



Issue 24 April-June 2003

Seminar calls for addressing VULNERABILITIES OF WOMEN IN CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

Speakers at a seminar called for increased sensitivity to women's needs in the poverty reduction strategy policy (PRSP) being drawn up by the government. They also underscored the need for recognising women's efforts in contesting the adversity and minimising risks in various challenging situations. They stated that civil society organisations should work collectively for women in adverse circumstances. The two-day national seminar on *Women in Challenging Situations in Bangladesh* was organised by the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) in collaboration with British Council at the CIRDAP auditorium, Dhaka on 23 and 24 July 2003. A good number of academics, researchers, human rights and NGO activists, journalists, students and women in challenging and adverse situation participated in the seminar and shared their experiences and views. An exhibition of photographs on *Women at Work* was also organised on the occasion.

The participants noted that women in Bangladesh faced many adverse conditions; however, their efforts at negotiating with such situations remain largely unrecognised and unacknowledged. It was felt that time has come to underscore and learn from measures adopted by women in contesting and overcoming the adversities.

The first working session of the seminar focused on *Ethnic Women*. The session began with a presentation of a theoretical overview of women in challenging situations. Other presentations in this session were on Rohingya refugee women, the post-peace accord situation of women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Bihari women in camps. The second working

session concentrated on *Natural Hazards and Women*. Papers in this session looked at women displaced by riverbank erosion and the impact of development interventions on women in the Sundarbans. The third working session focused on *Employment and Women*. Presentations included reflections on the implications for garment workers following the expiry of Multi Fibre Arrangement (MFA) on garment workers and occupational changes and income generating strategies by women in the urban informal sector. This session ended with sharing of experiences by representatives of women workers union and migrant women's association.

The first working session of the second day on *Women and Border* began with presentations on vulnerabilities of trafficked women and women's participation in informal cross border trade. The second working session explored the interface between *Institutions, Law and Women*. Papers in this session concentrated on domestic violence, women in safe custody, vulnerability of sex workers and struggles of women as carers of disabled children.

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At the open forum participants underscored the need for incorporation of women's issue in national policy planning, developing a secure environment for female

migration, legal reform, empowering of women by entrepreneurship development.

Professor S M A Faiz, Vice Chancellor of the Dhaka University in his speech as the chief guest made a plea for addressing the plight of the Bihari women, the riverbank erosion victims and garments workers in post MFA-regime. Mr. Carl Reuter, Director of the British Council, in his speech expressed the need for quality research to reflect the existing realities of the struggles and successes of women. He stated that Bangladeshi women have made major achievements on many fronts despite the odds and there is a need for more sustained effort to portray such positive images of Bangladesh in international media. Professor Najma Chowdhury of the Department of Women's Studies, University of Dhaka, and Advisor to the 1996 Caretaker Government chaired the concluding session of the seminar. In her address she emphasised that women play a vital role in the generation and regeneration of the society. She cautioned that empowerment of a few prominent women must not be taken synonymously as empowerment of the amorphous body of women who are compelled to face challenging situations. She underscored that the cumulative effect of sustained development would lead to overall empowerment of women in the long run.

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATIONS

Working Session I

The first paper *Women in Challenging Situations: A Theoretical Overview* was presented by Lailufar Yasmin of Department of International Relations, Dhaka University. It covered women in challenging situations in both the private and the public spheres where women's activities are subsumed within socio-political stereotyping shaped by patriarchal notions. The paper also dealt with different mechanisms available for women to cope with challenging situations like psychological capabilities and preference-based approaches, which primarily help women to identify their sources of trauma, to discover capabilities and demonstrate how to deal with practical situations.

Syeda Rozana Rashid of RMMRU presented the second paper titled *Rohingya Refugee Women: Limited Choices and Unlimited Challenges*. The paper argued that religious inhibitions, and lack of access to education left Rohingya women powerless and vulnerable. The paper highlighted the vulnerabilities faced by these women at various stages of

displacement and highlighted their resilience in adapting to changing situations.

The presentation on women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts by Dr. Sadeka Halim of Department of Sociology, Dhaka University and Adv. Susmita Chakma underlined how women experienced violation of their rights by settlers and security personnel and often as a result of displacement by various development interventions. The paper *Gender and Human Rights Violation in CHT: The Post Accord Situation* highlighted that civil society, political leaders and other concerned institutions in the CHT have not played an effective role to provide justice to the women of the CHT.

Dr. C R Abrar of RMMRU presented the final paper of the session on *The Bihari Women in the Camps*. The paper examined how different age groups/categories of women prioritise their problems and cope with adversarial circumstances. Intervention strategies of the government, international agencies and non-governmental organisations in this context were highlighted.

At the end of the session experiences of camp life were shared by Sheikh Shabana, a Bihari woman. She identified various problems of camp life faced by the Bihari woman including access to education, sanitation, healthcare and insecurity. Professor Perween Hasan of the Department of Islamic History and Culture, Dhaka University and a leading women's activist chaired the session.

Working Session II

The first paper of the session titled *Women by the Rivers: Hope in Despair* by Sayed Nurullah Azad explored a hitherto uncharted territory in the discourse on disaster management and its aftereffects on women. The paper presented instances of negotiations between agency and structure in varied forms and highlighted their implications for women. The paper also drew attention to the changing pattern of social division of labour whereby women appear to be gaining a positive leverage over decision making within the household. Ms. Maleka Begum chaired this session titled, 'Natural Hazards and Women'.

The other paper *Linkages between Development Intervention and Violence against Women: Sundarban Projects* was presented by Sardar Arifuddin of Action Aid Bangladesh focused on women affected by shrimp cultivation projects in the Sundarbans region of the

country. The paper attempted to examine the plight of women and girl children in the wake of development programmes. It stated that women experienced increased impoverishment that compelled them to migrate in search of employment during which they became victims of trafficking, abuse and harassment.

Working Sessions III

Laid-off Garment Workers: Implications for Post-MFA Regime was the first paper in the session and was presented by Afsan Chowdhury, a development and media analyst. The paper questioned the validity of empowerment through employment in the export sector and wage labour market without negotiating options and the possible impact when female workers have in fact no control over decision-making. It stressed that concern over the post MFA regime stems more from the desire to protect export earnings than for the benefit of women workers.

Shashanka Saadi of Action-Aid Bangladesh presented the second paper *Women in Informal Sector: Occupational Change and Something More*. He demonstrated how women are renegotiating gender roles by engaging in various activities in the informal sector thereby becoming independent and self-reliant. The paper also argued that the changing pattern of women's involvement in the informal sector needs adequate attention of the socio-economic and politico-economic experts, as it would be the missing link for social change all over the world.

Saadi's paper was complemented by a presentation on *Creative Income Generating Strategies by Urban Women Workers*. In this paper Dr. Kathy Ward of Department of Sociology, Southern Illinois University illustrated how women adopted strategies in creative ways for income generation. The paper stressed that women in the urban informal sector actually worked multiple shifts, though their contribution to the national economy remained, for the most part, unacknowledged. Given the extraordinary reliance of the Bangladesh economy on garment factories, micro credit donors, and remittances from migrant workers, there is a need to understand the broader implications of global restructuring, structural adjustment programmes, changes in trade agreements, and the effects on women and their families.

Farida Akhter of UBINIG moderated the session. At the end of the session a garment trade union leader, Nazma Akhter, shared her work experience and drew

attention to the likely scenario that garment workers may face in the wake of closure of garment factories in 2005. Sheikh Rumana of Bangladesh Women Migrant Association (BWMA) and Bakia Sultana of Welfare Association of Repatriated Bangladeshi Employees (WARBE) also shared their experiences as former migrant workers. They stressed on informed decision-making and called upon the government to lift the ban on migration of unskilled women abroad to discourage irregular migration of women, which involved high risk.

Working Session IV

Professor Firdaus Azim of Department of English, BRAC University chaired the session on Border and Women. The first paper of the session *Trafficked Women: Transformation of Levels of Their Vulnerabilities* was jointly presented by Khandaker Rezwanaul Karim and Shahzada Akram of RMMRU. The paper examined the life of trafficked women in four phases: prior to trafficking, during trafficking, post-trafficked phase in destination country and post rescue and return. A comparison among different levels of vulnerability of trafficked women at different phases was made in this paper.

The other paper *Women's Participation in Informal Cross-border Trade* was presented by Md. Jalal Uddin Sikder of RMMRU. The paper highlighted that although smuggling, as an occupation is dangerous, adverse socio-economic conditions compel women in the border areas to engage in this activity. Braving the hazards these women strive to bring some difference to their lives. The paper also identifies the impact of women's involvement in smuggling on their social status, family and especially on children.

Working Session V

The first paper of this session titled *Wife Abuse (Domestic Violence)* by Dr. Nusrat Ameen of Department of Law, Dhaka University, examined the situation of spousal violence, which is essentially considered to be a private matter. Drawing upon relevant legal provisions in this context the presenter argued that public/private dichotomy relegates wives to an insignificant status. Therefore, wife abuse must be recognised as an offence in order to initiate changes in attitude of the society, especially of the professionals dealing with such cases.

In her paper *Institutional Violence Against Women: The Saga of Women in Safe Custody* Dr. Sumaiya Khair of Department of Law, Dhaka University, explored the victimisation of women in safe custody and demonstrated the challenges faced by them when state institutions, that are meant to enforce the law and provide legal safeguards to inmates, themselves contravene the law. The paper examined the legal basis of safe custody in the light of domestic and international law. The paper also drew up on case laws in the context to illustrate the role and attitude of the judiciary in dealing with instances of arbitrary deprivation of liberty and consequent violation of women's fundamental right to life, liberty and security.

The third paper *Sex Workers in Bangladesh: Vulnerabilities in Incarceration and Struggle for Dignified and Secured Livelihood* was presented by Kalpana Rani of Concern Bangladesh. She discussed the vulnerabilities of sex workers and underlined the shift in the discourse on women in prostitution, which has positioned prostitution as a form of labour. The paper argued that sex workers are one of the most vulnerable social groups in the Bangladesh.

Professor Naila Khan of Dhaka Shishu Hospital in her presentation on *Struggle of Parents of Disabled Children* illustrated how parents cope with the fact that their children are incapacitated for life. She demonstrated the responsibility and stigma, which are attached to women as mothers of disabled children. She stressed the need for formal support from the State, services closer to home, distance training package and changing attitude for strengthening coping strategies of mothers confronting the situation.

Dr. Iftekhruzzaman of Bangladesh Freedom Foundation chaired the session. At the end of the session, Momtaj, an organiser of sex workers, shared her experience as a former sex worker. She expressed that the issues of sex workers legal and other rights should be viewed from a humanitarian point of view.

Reporter:
Syeda Rozana Rashid

RMMRU National Seminar on WOMEN IN CHALLENGING SITUATIONS IN BANGLADESH

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE FLOOR

- ❑ The issue of women's vulnerability to insecurities and available coping mechanisms should be incorporated in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) of the government.
- ❑ The civil society as a whole should work collectively for women in adverse circumstances rather than criticising the State's position.
- ❑ There is a serious need for lobbying and coordinating with the government by the civil society for effective intervention in respect of women's issues.
- ❑ Development interventions should be reviewed to ensure that they do not turn into development disasters.
- ❑ The government should facilitate the development of a secure environment for encouraging female migration. In this regard women should be provided opportunities to develop their skills to prepare themselves for labour migration. In the meantime the ban on migration of unskilled and semiskilled women should be lifted.
- ❑ Policy interventions by the State must take in to cognisance of the level of 'force' and voluntarism of women in making choices in life.
- ❑ Attitude towards law must be changed. State must ensure that government functionaries must be punished for misdemeanours and unlawful acts.
- ❑ Lobby for law reform in respect of sex workers.
- ❑ Checking and balancing the investigative activities of the police through creation of a new agency.

MIGRANT WORKERS AND THEIR VULNERABILITIES TO HIV/AIDS

Shahzada M Akram
Syeda Rozana Rashid

By the 1990s, it became clear that Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and AIDS were spreading dramatically in many developing countries in South and Southeast Asia. All the known HIV-risk behaviours and factors, i.e., female sex workers, men having sex with men (MSM), injecting drug users (IDUs) and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are present in Bangladesh. Over the last few years, serological surveillance¹ studies have been undertaken on the high-risk behaviour groups.² Researchers have established that migration and mobility, though not a risk factor themselves, may create conditions that can expose migrants to vulnerable situations as far as HIV/AIDS is concerned.

Bangladesh is a labour surplus country and it contributes significantly to the labour market of the Middle-Eastern and Southeast Asian countries. Besides documented labour migration, the country is also experiencing cross border migration of labour to neighbouring countries. A significant segment of the HIV positive people (41%) in Bangladesh are returnee migrant workers, who either have been deported or have returned after completion of their term.³ However, there is yet to emerge adequate literature that reflects the lifestyle of both regular and irregular migrant workers in the destination countries.

In this context, a study was undertaken to assess the vulnerabilities of migrant workers, both regular and irregular. Field work of the study took place in Dhaka, Gazipur, Narayanganj, Cox's Bazar, Rajshahi and Jessore during September – November 2002. The study was titled *An Assessment of Migrant Workers' Vulnerability to HIV/AIDS*, commissioned by HIV/AIDS and STD Alliance Bangladesh (HASAB). The study came up with important findings about the vulnerability of outgoing, returnee and cross-border migrant workers to HIV/AIDS.

Situation at Pre-departure Phase

It was observed from interviewing 100 outgoing migrant workers that a small section of them were engaged in a number of high-risk behaviour practices. This sample group had not gone abroad, but was in the process of migration for the first time. Despite the common understanding that Bangladeshis are relatively safe from contracting sexually transmitted diseases on account of their religious and cultural values it is

evident that there arises occasions when such values come under stress by extraneous factors. Therefore, there is no scope for complacency that HIV/AIDS will not proliferate and may take an epidemic form in the near future. This may indeed be a serious challenge for the health administrators of the country.

It was found that there is a serious lack of information amongst outgoing migrant workers on HIV/AIDS and STDs. Institutional efforts to disseminate information on HIV/AIDS and STDs are rare at the pre-departure phase. The outgoing migrant workers are not properly informed regarding HIV/AIDS test and its implications. None of the government and private organisations involved in migration process offers information on these issues. Secondly, this group of people has very little knowledge about health services in the receiving country, which puts them in a vulnerable situation. However, it seems that urban settings allow the outgoing migrant workers to enjoy more information, while people from rural areas have to depend on those from whom they procure visas and are therefore more vulnerable.

High-risk behaviours exist among a section of the outgoing migrant workers. It was also revealed that irrespective of social, economic and educational background, a number of individual respondents were engaged in multiple sexual relations. It was found out that individual's actions to a great extent may be influenced by peer groups, i.e., friends, neighbours, relatives and sometimes by loved ones. In addition, the practice of 'unsafe sex', i.e., sex without condoms, may make the concerned person vulnerable to HIV/AIDS/STDs of which s/he is completely unaware.

Availing services of sex workers among the target group is another cause for concern, not on account of the practice, but due to low condom use. Since pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relationships takes place in both rural and urban settings, as the study findings show, there is a likelihood of proliferation of STDs and HIV/AIDS, in view of low condom use.

It was revealed from the interviews that there is great lack of awareness on the issue. At the individual level, among the outgoing migrant workers, there is lack of awareness about the necessity of condom use for the prevention of HIV/AIDS as well as STD transmissions,

lack of proper knowledge about STDs and the necessity for treatment, and its prevention methods and practices, lack of gender sensitivity with regard to dealing with sex workers, along with female members of the society at large. As a result, there has been a sharp rise in STD infections among the low-risk behaviour groups, i.e., common people, let alone among the high-risk behaviour groups, i.e., commercial sex workers. It was further found that there has been very little impact of printing and electronic media on disseminating information on HIV/AIDS and STDs.

Situation at Post-Return Phase

This part of the study interviewed 50 male and 50 female returnee labour migrants. Respondents had migrated when they were within active working age and spent the productive years in the country of destination. More than two thirds of the respondents were found to be married. A bulk of the male respondents did not cross the SSC level. Most of the respondents belonged to nuclear families. The majority of the respondents served in the Middle Eastern countries. Male migrants worked as formal salaried employee, salesman, construction labour/mason, while the majority of female migrants worked as skilled labour in ready-made garments sector.

More than two thirds of the respondents reported that they had to undergo medical check-up before departure to the country of destination. However none of the respondents were given information on STDs and HIV/AIDS. Female respondents were much better informed on the provision of health services in their job contracts. The number of female migrants receiving services like health-care advice and regular medical check-up was higher than the male respondents.

Some of the interviewees stated that they were involved in extramarital sex. A large number said that they did not use condom. Some received commercial sexual services in the countries of destination. A very small number reported engagement in homosexual activities without condom. While serving different terms in jail, a small number experienced sexual and drug abuse.

Regarding knowledge on HIV/AIDS prevention, though a good number stated that they did not know how the disease could be prevented, a significant number stated that HIV/AIDS could be prevented by limiting sex with one partner. When asked about the non-spreading factors of HIV/AIDS, a good number of the respondents had clear idea on the issue. A large number had clear notion of AIDS definition, ways of transmission and ways of prevention. Migrant workers sources of information on HIV/AIDS at both home and abroad were mainly through interaction with people.

Respondents showed a much higher level of awareness on STDs though a significant section reported that they had not experienced any of the symptoms of STDs in pre-departure, during migration and after return. Among the respondents having contracted STDs, a significant part did not undergo any treatment and were not aware how the disease might be prevented.

Situation of Cross Border Irregular Labour Migrants

The study interviewed 50 males and 50 females who have been irregular migrants, mainly in India. They were interviewed in the districts of Rajshahi and Jessore. Most of the respondents went to Mumbai, Kolkata and Maldah. More than three fourths of the target population were married. Higher rates of marriages and desertion were found among women. A large majority of the cross border migrants was illiterate. The economic condition of the target population was found to be poor. Most of them did not have cultivable land of their own and hence had to depend on off farm sources such as small business, labour, and transport labour. Those who were involved in agro-based work, mainly did that in others' land.

In India, men were found mostly engaged in construction work. Others worked as hotel boy, electrician, salesman and hawker. Women mostly worked as domestic workers. Apart from these, they were found to be engaged in different manufacturing industries, sex work and tailoring. Men and women went to India with neighbours, relatives and middlemen who knew routes and destinations. Women were staying relatively longer than men.

There is a big correlation between the dwelling and occupation of the labour migrants. Men who used to work as construction labourers mostly lived in the construction sites. Others stayed at rented house, slum, shop and employer's house. Women were mostly found to live in slums. Some lived in the rented house or employer's house.

There is relation between social behaviour of labour migrants and their dwelling. Men who used to live in slum or in construction sites, used to pass their leisure time with friends, family and neighbours. Watching movie on TV and in cinemas was popular entertainment. A few cases were reported where male labour migrants admitted that they consumed alcohol and bought sex. Most of those, who had engaged in such activities, were found to be encouraged or motivated by their friends to do so.

All the irregular labour migrants who had experiences of sex were found to be heterosexual. A major part of women had sexual experience at an early age when they had little information and knowledge about STD. Most of the men and women identified their spouses as sex partners. Some had experienced sex with neighbours, relatives, lovers and sex workers. A small

number of respondents were found to have extramarital sexual relations. The study also found low and irregular use of condom by the cross border migrant community. An investigation to the causes of limited use of condom suggests that there was a lack of awareness, misconception and religious taboo among them. This was also partly caused by higher use of other birth control measures by female partners.

The study found a general low level of awareness about HIV/AIDS. Respondents came to know about methods of infection and prevention of HIV from other people, radio, television, poster, wall writing and

doctors. A few interviewees heard about HIV/AIDS from local NGOs.

Notes and References:

¹ AIDS and STD Control Programme, 2000, *Report on the Second National Expanded HIV Surveillance, 1999-2000, Bangladesh*. This denotes that the surveillance is undertaken along with serological tests of the respondents in order to identify STDs/HIV/AIDS among the target group.

² Population Council, 'National HIV/AIDS Database, *Research Update*, October 2002, No. 1.

³ UNDP, 2001, *HIV Vulnerability and Migration: A South Asia Perspective*, pp. 27.

PUBLICATIONS

India as a Refugee Host Country: Management, Practices and Policy Options, Mahendra P Lama (ed.), Proceedings of the national seminar organised by South Asia Studies Division, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 120.

Refugee related issues have become more complex. The regional and international situations have changed quite substantially. The very definition of a refugee has been now subjected to a range of political interpretations. India as a major refugee receiving country in South Asia has shown definite fatigue in the hosting and management of refugees. The absence of a forthright and comprehensive legal regime has made the issue more fragile and the management distinctly *ad hoc* in the country.

This volume is an outcome of the proceedings of a two-day National Seminar on *India as a Refugee Host Country: Management, Practices and Policy Options* organised on 14-15 April 2000 by the South Asian Studies Division of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. The seminar was organised to examine where India stands today in the hosting and managing of refugees and to critically assess and suggest the policy interventions required for a comprehensive understanding. This seminar brought together policy makers, refugees, refugee managers from both NGOs and the government, scholars, experts and international humanitarian and protection agencies to a common forum. As the proceedings of this national seminar show, all the participants put their views, concerns and suggestions across forthrightly and frankly. This effort will no doubt help in generating support and mobilising intellectual arguments in favour of evolving more

scientific, objective and sustainable national refugee management norms in India. This could also pave the way for a much required South Asian regional policy.

Occasional Paper 9, *The Camp-based Bihari Community: Perceptions of New Generation* (in Bangla), Syeda Rozana Rashid and Shahzada Akram (eds.), Dhaka: RMMRU, April 2003, pp. 46, Tk 20.00

RMMRU has been involved in research and advocacy works on the camp-based non-Bengali community in Bangladesh. As a part of the process, it organised an inter-community dialogue between a Bihari youth group and Young Researchers' Forum (YRF) of RMMRU in April 2000. Among the issues, discussions took place on camp conditions, present status and perception on future, nationality of Bangladesh, and repatriation to Pakistan. Participation of a number of senior lawyers highly enriched the discussion. Subsequently, RMMRU decided to publish the discussion as a part of its advocacy in order to sensitise common people on this issue.

Occasional Paper 9, *The Camp-based Bihari Community: Perceptions of New Generation* is the result of this initiative. Contributors in this publication are from the YRF of RMMRU and one Bihari youth group based in Geneva Camp, Dhaka.

ACTIVITIES OF THE UNIT

January – April 2003

Conference: The DFID- RMMRU Conference on *Migration, Development and Pro-poor Policy Choices in Asia* was organised on 22-24 June 2003 at Dhaka. The conference was participated by about one hundred participants, eighty of whom were from overseas. Papers on internal and international migration on India, China, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Vietnam were presented. Professor Ronald Skeldon gave the key-note speech at the inaugural session that was attended by Mr. Reaz Rahman, State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr. David Carter, UK High Commissioner to Dhaka, Professor S M A Faiz, Vice Chancellor of the University of Dhaka, Mr. Paul Ackroyd, Head of DFID, Dhaka.

Publications: A book titled *Displaced Within Homelands: The IDPs of Bangladesh and the Region*, C R Abrar and M P Lama (ed.) was published in February 2003.

Occasional Paper 9 on *The Camp-based Bihari Community: Perception of the New Generation*, Syeda Rozana Rashid and Shahzada Akram (eds.) (in Bangla) published in April 2003.

YRF Monthly Meeting: In the monthly meeting of April 2003, Maruf Ahmed, 4th Year Honours student of Public Administration, presented a paper on *The Recent Push-back at the Bangladesh Border*.

In the monthly meeting of May 2003, Sakila Matin Mridula of International Relations, and Faizur Rahman of Public Administration, presented a paper on *Banning of Two-stroke Three-wheelers: Impact on the Livelihood of the Drivers*.

Field Work: A five-member team of RMMRU visited Kolkata from 24 – 29 March 2003, to have a more informed idea about the trafficking in of Bangladeshi women and children at the receiving end. The team interviewed victims, Deputy High Commissioner of Bangladesh Mission in Kolkata, shelter home authorities, counselors and anti-trafficking activists in Kolkata.

Field visits were organised in districts of Rangpur, Nilphamari, Lalmonirhat, and Kurigram in December 2002 – January 2003 for a study on *Riverbank Erosion and Displacement*. The study was commissioned by Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) and conducted by Dr. C R Abrar.

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