

SPOTLIGHT

Manisha Chakma met Pinky for the first time at a tea stall located right outside her college. Like Manisha, Pinky too had left her hometown and arrived in Dhaka in search of a good job and decent life. After a brief chat, numbers were exchanged and over the next few days, Pinky, in Manisha's words, would go on to become a 'hi-hello' friend.

Pinky would randomly enquire about various aspects of Manisha's life. "I didn't know a lot about her. But she seemed nice and we talked every now and then," recalls Manisha.

A couple of months into their meeting, Pinky gave her new friend a proposal—one which would end up sending Manisha on a journey so painful, she still shivers at the thought of it.

The proposal was both simple and bizarre, she was asked if she wanted to marry someone from China and spend the rest of her life in a developed nation.

"I was told that Chinese men are crazy about their wives and that they would do anything to keep them happy. Pinky also enticed me by saying that I would be able to get citizenship within a year which is a very short period compared to many other countries," recalls Manisha.

"The number of men in China hugely outnumber the women and that's why men find it difficult marry in that country and are looking for brides abroad."

What Manisha is referring to is China's gender imbalance, considered to be the most serious and prolonged in the world. According to China's National State Population and Family Planning Commission, there will be 30 million more men of marrying age than women by the year 2020.

According to a research published by *People's Daily* in 2017, if a man wishes to marry a woman from Beijing, he is expected to pay an average of RMB 200,000 (Tk 25 lakhs) as cash gift up front.

Researchers blame China's one-child policy, introduced in 1979 and phased out by 2016, for the current crisis. Like in many other nations, China too has a bias for sons and the policy led to many families aborting female foetuses and abandoning baby girls to ensure that their only child was a son.

As a result, marrying foreign women, seems to be a more viable option for the "leftover men" in China. Unfortunately, a huge number of these marriages are often forced on the women and involves traffickers.

In 2012, Chinese officials repatriated around 1,281 women. Most of these women were from neighbouring nations, such as Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. In 2015, 85 women from Cambodia were repatriated from China after being sold into forced marriages, according to a report published by United Nations.

While women from Southeast Asia have been traditional victims of this trade, the business is relatively unheard of here—and that's what makes women like Manisha, easy targets.

The first meeting

"Pinky told me so many nice things about Chinese men that I got possessed by a desire to lead a happy life in China and I agreed to her proposal," says Manisha. After one such conversation with Pinky, Manisha was taken to a restaurant in Uttara, where she would end up meeting her future husband.

"I saw around six to seven more girls there and like me they were all indigenous women from the Hill Tracts. They too had

come to meet their husbands and that made me feel confident as I realised that I was not the only one getting involved in this," recalls Manisha.

"A few minutes later around seven to eight Chinese men entered the room. Our would-be spouses were pre-assigned. Pinky had already selected the Chinese man I was to marry. She told me to keep faith in her decision as she had been in the business for a long time. She chose someone who claimed to be a businessman and I agreed," says Manisha.

Three days later, Manisha woke up to a call at 6:30 am. It was Mizan, Pinky's partner in crime. He was responsible for the paperwork and had been present in the restaurant as well. He asked her to come to Uttara by 9:00 am to sign a few documents. Manisha hurried to Uttara only to realise that Mizan had the marriage documents ready and wanted her to sign them.

"I was a little hesitant at first. But then he showed me the signatures of the six other

when the apps were unable to translate appropriately. So, we only talked whenever it was necessary. Otherwise we remained quiet," says Manisha.

Despite all the troubles, Manisha tried to cope with the situation. "All my family members in Bangladesh knew that I had married a foreigner. They knew it was a risk. I didn't want to disappoint any of them. So I tried my best to work things out," she says.

However, she could not take it for too long. One day in March, her husband asked for her passport. He wanted to keep it at his mother's house located many miles away. Manisha denied. As a result, he hit her.

"He held my neck and hit my head. He also broke my phone that day. That's when I truly realised how strong he was. After all, he was a construction worker. His hands were like iron. He didn't need a stick to beat me," she recalls.

That very night he raped her. "I had only heard about the concept of marital rape. I didn't exactly know what it was. But after that night, I realised how horrifying it could be."

"It was as though an animal had taken over him. I told him that I was sick and that I had not eaten, but he wouldn't listen. He just wanted to fulfil his desire," she says.

With her phone broken, Manisha's family couldn't contact her for a week. As a result, her sister contacted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) in Dhaka. MOFA conveyed the issue to the Bangladeshi Embassy in Beijing which in turn sent the police to Manisha's place. And the couple got detained at a nearby police station.

A translator was brought in and Manisha recounted all the atrocities. The

police eventually said that they would file a report on the issue and then asked the couple to return home. Manisha reckoned that her husband would be nicer to her considering that the police had come to know of the assault. However, the beatings increased and he turned even more violent.

With no other option in sight, Manisha decided to be patient and stopped arguing with her husband. It was a move that helped her think more clearly and formulate an escape plan.

The escape

"Since the police could not help me, my target was to somehow reach the Bangladesh Embassy in Beijing, which is around 200 km from my place," she says.

"I had an old Symphony phone from Bangladesh. It

had IMO (A video call and chat app). I needed to get access to the Internet for which I needed to get out. So, the first thing I did was to pamper my husband and get him to give me a duplicate copy of the house key. It took me

HOW I ESCAPED MY CHINESE HUSBAND

NAIMUL KARIM



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

Communication wasn't easy either. The couple would use online translation apps to understand each other. "There were times when the apps were unable to translate appropriately. So, we only talked whenever it was necessary."

a month," says Manisha.

One afternoon, after her husband got drunk and passed out, she took her phone and slipped out. She went to numerous shops and begged them for wifi passwords. Eventually, she found a parlour, run by a couple, who agreed to give it to her.

"The password was easy to remember. It was 1 to 9. The moment I got online, hundreds of messages flooded my IMO. I can't explain how I felt at that moment. I felt relief," she says.

Manisha asked one of her friends in Bangladesh to send the address of the Bangladesh Embassy in Beijing. She noted it down.

The next hurdle was to find out someone who could read English and tell her how to get to Beijing. That task was a lot harder than it seemed with English-speaking residents a rarity in her area.

After an hour, Manisha got desperate, and entered a 'big' bank, hoping to find a senior officer who would know English. "There was only one lady who knew English. I told her about how I was assaulted by my husband. She felt bad for me and told me about the trains and buses that could take me to Beijing," says Manisha. However, Manisha would need her passport to travel by either train or bus. Since she didn't have it, the lady in the bank advised her to take a cab.

Manisha returned to the bank the next morning with all her jewellery from Bangladesh. With the help of her new friend she managed to sell the gold for RMB 1,500 (around Tk 18,652).

"The lady at the bank taught me how to talk to a taxi driver in Chinese. I wrote it all down in my notebook."

Manisha went back home, hid the money and was all set to leave the next afternoon. Unfortunately for her, her husband decided not to go to work that day. He wasn't sleeping either. Manisha had to wait till 6:00 am the next day, when her husband finally fell asleep, before making her move.

"As soon as he slept, I got out of the house and ran for 15 to 20 minutes. I reached the main road and started looking for taxis with female drivers because I had heard that taxis in China are not that safe."

"It took me more than one hour to find a taxi. China is a place where there are CCTV cameras everywhere. If my husband had woken up, he could have found me in just 10 minutes," says Manisha.

The taxi agreed to take her to Beijing for RMB 1000. Manisha began to breathe easy,

the moment her taxi began to move. All her problems, she thought, would be solved now.

However, there was one more hurdle remaining. She had to pass through a check post before entering Beijing where officials would require her passport.

"I was shivering. When they asked me for my passport I began looking inside my bag pretending as though it was in there."

"I took my time. By then a long line had formed behind our car on the highway. I kept telling the officer that the passport was in there somewhere. I was scared that I would be sent back to my husband and I began to pray to God," recalls Manisha.

"I don't know what happened. But at that moment, the police officer, looking at the traffic behind us, asked us to leave and move ahead. I was so relieved that I actually started crying in the car," she says. Manisha eventually reached the Bangladeshi embassy in Beijing and stayed there for the rest of her time in China.

A diplomatic success

A quick-paced diplomatic correspondence ensued soon after, involving the Bangladesh embassy in China, MOFA in Dhaka and the Foreign Ministry of China. A number of letters were exchanged and Manisha was sent back home only two weeks after. Judging by the huge amount of time it usually takes to send back Bangladeshi migrant workers from the Middle East, Manisha's repatriation took place relatively quickly. And one of the main reasons behind this, was the tactful way in which the entire situation was handled. The positive relationship between the two countries also helped. However, MOFA in Dhaka also had to take unique steps in order to guarantee this diplomatic success.

"When Manisha's sister reached out to us, we were shaken to know that Manisha fell into a trap and got trafficked to China. Through our research and investigation, we found that she was lured with a promise of a better life. We were aware of the plight of women workers in West Asia but ethnic minority girls trafficked as brides was something we were not aware of. We were horrified," says Nahida Rahman Sumona, Director General of MOFA's Consular and Welfare Wing.

She adds that more Bangladeshi women have fallen into the same trap.

Based on Manisha's story, it's evident that there's a syndicate in Bangladesh working on recruiting women to get married to Chinese men. Manisha later learned that her former husband had paid around Tk 20 lakhs to the brokers to marry her.

Because of the severity of the issue, both the Bangladesh Embassy in Beijing and MOFA believe people should be made aware of such syndicates.

When compared to other forms of trafficking practices in Bangladesh, trafficking brides to China seems to be a relatively new approach and not something that is usually heard of. As a result, migrant researchers believe that the traffickers might be using Bangladesh as a testing ground to know if they can further expand their network. The researchers also believe that the concerned authorities must work on quelling this syndicate before it gets out of control.

** Names have been changed in order to protect identities.*