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Home after 20 years

Mentally ill woman who walked out of her house in a village in Chhattisgarh with her baby, reunited with her sons and brother; her family hopes to also find the infant who was lost then

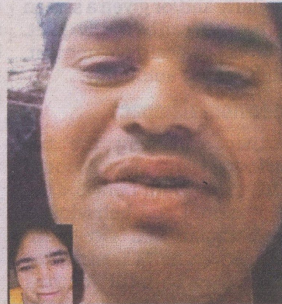
Sunshine Story

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THIS raksha bandhan was bitter sweet for a family in Chhattisgarh. While two brothers rejoiced that their mother, afflicted with a mental illness, who had walked out of the house 20 years ago, was reunited with them, the happiness was tinged with sadness as she had lost their sister whom she had taken with her. The reunion was possible on Thursday thanks to a social worker from a shelter in Mumbai where the woman was brought in June this year.

From Chhattisgarh, a joyous Prahlad Kumar Ratre, 24, the woman's brother spoke to this reporter on Thursday from his village, Kari. "I have been waiting for over 20 years to meet my elder sister Saurin, who disappeared with her one-month-old daughter from our house. I am blessed that my wish has come true three days before raksha bandhan."

Saurin Chelak's son Mohan Kumar, 26, who has a vegetable business, said it is a miracle, and his mother was slowly recognising the elders in the family and villagers. "The only tragic note to the whole story is that my mother had wandered out of our house with my sister in her arms, who she lost in her disturbed mental state on the



Saurin connects with her brother Prahlad Ratre on video call

way. While tears of happiness abound, some sadness remains, but the family is hopeful that my sister too shall be found."

Brought from Gujarat

Saurin, who was found roaming on the streets of Gandhinagar, Gujarat, nearly 12 years ago, was brought to Mumbai in June 2021, by the staff of SC Joseph Hospital and Shelter and put under the care of Dr Bharat Vatwani, who runs the Shrad-



Mohan Kumar and Lav Kumar reunited with mother Saurin; (far right) Laxmipriya Bishnoi the social worker who got her to give her name and that of her village

dha Rehabilitation Foundation for roadside destitutes with mental conditions, in Karjat. He diagnosed her condition as schizophrenia, which affects a person's ability to think, feel and behave clearly.

"Saurin was constantly restless and barely spoke or interacted with anyone in our rehabilitation home. Slowly, but steadily she started responding to treatment and identified herself as Suman, which we later learnt was actually her daughter's name. Her mental condition, was probably aggravated after the demise of her husband, and she left her village, without informing anyone," said Dr Varwani, who is responsible for

reuniting over 7,000 destitutes with their families and is a recipient of the Magsaysay Award.

"Treating Saurin and others has been a challenge as in the past six months, a majority of our staff and patients were down with COVID-19. One of our dedicated senior nurses, Asha Marade, lost her husband to COVID the day after she delivered her second child. "It is such wonderful reunions that keep us motivated," said Dr Vatwani. He said Saurin is under home medication now.

Social worker Laxmipriya Bishnoi from the shelter, made regularly coaxed Saurin into talking. After frequently changing her home address, finally

Saurin told her real name and her village's name. "I searched for Kari on Google and called the nearest police station, which is in Galoda Bazar. Sub-Inspector Yashwant Pratab Singh assured me that he would do everything in his power to track down the family and responded favourably within one hour.

"I got Saurin and her brother to speak on video call. He immediately broke down and said he would come to Mumbai to fetch her before raksha bandhan. But I dissuaded him and took her to the railway station nearest to her village on Thursday. This is when I realised that Saurin also has two grown up sons — Mohan Kumar and Lav Kumar. Her brother, too, had come to take her home," said Bishnoi.

Sub-Inspector Singh said tracking Saurin's family was not very difficult as elders in Kari village till date speak about the mentally ill woman, who vanished one fine day. "I reached out to the village sarpanch, and he tracked down the family in no time and to my surprise, I found one of her sons worked very close to our police station".