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Mentally-challenged, who wandered across border, heads to Bangladesh after 21 years

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TWO DAYS before Eid (June 29), the family of M. Rahman, 36, waited eagerly at the Phulbari road crossing on the India-Bangladesh border, to meet Rahman who had been missing since the last 21 years.

Rahman, diagnosed with

schizophrenia, wandered away from his home in Bangladesh in 2002. He is being reunited with his family through the efforts of Karjat-based Shradha Rehabilitation Foundation which has been working for the cause of mentally ill and destitute wandering individuals since the last three decades.

While last month's meeting could not take place due to missing paperwork, the much anticipated union is expected to take place on July 21 with Rahman on his way to New Jalpaiguri in West Bengal from where Phulbari is a



Rahman reassures his father via a WhatsApp call during his train journey that he is okay and returning home. Express

few kilometres away.

"Mein khush hoon (I am very happy)," said Rahman who is aboard a train to West Bengal and accompanied by members of the foundation including social worker Nitish Sharma and associate psychiatrist Dr Swarali Kondwilkar. The foundation has helped to reunite more than 10,000 individuals with their families across far-flung villages and managed to contact Rahman's family across the border, which had given up all hope of him being alive.

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● Mentally-challenged, who wandered across border, heads to Bangladesh

"This may not be the first instance of a mentally ill person wandering away from home, in the country or across the border, but it is a pioneering and heartwarming effort from multiple authorities who have helped in reuniting the family with the son," said noted psychiatrist Dr Bharat Vatwani, and founder trustee of the foundation which has a 6.5 acre plot shelter in Karjat and takes in more than 120 mentally ill and destitute individuals at a time.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Rahman continued to stay at the facility and showed good progress, Dr Kondwilkar said. Social worker Nitish Sharma played his part in finding and identifying Rahman. "We saw him sitting by the roadside holding a newspaper and was totally silent," Sharma says. "He was incoherent and since I speak Bengali, I could develop a rapport with him. It took several months. He would lapse into a different dialect of Bengali spoken in the regions

on the border of West Bengal," he added.

An event organised by the Ahmednagar-based NGO, Snehalaya offered the first ray of hope for a possible family reunion. Around 150 youngsters participated in a 75-day cycle rally from Ahmednagar to Gandhi Ashram in Noakhali, Bangladesh on the occasion of Gandhi Jayanti on October 2, 2021. The rally was held to celebrate 50 years of Bangladesh's independence. "A function was held the following year on August 15, 2022 to felicitate the youth and Raha Naba Kumar Das, Director of Gandhi Ashram Trust, Noakhali, Bangladesh," says Dr Girish Kulkarni, head of Snehalaya.

Sharma, who attended the event wanted to ascertain whether Rahman was from Bangladesh and met Bangladeshi student volunteers and media personnel who he requested to interact with Rahman via video calls. Multiple video calls later, con-

tact was established with Rahman's family. The father, Sahidul Islam, 63, informed them that his son had a history of mental illness and had disappeared in 2002.

"Unfortunately, no treatment was taken for the mental illness by the family in Bangladesh. Rahman suffered from chronic schizophrenia, and would relapse into catatonic silence or self-talking and grimacing," Dr Vatwani remembers. "We could not celebrate Eid together as my son could not cross the border due to lack of some documents. But that process is now complete and soon there will be many more occasions to celebrate now that my son is coming home," says an ecstatic Islam, a retired army corporal, while speaking with The Indian Express on a WhatsApp call from Thakurgaon, Bangladesh.

Official identity documents were obtained from the Deputy High Commission of Bangladesh. Following persist-

ent follow-ups by Rahman's father, the Bangladesh Embassy in India sent a travel permit allowing him entry into Bangladesh. "The case of reuniting Rahman with his family was taken up this July by Bhupesh Bawankar, assistant foreigner regional registration officer, who was so moved by Rahman's story that he requested the staff to personally guide us in the filling the online application form for the exit permit," Dr Vatwani said. Necessary police clearances were obtained and a special cell for matters related to Bangladeshi nationals, known as Bangladeshi Vishesh Pathak, was also contacted.

It is now just a matter of days before Islam and his family welcome Rahman who has boarded the Jnaneswari Express from Kalyan headed towards Kolkata's Shalimar station. There onwards, Rahman will catch another train to New Jalpaiguri and finally travel to Phulbari.