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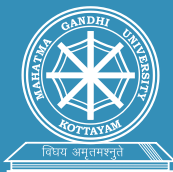
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Matsya Sabha: Inclusion of Fisher People in Local Governance

J. B. RAJAN and HARIBABU T. P.

To assume that the marginalized and oppressed shall reap the benefits of decentralized governance by default is being proven wrong in the case of traditional fisher people in Kerala. Local Self Government Institutions' (LSGIs) bottom up planning process backed by State's budget allocation to encourage local economic development and social justice in Kerala had inspired community expectations. The process promised participatory planning involving all sections of people. Mandatory *Grama Sabha* meeting was aimed to encourage participation of all sections and explore different development options. Logically, this should have included economically and socially backward communities like the traditional fisher people. However, the living conditions of traditional fisher people have only worsened. The happenings in Kerala traditional fisheries sector during the past 15 years is incontestably linked to the history of LSGIs. There was a genuine presumption that the LSGIs shall rescue the traditional sector from the capital-intensive fishing practices that has adversely affected their share and has left them in despair. There were reasons to justify this presumption, since the LSGIs bottom up planning process claims local economic development and social justice. Conventional top down planning model hardly addressed the issues of fisher people, the fundamental limitation being that the community had no access to the planning process. Decentralized planning pitched in this circumstance, promised opportunities, roles, and accesses to the marginalized in the planning process that certainly include the fisher people. After almost 15 years and through three five-year plans of decentralization, it is worthwhile to do a stocktaking of the status of fisher people. Have their lives reformed, their employment opportunities improved, fishery resources extended, or are coastal eco-systems and regions of fisher people habitats protected? It calls for a rigorous examination of available facts of both the fisheries sector and that of the decentralized planning for fisheries to arrive at an objective conclusion. This examination, attempted first at the macro scenario of fisheries sector us followed by a current and live micro situation. A third attempt, a situational analysis of entire marine fishing villages is made to learn about LSGIs decentralized planning process and its outcome to the traditional fisheries sector. This is followed by setting the rationale for participatory and inclusive

governance. The final attempt is to propose a mechanism that shall provide due space for the fisher people so as to voice their rights and take part in the local governance actively.

1. Fisheries Sector in Kerala

The geographical features of Kerala make it exceptionally conducive to marine and inland fishery. The coastal stretch of Kerala is 590 kms that runs along the entire length of the state off the Arabian Sea. The continental shelf area (sea spread upto the depth of 200 metre) lying adjacent to Kerala coast is 39,139 km² which is almost equivalent to the land area of the State. In addition to this, there are rich inland water bodies consisting of 44 rivers (having an area of 85,000 ha), 53 reservoirs (42890 ha), and 53 backwaters and other brackish water bodies (65213 ha) endow it with a multitude of fisheries (Govt. of Kerala 2009 a: iii).

The fishing population in the state is spread according to these geographical settings. In the marine sector, the population lives in an unbroken line in tune with the rolling waves from one end of the State to the other. There are 222 fishing villages¹ in the marine sector, where fishing and related activities provide livelihood to 7.84 lakh fishing population. These villages belong to 102 coastal Panchayats, spread out in nine coastal districts of the State. The inland sector on the other hand is scattered around the inland water bodies. There are 113 fishing villages providing livelihood to 2.34 lakhs fishing population in the inland sector (Govt. of Kerala 2015: 2). The number of active fishermen is 1.83 lakhs in marine sector and 0.50 lakhs in inland sector. (*ibid.*). Kerala is a major marine fish producer. Among the fish catch from Kerala coast of more than 300 different species, the commercially important fishes number about forty. (Govt. of Kerala 2010: 79). Total fish production from Kerala during 2014-15 was 7.25 lakh tones - marine fish production 5.24 lakh tones and inland fish production 2.01 lakh tonnes. (Govt. of Kerala, 2015). The marine products export from Kerala during 2014-15 was 1.67 lakh tones, valued at Rs.5166.08 crores; constituting 16% in terms of volume and 15% in terms of value of the Indian marine products export. (*ibid.*).

Akin to other productive sectors, fisheries sector has also been deeply divided with the advent of modernization. Mechanization and modernization of fishing vessels resulted in alarming over capacity² of fishing fleet in the State, pushing the traditional³ sector to extreme marginalization. Viewed it

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differently, the ever escalating over capacity is directly linked to fishing pressure in the coastal waters of the State. The fishing pressure in the coastal waters has increased from 8 fishermen per km² in 1985, to 10 in 1992, 12 in 2001, and 15 in 2007. Predictable loser in the competition is the traditional fisheries sector.

The above side contradictions apart the fishing community as a whole is living below par standard to that of the state population. In 1980-81 the difference in state per capita and that of the fish workers was Rs. 540. Subsequent years marked huge increase in this gap; 1993-94 Rs.1105, 1998-99 Rs. 3960 and in 1999-2000 this gap built into Rs. 4462 (Govt. of Kerala 1998: 9; Govt. of Kerala 2002a: 1). Socio-Economic Survey of Fisherfolk in Kerala reveals the most startling figures about the standard of living of fisherfolk. It states that poverty in Kerala is 9.38 percent in rural and 20.7 per cent in urban; but among the fisherfolk it is an astounding 64.1 percent (Govt. of Kerala 2005: 16). All statistics further endorse that coastal regions are backward in health and sanitation. Clean water and potable water is still a very rare commodity in the coastal villages. There is acute need to better the housing conditions too. Electrification is still not satisfactory (Ibid.: 17-26).

2. *Micro Scenario*

A survey conducted for Thiruvananthapuram Corporation covered 12 coastal wards of it, with focus on people with fishing as an occupation. (Rajan 2010: 3-12). The survey looked into the demographic characteristics, entitlements, household amenities, educational status, and employment. The facts are suggestive of the state level macro picture.

The survey covered a total of 18,672 households in 12 coastal wards, of which 8296 households depended on fishery while 10,376 non-fishing. The total fishery population in the surveyed wards was 45,009, which forms 49 percent of total population of 91, 260 in the wards. The Sex Ratio in the non-fishery households was favorable to females at 1032; while unfavorable at 931 in the fishery households. The household size (Population divided by the number of households) was also larger among the fisher households. The average family size among fishery households was 5.4 members per household, as against 4.4 among non-fishery households.

To consider the entitlements, essential documents like land records, ration cards and house ownership pattern were looked into. The type of house was also considered in order to assess the living standard quality. Number of

households without *Pattayam* was highest among fishery households - above 7 per cent. Among the non-fishery, about 5 percent households were without *Pattayam*. When compared to non-fishery households, fishery households are better off in respect of possession of ration cards. While 13 per cent of non-fishery households did not possess ration cards, the fishery households without ration card were 7 percent. Number of households living on *Poramboke* land was higher among the fishery; 9 percent among fishery households and 5 percent among non-fishery households. About 13 percent of the fishery households live in huts and another 14 percent in sheds. Together they constitute 27 per cent, which was higher than the total wards of 24 percent and 22 percent of total non-fishery households.

Un-electrified households were higher among fishing; it was 6 per cent in all wards, 5 percent in non-fishery, and 7 percent in fishery households. The divide between fishery and non-fishery households in toilet availability was almost double. Households without toilets were 11 percent for all wards, 8 percent for non-fishery, but 15 percent for fishery. The overall potable water requirements in the surveyed wards were shared by households, having their own sources like private well and private tap; while the rest was collected mainly through public taps. Among fishery households, 56 percent was through public taps; while the rest 46 percent through the households' own sources. But in non-fishery own source contributions were more than half; 57 percent while the rest 43 percent through other sources respectively.

Among fisher people, illiteracy level was quite high when compared to non-fisher people; it was 12 percent among fisher people where as only 5 percent among non-fisher people. The general educational level of fisher people was 80 percent, while the non-fisher was 84 percent. The fisher people were the lowest with just 2 percent technical/professional qualified when compared to the 6 percent of non-fisher population.

Among the fisher people, 43 percent of the population was the labour force-they were either employed or un-employed and seeking work; where as 57 percent was outside labour force. Labour force constitute 38 percent among non-fishery population. Within the labour force, the unemployed were 14 per cent among fishery, 15 percent among non-fishery. Employed among the fisher population consists of employed persons in fishery sector (active fish workers, allied fish workers, and other fishery-related occupations) and in non-fishery sector. Of the total employed fisher people, 78 percent were employed in fishery sector; while the rest 22 percent were employed in non-fishery sector. Of the total employed in fishery sector, 98 percent were active

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fishermen and the rest 2 percent shared between allied workers (1.3 percent) and other category in fisheries (0.38 percent). Of the 22 percent fisher people employed in non-fishery sector, nearly half of them work as *coolies-i.e.* casual labourers (43 percent). Another area of significance was those migrated to foreign countries at 20 percent. Fisher people working in Government services were just 5 per cent of those employed in non-fishery sector.

3. Decentralised Planning: Impasse in Fisheries Sector

A situational analysis of Local Self Government Institutions (LSGIs) and the fisheries sector evidence that the former did not impart any sufficient resource through successive plan period for bettering the fisheries sector. It did not employ any strategy from one plan period to the other for overcoming earlier shortcomings either. Performance of fisheries sector under the LSGIs, during the past one decade, was evaluated to confirm that the power bestowed to the LSGIs and through that to the people did not support the cause of the sector. The performance of LSGIs during 9th and 10th five-year plans in the fisheries sector provides adequate reasons to establish this fact.

It was during the 9th five year plan that the LSGIs went through radical reforms in the state. The LSGIs were empowered with funds and guidelines for detailed plan preparations. The general strategy was to identify local level issues, beneficiaries and plans were to corroborate those issues. As the postulate of local level planning, the issues in fisheries sector under LSGIs should have been tackled under this approach. But studies conducted indicate that fisheries sector during the 9th plan (1997–2002) was not adequately represented and failed to evolve effective projects during the plan period. The *Vikasana Rekha* (Development Report) of 102 coastal LSGIs scrutinized as part of an action research by Kerala Institute of Local Governance (KILA) and also further enquiries evidence that the sector did not receive adequate consideration (Rajan and Haribabu 2006: 69). Not only has the sector underperformed during this period but even procedures, processes, and data were far from satisfactory in the Development Reports. The *Vikasana Rekha* lacked consistent format and uniform reporting. Data provided were either insufficient or lacked consistency. This was in spite of number of Government guidelines that emphasized the data needs for decentralized planning during the 9th plan (Govt. of Kerala 2007:4; Govt. of Kerala 2002:15; Govt. of Kerala 1996:7; Gulati and Isaac 1998:8). Out of the 102 development reports scrutinized, only 26 had listed the Taskforce. Even those listed lacked numbers

and the composition of members, leaving for speculation whether taskforces were constituted at all. Only less than 50 percent of the coastal Grama Panchayats had indicated the number of coastal wards in their Panchayat. A coastal ward in a coastal Panchayat is a critical indicator to gauge the spread of fishing community, population, and fishing activities. A mere 20 per cent Grama Panchayats indicated total fisher population. The BPL families were also not listed. This information was crucial for determining special schemes and those seek support of the decentralized planning.

Numbers of fish workers and those in allied fishery sectors was not represented adequately. This data was crucial during planning process for plan fund allocation, beneficiaries, number and types of schemes, and also women component plan. Hardly 50% of coastal Panchayats had data on fishing crafts, when surveyed. Wherever there was task force, the members and experts have not relied on secondary data available with various sources about the sector, people and their living conditions.

Evaluation of 9th plan that concluded in 2002 provided great learning to the State Planning Board (SPB), it can be observed. Looking ahead, the SPB gave insights and directions to the LSGIs about 10th plan. One of the core objectives of decentralised planning during the 10th five year plan (2002-2007) as envisaged by the SPB was “focus on Natural Resource Management and integrated area development” (Govt. of Kerala 2002: 4). The attainment of this objective would help to resolve two major threats facing the fisheries sector of Kerala. The areas requiring serious attention in the form of protection and conservation measures are (i) The fishery resource being one of the most depleted natural stock, and (ii) the coastal area being in a vulnerable situation due to indiscriminate encroachment (Rajan and Haribabu 2005: 53).

In-depth research was carried out on the performance of fisheries sector during the 10th Plan also revealed same situation. This was primarily to test the qualitative progress of the sector from the earlier plan. Also to gauge the effectiveness of the focus shift as per the guideline (Govt. of Kerala 2002: 4). In fishery context, this was most significant, sensible, and also timely. For the purpose of evaluating fishery sector in the 10th plan, two key documents of the coastal LSGIs - the *Padhaty Rekha* (Plan Document) and *Vikasana Rekha* (Development Report) were studied. The findings, however, were not encouraging. Planning in fisheries during this plan period show two basic tendencies, (a) there was no effective shift from that of the 9th plan; lopsided planning continued unabated, and (b) there were no attempts to address central issues that plague the sector. Overall evaluation of fisheries sector performance

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during the 10th plan of LSGIs was bleak. Projects for resource exploitation dominated both marine and inland sector; whereas resource conservation/management projects did not find its due place. The consequence of this failure amounts to lost opportunities for the sector and the community. But more importantly, it reflects the failure of decentralized planning in the fisheries sector.

4. Participatory to Inclusive Governance

Examining in fishery-centric perspective, the local self government institutions failed to uphold its mandated purpose of representing the poor and underprivileged. It include the traditional fisher people, though there are instances of assimilation of communities in similar or comparable living conditions within the country. It also refused to take notice of the global fisheries crisis so that it can re-position the sector at the local. As an institution envisaged for inclusive democracy with added emphasis to represent the marginalized, the LSGIs lacked insight and initiative to study objectively the opportunities for crisis management in traditional fisheries sector in the State.

Towards Inclusiveness

Take for example the loans that LSGIs in Kerala could borrow from Government of India. The directive for Provision for Extension of Scheduled Areas (PESA) insists that the State legislation on Panchayats shall be in consonance with customary law, social, religious, and traditional management practices of community resources. (Govt. of India 1996: 41). It further affirms that “every Grama Sabha shall be competent to safeguard and preserve the traditions and customs of the people, their cultural identity, community resources and the customary mode of dispute resolution” (Ibid.: 42). A similar acknowledgment of community system assimilation to Grama Sabha is evident in the Forest Rights Act for the Scheduled Tribes (STs) and other traditional forest dwellers. The Act is a corrective move by the government to undo the unfairness met out to the communities, historically. It is “an act to recognize and vest the forest rights and occupation in forest land in forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other forest dwellers who have been residing in such forest for generations but whose rights could not be recorded” (Govt. of India 2006: 1). The significance of both these case is that people and systems alienated from mainstream is reabsorbed. It also sends optimistic signal to other communities that languish in similar circumstances. Traditional fishing community in Kerala is yet to gain this status.

It is not that the Government of Kerala and the LSGIs has to re-invent the wheel for similar arguments in favour of traditional fishing community in the State. There exists recognition about their rights to habitat in their traditional locations, i.e. the coastal regions so that they continue to thrive in their occupation and thus enjoy their right to livelihood. Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification 1991 of Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), in their norms for regulation of activities in CRZ III made it explicitly clear that community has right to construction of dwelling units along the coast. The Notification states, “Construction/reconstruction of dwelling units between 20 to 500 meters of the HTL (High Tide Line) permitted so long as it is within the ambit of traditional rights and customary uses such as exiting fishing villages and goathans” (Govt. of India 1991: 6). It is noteworthy that the entire fishing community settlements along coastline of the state are officially recognized fishing villages and are thereby eligible to enjoy the customary rights. The CRZ Notification (1991) reiterates the Madras High Court decision on Easement Rights to the fisher people access to beach (AIR 1963). The government could make a strong case on behalf of traditional fishing community and translate the above recognition similar to that of forest dwellers, if it earnestly desired.

Village Assembly for Traditional Rights

The fact that the LSGIs could be made flexible, accommodative, assimilative, and work along with traditional and customary institutions only further the objective of participatory democracy. There are instances where local peoples’ institutions find itself working in conjunction with the Grama Sabha. Whether it is the ‘Van Panchayats’ of Uttaranjal or the ‘Customary Panchayats’ of Karnataka, the intention is to expand and deepen the direct democracy base. “Van Panchayats have now existed since the last 75 years as an institution for the management of forests by the people. The first set of rules was published in 1931, which gave some powers to local people for the protection and regulated use of forest resources. Under these Rules, Van Panchayats could be primarily formed for Class I forests. The 1976 Rules provided further powers to the people for electing their own representatives to manage Panchayat forests. The Uttaranchal Panchayat Forest Rules, 2001, have now replaced the 1976 Rules. The relationship of Van Panchayats with Gram Panchayats has been found to be cordial” (Kumar 2006: 84). And further, “There are numerous civil society organizations functioning at the village level... Given that this body is known by different names in different regions of Karnataka, a more generic term such as ‘customary Panchayat’ is

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used here to describe this institution, which mainly deals with dispute resolution along with other social functions. The Customary Panchayats is a forum consisting of all the senior caste leaders in a multi-caste village. Thus, it is essentially a council of elders (or leaders)...” (Pur 2006: 31). As already mentioned, the realization is that specific needs and demands could find its way to the Grama Sabha (the formal body) and that in turn shall strengthen the LSGIs, once these forums could be formalized and recognized. Traditional fishing community in Kerala spread out along the 590 km coastline represent different religions, castes, believes, and customs. Yet the common factor remains that their fishing practices are traditional and that their very existence is threatened with the onslaught of destructive modern fishing practices. Unlike Utranchal or the neighbouring Karnataka State, Kerala has not contemplated the possible eligibility of traditional fishing community’s inclusion for similar privileges.

Positioning Fisheries in the Debate

The issues in fishery sector cannot be seen in a limited context. It is rather the fall out of changes introduced, without considering the sustenance of the sector and thereby communities who are depended on it. The initiatives taken by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) vouch this crisis most effectively. The major concerns in fisheries that cut across continents, nation states and precipitate to local communities are several and many need much larger initiatives. There are issues about fishing rights in territorial waters, about industrial fishing methods as against the traditional fishing, escalating investment costs and discussions on active vis-a-vis passive gears. The stake in this debate is future of fishery resources as well as the traditional fisher community. Deepening of this crisis unabated globally brought into existence the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF) by the FAO. The CCRF has directed nation states to create institutional frameworks in the interest of resources as well as the community. The FAO said: “States should develop, as appropriate, institutional and legal frameworks in order to determine the possible uses of coastal resources and to govern access to them taking into account the rights of coastal fishing communities and their customary practices to the extent compatible with sustainable development” (FAO 1995: 26). The sea tenures, traditional livelihood rights, community institutions for resource conservation, etc. have been in existence in many countries. Traditional institutions and practices like Fishermen’s Tribunal (Tempier 2009: 24) and indigenous judiciary system – Sea Court (*Kadakkodi*) (Rajan 2002: 65) categorically state that there are more to be gathered from

knowledge evolved from the past. These are sane voices based on studies and consultations conducted globally and also at regional level. Had there been a forward looking LSGIs, these concerns could be addressed employing local practices and knowledge effectively. Traditional fisheries could thereby re-position itself and to a large extent combat against destructive practices.

The urgency favouring traditional fisheries sector felt in comparable circumstances like that of watershed management or the Tribal Sub Plan. The guidelines for the preparation for XIth five-year plan emphasizes for holding of special Sabhas-Watershed Sabha for Watershed Management, and *Oorukoottom* (Assembly of Tribals) for empowering the tribal people (Govt. of Kerala 2007: 22, 28). "... that the Watershed Sabha consisting of all the residents as well as the land owners in the watershed will be convened for that purpose, and after that the project proposals containing all the interventions will be presented before the Grama Sabhas". (ibid.: 51). In order to improve the quality of planning under Tribal Sub Plan (TSP), steps were taken to strengthen *Oorukoottom* (Ibid.: 28). But similar steps are missing in the case of traditional fisher people.

Wakeup call for LSGIs

In a recent assessment of the state of Panchayats, it was observed that "In the rapid changes that will take place in India, and indeed the world in the twenty first century, governance systems will have to be at the cutting edge of being the protectors of the poor, the oppressed, the vulnerable and the underprivileged. Poor women, the girl child, the minorities, the Tribal and the Dalit, the handicapped and the destitute, will need special attention" (IRMA 2008: 2). This very recent observation is a wakeup call to the decentralized governance. In this era of ruthless economic reforms, the oppressed and marginalized must reiterate the ownership on LSGIs and demand further space for participatory role envisioned in decentralized planning. The pace, magnitude, and sophistication of current development call for more informed and qualitative role in decision making. It is for the oppressed, underprivileged, and the excluded to hold on to the opportunity most and make demands, since it is their lives that are being carved out. On the other hand, it is equally important that the LSGIs open up their space and plan futuristic. Any system concerned about the welfare of the underprivileged must create appropriate space for those voices to be heard.

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Limitations in Approach

Critical limitations are evident in the LSGIs and its decentralized planning. Fishing is natural resource-endowed activity. Decentralized planning failed to recognize this fact as first and foremost. The LSGIs followed the flawed models of its larger counter parts, while planning for fisheries. This plan model erroneously bestows significance to exploitation and its methods; intensive, capital centric. Fishery planners and planning fails to recognize resource in place of equipment (fishing gears, nets, and other implements). Resource management becomes secondary in this planning framework. The second limitation is that of active participation in planning process. There are two major spaces for active participation in decentralized planning of LSGIs. The one pertaining to direct democracy and the other informed participation in direct planning process. Both are essential and central. Community participation in Grama Sabha is to uphold its rights, voice its opinion, and concerns. The Working Group⁶ is the platform for informed participation in plan processes. While the Grama Sabha participation ensures community needs and wants, the Working Group is meant to provide critical planning space.

5. Towards Matsya Sabha

The decentralization of power to LSGIs and the mandating of *Grama Sabha* would benefit marginalized and unorganized sections like fisher people, whose voice was earlier not heard and were denied opportunities. However, the participation and representation of fisher people in this already available space have been poor, as revealed by various studies. The LSGIs through the past two five-year plans have addressed the sectoral issues adequately, even though there were fund allocation, required infrastructure, and institutional backup. Supportive mechanisms like the Working Group and transferred officials failed to highlight the plight of the sector and the community. There were Government guidelines that could have been interpreted and made functional to support and benefit the sector, had the LSGIs put their resources judiciously. Nor were burning issues in fisheries sector addressed adequately. There were very few projects for resource conservation and regeneration, while projects for resource exploitation dominated. The fisher people on the other hand were also not able to thrust themselves to press their demand for their well-being as well as that of the sector. Their participation in the *Grama Sabhas* is also not satisfactory. There could be both

historical backwardness as well as occupational peculiarities for the fisher people to express themselves in large assembly of people, it is understood.

A Forum for Self-Expression

It is in the light of these objective realities, the space for an effective forum is explored. The demand for a distinct space for fisheries sector within the formal institutional set up, the *Matsya Sabha* (Assembly of Fisher People) of the LSGIs is considered appropriate and a step in right direction. To ensure effective participation of fisher people in *Grama Sabha*, the *Matsya Sabha* needs to be recognized and mandated. The *Matsya Sabha* can ensure effective participation of fisher people in the planning process operating within the boundaries of the larger body, the *Grama Sabha*. Through the *Matsya Sabha*, fisheries planning can provide radical shifts. There is sufficient reason to argue that decentralized planning process need to enlarge its focus by incorporating eco-system approach for fisheries productive sector. When the *Matsya Sabha* can legitimately be operationalized, the fishing community can express, demand, and attain their just share in decentralized planning of the LSGIs.

Matsya Sabha: Modus Operandi

The purpose of *Matsya Sabha* is to strengthen democratic participation of fisher people in decentralized planning process of LSGIs and thereby ensure equitable funds and resource sharing for fisheries sector and fisher people. The constitution and operation of *Matsya Sabha* (Assembly of Fisher People) are founded on three vital features; they are eligibility for membership, institutional procedures, and operational mechanisms. The membership eligibility to the *Matsya Sabha* is restricted to households with at least one family member who is an active fisherman or allied fish worker⁷. The adult members from such families whose name is in the voters list are eligible for participation in the *Matsya Sabha*. *Matsya Sabha* constituency shall be based on designated wards i.e. one *Matsya Sabha* in one coastal ward and shall operate within the ward boundary of the LSGI. *Matsya Sabha* meeting can be organized prior to the meeting of *Grama Sabha*/*Ward Sabha* meetings and there shall be mechanisms to ensure recommendations emerging from the *Matsya Sabha* to find its due place in the *Grama Sabha*. The functioning of *Matsya Sabha* shall be in accordance with the norms of participatory democracy principles. It shall be the effective platform for grassroots level participation. Every attempt shall be made to ensure maximum fish worker representation, effective participatory planning process along with officials from the *Matsya Bhavan*.

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Matsya Sabha: Functional Domain

Matsya Sabha is to act as the stepping stone to infuse development and well being of traditional fisher people. The *Matsya Sabha* shall set in motion all mechanisms to attain this target by systematic analysis of objective situations of fisher people and the fisheries sector. Top priority shall be to interpret and address sector-specific issues by bringing expertise from both traditional and scientific sphere. And also to translate this acumen into fisheries working group and the planning process of the LSGIs. Collectively, the *Matsya Sabha* can endorse some of the central requirements in the sector, such as *Matsya Sabha* shall voice the development priorities of the fisheries sector, reflecting its needs and wants. Beneficiary list of fisher people shall be prepared and prioritized by objective assessment of ground situations. *Matsya Sabha* shall prepare and approve Fishermen list⁸ of those actively working in the sector along with concerned officials so that it is foolproof without omission or duplication, and effective and realistic assessment of schemes and projects by systematic and periodical social audit.

6. Constructive Interface

The programmes of three agencies- Department of Fisheries (DoF), Matsyafed, and Kerala Fishermen Welfare Fund Board (KFWFB)- can be made transparent and accountable in the *Matsya Sabha*. The development and welfare funds available with the DoF for the sector, loans and credit facilities of the Matsyafed, and demands from fishworkers can be coordinated to avail funds available with the LSGIs for the sector. Such arrangements can avoid duplication, enhance quality of schemes, and optimum use of total fund available for the sector. The membership of KFWFB can be verified by the *Matsya Sabha*. The success of planning process in the fishery sector will remain largely on active participation and collective decision making of these three agencies with the *Matsya Sabha*. There is a need for interpretation of community voices into plans and schemes through an organic process. There is a coming together of traditional wisdom with modern knowledge and techniques with mutual agreement and respect for the other.

By all means *Matsya Sabha*, the forum of exclusivity, is justified for the well-being of traditional fisher people under the LSGIs. It shall be a step in right direction for the LSGIs that has missed to contribute towards the fisheries sector in its past one and half decade of decentralized planning. By providing equal opportunities through the *Matsya Sabha*, the LSGIs can justify that they stand for the underprivileged and the marginalized.

Notes

- 1 The term fishing villages is the official categorization of villages by Department of Fisheries.
- 2 The difference between numbers of fishing crafts in operation to that of allowable limit is termed as over capacity. This difference of crafts in operation is disproportionably high in the state; mechanized boats are 294 per cent, motorized canoe 893 per cent and non-motorized 10 per cent are in operation against the allowable limits set in the state by several technical committees.
- 3 The fisheries sector is broadly categorized into two, depending on the technology base. They are mechanized sector and traditional sector. The fishing crafts propelled with Inboard Motors (IBMs).

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