simultaneously as both, marriage and trafficking in a girl appears difficult to reconcile. One way for ACD to deal with the uneasy association of the two terms has been to label the marriages contracted by the migrated women as “faked” ones.

“But most of these marriages have no marriage document. So, it proves very clearly that these were all faked marriage in nature and the girls were simply cheated in the name of marriage. After performing the so-called marriage the man crossed the border and sold the girl to another person against money. In many cases, the ownership of these girls

⁴ This information was passed on by a present employee of ACD met in Rajshahi

changed very frequently. Above all, marriage here serves as a means of migration but most of the marriages do not comply with the necessary conditions of a marriage and the girls were just smuggled out of the country as a very cheap commodity.”

In the ACD study, marriages were mostly celebrated in Bangladesh at the girls’ home prior to migration. Did some of these marriages serve as mere instruments to smuggle a girl out of country and re-sell her elsewhere? Possibly, but the evidence gathered here suggests otherwise. Certainly, marriages concluded without registration or deeds are common in Bangladesh and this does not make them ‘faked’ marriages.

The notion of ‘faked’ marriage begs the question of what is a ‘real’ marriage. Is a marriage made ‘real’ by the fact that it is registered? Is it ‘real’ when parents agree to the union? Can parents delegate their authority and entrust a third party with the responsibility to arrange the marriage of their daughter? Does it make a difference to the ‘reality’ of a marriage if the girl is a minor, or is handed over for a price, or marries a man of another caste or religion? Clearly, answers to the above questions depend on the legal, social and religious authorities prevailing at a particular time and in a particular place. Historically, marriage forms have been extremely diverse and often hierarchically ranked: the poor did not follow the same patterns as the rich.

What about ‘purchased wife’ and slave-wife? Such statuses are not unknown in the history of Bengal. Anthropologists long ago debated the question as to whether the practice of bride price could be equated with trafficking in women. They concluded that it could not as it remained inscribed in a system of ritualized exchange between wife-givers and wife-takers. More recently, Indrani Chatterjee revisiting 19th century Bengal found that even after slavery was officially abolished, the Nizams of Murshidabad and other Indian royal houses continued to keep female slaves who were an integral part of their households. Girls bought at a young age became concubines and a few became wives and even mothers of future nizams. The historian shows that to have been purchased as a slave was no disqualifier for later marriage and incorporation into the family of the master.

Chatterjee recalls a process of ‘classicization of Islam in Bengal’ which, in the later part of the 19th century, led to the redefinition of ‘marriage’, ‘*nikah*’ and ‘slavery’. Poor and itinerant *maulovis* invited poor men to marry freed female slaves and even help themselves among the slaves kept by Hindu masters. Putting female slaves to work as prostitutes for the profit of their holders was proscribed but marrying them – regardless of the women’s volition – was encouraged.⁵

Indrani Chatterjee’s study broadens our understanding of both, marriage and slavery. Her research on the household of the Nizams of Murshidabad where some slaves could be well paid and well cared for led her to conclude that slavery need not be imagined as a problem in coercion and exploitation of labour – a portrayal derived from slave plantation in America – but as a dialectic between alienation and ‘belongingness’.

5 The burning down of brothels in latter part of the 20th century and ‘rehabilitation’ of its inmates through marriage under government patronage shows that attitudes shaped in the late nineteenth century survived for a long time.

Could the insights gained in the above study help us understand the position of girls who were sold into marriage in north India? Let us consider Tahomina's marriage to Shumo Pal? The man purchased and married a girl of foreign origin whose religion and caste pedigree he did not care to know. It can be assumed that Shumo Pal's marriage carried low prestige but it could not be called a 'faked' union. The young age of the bride, the fact that she had been purchased, her initial protest, the absence of her parents who were uninformed about the marriage, these did not invalidate the 'contract' which Aimoni concluded with Shumo Pal nor did it impinge on the binding of the marriage ceremony which was performed by a priest.⁶ For Tahomina, the marriage which bound her to Shumo Pal was real enough. In the eyes of his community, Tahomina was Shumo Pal's legitimate wife and he had full marital rights over her. Even in her natal society, Tahomina was not excommunicated because her marriage was 'faked' but because she had been married to a Hindu man.

Tahomina eventually left the marriage but such termination has been exceptional. One of the merits of marriages in Uttar Pradesh, widely recognized among the sending communities in Bangladesh, is their lasting character. Husbands are known not to divorce their wives easily and simultaneous polygamy has not been found in our study.

*"One cannot say that all these women married in Uttar Pradesh are doing well. One or two have done well; all the others have to work really hard. They go to the field like men but they are not allowed to speak to people outside the family. Their husband beats them, just like here. One thing is good: polygamy and divorce are very rare."*⁷

ACD was one of the first organizations to use the word 'trafficking' in relation to these marriages. As pointed out, the marriages were suspected of being mere instruments for the recruitment of women for prostitution purposes, an interpretation not supported by the evidence we collected. If it could be confirmed that girls were purchased to serve as wives in long lasting monogamous unions, would they still be considered to have been trafficked? This is the tricky question over which a great deal of foginess persists.

It is truly remarkable that both, in the sending and the receiving communities, the word 'trafficking in women' (*nari pachar*) is not applied when girls are procured to be locked into long lasting marriages. In the Bangladesh villages we visited, marriages contracted by Uttar Pradesh men with Bangladeshi girls were considered 'real' marriages and, as such, were moral even though it was recognized that the wives had a hard life. This was clearly expressed by men met at a tea stall in Bishnupur of Jhikorgachha thana in Jessore.

"Eight women from our village left to be married in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. Two had been abandoned by their husband and 6 were unmarried. Their parents could not marry them. They were poor and some of the girls were not good looking. Those who came back to visit after a few years looked in bad health and exhausted. The husbands we saw were elderly."

⁶ The marriage ceremony may have omitted the circling around the fire 7 times which is performed only once in a life time. Tahomina had little to say about the ritual which was unfamiliar to her. The main point is that the marriage celebration rendered public the acquisition of the wife and legitimized the marital relation.

⁷ Statement from the mother of a woman who was married in Uttar Pradesh 15 years ago.

May be these women have a hard life but if they had stayed here, they would have become 'spoiled'. So, it is better that they got married in this way.

That some of the girls/women had been sold was known to these men. Yet, there was no outcry at the 'trafficking in women'. Rather, there was a sense of relief that the poor girls and women had found shelter while their natal community was rid of females likely to have become 'spoiled' if they had stayed. 'Spoiled' females are always in excess, at least in the eyes of society's gate keepers. Mechanisms to dispose of them and keep their number low no doubt bear a relationship with the creation of a 'surplus' of women available for migration and sale into marriage outside.

It should be pointed out here that, in the villages we visited in Uttar Pradesh, acquiring a wife by purchase was acceptable and, until recently at least, was not associated with trafficking. If a man could not find a wife locally, he could purchase one from a distant country. Go-betweens and *dalals* were sometime blamed for playing dirty tricks on a man demanding to be supplied with a wife. Such was taking the money from the prospective husband in advance and failing to deliver the promised girl. The system could lead to excesses and the market could cause disorder (as indicated by the Itwa doctor) but the practice of purchasing a wife itself was not condemned.⁸ It was simply looked upon as a lower form of marriage.

3.5 Wives' economic value: comparing Uttar Pradesh and Bengal

The fact that rural women in Uttar Pradesh work their husbands' land or hire themselves as day labourers no doubt increased their economic value. Purchased wives were usually considerably younger than their husbands and could be counted upon to support them in old age. There was sufficient work (at least, until the introduction of combined harvesters a few years ago) and a laborious wife could feed herself and her family.

"Over there, there is no hunger but the labour one must bear is too much. If I did not have a child, I would stay here," (Priti when she visited her family 3 years after her marriage)

Purchased wives have been compared to cows which are highly prized by their owner and, therefore, must be tied and carefully watched over to minimize risks of loss. Fear that newly acquired wives might escape has been a real concern and several witnesses reported that, for one year after the marriage and until they gave birth to children, wives were locked in, closely guarded and forbidden to talk to people outside their husband's compound. They were especially barred from speaking to Bangladeshi girls they knew. Later on, if and when they were allowed to visit their family in Bangladesh, their children would be kept behind to make sure they would return.

In Basti, we met a Bengali woman called Joya Devi, married for 16 years to a much older man. She explained that her husband possessed only one bigha of land when he married her. Thanks to her hard work, he now owns thrice that amount. The woman's hands were rough

⁸ Recent events in Uttar Pradesh have led to greater caution in exposing the practice. The topic is now censored. Many in the area admitted that such a system of wife procurement led to some excesses but the word 'trafficking in women' was carefully avoided.

and lined with crevasses and she looked much older than her age. Her three children were in poor health. She supported her elderly husband who was unable to work. While speaking to Joya Devi, a local man commented on how devoted Bengali wives were. “They are better than local women”, he said. In 16 years, Joya Devi had not returned once to visit her natal family and she did not know whether her parents were alive. Her situation bears similarity with that of Tahomina and recalls the description of a slave-wife made by a Sylheti informant in a mid-nineteenth century document. Asked whether transportation and sale of women constituted a domestic slave-trade, the woman had replied:

“Whereas a wife continued to have claims upon kin for redress of wrongs and retained visiting rights, and her children had both sets of kin (maternal and paternal), a slave-wife did not. These girls never again in their lives saw their relations (atmio shojon).”⁹

Joya Devi did not consider herself to be a slave-wife. But she had been a purchased wife and the definition above fits her situation rather well. Hard working wives like her eventually gained the appreciation of their husbands and could achieve a degree of economic security for themselves and their children. But they possessed nothing of their own. Joya Devi said her son would inherit his father’s land. In her case, the husband did not have children from a previous marriage which made inheritance less problematic.

We have seen that both, ACD, the Bangladesh NGO and village communities find difficult the recognition of trafficking elements within ‘real’ marriages. ACD identified trafficking practices but deemed the marriages contracted by the migrant women to be ‘faked’. Similarly, receiving communities in Uttar Pradesh clearly acknowledged and justified the ‘purchase’ of girls for the purpose of marriage but did not associate such purchase with trafficking since the girls were acquired not for further sale but to be kept in long lasting marriages.

The distinction between purchased wives and non-purchased wives, the extent of their respective ‘alienation’ and ‘non-belongingness’, (to use the criteria characterizing slavery according to Chatterjee) are certainly matters of degree. Slave-wives nowadays jurally have no status and a ‘purchased wife’ is legally a ‘wife’. Most of the girls/women whose story we recorded in this study were not purchased to be re-sold, although this happened in a few cases. The success of their integration has been variable. In the case of Tahomina, fifteen years did not suffice for her to develop a sense of belongingness. Others stayed and were eventually absorbed in their husbands’ families.

Purchased wives with uncertain origins ranked low in the receiving society and this low status was passed on to their children limiting their marriage prospects. In Basti and in Gonda, men who had purchased a wife often married their children within similarly constituted families creating a kind of sub-caste. Awareness about caste remains strong in rural Uttar Pradesh, including among Muslims. We met children born of purchased wives who wished to migrate to Mumbai or Delhi and escape the handicap of their birth.

⁹ See Chatterjee, I. p.26

3.6 Marriage across frontier: views on *bidesh*

In Bengali society, marriage for a girl normally entails migration of a kind. Wives move to their husbands' home after marriage; in other words, marriages were, and still are, largely virilocal. But in the cases reviewed here, the cultural and the geographic distances traveled by brides were abnormally large, creating a deep rift between wife-givers and wife-takers. We have seen that married daughters' visits to their father's home on *nayor* could not take place in a normal way; husbands often forbade or delayed these visits to the extent that contacts between a wife and her natal family were severed. Wife-givers were eliminated from the social landscape. From the wife-taker's point of view, the money of the purchase cancelled out any obligation towards wife-givers. It did not matter that, in most cases, the money was not paid to the girl's parents themselves but by a go-between.

The exploitation of Bangladeshi girls sold as wives in Uttar Pradesh or elsewhere was made worst by their uprooting to a foreign land (*bidesh*). *Bidesh* is a relative term. In the context of the events studied here, *bidesh* defines a place where the Bangla language is no longer spoken. Returnees described Uttar Pradesh as a place where the language, the food habits, the hygiene, the climate, the crop patterns, the gender division of work and many other customs were unfamiliar. Hindi or Bhojpuri was spoken, wheat and dahl replaced a diet of rice and fish, bathing everyday was frowned upon, winters were cold and summers extremely hot; wives were made to work outdoor on the land like Santal women. The initial confinement and the isolation of purchased wives in their husband's home, the low consideration and lack of respect they suffered made *bidesh* a particularly miserably place to live, especially in the beginning.

In defining *bidesh*, it should not be assumed that the demarcation line between Bangladesh and India matters. Even though the border has become increasingly problematic to cross (without documents), West Bengal is not understood as foreign land. The same families straddle the border line, journeys are frequently made and marriages across the border are regularly contracted. A Bangladeshi girl who marries an Indian man and integrates his household, therefore, does not necessarily imply a journey to *bidesh*, and vice versa. *Bidesh* starts further west, beyond Katihar in Bihar.

Tahomina explained how she felt in her husband's home. She was without roots, without history and without dignity. When her younger brother accompanied her as she returned to Bereilly after visiting Bangladesh, he was not well received by the husband. Tahomina had been married for 14 years by then and none of her natal family had ever visited her husband's home before. Other relatives who visited sisters or daughters in Uttar Pradesh were also shocked by the lack of consideration and the poor reception they got. This is how a mother described the visit she made in 2001 to her two daughters married in Basti 18 years earlier.

Last year, we gave the dalal who took our daughters 700 taka and, with my 21 year old daughter, I went. What I saw was appalling. My daughters were married to men who had been married before and had children from a previous wife. They had to work the land like Santal women. They were not given any consideration. My daughters could not spend any time with us. They are like slaves.

We were not allowed to go out and meet with other girls from our area who have been married there. We were kept in one room like prisoners. Food was brought to us but our daughters were kept away from us. We could not speak to them freely. In the end, we were told by their husbands: "Your daughters were sold to us for 40,000 taka. You need not come and visit them anymore. This damages our reputation." My son-in-law gave money to a man who took us back to the border.

People here know my daughters were married. After 18 years, I learned they have been sold. Now I know. They are like the cows one gets to plough the field. They get fed because they work and give birth to children. They could not talk to their own mother. They could not offer her a plate of food. If I had married my daughters to a beggar here, they would have been better off."

This woman's two daughters visited Bangladesh once 10 years after they first left and a second time 7 years later. On both of these visits, they spoke very little about the circumstances of their married lives. It is only when the mother went that she found out the sadness of their existence. It took 18 years before she could understand they had been sold to old and ugly men. In her view, marriage far away (*dur bidesh*) made such cheat and exploitation possible. Not knowing the marriage system of this distant country, the parents had agreed to their daughters' marriage but they had been utterly cheated.

In another case, a father visited his daughter in Gonda, Uttar Pradesh, seven years after she left and once more two years later. On the first trip, he found out his daughter, a Muslim, had been married to a Sikh. This is how the mother describes the two visits.

My husband took a lot of trouble to find Lucki. When he did find her, he was not allowed to see or to talk to her. He stayed with Rahima for 5 days [Rahima is a woman originating from the same village as Lucki and married to a Muslim man in Gonda].

One day, Lucki's husband threatened my husband with a gun. Rahima's husband intervened. In the end, he was allowed to see Lucki from a distance but he could not talk to her.

Two years later, my husband returned. This time, he was allowed to stay in our daughter's compound but in a separate house. He was given raw food which he cooked himself. He could talk to Lucki but he could not touch her or go near her. He felt humiliated and sad and after 5 days, he returned. As he was leaving, Lucki sent a photo of herself and her husband for me. This is all I have of her. My husband died 3 years ago and I cannot visit her. Our daughter has been lost to us.

Lucki left her family at the age of 19. This was 15 years ago. She never returned once and never saw her mother again. The photo she sent has been framed and hangs on the wall of her mother's house. It shows a 'happy' couple. The bride wears *shindur* on her forehead and a tattoo has been inscribed on her arm with her husband's name. The mother commented: "*This is how they mark them. Rodhuli [the dalali who took her] sold my daughter.*"

These stories show that marks of honour and consideration normally expected from in-laws are not extended to wife-givers who are not recognized as relatives (*atmio*).

Bidesh is understood as a location where marriage is differently constructed and where “our” rules do not apply. In both of these cases, the girls’ parents did not know at the first visit that their daughters had been sold. When they learned this and, in addition, found out that their daughters had been married to men of a different religion, the reckoning was painful.

Among the daughters who never kept in touch with their families, how many were sold to men of another religion? The borders crossed here are far more consequential than those which demarcate countries and problems caused by such situation will be seen below in the second part of Tahomina’s narrative.

3.7 Marriage, consent and trafficking

We have seen that neither those who purchased wives nor those who sold girls in marriage associate such transaction with trafficking in women (*nari pachar*). What do the migrated/sold girls and women themselves have to say? Were they willing candidates for marriage in a foreign land? Were they asked for their opinion at any stage of the transfer? Should protest and lack of consent be retained as criteria of trafficking?

Before engaging a discussion on these issues, it should be recalled that, in Bengali society, marriage for a daughter is not a matter of choice. The timing of the marriage and the choice of a spouse are usually decided by the guardians and daughters are not necessarily consulted. Pressure on guardians to marry off daughters within a certain age is considerable and was even greater in the past. Although there are differences in the marriage systems of Hindus and Muslims, the spirit of *kanya dan* was/is woven into a shared Bengali cultural fabric.¹⁰

Accepting to be given in marriage was (and still is) part of girls’ education and many girls left for Uttar Pradesh obediently as their parents entrusted them to a neighbour or an ‘auntie’ with the instruction to arrange their marriage should a suitable husband be found. Other girls took the initiative and convinced their parents to let them go to Uttar Pradesh to be married. A mother whose two daughters did so describes the pressure they felt then. This was in 1983.

‘We could not marry our eldest daughter who had reached the age of marriage [she was 17 years old]. We could not pay for dowry. Her sister was one year younger. We kept our daughters inside the house but people still criticized us. “Your daughters are like banana trees. They are growing out of the roof. They are like elephants [too big to be living at their parents]. How can you keep them inside the house? At their age, I had two children already.” My daughters felt shame. They did not want to hear these insults anymore. So, they left to be married in Lucknow.’

¹⁰ In the true spirit of *kanya dan*, parents have the religious duty to marry their daughters before or soon after puberty and they are not meant to derive any material benefit for doing so. The gift of a virgin daughter in marriage is believed to bring blessings upon the parents and the transfer of a bride from wife-givers to wife-takers is ideally total and final. See Lynn Bennett, *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters*, Columbia University Press, 1983.

Eighteen years later, this woman is not interested in sending her youngest daughter to be married in Uttar Pradesh although she is still unwed at the age of 21. The mother knows that a marriage in this distant country can be like a death sentence. Beside, village society has changed.

'The pressure to marry a daughter is not as strong as it used to be. People don't insult us anymore. This unmarried daughter is not confined to the house as her sisters were. She is a BRAC member; she raises ducks and has some income.'

The number of girls who are saying 'no' to marriage (or at least to any kind of marriage) has increased but remains small. Puja, a 30 year old unmarried woman, was able to resist the strong pressure applied by her family to be married in Agra. Her elder sister was married in that city 20 years earlier and the father commented that, unlike Puja, she had not protested. Considerable change has taken place in a few years, he remarked.

Interestingly, more than the economic burden of an unmarried daughter in the house, Puja's father was concerned about family honour. Puja worked and contributed her share to the family's income but her position remained uneasy. The fear of losing reputation, or lost reputation, has constituted in the past an important push factor contributing to the creation of a pool of girls available for sale and marriage in Uttar Pradesh. This 'surplus' of girls has somewhat diminished but has not disappeared. One *ex-dalali* commented that 'spoiled' girls were easily convinced to accept a marriage in Uttar Pradesh 20 years ago but now such girls go to Dhaka to work in garment factories or elsewhere.

Unwilling daughters are still sent to be married in Uttar Pradesh. Nironjon, a 50 year old man who belongs to the blacksmith caste but mostly works as an agricultural day labourer has 4 daughters and 4 sons. Four years ago, he agreed to marry Tulie, his 15 year old daughter, to a UP man who had come looking for a wife.

'We agreed to the marriage. They left the day after the wedding. We did not offer anything except food. They came prepared with the sari and everything. Tulie cried at first but she seemed happy afterwards.'

Two years ago, Tulie came on a visit with her husband. She had lost weight and looked very depressed. She had to serve a large family of in-laws. Her mother-in-law and her husband made her life very difficult. They beat her. She worked like a slave. She was not given time to eat or to rest. As she left she said: "Instead of marrying me, why did you not drown me in a river?" She cried the whole time. I felt sad but what could I do? How could I have kept my unmarried daughter in the house?

I cannot poison my daughters. If I send them away to survive, what is the problem? You don't know how troublesome and tormenting it is to keep an unmarried daughter in the house. Our community sent many girls to the West and we still do.'

For this father, leaving his daughter unwed was not an option. He married her at a young age so that she would not oppose her father's decision. Nironjon is considering marrying Tulie's younger sister in Uttar Pradesh also. Note that Nironjon did not 'sell' his daughter but he did not have to pay for a dowry which in itself is an immense relief.

Men who travel from Uttar Pradesh to Bangladesh to find a wife generally pay someone to vouch for them and help them in their search. In Basti, we noted that wives acquired by husbands who entered Bangladesh continued to be categorized as ‘purchased wives’ even though no money was given to the parents. It sufficed that the husband had spent money to procure a Bengali wife.

As mentioned, admitting to the purchase of a wife in Basti did not appear shameful and was not hidden. It is remarkable that, while the ‘purchase’ was often re-affirmed by the wife-takers, the ‘sale’ was denied by the wife-providers. The market certainly rests on ambiguity and fogginess and the terms of the transaction were anything but transparent. *Dalals* and go-betweens are generally very skilled at manipulating words and meanings in a business which is based on lure and deceit. *Dalals* present themselves as ‘guardians’ who performed a meritorious act and sometimes accepted the ‘mohorana’ or ‘gifts’ from grateful wife-takers. They held a discourse for the girl’s parents and another for the wife-takers. Case histories read as though a ‘purchased wife’ was not ‘sold’ by anyone. The difficulty here lies not only in finding the missing pieces of a puzzle but in assessing the different shades of meaning attached to them by different actors.

Some girls who migrated were prepared for marriage; others, like Tahomina, were caught by surprise. Some left enthusiastically; others reluctantly. Whether the migrant consented to the marriage or not made little difference to the outcome of the transfer. Most of them sooner or later realized that they had been cheated and were trapped. Husbands were much older or much poorer than announced; they had children from a previous marriage; the work load was excessive; the lack of trust and the isolation (the impossibility to speak to women who came from the same village in Bangladesh or were related to them) was beyond the acceptable.

Cheating and lies proffered by matchmakers or prospective husbands to convince parents to agree to a marriage happen in ‘normal’ marriages as well. But distance here made it easier to elaborate a fiction which could not be checked beforehand. And once married, the girls were triply trapped: by the bond of marriage, by the distance which separated them from their families and by the knowledge that they had been purchased.

Nazma did not protest when, at the age of 14, she was taken to Nainital, north of Delhi, by an village ‘auntie’ and her marriage was arranged. After all, her parents had entrusted the auntie who regularly traveled to India to do so if a good party could be found. The shock came 4 years later when she asked her husband permission to visit her parents. He replied that she had been purchased for 20,000 taka and she had no such right. As seen with Tahomina, the announcement of the purchase itself had debilitating effect on Nazma. Nazma re-lived the journey of her migration and re-considered the bond which tied her to her husband. It sunk into her that she had been sold and could not even claim the right to see her parents. She was her husband’s thing, she was his slave. No one could check the truth of the matter but the husband prevailed.

Hearing about their having been purchased made Nazma and Tahomina surrender in defeat. Could they not have challenged the conduct of such ‘sale’ as immoral, illegal and unacceptable? The power of ideological constructs sustaining market and marriage systems here must not be minimized. Actors involved in the trafficking scenario broadly shared a culture in which the right to appropriate what has been paid for is recognized. As for

marriage, it guarantees a husband (and his family) monopoly rights over a wife wed-locked into a long-lasting role of subservience. These wives possessed no wealth of their own, not even the jewelry which came with a dowry and they had completely lost the support of their natal families.

Given the education they had received and the isolation in which they were held, it took time before some of them deconstructed marriage and market. Tahomina eventually decided that these ideologies would have no hold over her but it took her 15 years to act upon it. Some took even longer. An astonishing story was heard from a *dalali* met in September 2003 in Jessore. She mentioned that two Muslim girls whom she had sold to two Hindu men in Haridwar twenty years earlier had recently returned and claimed money from her as they knew she had sold them. The *dalali* gave each of them 7,000 taka. She was afraid the two women would speak and spoil her name. These women had voluntarily come forward with their origin when the police searched for illegal Bangladeshis in the area and it is through the police that they returned to Bangladesh leaving their children behind.

Women met in Uttar Pradesh said that, with time and the birth of children, the label 'purchased wife' lost some of its debilitating effect but when they had first entered their husband's homes their having been purchased was often recalled to make them give in to various demands. One woman pointed out that her having been purchased with family capital was reminded to her when she repelled the sexual advance of other men in the house. "We had to manage the demands of other men in the house very tactfully", said another Bengali wife.

As mentioned, parents themselves seldom received payment for allowing their daughters to be married in Uttar Pradesh or further west and many were not even aware that a middle person made a profit from the transfer. Only when a daughter did not return or when it got known that she had been married to a man of a different religion did the parents begin to suspect that their daughter may have been 'trafficked'. Trafficking in girls was, and still is, strongly associated with brothels, prostitution and forced promiscuity.

3.8 Women who 'agreed' to sell themselves

Lately, the women who were married in Uttar Pradesh were older. Like Fatima in Tahomina's narrative, some of them 'agreed' to sell themselves. In Chapainawabgonj, one woman had a heroin-addicted husband who was so desperate for the substance that he had offered his wife to other men. She left him and went back to live with her mother but the husband pursued her there. Eventually, the mother suggested to her daughter a marriage in Uttar Pradesh in order to escape. The mother commented that this second marriage gave no peace to her daughter either. She had escaped the frying pan to jump into the fire.

In another case, a young girl had become her family's main breadwinner at the age of 14 as her father was sick and her elder brother was a heroin addict. She earned by carrying smuggled goods across the border, a job which exposed her to all kinds of risks and abuse. At home, her heroin-addicted brother regularly seized her earnings and could be violent. There was no peace at home and no peace at work, so, at the age of 18, she accepted a marriage in Uttar Pradesh.

Women who ‘agreed’ to sell themselves, surrendering their freedom and entering into servitude in exchange for a sum of money to pay for a debt or simply to survive is a practice still remembered in brothels today. Examples of boys entering a kind of temporary slave-like condition can be found elsewhere also (e.g. boys who hire themselves as ‘*dulabanga*’ on Dubla Char in the Bay of Bengal during the winter months).¹¹

For people with very little choice, protest and lack of consent cannot be retained as criteria of trafficking. A majority of the girls who left to be married in Uttar Pradesh and beyond came from poor families. Parents were trapped. They could not pay for dowry and without dowry prospects for marriage were extremely poor. The obligation to arrange a marriage, even if it be a bad one, was felt by both, parents and children. Many daughters agreed that if a marriage in Uttar Pradesh was the only kind they could afford, they would accept.

‘Consent’ or ‘protest’ are individual postures which, in themselves, are inadequate measures of the extent to which exploitation and pain may be suffered by an individual. It bears an uncertain connection with the trafficking events that may take place. Some girls left laughing, others left crying but most left quiet and resigned, they ‘understood’ what was expected of them.

Most girls did not return for many years and their families could not hear about their desolation and despair. Tulie is an exception. Visiting 3 years after her marriage, she asked her father why he did not drown her instead of marrying her in Uttar Pradesh.

4. The field research: some quantitative data

In all, 112 cases of Bangladeshi girls/women sold into marriage were identified in various field works conducted between 2001 and 2003. Thirty cases were documented from communities in Jessore and Satkhira and 67 were recorded from villages in Rajshahi, Nawabgonj and Dinajpur districts making a total of 97. These cases were identified in Bangladesh though some of the informants in Jessore and Satkhira had migrated with their families in Mumbai and it is from that city that their adolescent daughters were taken away from them.

Fifteen cases were collected from a community of Bangladeshi migrants living in Jaipur in Rajasthan. Here parents had arranged their daughters’ marriages against payments ranging from 40,000 to 100,000 rupees. Data collected from Rajasthan are sometimes analyzed separately as cases are not always comparable to those of girls recruited from Bangladesh.

Ten narrative accounts were obtained directly from women who were married in Uttar Pradesh or further to the west (*dur bidesh*). Nine of them had left the marriage and one was visiting her family.

Below is a synopsis of persons interviewed. The number of parents, siblings, relatives and neighbours who helped piece together the story of a migration in the absence of the migrant

¹¹ See a Save the Children, Sweden study carried out on boys employed in the drying of fish during the winter on Dubla Chor by T. Blanchet and all. Report forthcoming.

was not counted exactly. Information may have been collected from one person but may have involved a group of 5 or 10.

The number of informants described as *dalal* or trafficker is low as we only counted those identified as such in their community. Others known to have transported girls may have benefited from their sale but did not admit so. This is one grey area difficult to clarify and, as a result, it is impossible to say with any precision the number of girls who were actually “trafficked”.

4.1 Persons interviewed:

Table 1:

Informant status	No of persons
Family members and neighbours who never visited the location of immigration	200-250
Family members who visited the migrant	23
The migrants themselves	10
Local <i>Dalal</i> /Traffickers	7
Local Journalists	9
Union Parishad chairmen and members	19
Educated persons and leaders of the community	14
NGO field workers in Dinajpur and Rajshahi (ACD, BNWLA, BRAC, SIDP, SUPK, ASA, Caritas, VDA, SUS, Pollishree, Bibhas)	15

4.2 Year of migration/sale into marriage

The table below shows that the migration of girls for the purpose of marriage to north India peaked between 1983 and 1987. As mentioned, it never stopped and 15 marriages took place between 1998 and 2002. The number of girls of Bangladesh origin sold into marriage in Rajasthan does not appear to have diminished. Numbers are small and can only be taken as indicative of trends.

Table 2: Year of migration/sale into marriage

Year of Marriage	Migrated from Bangladesh	%	Recruited from Rajasthan	%
1998 – 2002	15	15.5	6	40.0
1993 – 1997	14	14.4	6	40.0
1988 – 1992	18	18.6	1	6.7
1983 – 1987	37	38.1	2	13.3
Before 1982	13	13.4	-	-
Total	97	100	15	100.0

4.3 Age when first migrated/trafficked

The ages of girls who migrated for/were sold into marriage do not significantly differ between the two populations and results are here presented together. Nearly 40 percent of the girls sold into marriage were below the age 16 and the majority was below the age of 18. In the 1970's and 1980's, it was not uncommon for poor parents to entrust their 12-14 year old daughter to a neighbour known to travel regularly to India and instruct her/him to arrange a marriage should a suitable party be found. Also in the 1980's from Jessore, entire families migrated to Mumbai in an attempt to survive. They were easily convinced when a woman who sympathized with them proposed to arrange their daughters' marriage in Uttar Pradesh. Many accepted the money offered at a time of crisis not realizing they were receiving payment for the sale of their children.

As mentioned, recent cases of migration to north India for marriage concern older women, some of whom left with children. Daughters accompanying mothers have been especially welcome and were rapidly married off. One case was recorded where a 7 year old daughter who accompanied her mother was married and the age of 9 to a 12 year old groom. Child marriage is reportedly common in those communities of Uttar Pradesh.

Table 3: Age when married/sold

Age	Number of women	Percent
Below 16 years	43	38.4
16 - 18	41	36.6
19 – 21	14	12.5
22 – 24	5	4.5
25 – 27	7	6.3
28 - 30	2	1.8
Total	112	100.0

Interestingly, the ACD study carried out in Chapainawabgonj reports older ages for the migrated women they identified. Nearly 60 percent of them were 22 years old and above and one quarter were 27 and above. One presumes that most of these women had been married before. Whether the older age of the migrant women made a difference to the outcome of their migration is not revealed.

The ages of the migrants who were sold in marriage, once more, shows the preponderance of adolescent girls. The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines childhood as a lifespan extending up to 18 years of age. The numerous studies, debates and seminars which have been inspired by the CRC, in Bangladesh and elsewhere, strongly challenged the passing of adolescent girls as women even though, socially, they may be considered to be so. The CRC is a welcome and necessary reference, however, it would be wrong to read the past with today's lenses. Until recently, child and adolescent marriages were the rule in the Indian sub-continent.¹²

¹² The descriptions made by Rashsundori Debi, a 19th century upper class Bengali woman of her departure from her father's home after the celebration of her marriage at the age of 12 is poignant and reads like a girl's departure for Uttar Pradesh. She wrote: "The memory still fills me with pain. Is it not a great tragedy that one has to go away to a foreign land, leaving one's mother, one's near and dear ones behind, to live under lifelong bondage? But such is the will of God, so let us praise the custom." The journey from Pabna to Faridpur (now in Bangladesh) took three

4.4 Destination

Destinations are presented as reported by the informants. When the locations given were unknown to us and could not be found on a map, names were written as we heard them. The table below shows that 70 percent of the girls/women were taken to Uttar Pradesh and within that province, the great majority was married off in Basti, Gonda and Shiddharthnagar.

Table 4: Destination of the women who were sold/migrated for marriage

Country	Area	District	No. of women
India	In Uttar Pradesh	Basti	41
		Gonda	12
		Bereilly	9
		Agra	4
		Badhaun	6
		Lucknow	1
		Farakabad	3
		Haridwar	1
		Nainital	1
		Kanpur	1
	In Punjab	-	3
	In Kashmir	-	4
	Delhi	-	1
In Rajasthan	Jaipur	9	
Pakistan		Karachi	5
		Rahimagonj	1
Nepal		Zangipar	2
Unknown			8
Total			112

Six girls were sold into marriage in Pakistan. They had migrated for work but were forcibly sold into marriage. We know that the border between India and Pakistan has been considerably tightened since 1996 and traffic through these routes has nearly stopped. According to one Bangladeshi *dalal* met in Jaipur, Rajasthan, a famous gang leader named Sher Kha from Karachi controlled this traffic in girls and women until 1997 when he was murdered by a rival gang.

“Women from Bangladesh used to be taken to Mussa Colony in Karachi. There was a Shet there who ran that business. He paid the police. Many of us worked for him. Dalals brought women from different places and sold them to him. They got from 15,000 to 20,000 rupees per woman.

Pakistani men - mainly older men –bought these girls for 70,000, 80,000 rupees and lived with them as wives. Bangladeshi men also bought these girls pretending to use them as wives but they used them for sex work.

days by country boat. Rashundari was neither poor, nor low class. She was a female, dependant always. See the excellent commentary written on the period by Tanika Sarkar in *Words to Win, The Making of Amar Jibon*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1999

They chose the most beautiful, married them and used them as sex workers. An agreement had to be made with the girls used in this way. They had to be given a percentage of the income. Otherwise, doing this business was not possible....”

Former *dalals* and *dalalis* interviewed in Bangladesh explained that they could get better prices for the girls they sold the further west they went and selling girls in Punjab or Kashmir was more profitable than selling girls in Uttar Pradesh. Even in Uttar Pradesh, prices were better in Haridwar and Bereilly than in Basti or Gonda. Such information is consistent with what we heard elsewhere (e.g. in Kamathipura, the red light district of Mumbai).

4.5 Religious identity of migrants

Table 5: Religious identity of migrants

Religion	Number of women	Percent
Muslim	97	86.6
Hindu	15	13.4
Total	112	100.0

The proportion of Muslims and Hindus among girls and women who migrated/were sold in marriage is here similar to the national average for Bangladesh as a whole. The small sample and the way in which cases were identified do not permit any conclusion as to whether Hindu girls are more likely to migrate and be trafficked for marriage than Muslim, or vice versa. It can only be said that girls from both communities migrate/are sold into marriage and trafficking is a high risk for both.

If anything, poor Hindu parents are under greater pressure and face greater difficulty in arranging the marriage of their daughters. Dowry demands are higher and the obligation to match caste may be difficult in a dwindling Hindu community. There were more Hindu girls among recent cases of migration for marriage from Bangladesh. On the other hand, the 15 girls from Jaipur who were sold into marriage were all Muslim.

4.6 Level of education and marital status

Table 6: Level of Education

Literacy level	Number of women	Percent
Illiterate	96	85.7
Did not complete primary education	10	9.2
Completed primary level	5	4.5
VI – VIII	1	0.9
Total	112	100.0

Most of the girls were illiterate. This is also a measure of their poverty and destitution. After migration, illiteracy reinforced their isolation and the difficulty of communicating with their natal families. One woman mentioned that no one could read the letter which was sent to her when her mother died, not even her own son who spoke Bhojpuri and had been educated in Hindi.

Such inability to read or write combined with the inaccessibility to telephonic lines or other electronic media are difficult to imagine in this age. Wives' confinement, lack of control over resources, heavy work load and close supervision by in-laws combined with the technological backwardness of rural Uttar Pradesh made it difficult to maintain links with natal families. This situation can be compared with Bangladeshi women who migrated to work in the Middle East. The latter show similar rates of illiteracy but commonly used cassettes or telephone calls to keep in touch with their families. These women had migrated further away but were able to stay in closer touch with their families.

Table 7 shows that the great majority of the girls who migrated / were sold into marriage had never been married before and this is consistent with their young age.

Table 7: Marital Status when first migrated

Marital status	Number of women	Percent
Unmarried	85	75.9
Married	3	2.7
Divorced or separated	20	17.9
Widowed	4	3.6
Total	112	100.00

4.7 Reasons for Marriage and Migration to North India

Table 8 - Reasons for Marriage and Migration to North India

Reasons	Number of women	Percent
Parents unable to pay dowry	35	31.2
Enticed by dalal/trafficker	26	23.2
Parents wanted the money (Jaipur)	12	10.7
Previous marriage failed due to poverty	8	7.1
Marriage only	9	8.0
Girl getting old for marriage	6	5.4
Girl not attractive	4	3.6
Father took no responsibility for daughter, used daughter's sale proceed for his own marriage	3	2.7
No job opportunity in Bangladesh	3	2.7
Violence in the family	3	2.7

Other reasons	3	2.7
Total	112	100.00

Parents' inability to pay for dowry comes top of the list among the reasons given for a marriage in Uttar Pradesh or elsewhere in north India. Explicitly stated in 31 percent of the cases, this reason can be read in other answers as well. We know that a high dowry could redeem poor looks, damaged reputation, advanced age or other negative points on the marriage market. Similarly, acceding to dowry demands after marriage could avert the dissolution of a marriage. The dilemma of poor parents who were under the obligation to marry their daughters, could not do so without dowry but were unable to raise the required amount was evoked earlier. For such parents, sending a daughter to Uttar Pradesh was a god-sent offer.

The view that dowry demand is the main reason why poor parents agreed to marry their daughters in north India is widely shared by parents, journalists and NGO workers. None of them could challenge the religious obligation to marry daughters which is *foroz kaj* and poverty could not be escaped. So, all decried dowry demands. There is no space here to debate further why the dowry system, which so blatantly undervalues women, developed in Bangladesh.

Nearly one quarter of the girls and/or their parents were approached by *dalals* who actively sought recruits to feed their business. Proposing a 'service', some took money from both, the wife-givers and the wife-takers.

4.8 Contact with natal family after marriage

Table 9: Contact with natal family and country of origin after marriage

Those recruited from Bangladesh	Contact with natal family	Number of women	Percent
	Visited at least once	41	42.2
	Never visited but keeps some contact	30	30.9
	Returned for good to Bangladesh	10	10.4
	No contact with natal family but marriage in Uttar Pradesh confirmed	11	11.4
	No contact with natal family, reportedly sold to the brothel	1	1.0
	Lost (no news)	4	4.1
	Total		97
Those recruited from Jaipur, Rajasthan, India	Murdered by in-laws	1	6.7
	Left husband and returned to natal family	2	13.3
	Restricted and confined but keeps some contact with natal family	12	80.0
	Total	15	100.0

The table above shows that nearly 47 percent of the girls recruited from Bangladesh never returned to visit their families. In the ACD report, the percentage was even higher (84%). We

have seen that husbands interdicted or considerably delayed their wives' visit to their natal families. To this cause may be added sold wives' shame at having been married to a man of another religion, resentment at parents for disposing of them so irresponsibly, illness and death.

One girl was sold to a brothel and this was reported to her family by a village man who identified her several years after in a brothel in India. Others who were lost could have known the same fate.

5. Dalals and dalalis: traffickers and matchmakers

The table below shows the important role played by *dalals* and *dalalis*, these go-betweens who present themselves as matchmakers or job fixers, proposing a helping hand but actually engaging in a dubious and obscure business. In 50 percent of the cases, *dalals* and *dalalis* were the main initiators and motivators for the migration. The girls who went to Pakistan were promised work and so was Tahomina. The majority, however, migrated for marriage.

Table 10: Main motivators /decision makers for migration

Motivators and Decision makers	Number of women	Percent
Dalal motivated both parents	34	30.4
Parents by themselves	16	14.3
Parents and the migrant jointly	10	8.9
Migrant alone	11	9.8
<i>Dalal</i> motivated the migrant	9	8.0
<i>Dalal</i> motivated the mother	9	8.0
Father took decision with migrant's consent	5	4.5
Sister and brother in-law	5	4.5
Father forced mother to take the decision	4	3.6
<i>Dalal</i> motivated the father	4	3.6
Mother took decision with migrant's consent	2	1.8
Husband & migrant motivated by dalal	1	0.9
Brother took decision with the migrant's consent	1	0.9
Father-in-law took decision with the migrant's consent	1	0.9
Total	112	100.0

Again, it is useful to clarify what is meant by *dalal*. A same person could be referred to as *dalal*, relative or neighbour depending on the context and the relationship of the moment. In rural areas, *dalals* and their recruits often lived in close proximity and families continued to do so after the 'sale'. A go-between who has taken money against the transfer of a girl may not be called a *dalal* if he/she is a close kin. Needless to say, the supposedly protective role of 'uncle' 'auntie' or 'grand-father' was fully exploited in this business.

Poor parents may not afford to use the word *dalal* or *dalali* (at least not upfront) as this is a declaration of enmity. Others did not seek to know whether their daughters had been sold or not. In some cases, having discovered the trafficking activity of a particular ‘uncle’ or ‘auntie’ who had been trusted in the past, parents did not hesitate to call him/her *dalal*. Tarnishing a reputation was the only punishment that the wronged family could exert.

In preparing the above table, we made our own assessment of the role played by a motivator. A ‘grand-father’ was taken to be a *dalal* when it could be shown that he had transported several girls, had built a network for doing so and was known to have acted with a certain degree of expertise in trying to maximize his profit.

While Bangladeshi parents settled in Rajasthan ‘sold’ their daughters without intermediaries, it should be noted that parents living in Bangladesh took the decision alone in only 4 percent of the cases.

5.1 Selling a girl on the prostitution or on the marriage market

In the story narrated by Tahomina at the beginning of this chapter, we saw that Aimoni chose to sell the 14 year old girl on the marriage market although she could have made more money if she had sold her on the prostitution market. Why did she act in this way? *Dalalis* interviewed in Bangladesh commonly underlined the auspicious and sacred character of marriage, an event that brings blessings upon guardians. This is how Rodhuli Begum, a 75 year ex-dalali from Chapainawabgonj, expressed the view.

‘I arranged the marriage of 32 girls from this area. They are happy and they bless me everyday. This is why I live in peace and prosperity in my old age.’

Bibi, an ex-dalali from Zikorgacha in Jessore who regularly traveled to Mumbai for 18 years (between 1981 and 1999) claimed that she never sold girls to the brothel although she could have earned much more if she had done so. She explained:

‘In Bombay, there are two markets, one for the brothel and another for marriage. Those sold in the brothel could never come back. Their name is written on their forehead. They are marked. But women sold in marriage sometimes come back after many years.’

‘The price for selling a girl into marriage varied from 500 to 2,000 rupees. The price for selling a girl to the brothel in Bombay was always higher. I could have earned a lot more by selling girls there.’

Rodhuli Begum and Bibi generally took girls from their community who were entrusted to them by their parents and, therefore, they could hardly admit dealing with both, the marriage and the prostitution market. But we have testimony that Bibi did so. It came from Feli, a woman from Hazirbagh, Zikorgacha, who returned to visit her family 15 years after she had been taken away.

In 1984, Bibi had taken three girls from the same village: Feli, Sophi and Cheli, aged 15, 14 and 17 years old respectively. She had promised their parents that she would arrange their marriage in Mumbai. For 15 years their families had no clue where the girls were. Here, the pain and the anguish of parents who do not know whether a daughter is dead or alive should be heard.

In 1999, Feli came back to the astonishment of everyone and revealed what she knew. Feli now lives in Basti and we could not meet her. Here is how her father reported what he had heard from his daughter.

Feli's story

“In Basti, Bibi arranged Feli's marriage with an elderly man. He was a widower with 4 children. At first, Feli did not suspect that Bibi had sold her. But five years later, when she asked her husband permission to visit Bangladesh, he refused pointing out that he had bought her for 3,500 rupees. Feli then learned that she had been sold.

Many years later, Feli traced Sophi by chance in Delhi. She heard from her that Sophi and Cheli had not been left in Basti like her. Feli had been chosen by her husband as she was the most beautiful of the three. Having sold her, Bibi returned to Kolkata with the other two girls. At Howrah station, she left Cheli with a man and took Sophi to Mumbai where she sold her to a man from Basti who was looking for a wife.

Sophi revealed to Feli that she had been kept in Basti for 5 years while her husband worked in Mumbai. When she was 18 years old, the husband brought her to Mumbai and made her work in a bar. Sophi is presently living in Delhi with her husband. She confirmed to Feli that she was also sold by Bibi.

According to this statement, Bibi moved around with three girls and disposed of them in three different places. Two were sold to be wives to Uttar Pradesh men and one was “left with a man” at Howrah station. Cheli who was “left with a man” at Howrah station has never been heard about since. Apart from the information given by Feli, Sophi's family has not received news of her in 15 years.

The description Feli made of her life in Uttar Pradesh fits the pattern already drawn by other ‘purchased wives’. She lives in Basti with her husband who is now a very old man. She had 3 children with him and also brought up the 4 children he had from a previous marriage. Wheat is the main crop and Feli works the family land herself.

5.2 Grooming a girl for marriage or for prostitution

In the interview she granted us, Bibi mentioned that she often kept the girls entrusted to her for some time before deciding of their fate.

‘I used to keep these girls for 1 or 2 months in Bombay before marrying them. In this time, they had to learn how to behave, keep clean and look attractive.’

It is quite clear that Bibi did not dispose of her wards only on the marriage market but, this, she could not say. Evidence that other *dalalis* dealt with both, the marriage and the prostitution market is given also by Sabiha, a woman from Bakra Union in Zikorgacha.

Sabiha's story

Sabiha was a mother of 5 when she went to Mumbai in search of a better life. This was in 1985. She first worked as a maid servant but the pay did not suffice. A Kolkata 'auntie' (*mashi*) who befriended her introduced her to prostitution. She also employed her two daughters as maidservants and advised Sabiha to send her husband and her two sons back to Bangladesh. While Sabiha's daughters were groomed by the *mashi*, Sabiha was convinced to place them in a brothel when they were only 13 and 15 year old.

The Kolkata *mashi* organized everything. For many years, Sabiha trusted her mentor who had helped her to pull out of want and poverty. But in the end, she felt cheated, sick and disgusted. She realized she was made a party to the selling of her own daughters. It took Sabiha a long time before she opened her eyes. The last drop which made the glass overflow was the sale of her third and youngest daughter at the age of 13 to an elderly man in Haridwar, Uttar Pradesh.

"This Kolkata mashi, I know her business now. She keeps girls at her house as maid servants for some time, prepares them mentally, then, she fixes work for them. She recruits destitute people from Bangladesh who are grateful for her help and kindness. Then, it is easy to get them to accept anything.

Look what she did with my youngest daughter. One day she said to me: "I will marry Sonia to a man from Uttar Pradesh, a widower. She will be happy. The man is a bit old but that should be no problem."

I agreed. I did not know she would do this to me. She sold my daughter for 50,000 rupees.

When I asked for my daughter's address, she gave me all kinds of excuses. One day, I got furious with her. Finally, she scribbled an address on a piece of paper and said: "You go and find your daughter but I cannot help you."

I had a lot of problems getting there. The name of the place is Haridwar [Haridwar] I think. When I finally traced my Sonia, she had been there for two years and I found her pregnant. She refused to talk to me and she did not want to see me. The husband told me that he had bought her for 50,000 rupees.

I could not tell this to anyone, least of all my husband. If he knew, he would kill me. I just said to him that I had arranged Sonia's marriage. Sonia has 3 children now. She visited us last year with her last child. Here people know she is "happily" married but I know otherwise. She is still very angry and distant with me.

This mother had given her assent when her 13 and 15 year old daughters were made to enter a brothel. Money was then badly needed and the mother shared in the profit of her daughters' sex work with the Kolkata *mashi*. But the youngest daughter being sold in marriage in Uttar Pradesh was intolerable to her. It plunged Sabiha into a deep depression and made her doubt everything. Soon after this event, Sabiha definitely left Mumbai with her eldest daughter (the middle daughter did not forgive her mother for sending her to the brothel at the age of 13 and is now estranged from her). There is something irrevocable about being sold as a wife; the trap is for

life whereas sex work can be a temporary affair. Sabiha felt guilty but also humiliated and abused by her mentor. She had agreed to a marriage, not to a sale. This time, the Kolkata *mashi* had pocketed the entire amount of the sale of Sofia and did not offer any share to the mother. The family situation was not so desperate by the time Sofia was sold and to sacrifice a daughter in this way, to Sabiha, could not be justified.

Offering a share of the benefit of their daughter's sale to parents is a very efficient way for *dalals* to shame and silence them. One poor widow, mother of 5 daughters allowed one of her daughter to be taken to Uttar Pradesh. She never saw her again. She confessed with great sorrow.

The dalal secretly gave me 1,500 taka. I 'ate' these takas. That means I can never say anything against him.

We have seen that the same *dalalis* dealt with both, the prostitution and the marriage markets. Often illiterate and from humble backgrounds, these village women were led to travel often because of their poverty and destitution. They developed networks, learned the trade, lost their scruples and sought profits. In carrying out their business, they exploited the trust they could easily gain from families of similar origin and background. They spoke the same language as their recruits. In the trafficking of girls, Bengalis exploited Bengalis, females exploited females, neighbours and relatives exploited their own people. *Dalalis* sheltered behind their appearance as simple village women often passed their prime and of a respectable age. If by selling a girl into marriage, religious merits as well as money could be gained, why not. But the driving force of their trade was certainly not religious motives.

5.3 Railway stations: hubs of trafficking activities

In India, railway stations, especially Howrah in Kolkata, have been critical platforms for trafficking activities. This was mentioned by Tahomina, Bibi, Feli and many others.

Bibi whom we met in October 2001 in her village in Zikorgacha, Jessore was quite explicit about these activities. Having retired from work two years before the interview, she did not mince her words. It may be mentioned that Bibi began to transport and traffic in girls after her 11 year old daughter was taken to Mumbai and went missing. She heard that the girl had been sold Uttar Pradesh as a wife. Bibi followed the route to Basti, looked for her daughter everywhere but could not trace her. The girl was never seen again. It is while trying to locate her daughter that Bibi learned the trade. First a victim herself, she became an agent of trafficking and was well known in her locality as a *dalali*. She explained:

If you don't want to make much money, you can sell a girl at the border. You have no cost and no risk. Two years ago [in 1999], the price was between 2,000 and 5,000 taka.

Most dalals are in Howrah station. There is more profit to be made there. These dalals recognize one who is selling a girl and you can recognize them... Police can also tell... The girl being sold will not notice anything. Five years ago [in 1996], one could get between 10,000 and 20,000 taka for selling a girl in Howrah station.

Howrah is risky. You can be jailed and fined. On the train also you can be arrested. In Bombay, it is less risky. I knew many dalals in Howrah Station. When they were arrested by the police, they paid and got free again.

You can also take a train and sell a girl in Basti, Faizabad or Bereilly. Dalals stand at the station there and wait for you.

A different route was used for girls recruited from Rangpur. They traveled via Maldah and Katihar, avoiding Howrah station where the risks of being caught were known to be greater. Railway stations such as Basti, Gonda, Brhani and Bereilly in Uttar Pradesh remained important hubs of traffickers' activities for many years and were never policed the way Howrah station was.

5.4 Matchmakers recruiting girls in the slums of Mumbai

Bangladeshi girls trafficked into marriage were not always recruited from Bangladesh. Some were found in the slums of large Indian cities. We have seen that Sabiha lost two of her three daughters while living in Mumbai. She is not the only one.

The following story is from Zamiron who was met in her village in Sharsha, Jessore. Two of her four daughters were taken, with her permission, to be married in Uttar Pradesh a few months after she arrived in the mega city. This was in 1986.

Zamiron's story

In 1985, several families moved to Mumbai because there was nothing to eat here. We went by ourselves without the help of a dalal. There was so much want here. No one could hold us back.

My husband was an elderly man. We left with the children- 4 girls and 1 boy. We left without informing anyone because we had borrowed money and we feared our creditors may snatch the 2,000 taka we had put aside for the trip.

Having crossed the border, we saw many families who were leaving like us. The flow of people reminded me of 1971. We just followed them. I know we went through Howrah station but I could not tell you how. We did not buy any food, not even for the children. We had to reach Mumbai and settle there with the little money we had.

In Mumbai, we had no address to go to and no one who could help us find work. We ended up in a bustee of Kandivali, Rafiqnagar. People were fighting for space. We did not understand the language. The first night, we just gathered around our luggage and huddled together not daring to sleep. I feared for the girls. We had no roof, nothing.

Zamiron goes on describing her life as a new migrant in Mumbai. Her husband started begging and she found poorly paid work as a maidservant. Her 14 year old step-son got work in a hotel. The girls, aged 12 and 15, were left behind in the bustee and she feared for them. “*The girls survived on very little. Their place was awful.*” Deprived of breast milk, her 2 year old baby died within three months. The family and its miserable circumstances were soon spotted by someone.

There are women there whose work is to look for girls ready for marriage and send them to Uttar Pradesh. They act like matchmakers but their purpose is to make money. Agents inform them about newly arrived people.

We had not been there 4 months that the matchmaker had already spotted my daughters. The woman behaved so nicely with us. We trusted her and allowed our daughters to go out with her. She was about 40 years old, from Faridpur. Her name was Shona Bibi. She always carried pan [chopped betel nut wrapped in a leaf] and she spoke so well. She came with gifts for the younger children and she showed us such kindness.

She spoke like this: “Hare! My country people are dying of starvation and here there is so much to eat. There is plenty of work. Boys offer money to marry girls and in my country girls remain unmarried because dowry cannot be paid. You are my country people. I will see what I can do for you.”

She found new employers for me. I began to work in 4 homes and could earn more. I felt very grateful to her. In my absence, she visited my daughters and motivated them. In the end, my daughters themselves proposed to go with ‘auntie’ who would arrange their marriage in Uttar Pradesh. In the meantime, I became pregnant, my step-son got completely out of control and my husband’s health deteriorated.

I was overwhelmed with problems and I agreed to let my daughters go. This was 7 or 8 months after we arrived. I thought: Shona Bibi is Bangladeshi. I can find her if need be. The girls themselves were happy to leave. They could not stand their miserable life anymore. We went out to work but they were left in the bustee all day. I thought my 12 years old daughter was too little to be married but my husband convinced me to let her go.

In 1986, I entrusted the two girls to Shona Bibi taking god as a witness. They left happily but their father and I were crying. This woman came to see me 20 days later. She said the two girls had been married in Bereilly and, should I want to visit them some day, she would go with me. She left no address.

People around us started talking. Some said: Don’t you see, your daughters were sold. Others said: You were burdened with 4 daughters and you are poor. It is better like this.

We never saw the matchmaker again. My husband got worst. I went through the pregnancy and gave birth. Musclemen threatened us and the money we had received from the matchmaker was all spent.

The total sum given to Zamiron by the matchmaker amounted to some 10,000 taka. It was given in small amounts as kind gestures to a needy family. Zamiron did not link these 'gifts' with the departure of her daughters for Uttar Pradesh. It is only 15 years later that she realized this money had been a payment for the sale of her two daughters.

Nothing can be kept secret in the bustee and knowing that Zamiron and her husband had received money, one can suppose that musclemen hovered around them like bees around honey. Soon, it was all gone.

After the death of her husband, Zamiron stayed in Mumbai with her four remaining children. In 2001 [15 years after they left], she met a beggar who told her: "*You married two daughters in Bereilly. I saw them.*" Zamiron became desperate to see her daughters again.

"I gave the man 1,500 rupees and he took me there. My daughters were not pleased to see me. Economically, they are secure but they are not happy. They are like servants, they get no consideration.

I was there only one day. When I saw their husbands, I got very disappointed. They are not good looking. They are elderly and they were married before. I wanted to bring my daughters with me but the husbands did not allow. "They were sold. You cannot take them", they said. My daughters did not want to come either. They have children and they said their lives were there.

I returned with my tears. So long as I did not meet my daughters, I hoped for the best and I did not feel so bad. After seeing them, I became very depressed and I had no wish to live in Mumbai anymore. I came back with my remaining children."

Zamila was met in March 2003, seven months after she had returned to Bangladesh. The return was difficult. She commented:

Some do well in Mumbai. But I did not. I did not go to the right place, did not do the right work and could not take the right decisions. When I got to know how to make the best of Mumbai, I had lost my energy and my enthusiasm. By then, I had lost 2 daughters, my husband had died and I was not so young anymore.

Zamila lived in Mumbai for 17 years without visiting Bangladesh once. Her four remaining children no longer speak Bangla. They felt out-of-place in their mother's village in Jessore. In Mumbai, the two daughters had been placed as live-in maid servants and saw little of their mother. After their sisters were married in Uttar Pradesh, Zamila had wanted to protect them from the predators roaming about in the bustee. She did what she thought right but the girls, now aged 16 and 21, are angry. They meet smart looking girls returning from the bars of Mumbai and they ask their mother why she locked them away as she did. Why did she prevent them from knowing the world and earning well as others have done? Zamila is losing grip on her remaining children. They wish to return to Mumbai and try their luck where their mother has failed.

Zamila's story is a good example of a family migration to Mumbai undertaken 15 to 20 years ago. It carried much hardship, many risks but produced little wealth. Hanif, a young and ambitious dalal from Zamila's village draws the contrast between then and now with characteristic exaggeration.

Fifteen years ago, there was family migration but there were not such high profits. Now girls earn 200,000 taka in 3 months. The demand is for sex work.

Zamila's two eldest daughters were part of the earlier family migration pattern. They were sold as wives in Uttar Pradesh. Will the two younger daughters follow the latest trend mentioned by the *dalal* above?

6. Marriage across religion and its consequences

Tahomina was sold to be the wife of a Hindu man. She was made to follow Hindu rites and had to hide her Muslim identity, a situation which further added to her sense of estrangement and unjust appropriation.

How many girls/women, like Tahomina, were married to men of a different caste or religion? In some cases, the suggestion is there, for example, in the following description of a marriage ceremony overheard by a mother who accompanied her two daughters to Basti.

Anju and Tanzima's story

Seven girls from this village left together. There were 3 dalals, 2 men and 1 woman. I was the only guardian. Other parents had insisted that I go to represent them. It took 3 days and 3 nights to reach there. The dalals paid for my ticket. We got off at Basti station.

The dalals left me alone in one place and went elsewhere with the 7 girls. I could not say anything. The following day, my 2 daughters were married to 2 brothers. All girls were married in the neighbourhood. I could hear the sound of the wedding but I could not go.

I had seen Hindu wedding before. I recognized the drums, the shenai, and the ulu-ulu. It was like that. Was it a Hindu or a Muslim wedding, I could not tell.

After the marriage, I asked to see my daughters again but I was not allowed. I pleaded with the dalals. Allow me at least to see from a distance what my daughters' husbands look like but they refused. I just cried. Isn't there a saying: Noa, ghora, nari, jar hate, tari (Boat, horse and woman, they belong to those who control them).

In 2001 (some 18 years after the two sisters were married and 8 years after their last visit), the mother was able to visit Basti again with another of her daughters. The younger sister who accompanied the mother commented:

I do not know what religion they are. The men wear dhoti and the sacred thread.

The family does not even know whether the two daughters were married to Hindu men or not. No one has cared to inform them.

Asked about Muslim girls who were given in marriage to Hindu men or to men of other religions, Rodhuli, the 76 year old ex-dalali commented:

“When you took a girl there, the community leaders [morols] arranged the marriage. The one who brought the girl was only the guardian. Local people were the match makers. If we did not agree to their choice, there were problems. Who the girl married depended on the power of the leaders.

About Lucki, the girl who was married to a Sikh, she said:

The custom there is like this. When a man is interested in a girl he gives her ‘salami’. If she takes it, she is his. This Sikh was a very powerful man. He owned 10 trucks. He wanted to marry Lucki and I could not oppose him. I tried but he could have killed me. In the end, I ran away.

That Lucki was married to a Sikh may never have got known if her father had not looked for her. The *dalali* knew this very well but, of course, she had kept it secret.

Tunu Dashi, a 60 year old *dalali* who took many girls to Uttar Pradesh confirmed the inability of the *dalal* to intervene in these matters. She explained:

Matching jati and religion was not possible for us. We did not understand which religion these men practiced. Besides, they were not particular about the religion of the girls they took. They were satisfied just with getting a girl [meye paile, hoilo].

These testimonies are consistent with the information obtained in Uttar Pradesh. We saw that men sometimes fought among themselves to get the most attractive girl and the most powerful prevailed and got the girl they wanted. That no question should be asked about the religion or the caste of a girl purchased to be wedded, in a society where caste remains an important marker of status is revealing.

In the villages we visited in Uttar Pradesh, people were aware of such mismatch. Upper caste men claimed that marriage by purchase did not happen among ‘us’; it occurred only among ‘them’, that is the scheduled castes. Similarly, Shia Muslims said it occurred only among the Sunni Muslims. They blamed the *dalals* who were only interested in money and the highest bidder and did not care to match *jati*; they made jokes about purchased girls who, within a few hours, had to learn the basics of a religion they did not know.

As mentioned, the mixing of *jati* restricts the marriage prospects of the children born of such unions and men who purchased a Bengali wife often married their children to children with similar parentage. Field work in Uttar Pradesh was too short to enter fully into the complex issue of caste and religious identities. The little we saw suggested that caste thinking (among both, Hindus and Muslims) is pervasive and Bengali girls acquired by purchase had to contend with the problem this caused for their own insertion and that of their children.

If insertion has its problems, to leave a marriage which mismatched jati and religions may be even worst. How can a Muslim woman return to her natal family with 'Hindu children'? This is what Tahomina did and the trial she had to go is reported next.

Tahomina's story (part II)

On her first visit to Bangladesh, Tahomina had not told about her having been sold to a Hindu man but it got known. Her brother revealed the embarrassing truth when he returned to his village after he was insulted by Shumo Pal. When Tahomina arrived with her five children one year later, she was received as a sinner who needed to be both, chastised and purified before being re-integrated into the society (*samaj*). Here is the second part of her narrative.

When I arrived here with my 5 children, my elder brother did not allow me in. We had traveled for 4 days and the children had only eaten puffed rice and sugar. We were exhausted and starving but no one offered us any food.

People surrounded us, stared and made comments. I just cried. I could not utter a word. At night, there was a meeting with my brother, my father, two or three neighbours and one hozur. They decided the following.

We must do tauba (an Islamic rite to demand forgiveness, purification and re-insertion in the community).

We must be converted to Islam, officially, in a public ceremony.

The boys must be circumcised within one week.

The children must be sent to a hafezi madrassah.

A collection should be made to put up a house for us.

The following day, they carried out their plan. I felt so ashamed. I wondered which sin I had committed to deserve such a big punishment. Mostly, I kept my eyes down but when I looked up I saw people of all ages staring at us. My children could not understand. They clung to me, terrified. They did not know any one and they did not understand the language. It was a horrible day.

One week later, they circumcised my boys. They were too young for this. They could not understand. [The boys were aged 2, 4, 6 and 10 years old.]

Three years after her return, their situation continues to be difficult.

For 6 months, the children were terrified and did not want to go out of the house. My brother and others were hoping that they would rapidly learn Bangla and practice Islam but it was not so easy; it took a long time for them to loose their fear.

Still today, no one eats from our hand in the village. I work on the road with CARE. When I am away, the children are regularly insulted. We converted to Islam. Still people sneer at us and call us 'Hindu'.

We are rootless. I am worried about my children. When I took the decision to leave with them, I did not foresee the problems we would face. The children were free and happy over there. Now, they never smile. It is as though some life substance had been sucked out of them. I feel guilty.

Tahomina's story shows the difficulty – nay, the impossibility - of a returnee to re-integrate her natal community in a dignified manner after being forcibly wedded to a man of a different religion.

7. The lack of health care

The lack of health care in rural parts of Uttar Pradesh – a situation reportedly worst than in rural Bangladesh - is regularly mentioned in the case histories. Whether families are poor or not, wives' health appears to be low priority.

In a village of Bangladesh, we met Kohinoor, a 38 year old woman who had returned to Bangladesh 6 months pregnant. This was her 14th pregnancy and she came to get an abortion which she could not get in her village in Gonda, Uttar Pradesh. “*There are so many facilities here*”, she commented. Unwanted pregnancies have been a major problem in her married life.

Every year, a new pregnancy. No doctor, no contraceptives. I used traditional medicine to abort. Sometimes, it worked, sometimes it failed. A dead fetus came out or a new baby was born who had to be brought up. I had no time to breathe. All the responsibility of the household fell on my shoulder. My husband spent most of his time outside. He came back for 1 day every 8 days. He was like a king who had to be attended to.

My husband does not agree with contraceptives. I thought I would get a ligation but if my husband found out, I would be in trouble. Over there, I don't know when I can get pills or injections. There are good hospitals in Basti and in Gorakpur but to get there is for me difficult. If I don't do anything, I will die. I conceived 14 times already. How much can a woman take? I do not have the strength anymore.

Kohinoor talked about the beginning of her married life which was not easy.

Even though I was not taken by force, what could I do? Can a goat run away when her 4 legs are tied? This is the way I was. Problems were so many. After marriage, I was fed and clothed adequately but my husband was seldom there as he was peddling clothes. My mother-in-law and my bhashur (husband's elder brother) made my life difficult. I did not understand the language, I could not follow orders. I stared at them like a cow. Problems were so many. When I had intercourse with my husband, I could not bathe afterwards. They are not clean people, they don't bathe everyday. When I took a shower in the morning, my mother-in-law used to

say: "If you wet your clothes so often, they will rip and you will bring poverty to this household."

I cried alone. I could not talk to anyone. They made me feel I was the most neglected person on earth. I was pushed out of my father's house and here no one cared about me. I thought I would commit suicide.

At the end of 2002, Uttar Pradesh received considerable worldwide attention as new cases of polio among children were found at a time when WHO was about to announce that the eradication of the disease from all countries of the world. Questions were raised. What had gone wrong in this province of India? Why were children not immunized? The polio cases drew worldwide attention to the poor health facilities and services in that province where part of the rural population had not been reached. The case histories we collected amply confirm this state of affair. Below are presented two stories of migrant women who became too sick to work and were taken back to Bangladesh by their husbands.

8. "Better be a beggar in my country than a wife in Uttar Pradesh"

Two returnees were met who presently earn their living as beggars. Hard as it is, both found their life as beggar preferable to the hardship and the low status they endured in Uttar Pradesh.

Togori mentioned that her husband was not an old man, he was rather good looking (better than Togori) and he did not beat her anymore than a Bangladeshi husband. Yet, her life in UP was miserable.

"My husband had no land of his own. He worked as a day labourer. Everyday, I had to go out with him to work. We harvested wheat, rice and jute. I had no experience of such work. I had to learn everything. We used to leave early in the morning with our lunch and return at sunset. Each of us received 2½ kg of wheat or rice as payment. We were never paid in cash. This is the rule over there. No one begs. Everybody works. The most difficult was when we had to stand in water to transplant rice seedlings or peel off jute sticks. We were attacked by leeches and we developed sores.

Women work outside and no one sees this badly. Men respect working women. Sometimes I was insulted, sometimes I was hit but not because I was working out in the field.

One evening, while returning from work, Togori was hit by a motorbike and her leg was badly injured. She also developed TB. She could not longer work and her husband sent her back to Bangladesh with her small daughter. Togori's aunt and her grand-mother, who are also poor, gave her shelter and raised money for her treatment. They gave the support they could afford and Togori recovered within 6 months. When her husband came to fetch her, Togori refused to follow him.

I came back here sick and thin as a skeleton. People here helped me. My husband contributed nothing. At the time, he did not want to know how I

was. Now that I am healthy again, he wants me to go back. Why should I go back to him?

In UP, I worked for 5 years and returned sick and with nothing in my hands. Comparing my life before going to India, my life in India and my present life, I feel I was most miserable in India. Even though I have a husband there, I have no wish to go back. Here, as a beggar, I can earn for myself and save for the future. Better be a beggar in my country than a wife in Uttar Pradesh.

Togori now has a bank account and every month she can save 400 to 500 taka. She also saves with a saving group. Even though she is alone to care for her small child, she has more control over her life.

Jatuni is Togori's begging companion. She is also a returnee from Uttar Pradesh. Her life circumstances were even more difficult than those of Togori. Her husband had been married before and had two children from that marriage. Then they had four children together. Togori lived in Mumbai with her husband for 6 years until her elderly husband lost his job and the family returned to Basti in Uttar Pradesh. There they found out that the husband's small patch of land had been grabbed by his elder brother. They had no house. How could the 8 member family eke out a living?

Over there, there are no beggars apart from one family which is elected by the village. All others must work.

They worked as day labourer on other people's land. Jatuni had never done such outdoor work which was also hard for her elderly husband. A daily pay of 2½ kg of wheat per worker could not feed the family. Within a year of her return from Mumbai, Jatuni – who had given birth to a 5th child - became too sick to work.

Over there, husbands take no responsibility for their wives' illnesses. I saw no doctor and got no treatment. I went to a medicine shop. Once, they said I had TB, another time they said I had cancer but they did not treat me. Treatment was not available and, in any case, it would have been too costly

The husband brought back to Bangladesh Jatuni with her 5 children. They were aged 9, 7, 4, 2 and 6 months old. This was 3 years ago.

I started begging. What else could I do with so many small children. My brother was too poor to feed me.

The day we met Jatuni, she had just returned from a begging round. She had collected 5 kg of grams (*mashkalai*) and 1 kg of rice. Six months earlier her husband had come to see her.

My husband came. He wanted me to go back with him but I refused. Why should I go? I was sick and he did not treat me. He pushed me back here because I could not work. I survived by begging. Now that I am better and can work, he wants to take me. Why should I go to work in his country? If I must work to eat, I will do so in my own country. I am better

off here. Many people show me kindness even though I am a beggar. I am one of their daughters. Abroad, I was less than a dog.

Jatuni took her 9 year old daughter out of school to look after the baby and she placed her 7 year old son as servant in a family. She is sorry she could not do much for her children but still she feels at peace in a way she never did in Uttar Pradesh.

It is easier for me to survive here. Over there, you earn less and the work is harder. Also my husband would rule over me and if I mix with him, I may be pregnant again. No one told me about contraceptives while in UP. I learned about these things here.

In Basti, my daughter would be married off already but I don't want her to have the kind of life I had. I will keep her here if I had known what I know now, I would never have agreed to be married in Uttar Pradesh. Today, girls do not accept such proposition. They are not so stupid (boka). They understand much more than we did.

Togori and Jatuni's return and their determination not to go back may mark the end of an era. Poverty has decreased in Bangladesh and may have increased in some parts of Uttar Pradesh. Again, the closure of the textile mills in Mumbai removed the comparative advantage its workers had. The resources to buy and to maintain a Bengali wife were lost.

9. Fathers who sell their young daughters: the Jaipur data

A one month field work carried out in Jaipur (Rajasthan) in February 2003 revealed that the city used to constitute a last stop for traffickers in girls before they entered Pakistan. Bustee dwellers said none of them were directly involved with this traffic but they heard about it. One of them explained:

Some Bihari men used to stop in the bastee of Ajmiripuria and Bazbadonpura. They stayed there for a few days on their way to Jaissalmer or Punjab before entering Pakistan. They lodged with their relatives here or with people they knew. They checked the border situation and also took rest. Bangladeshi girls were always with them. We heard they sold these girls in Pakistan for marriage or for the brothel. Now there routes are closed and these men do not come anymore.

If this market is closed, another one is still going on strong and that is the demand within India (Rajasthan, Kashmir, and Uttar Pradesh) for young girls to marry. Fifteen cases of sale of girls were identified among Bengalis originating from Bangladesh in *Bazbadonpura bastee*. The girls sold were remarkably young (between 9 and 15 years old). Here guardians (a father, an aunt) negotiated the deal without the intervention of *dalals*.

Girls were sold for amounts of money much larger than seen in Uttar Pradesh – up to 110,000 rupees. Their situation as purchased wives bears similarity with that described above. The Bengali girls sold from Jaipur, however, had some advantages. They spoke the local language, they were not so estranged from the local mores and they could return to their families more easily than girls recruited from Bangladesh as the distances were not so large.

Moreover, in Jaipur a girl who left a marriage could earn a living and also could remarry quite easily.

In the bustee community we studied, waste collection was the main occupation and everybody could engage in it. Men and boys did not earn more than women and girls, rather the opposite was true. Women and girls were more constant in their work and less prone to various addictions, so they were in fact earning more than the men and were the main family providers. Children contributed their share at an early age. The poor in Jaipur are better off than the poor in Bangladesh. Girls who failed marriage were easily accepted back in their families and could earn to support themselves.

We met one girl, Luna, who had been sold in marriage by her father for 80,000 rupees. She was 12 years old and the husband was 45. This is how she tells her story:

Father showed me the picture of a young man but he married me to an old man who died his hair.

One year before my marriage, father had arranged the marriage of my step-sister for 60,000 rupees. She was 9 years old. When father first proposed to me, my mother and I did not agree. But I saw the photo. The boy was good looking. Father said: "We will have a celebration for your marriage. If we take a little money, what is the problem?"

I agreed. I thought, after all, one way or the other, I have to marry. This boy is young, he is well off and father will get something. In Rajasthan, marriage ceremonies are expensive. I was happy. I would have a big wedding.

My brothers were hesitant but when they heard about the money, they agreed. Mother did not say anything. Marrying a daughter is the father's responsibility [even though the parents were separated and Luna's father had remarried and lived with his second wife]

My husband was part of a large family. They had a lot of land. His first wife died, I heard. He spent most of his time outside. I was not pressurized for work. But they did not allow me to keep in touch with my family.

My husband was old. He was not good looking. I never liked him. I cried all the time. I tried to run away. In the end, my auntie and my brother, hearing how desperate I was, convinced my in-laws to let me visit my family. They promised to take me back. But I never returned. My husband came to get me but my brothers sent him away.

This story shows the limits of wife-purchasers' power. While the girl was in their midst, the in-laws' control could be daunting and overbearing but once she was let out and refused to come back, there is little the wife-purchasers could do. They could not use recourse to courts or to the police as their purchasing and wed-locking a 12 year old girl was illegal to begin with. So, they applied some pressure and let go. They lost the girl and the money. Luna was lucky to escape. Table 9 showed that out of the 15 Jaipur girls sold in marriage, one was murdered by her in-laws and 12 were restricted and confined. Only 2 out of 15 had left the marriage.

Luna explained that with the 80,000 rupees her father got from her husband, he spent 20,000 on the wedding and with the rest he bought land and fixed his house in Bangladesh.

Bustee people were critical and had low regard for Luna's father, a man who had sold 4 of his 5 daughters and was known to have sold other girls as well. The man clearly made a business out of it. First, he had sold Luna's step-sister at the age of 9, then Luna at the age of 12, another step-sister at the age of 10 and finally he sold his youngest daughter who was only 6 years old. This girl's mother had died 9 months earlier and Luna's father had decided to return to Bangladesh. He gave one 9 year old daughter to his sister and returned to Bangladesh alone with his 8 year old son. It appears that girls have saleable value when young and virgin and this father did not miss a chance to cash on it. Boys have value always.

10. Conclusion

The migration and sale of Bengali girls from Bangladesh (and West Bengal) to north and north west India for the purpose of marriage peaked 15 to 20 years ago and decreased afterward but never completely stopped. In Rajasthan, the demand for purchasing young girls for marriage purposes remains strong today. How can be explained the ups and downs of such a market? What are the factors behind the demand and the offer?

The short field work carried out in Rajasthan did not permit to grasp the dynamics of the local demand market which is certainly complex with different castes having different rules and expectations. One can only remark that Rajasthan is located in that part of India where girls have been 'missing' for more than a century. We have seen that women in Uttar Pradesh worked the family land or hired themselves as labourers. Most girls sold in Uttar Pradesh were married to older men who had been married before. Purchasing and marrying a young girl procured these men a source of dependable labour and services and insurance for their old age. Several Muslim girls were married to Hindu men especially in western Uttar Pradesh where Muslims are few. A *dalali* who has been 'selling' girls for the last 20 years confirmed this.

All the girls I took to Bereilly and Haridwar were married to Hindu men who had been married before. Demand for girls was especially high among Hindus as it was more difficult for them to find a second wife locally.

In communities of Basti and Gonda, Uttar Pradesh, marriage costs for poor men were high and it was cheaper for them to purchase a girl from Bangladesh than marry locally.

Twenty-three years ago, it was expensive for men to marry over there. They had to offer gold and silver to the bride and the den mohor money had to be paid to the guardians. It was much cheaper to marry a girl from Bangladesh.

Female neglect, hard work, lack of health care and absence of contraceptive services may account for higher female mortality and the skewed sex ratio which characterized the areas where a demand purchased wife existed. Technology permitting the abortion of female fetus was not in use at the time and cannot be retained as a cause for the 'missing' females.

Dalals and go-between traded in girls between a country having a shortage of them and another supposedly having a surplus. Girls were collected from densely populated areas of Bangladesh – Jessore, Satkhira, Khulna, Faridpur, Rajshahi - where dowry demands crippled poor parents who could not arrange the marriage of their daughters. Adolescent girls were also collected from Mumbai slums and from railway stations where poor Bangladeshi migrants transited. Parents who could not ensure the security of their adolescent daughters in slums agreed to a marriage in Uttar Pradesh.

In the 1990's, parents in Bangladesh became increasingly reluctant to send their adolescent daughters for marriage to these distant lands after many of those who had left did not return and stories were heard of girls having been purchased. Visitors spoke of the harsh lives and the low consideration these purchased wives suffered. Bangladesh society had also changed and the pressure to marry a daughter soon after puberty had relaxed. Adolescent girls and young women had more access to work and income which lessened the burden they represented for their families. In some communities, girls had begun to migrate for work to Mumbai or elsewhere. They had become like sons, or even better than sons, supporting entire families with their income. This new role of daughters considerably reduced parents' interest in marrying them early and more girls refused to be married in any way preferring to migrate for work.

In Uttar Pradesh, combined harvesters brought from the Punjab reduced the demand for agricultural labour while migration to the city drained villages of their youth, altering life styles and marriage patterns.

Now, dalals do not bring girls from Bangladesh as before because boys migrate to the city and marry over there. The demand for Bangladeshi girls is not as it was before. In our village, in case of emergency you will not find 10 men. Girls who were married in my time all stayed behind in the village. Now, half of the young wives live in the village, the rest in cities.

I always refused when my relatives asked me to arrange the marriage of their daughter in Uttar Pradesh. Boys there live abroad – Delhi, Bombay, Agra, the Middle East and elsewhere. Some come only every 3 years. Why should a girl leave her country to marry such men? (A Bangladeshi woman who had been married for 22 years in Uttar Pradesh)

We have shown that the migrated girls bore the status of 'purchased wife'. The amount of money spent on their purchase could be large or small but, in any case, it sufficed to justify a tight control and an appropriation which denied purchased wives the right to visit and keep in touch with their natal families. Girls married across out of *jati* (caste) and *dhormo* (religious community) in any case were dead to their families. In a society obsessed with purity of caste, the status of such purchased wife was low and their uncertain pedigree (and often that of their husbands) carried on to their children.

Since December 2002, villages located within Bangladesh along the Indian border have been feeling the pinch of a tightened border control. Undocumented migrants have been picked up from various places in India and pushed back inside Bangladesh by the Indian police, often in most unfortunate circumstances. Among these reluctant returnees, at least two women were found in Jessore who used the 'push back' move to escape a life of bondage. Twenty years

after having been sold in Haridwar, they finally returned to their country. Married to men of a different religion than their own, denied respect and consideration, these women could not develop a sense of belonging. When the police came searching for illegal Bangladeshis, they came forward and demanded to be taken back to their country leaving numerous children behind. That women should abandon their children and run away from a marital home after 20 years provides one more strong statement on the living conditions purchased wives experienced. The tragic consequences of traffic in human being which, until recently, attracted little attention must be appraised.

Those who believe that when girls are wed-locked, confined and non-promiscuous, morality is safe and there are no problems are mistaken. The distant migration of mostly adolescent girls to be sold and wed-locked to men, usually married before and much older than themselves, often of a different religion group or otherwise suffering a 'flawed' reputation, invited all kinds of violence and abuse. The girls and their parents were lured and cheated. This is not what had been promised to them. Today, in 2003, it must be inscribed in the chapter of 'trafficking in human being'.

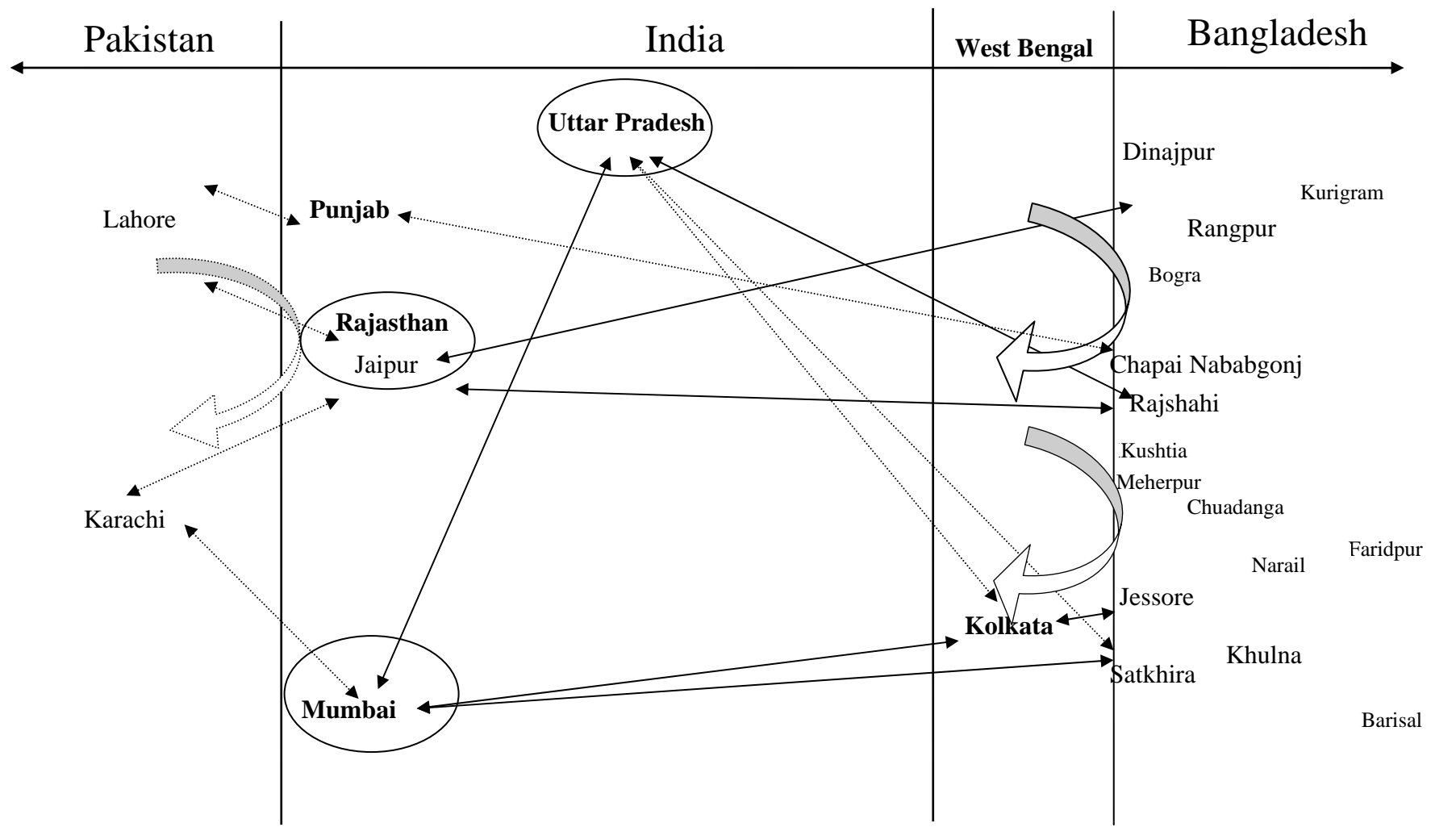
These girls did not enrich their natal families or their countries or origin. Remittances were not expected of them and were never sent. They were driven away and were not meant to come back. Collective memory could forget about them. History had no place for them.

This study was written so that this less-than-glorious episode should not be forgotten. It is important that questions be raised and lessons learned about the forces which generated this trafficking in girls. How was a 'surplus' of girls to be sold and disposed off on a distant marriage market produced in the first place? Poverty, war, floods and famines had taken their toll on Bangladesh society but some suffered much more than others. It must never be forgotten that excessive dowry demands, the obligation to marry a daughter in any way and regardless of risks were some of the social mores which prompted the offer and the sale of girls abroad. Demanding provinces must raise their own questions about their 'missing' daughters and the way in which those who came to replace them were treated.

This chapter showed 'trafficking in women' to be embedded in specific historical circumstances which shaped the particular form it took in the past. The possibility for adolescent girls and young women to earn relatively good incomes has effectively reduced interest in migration for marriage. Twenty years ago, girls left to be married in Uttar Pradesh; today, girls from the same villages migrate to Mumbai and the Middle East to work in the entertainment industry earning more than their brothers and redefining gender roles within the family. These women who 'do' *bidesh* break away from *pardah* and *desh*. They migrate as individuals, temporarily free from marital and familial supervision but also unprotected. They move further away. Forces unleashed by globalization processes are exerting a strong pull on Bangladeshi girls and women, including rural dwellers who never visited the cities of their own country. How well prepared are the migrants, their family, society and government to meet the new challenges, risks and opportunities these offers represent? Female emigration in Bangladesh is a reality which can no longer be ignored, silenced or even forbidden. It has happened and it is increasing today. One should not wait another 20 years to admit to it and take realistic steps to curtail the activities of cheaters and traffickers.

Girls Sold in Marriage :

Routes Followed



Glossary

atmio-shozon	: relatives (maternal and paternal)
bangla	: Bengali, Bengal
bhashur	: husband's elder brother
Bhojpuri	: language of Bhojpur, (In UP, local people said that many women from Bengal speak Bhojpuri, a mixture of Hindi, Urdu and Bangla sometimes difficult to understand)
bidesh	: foreign country, foreign land
Bihari	: people of Bihar
boka	: stupid; foolish
dalal/dalali	: a male/female broker; transporter of human beings often involved in cross border trafficking.
dahl	: lentil, pulse
denmohor	: amount of money pledged to the bride by the bridegroom in Muslim marriages.
desh	: own country, one's own place
dhormo	: religion, morality
dulabhanga	: boys employed in the drying of fish on islands in the Bay of Bengal. Work conditions are described as harsh, as slavery.
dur-bidesh	: far away, foreign place, unknown country
dur-poschime	: distant west
foroz kaj	: compulsory duty which cannot be avoided (Islam).
hafez-i-madrassah	: religious school where students learn to memorize the Koran.
hozur	: honoured person, superior authority (Institution). <i>Hozurs</i> officiate at religious ceremonies.
jati	: caste, race, religious group, gender or species.
kharidan awrat	: "purchased woman"

kanya dan	: act of giving a daughter in marriage. Parents have the moral/religious duty to marry their daughters before or soon after puberty.
mashkalai	: a kind of lentil marked with black and grey spots.
mashi	: aunt, mother's sister
maulovi	: a religious man.
meye paile hoilo	: satisfied just with getting a girl/woman.
mohorana	: See 'denmohor'
morol	: village headman, community leader
morzada	: dignity.
nao, ghora, nari	
jar hate tari	: boat, horse and woman, they belong to those who control them.
nari pachar	: trafficking in women
nayor	: visit of a married daughter to her father's home.
nikah	: used in opposition to <i>biye</i> [marriage] to signify a second and successive marriages.
purdah	: seclusion of women.
prodhan	: a village chief.
salami	: a present in money; Senior persons offer ' <i>salami</i> ' after receiving salutation from juniors or persons dear to them.
samaj	: society. Moral society governed by <i>dhormo</i> .
shankha	: conch bracelet. Hindu women wear them as long as their husbands live.
shindur	: vermilion powder which married women use in the parting of their hair.
shongshar	: domestic life.
shongshar cora	: Sums up the numerous responsibilities of a wife.
tauba	: an Islamic reparation to demand forgiveness, purification and reinsertion in the community.
thakur	: hindu god; a person deserving respect and reverence. He who performs worship [<i>puja</i>] and rituals.

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