

# Vishal R. Daftuar





# TAKING PRISONERS HOME ACROSS BORDERS

*The human rights activist has been actively involved in securing repatriation of innocent citizens who become cross-border prisoners after straying into foreign territories*

>>Giridhar Jha

**S**atish Choudhary, a resident of the Darbhanga district in Bihar, returned home after spending 11 years in a jail in Bangladesh. Rajendra Ravidas, a native of Bhagalpur, and Anil Kumar Singh of Balia in Uttar Pradesh had been in detention in jails in the neighbouring country for four and two years respectively before being repatriated. Bangladeshi citizen Savera Begum returned home in 2020 after spending a few years in a women's shelter home in Muzaffarpur and then in the Begusarai jail in Bihar. All of them have one person to thank: human rights activist Vishal Ranjan Daftuar, but for whom their detention might have continued longer.

Daftuar has been involved in human rights activism for over 25 years now. Having seen their challenges from close quarters and encouraged by then president Ram Nath Kovind, Daftuar founded an organisation called the Human Rights Umbrella Foundation in 2019. It was through this foundation that he took up cases of Choudhary, Ravidas, Singh and Begum. The men had strayed into Bangladesh and been detained for the lack of proper documents, while Begum had reportedly lost her documents in India. Unable to secure their release, their families

had approached Daftuar.

Daftuar understands the challenges involved in the repatriation of cross-country prisoners and is familiar with the procedures. But he also understands the plight of the families. His biggest regret is that many innocent people are forced to languish in foreign jails for several years because of red tape and bureaucratic indifference. "It is my mission to try and secure the release of such persons through my organisation," he says.

## Ray of Hope

Choudhary had gone missing from Patna in April 2008. Despondent after making several efforts, his brother Mukesh approached Daftuar, who wrote to Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and external affairs minister S. Jaishankar, among others, seeking their intervention. The efforts yielded quick results. On September 12, 2019, Daftuar and Mukesh got Choudhary's custody. As the news spread, the families of Ravidas and Singh too contacted Daftuar, who took up their cases as well. Daftuar got in touch with competent authorities in both the countries and managed to get them repatriated.

One of the biggest achievements of the organisation, Daftuar highlights, was to repatriate Savera Begum, who had gone to Patna to meet her relatives but had got lost. In the absence of valid documents, she was sent to a women's shelter in Muzaffarpur. "I played the role of a coordinator at the behest of the Bangladesh embassy to facilitate her return to her native country." She finally returned home in 2020, after four-and-a-half years of staying away from her family.

On the arduous mission to reunite families that have been separated by unfortunate circumstances, Daftuar feels that the biggest reward for all his hard work is the smiles that appear on the faces of families when they see a long-lost member. On the road ahead in his mission, he now hopes to secure the release of two Myanmar citizens who have completed their prison terms in Purnia in Bihar. 