A UNIQUE INITIATIVE FOR INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY: CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND POLICY FORMULATION

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ABSTRACT

Bedadka Grama Panchayat (GP), Kasaragod District, Kerala, India took up a unique and innovative step to formulate and finalize the Sports Policy for at the local level. The paper brings out an analysis of the innovative exercise made for 'creative and critical engagement of youth in local governance' as well as to ensure their active participation in policy formulation. This was done by conducting a 'Virtual Gram Sabha' through the social media platform, WhatsApp. Traditionally considered as an 'elite process', the policy formulation exercise at the grassroots by involving 'common people' that essentially excluded the non-residents of the locality is a paradigm shift towards realizing 'inclusive democracy'. 'Bedadka experience' showed that creative engagement of youth in local governance is possible, feasible and practical. Such an exercise has the latent potential to be a 'game changer' loaded with the impetus for redrawing and redefining the conventional barriers of policy, governance and development.

Keywords: Inclusive Democracy, Local Governance, Policy Formulation, Virtual Meeting, Youth

1.   Introduction

Bedadka *Grama Panchayat* (GP), Kasaragod District, Kerala, India took up a unique and innovative step to ensure creative and critical engagement of youth by conducting a 'Virtual *Gram Sabha*'[1] through the social media platform, WhatsApp. This may be viewed as an effort for incorporating the Information, Communication and Technology for Governance and Development (ICT4GD) in general and 'Mainstreaming Youth in Local Governance'[2] in particular. By bringing a youth-friendly initiative in decision making, Bedadka GP has proved that it is an 'institution of self-government' with power and authority to take policy decisions.

The innovative exercise brings out two important things for a discussion here. Firstly, it analyzes the process, features and expected outcomes of the attempt of ICT4GD. Secondly, it makes an attempt to examine the prerogative of Local Government to take up policy formulation from below. On the whole, the paper brings out the different aspects of a unique initiative made to enhance youth participation in local governance and to carry out policy formulation from below, in a participatory manner.

In this paper, theoretical underpinnings, rationale of the initiative, a brief profile of the study area,

the process, accomplishments, limitations and recommendations are discussed in separate sections.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

Science and Technology has influenced a number of traditional concepts, beliefs, patterns and practices in our day-to-day life. In certain aspects, technology has seriously altered the concepts of time, distance, connectivity and procedures. Like many others, the concept of 'Democracy' has also undergone a makeover due to the influx of technology. And the concept of 'e-Democracy' brought out a revolutionary shift in the theory and practices of conventional literature in this domain. It accelerated the channels of communication among the key stakeholders of the political system and subsystems – the leaders, the connectors and the masses (population) who are engaged in the process.

There are different meanings and interpretations of democracy, which are created by their circumstances and influenced by the socio-economic-political-cultural-psychological

dimensions in the society. According to the Democracy Index report (EIU, 2020), the definition of democracy has been one of the most seriously contested ones. Significantly, the terms democracy and freedom are being used interchangeably by many. The relationship between these two words was clearly mentioned in the Democracy Index report that views democracy as a set of practices and principles that institutionalize and thereby protect freedom.

Introduction of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) has brought in several changes to the concept of democracy, with positive and negative connotations in the society. According to Narayan (2000), ICT is creating 'economic, social and political empowerment opportunities for poor people in the developing world. Although most poor people remain isolated from the new information revolution, cellular phones and other innovative solutions are beginning to provide low-cost ways for poor people to access ICT. It is noted that ICT is helping poor people overcome powerlessness and voicelessness even while structural inequalities exist in the distribution of traditional assets such as education, land and finance. The author visualizes ICT as a powerful tool for empowerment of people and highlights several instances of providing innovative and creative solutions to the poor people.

While ICTs provide obvious access to information about various topics, they touch upon crucial interfaces vis-à-vis the direct participation of voters, thereby contributing to significant changes in electoral systems, digital advocacy and lobbying (Selian, 2002). According to the author, online consultations are part and parcel of the transformations of governance shaped by ICTs. Swedish Program for ICT in Developing Regions (SPIDER), in the background paper of Stockholm Internet Forum (2013), highlighted that ICT has a clear role to play in strengthening the foundations of democratic society, from citizen engagement and participation, to openness and transparency in

government. The paper comments that ICT empowers local communities to demand their rights and to hold the government accountable, thus strengthening good governance.

According to Ojo and Sunday (2014), the scope of e-governance revolves around e-registration, e-participation, e-taxation, e-mobilization, e-education, e-service delivery, e-feedback, e-policing, e-planning, e-debate and analyses of public financial statements. Among them, participation, feedback, planning and debate are very much significant from the point of view of citizens.

Democracy is generally viewed as a dichotomous concept - a state is either democratic or not. But it appears to follow a continuous concept also. And, there is no consensus on how to measure democracy in a comprehensive manner that may be applied forever. At present, the best-known measure is produced by the US-based 'Freedom House'.[3] **According** to that, the average of political freedom (based on 10 indicators) and of civil liberties (based on 15 indicators) is taken to measure democracy on a 7-point scale.

The tryst with democracy in India received an 'elevated statuses with the promulgation of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (known as *Panchayati Raj* Act)[4] **in** which *Gram Sabha* has a 'statutory position'. The first section (243A) of the *Panchayati Raj* Act states that that 'A *Gram Sabha* may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the Legislature of a State may, by law, provide' (GoI,

1993). The concept of *Gram Sabha* has been configured to work like an assembly of all voters in a village. It is the embodiment of direct democracy that can contribute significantly in decentralized governance.

Grama Sabha is the basic institution in the political sub-system which could play a very important role towards realizing the concepts of Grassroot democracy, Participatory democracy, Deliberative democracy and Deepening democracy. In principle, the constitutional status to *Gram Sabha* should have resulted in making the democracy more active, proactive, participative, and vibrant. However, the reality is far away from the expectations.

Several attempts were made during the past several years in different parts of India to define, redefine, analyze, and rejuvenate *Gram Sabha* as the genuine institution for direct democracy. Some of the important ones are indicated below.

On 26 January 1963, the Ministry of Community Development and Cooperation, Government of India set up a committee chaired by RR Diwakar to study the position of *Gram Sabha* in the *Panchayati Raj* movement. The Committee reported that 'even in those states where the institution of *Gram Sabha* has been introduced by statutes as early as 1947, it cannot be said that the institution had been functioning there in any real sense of the term' (GoI, 1963).

According to Maddick (1970), the causes of failure of *Gram Sabha* as an institution are numerous. He viewed that socio-political reasons

like class, caste, and interest group problems as well as trickle-down effect of state politics also affect the working of *Gram Sabha* in the country.

A micro level study on the functioning of *Gram Sabhas* in Bengaluru Rural and Dharwad Districts of Karnataka (Bhargava and Raphael, 1993) highlighted that some people dominate in the meetings and others are mere listeners, may be due to their illiteracy and are not adequately informed of the schemes or any such privileges. The report viewed that 'performance of *Gram Sabha* is not up to the desired extent at operational level all over Karnataka State due various reasons.

Panchayat (Extension of Scheduled Areas) Act (GoI, 1996) provides that every *Gram Sabha* shall be competent to safeguard and preserve the traditions and customs of the people, their cultural identity, community resources and the customary practices of conflict/dispute resolution. It suggests that every *Gram Sabha* shall approve the plans, programmes and projects for social and economic development of the area before such plans, programmes and projects are taken up by the Local Government for implementation. And, every *Gram Sabha* will be responsible for the identification and selection of beneficiaries under the poverty alleviation and other programmes.

Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen (2002) commented that '*Gram Panchayat* should be accountable to the *Gram Sabha* and the process of making Panchayats accountable should be the business of the *Gram Sabha*' (Dreze and Sen, 2002). The authors emphasize that the local government shall

be made accountable to the citizens in a healthy democracy.

Johnson analyzed the functioning of *Gram Sabhas* in two Indian States – Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. The State Govt. of Madhya Pradesh took up a series of legislative reforms to improve the power of the *Gram Sabha* and the accountability of the *Gram Panchayat* which culminated in a legislation of *Gram Swaraj* (Village Self Rule) in 2001. However, the State Govt. of Andhra Pradesh pursued a policy that effectively bypassed the locally elected institutions, using the non-elected bureaucracy as a principal means of delivering poverty programmes (Johnson, 2005). The author provides a contrasting picture from two Indian states in operationalization of local government at the village level.

Narayanaswamy (2005) regarded *Gram Sabha* as one of the most important basic institutions of the democracy at the village level, in addition to *Gram Kosh* (Village fund) and *Gram Shanti Sena* (Village Peace Corps). He commented that the village would emerge as an organized unit to look after its internal administration, development and agro-industrial economy. The author commented that the idea of *Gram Sabha* has not struck roots in the minds of the people.

A study on people's participation in *Gram Sabhas* in Gorakhpur District of Uttar Pradesh came out with several specific suggestions to make the participation of the people more effective, efficient and meaningful. One of the most

significant suggestions was about the constitution of a Draft Plan Committee by the *Gram Sabha* consisting of elected members and other key stakeholders from the locality. The Master Plan for the area will be prepared by the Committee and approved by the *Gram Sabha* after detailed deliberations, will be a comprehensive document for the welfare and development of the area. The participatory process of plan formulation will ensure that '*Gram Sabha* is the final authority in formulating plans for village development, which will act as a motivating factor for the village population' (Gireesan, 2005). The author reinforces the primacy of *Gram Sabha* in planning from below and puts forward practical suggestions to rejuvenate the participatory structure.

Kohli commented that 'the past performance of *panchayats* as agents of redistributive development has been discouraging. The factors that help explain poor performance in the past include the power of those with local influence, political and bureaucratic corruption, and low levels of mobilization among the really poor' (Kohli, n.d.). The author brings out the significance of Local Governments as democratic institutions for redistributive development.

Gram Sabha has been viewed as the institution for direct democracy, for participation of the local community in decision making on their concerns, programmes and projects, fixing priorities, selecting beneficiaries, receiving annual reports and accounts, approving the coming year's programmes, conducting social audits, etc. Buch (2012) views participation not only as a means to an end but also an end in itself. The author comments that *Gram Sabha* continues to be a centrally managed exercise, even decades after its assuming constitutional status.

Innovative strategy was adopted to enhance people's participation in *Gram Sabha* of a *GP in* Alappuzha District, Kerala. Through detailed deliberations, a *Gram Sabha* Participation Index was developed to carry out an assessment of the participatory structure at the local level (Gireesan and Chathukulam, 2015).

Despite its constitutional status and statutory role, *Gram Sabha* could not be strengthened as a grass root institution to the desired extent, despite several well-meaning efforts as cited before. Studies brought forward several reasons for very low participation of village community, especially the youth in *Gram Sabha* meetings. Inconvenient date, time and location for the *Gram Sabha* meetings; non-seriousness of the procedures, lack of inclusive approach; caste, class and gender hierarchies; inadequate institutional mechanisms; inadequate knowledge of the elected members; lack of proper training and awareness to the elected members about the importance of *Gram Sabha*; insufficient space for the voice of youth where the decisions are mostly taken by the elders, less time and scope for discussions due to monotonous procedures, absence of follow-up of the suggestions made, etc. are some of the key reasons cited for poor participation in *Gram Sabha* meetings (Bhargava and Raphael, 1993; Buch, 2012; Gireesan, 2005, 2012, 2015).

3. Rationale of the Initiative

Academicians, practitioners and other stakeholders interested in empowerment of *Panchayati Raj* system and strengthening of *Gram Sabha* were always looking for innovative approaches and practices to identify creative, critical and dynamic ways of attracting the community, especially the youth. Several efforts were made in the past to ensure their active participation in such participatory structures in the larger interests of the political sub-system. In this context, the unique initiative and strategy of incorporating social media for the conduct of a *Gram Sabha* (Virtual *Gram Sabha*) in a local government becomes significant. However, before discussing the process and other aspects of the initiative, some pertinent questions are put forward.

(a) Whether the policy formulation in India has been inclusive?

(b) How do we go about making democracy and democratic practices 'Participatory'?

(c) How far use of technological gadgets could benefit the engagement of people in a democracy?

(d) To what extent, use of technology enhance the quality of democratic practices?

It is significant to note that 'All politics is local which reflects that those issues that really matter in people's daily life - water, sanitation, primary health care, primary education, year-round access to affordable and nutritious food, access to markets and employment opportunities, basic safety and social justice – must be resolved locally. This requires responsive and effective local governance' (UNDEF, 2014).

One of the key questions put forward to the citizens in any country is that if s/he were a citizen with rights, how can s/he work with her/his fellow citizens to make the community sustainable? Self-introspection, self-reflection, analysis, looking around with a focused mind, taking voluntary initiatives for common goals, working as a member or leader in community development and empowerment initiatives etc. are quite significant in this context towards strengthening democracy and sustain democratic practices. It needs no special mention that active citizenry could play a vital role in governance and development of the locality, thereby contributing significantly towards the growth and development of the State as well as the country.

In this context, the paper on Virtual *Gram Sabha*, about an initiative made by a Local Government in an Indian state becomes significant. It is all the more unique as the effort was made to deliberate upon the Sports Policy formulated by the local government at the grassroots. The paper brings out an analysis of the innovative exercise made for 'creative and critical engagement of youth in local governance' as well as to ensure their active participation in policy formulation. It also brings out a comprehensive documentation of the process, followed by a detailed portrayal of its key features, procedures and outcomes. In addition, the paper tries to address the research questions raised in the preliminary section through the process documentation of a technological

intervention.

4. A Brief Profile of the Study Area

Bedadka GP in Karadukka Block of Kasaragod District, Kerala consists of three revenue villages such as Bedadka, Kolathur and Munnad. The GP is surrounded by Payaswini River at the North, Vavadukkam River at the South, Kuttikkol GP at the East and Karicheri River at the West (Bedadka GP, 2016). The GP forms part of the Uduma Assembly Constituency and Kasaragod Parliamentary Constituency.

The GP has a total geographical area of 85.49 Sq.km. and total population is 27,868 which include 14,587 Female and 13,281 Male, as per Census 2011. The sex ratio of the GP is 1000: 1046 and its population density is about 312 per sq. km. The GP has 98 SC families and 776 ST families accounting for the population of 402 and 3,348 (Bedadka GP, 2017). Agriculture is the main source of livelihood of the local population. In addition to cereals, cash crops like rubber, areca nut, coconut and cashew are the major products grown in the area.

Majority of the elected members of Bedadka Gram Panchayat are women. Most of them are below 40 years which is a very significant factor. The area has a dominant presence of the Left Democratic Front led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) with a marginal presence of Indian National Congress (Indira) and Bharatiya Janata Party. The area has a large presence of political as well as non-political organizations such as farmers' groups, trade unions, women

organizations, self-help groups, youth clubs, youth wing of political parties, non-resident citizens' organizations, etc. Most significantly, Bedadka GP has supported the formation of a consortium of all Youth Clubs/ Youth Organizations functioning in the GP area and they are registered with the Youth Co-ordination Committee (YCC). Dominant segment of young elected members of the local government, dynamic presence and continuous support extended to the GP by the YCC, active participation of class and mass organizations could be viewed as favorable aspects in enabling Bedadka GP to take the initiative for inclusive democracy.

5. Virtual Gram Sabha @ Bedadka GP – Process Documentation

The unique initiative taken up by the leadership of Bedadka GP is a reflection of their strong political will to seek inputs on the draft document of 'Sports Policy for Bedadka GP'. It is unique for more than one reason. Firstly, there was hardly any attempt made earlier towards the formulation of a policy at the local level. Secondly, the process for policy formulation through a participatory structure at the local level (*Gram Sabha)* was never attempted earlier. Thirdly, the Gram Sabha meeting was exclusively convened to seek inputs from non-resident citizens, who were not engaged in the programmes and activities of the Local Government, being located thousands of kilometer away, outside the country. Fourthly, incorporating technological intervention by use of social media platform like WhatsApp for a Gram Sabha meeting was not noted in the country

before.

The draft policy document for discussion by the Gram Sabha was prepared by a core team with the technical support of the Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development (RGNIYD), Sriperumbudur.[6] **This** was one of the follow-up activities made by the Bedadka GP in its stride to become 'the first youth-friendly Local Government' in the country.

Towards understanding the intent as well as the process behind such an initiative, it would be pertinent to examine, discuss and analyze the key activities taken up in the area prior to that. Such an exercise is imperative to understand the political eco system in the area that led to such an activity and take up the process documentation.

A 'Workshop on Empowerment of Local Government System – Bedadka GP, Kasaragod District, Kerala' was organized by the Dept. of Local Governance, RGNIYD at Sriperumbudur during 5-6 October 2017. The idea of going ahead for seeking guidance and support from the Institute was made by the Bedadka GP after serious consideration of the inputs, comments and suggestion made by two young persons from the locality who were doing their studies at the Institute.[7] **During** the two-day workshop, a Team of representatives from Bedadka GP headed by its President actively participated.[8] There were sessions on varying topics connecting domains like youth, governance and development. Constituency Management System – Potentials and Prospects[9], Youth Budgeting, Youth in

Climate-Resilient Agriculture, One stop Centre for Youth Development,[10] Participatory Techniques in Governance and Development, etc. were some of the important sessions discussed during the workshop. In addition, brief presentations on history, geography, economics and politics of Bedadka GP were made by the members of the Bedadka team. The workshop concluded with the mutual conviction of transforming Bedadka GP into a 'Youth-friendly Panchayat' with the external support which was endorsed by the Local Government through a formal resolution in its committee meeting[11] and decided to collaborate with the academic institution in a 'formal pattern'.[12]

As a follow-up, a 'Youth Summit' was organized by the Bedadka GP at TASHCO Park, Peraladukkam, Bedadka on 26 January 2018. The event was organized to generate awareness among the key stakeholders of the GP along with involving elected representatives from other 'Spheres of Government'[13] and ensuring convergence of resources, if needed. The programme was attended by the Member of Legislative Assembly, elected members from different spheres of Government and Govt. officials. Most of the staff of the GP and its transferred institutions such as *Anganawadis* (Child Care Centers), School, Primary Health Centre, Agriculture Office, etc., members of Self-Help Groups, functionaries of YCC with representatives of various youth organizations, community members, social workers/ social activists in the area and other stakeholders

actively participated in the programme. During the programme, the potentials and possibilities of transforming Bedadka GP into a 'Youth-friendly, Youth-centric and Youth-led Local Government' (Gireesan, 2019a) was discussed.

As a natural follow-up, a pilot initiative was made to carry out a 'Youth Status Study in Bedadka GP'. The data collection, as part of the pilot study, was carried out during 30 April – 05 May 2018. The significance of the pilot initiative was well manifested by the active presence of the Member of Parliament (MP), Kasaragod Lok Sabha Constituency during the inaugural function held on 30 April 2018. The MP highlighted the significance of such collaborative efforts and hoped that such joint ventures will result in transforming Bedadka GP into a 'model local government for youth development' in the state and the country. During the pilot intervention, a team of PG Students, Ph.D. Scholars and faculty from the Department of Local Governance carried out the field work in the selected areas of Bedadka. They were divided into four teams and each team was accompanied by the elected members of the local government and functionaries of Women SHGs, volunteers of YCC, etc. Based on the quantitative and qualitative inputs gathered from the field during the pilot study, a report was released. It is significant to note that 'The process of data collection itself could be viewed as a tool for capacity building of the elected members of the GP, as they were active participants in the exercise' (Gireesan, 2019b).

Towards further strengthening the youth development programmes and activities in the area with thrust on sports and games, Bedadka GP took the pioneering attempt to formulate a 'Sports Policy for Bedadka'. Based on the inputs captured during the field study coupled with in-depth discussions with a number of key informants, a draft policy document was made (Bedadka, 2019). It was suggested to have a comprehensive discussion on the draft document by conducting a 'Special *Gram Sabha* for Youth'. In addition, it was also suggested to consider organizing a 'Virtual meeting' exclusively to discuss the policy document among the non-resident citizens of Bedadka, as most of them were away from the area for several years.

Towards the run up to the Virtual *Gram Sabha*, a notification was issued by the Local Government inviting registration of delegates to the meeting. The notification included the details like the date and time of virtual meeting, mode of registration, the draft policy document for discussions and certain general instructions to ensure smooth conduct of the virtual meeting. Early registration of delegates was necessary, as the size of the WhatsApp group exclusively made for the discussions could not exceed 250. The date and time was scheduled in such a way to enable the majority of the persons registered to participate in the meeting.

Advance Registration was completed almost one hour prior to the starting time of the virtual meeting held on 20 December 2019. About 192 delegates registered with the WhatsApp group,

exclusively created for the purpose. The virtual meeting started at 8 p.m. on the designated day and the routine formalities lasted about 30-35 minutes only. Like a formal Gram Sabha, all routine formalities such as welcome address, presidential address, introduction of topic for discussion, etc. were held. District Collector-Kasaragod, members of District Planning Committee, elected members and officials of Bedadka GP, key functionaries of YCC, etc. made brief interactions.

The virtual meeting was inaugurated by the Director, Kerala Institute of Local Administration who took less than a minute to deliver the message. More than three-fourth of the total duration of the meeting was consumed by the delegates (non-residents) to express their views, comments and suggestions. Though it was decided to restrict the discussions to 10.30 pm, the same could not be done as the delegates were sharing their views from different countries uninterruptedly. Even after the formal vote of thanks was done at 11 p.m., the delegates were indicating their views, and the last comment was recorded at 2.38 a.m. on the next day. Such was the dynamism, enthusiasm, energy and spirit manifested by the non-resident citizens who participated in the event. Most of the delegates expressed their utmost satisfaction of being linked with the Local Government and their native through this virtual meeting of Gram Sabha. Some of them expressed that it was a memorable experience for them to be in touch with the development initiatives of their native village,

being the first attempt.

6. Accomplishments of the Initiative

Conduct of a Virtual *Gram Sabha* meeting for non-resident citizens was an important step towards transforming Bedadka into a 'Youth-Friendly 'Local Government. Being a youth-friendly initiative, the following points were noted as part of the event.

As the meeting was organized on a Holiday/week-end, it encouraged many employees, irrespective of their social, economic and other engagements, to participate in the Virtual *Gram Sabha*. The programme started at 8 p.m. looking into the convenience of maximum delegates, who are employed in different countries, to join the virtual meeting. All the procedural formalities of a conventional *Grama Sabha* were adhered to during the conduct of the Virtual *Gram Sabha*. The whole event lasted for more than 3.30 hours in which the procedural formalities took less than one-fourth of the total duration and most of the time was devoted for discussions.

The proceedings were regulated by an Administrative Panel which consisted of six volunteers from the Youth Co-ordination Committee (YCC). The Panel was responsible for planning, providing 'right' to the delegate to present their views. Technical support for the conduct of the virtual *Gram Sabha* was provided by the YCC volunteers. Every activity was made in a non-hierarchical environment with no class distinction manifested by the organizers to the delegates.

WhatsApp, being a very popular social media platform among the youth and the least expensive and convenient form of technology, was preferred. This resulted in encouragimg the delegates to contribute more actively with their views as well as automatic recording of the events. Most of the delegates shared their views in their mother tongue, Malayalam. Throughout the meeting, equal opportunity was provided to all the delegates for citing their comments, views and suggestions. The Administrative Panel acted with utmost moderation and regulated the proceedings in a minimalist way.

Out of 250 persons (all non-residents) registered for the event; about 192 delegates actively participated in the virtual meeting. Significantly, most of the delegates were below 40 years, which is a manifestation of interest of youth. As the meeting was organized in virtual mode, the discussions could overcome the conventional barriers of age, gender, time, space, etc. that used to be there in a conventional *Gram Sabha*. And there was no formal expense incurred for the meeting as the meeting was held in virtual mode, unlike the conventional meeting.

Conduct of virtual meeting could be seen as a strategy to ensure critical and creative engagement of youth as it transcends all the conventional barriers of gender, age, professional status, place of work, date, time, venue, transportation, health conditions, economic hardships, family conditions, etc.

7. Limitations of the Virtual Meeting

The idea and practice of WhatsApp *Gram Sabha* is not devoid of limitations and some of them are listed below.

The virtual meeting was not attended by those non-resident citizens, who were handling the conventional handsets with key pads and mobiles with no WhatsApp. As the registration of delegates to join the virtual meeting was closed one hour prior to the programme to enable right to the registered delegates by the Administrative Panel before the meeting commences, it may have deprived the opportunity to few delegates to participate in the meeting.

Despite efforts made by the organizers, no woman participated in the virtual meeting. Being the first of its kind, there may be apprehensions among the women about the virtual meeting. However, certain specific issues of women were cited by the delegates during the meeting. As the virtual meeting demands use of modern mobile sets with touch-screen facility, a smaller number of senior citizens only participated. It may be due to the reason that many elderly people used to keep conventional mobile phones only due to its small size, robust structure, easy to handle features and longer battery holding capacity. Most of the shortcomings cited here could be addressed if requisite care and attention is taken by the organizers while replicating similar events.

8. Recommendations

The unique initiative made by Bedadka GP by operationalizing the Virtual *Gram Sabha* is

expected to stimulate and encourage Local Government Institutions within the State and outside to replicate such practices. It has already shown a 'spiraling effect' in the context of COVID-19 as many *Grama Panchayats* in Kasaragod District and other Districts of Kerala have organized Committee meetings by using WhatsApp and other social media interactive platforms like Google meet, Zoom, Webex, etc. Such initiatives have the latent potential to add value to the existing mandate and functions of the Local Governments and to enhance the speed, quality and efficiency in delivery of services.

The motto of the Sports Policy of Bedadka GP is 'Sports for Development and Empowerment'. This is the manifestation of its thrust on 'youth development and development of youth' (Bedadka, 2019). The document aptly shows the perspective of the policy formulated, much more than its literal meaning. The Virtual *Gram Sabha* was organized exclusively to discuss the draft policy formulated by the Local Government, to seek their comments and suggestions from the non-residents of the locality and incorporate the relevant points and finalize the draft. This is expected to be a welcome addition to the policy studies by taking the first step for policy making at the local level.

9. Summing Up

Inclusiveness in policy formulation was never a priority in India. Generally, the process of policy formulation was considered as an elite exercise, used to be taken up by the Union and State/ Provincial Governments only. In this context, the initiative made by Bedadka GP is quite laudable. It explicitly manifests the commitment, ownership and willingness of the Local Government to go back to the people, enable them to come up with their views and suggestions and take steps to formulate a policy from below. Virtual meeting could be considered very effective as it transcends the barriers of a conventional Gram Sabha such as age, gender, professional status, place of work, paucity of time, etc., thus making it more inclusive and participatory.

In addition, the pro-active step taken by the Local Government to engage non-resident citizens, hailing from its area of jurisdiction, in the policy formulation exercise through a virtual meeting was quite unique. It amply demonstrates that application of technological gadgets could enhance active engagement of young people by using a social media platform. It is noted that adoption of interactive social media platforms could be a value addition while replication of such exercises. Achievements of the initiative cited in the paper showed that the quality of democratic space and practices could be enhanced by adopting technology-driven as well as youth-friendly initiatives. However, such virtual meetings shall be viewed as 'supplementary' to the conventional Gram Sabha meetings and shall not be 'complementary' in view of the shortcomings cited before.

Policy formulation at the grassroots by involving 'common people' may have certain shortcomings in the product. In spite of limitations, such an

exercise will provide a boost to the stakeholders who think, speak and act with the motto, 'Development of the youth, by the youth and for the Youth'. The paper reveals that virtual meetings for non-resident citizens and stakeholders, most of them youth, have the potential to make democratic practices more inclusive and participatory. 'Bedadka experience'[14] showed that creative engagement of youth in local governance is possible, feasible and practical. Such an exercise has the latent potential to be a 'game changer' loaded with the impetus for redrawing and redefining the conventional barriers of policy, governance and development.

Notes

1. Gram Sabha is a meeting of all adults who live in the area covered by a Gram Panchayat (Rural Local Government at the field level). Anyone who is 18 years old or more and who has the right to vote is a member of the Gram Sabha.

2. RGNIYD carried out a pilot action research project titled as Mainstreaming Youth in Local Governance by taking one Village Panchayat in each State/ UT of India.

3. The Freedom House was founded in Oct 1941 in the USA when Wendell Willkie and Eleanor Roosevelt served as its first Honorary Chairpersons. It describes itself as a 'clear voice for democracy and freedom around the world'. In a narrower sense, it denotes electoral democracy in which positions of political power are filled through regular, free and fair elections between competing parties, and it is possible for an incumbent government to be turned out of office through elections.

4. Panchayati Raj Institutions are the Local Government Institutions in the rural areas. They are available at the village level,

intermediate level and District level.

5. 'Non-resident' refers to those persons who are away from the locality for a considerable time for studies, employment or any other important assignment. Here, those who were living outside the country for not less than one year has been considered as non-residents.

6. Bedadka Grama Panchayat led by C Ramachandran, President took an innovative step for the formulation of a 'Sports Policy for Bedadka GP'. The Whatsapp Gram Sabha was organized exclusively to seek comments and suggestions on the draft policy document from 'Non-Resident Citizens' of Bedadka GP. Faculty from the Department of Local Governance, Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development, Sriperumbudur provided the guidance and technical support to the contents and process.

7. Vidyadharan KG and Kaladharan KG, both natives of Kolathur area of Bedadka GP, were the students of RGNIYD during the period 2016-2018.

8. 'Team Bedadka' was led by C Ramachandran, President, Bedadka GP and consisted of Sukumaran Payam, Chairperson, Standing Committee on Education and Health; MK Sabitha, Secretary, Bedadka GP; Damodaran Master, and Prasanth Payam, both Members of Bedadka GP Planning Committee.

9. Constituency Management System (CMS) is visualized as an 'ICT-enabled Spatial Decision Support System' for the political leadership.

10. One Stop Centre for Youth Development is considered as a common facility Centre exclusively for youth, where all relevant functions and requirements for youth can be easily available and accessible to them.

11. Bedadka GP took a resolution in the Grama Panchayat Committee meeting held on 12 September 2017 (vide decision No. 3/2017) to enter into a MoU with the academic institution. The MoU intends to transform Bedadka into a Youth-friendly Grama Panchayat.

12. There are many patterns of collaboration of a Local Government with an academic institution or research institute or development organization. And it could be for realizing certain short term or long-term objectives as per the needs/ demands/ requirements of the Local Government. The Local Government can enter into a working relation with any relevant institution/ organization in an informal manner. But by bringing a resolution in the Committee meeting, taking up detailed discussion on the subject, and then passing the resolution provides a formal pattern, official touch and legal validity to the collaboration.

13. The phrase 'Spheres of Government' has been advocated here instead of the conventional words such as Levels, Tiers and Strata to indicate different Governments - from the Grama Panchayat to the Union Government of India. 'Spherical Autonomy' is one of the core principles of decentralization. It provides 'sufficient autonomy' to all the governments in their own domain, irrespective of their size, position and range of functions.

14. 'Bedadka experience' in the conduct of virtual Grama Sabha was given wide publicity by the vernacular dailies in Kerala. Drawing inspiration from that experience, number of *Gram Panchayats* in different parts of Kerala organized virtual meetings of elected members, designated officials and key functionaries of various organizations during the COVID-19 lock down period. The conduct of virtual meetings by the Local Governments has been widely reported in print and visual media.

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