STRENGTHENING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE: EFFORTS BY NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

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ABSTRACT

India is the largest democracy in the world and has been witnessing successful conduct of elections from more than six-decades. As Abraham Lincoln said, Democracy means ‘government of the people, for the people, and by the people’. The key role of citizens is to exercise their ‘right to vote’ and participate in the democratic process. Even after 65 years, we can observe that the participation of people in elections is not 100 per cent.

Professionally qualified people and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have taken up specific and targeted interventions to sensitize and motivate the citizens to exercise their ‘right to vote’. It is evident that there has been a significant increase in the voter percentage due to the efforts put in by these NGOs. Both developed as well as developing countries can emulate this what-works-model so that the ideals Democracy - justice, equality and liberty can truly prevail in letter and spirit.

Keywords: Democracy; Making Democracy Work; Non-Governmental Organisation; Corruption; Criminalization; Stakeholders

INTRODUCTION

Voter turnout in Delhi (India’s capital) during 2013 was 66 per cent as against last year’s 57 per cent. And more importantly, a one-year-old party has proved to be a giant killer. Last year’s elections in Bangalore Urban saw a shift in voter turnout – albeit not a large one from 47.3 per cent to 52.83 per cent. Voter turnout in Karnataka moved from 64 per cent to 68 per cent to over 70.23 per cent. There were some improvements in pockets, partly because of Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagarapalike’s voter awareness drives. The efforts of Non-Governmental Organisations and organisations working to reach out to the voter, has made a huge difference (Harshini, 2013).

According to Wikipedia, Democracy is a form of government in which all eligible citizens participate equally – either directly or through elected representatives – in the proposal, development, and creation of laws. It encompasses social, economic and cultural conditions that enable the free and equal practice of political self-determination. The term originates from the Greek term Democratia which means “rule of the people”. Democratia is derived from two Greek words demos meaning “people” and kratos indicating “power” or “rule”.

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The Constitution of India (1997) in its Preamble clearly mentions that ‘WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN, SOCIALIST, SECULAR, DEMOCRATIC, REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens:

JUSTICE, social, economic and political;

LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;

EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all

FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation’

Article 326 of the Constitution of India empowers every citizen of India that the elections to the House of the People and to the Legislative Assembly of every State shall be on the basis of adult suffrage; that is to say, every person who is a citizen of India and who is not less than eighteen years of age on such date as may be fixed in that behalf by or under any law made by the appropriate Legislature and is not otherwise disqualified under this Constitution or any law made by the appropriate Legislature on the ground of non-residence, unsoundness of mind, crime or corrupt or illegal practice, shall be entitled to be registered as a voter at any such election (The Constitution of India, 1997). Election to the Indian Parliament is held once every five years.

As Butler, Lahiri and Roy (1995) put it, ‘every election is a potential turning point in history and deserves a full study as a contemporary event, an opportunity to observe politicians and party organisations at full stretch, to examine the influence of press and broadcasting, to assess the involvement of ordinary citizens’.

Voting percentage clearly speaks of how many people have taken part in the process of democracy. On the one hand, India’s voters are not coming forward to vote and exercise their power. On the other hand, it is evident that influence of four C’s - Criminalization, Corruption, Casteism and Communalism is making an impact on the free and fair conduct of elections. Efforts are being made by the Election Commission of India to tackle both these challenges. Meanwhile, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have been putting their best efforts to improve the citizens’ participation in the voting process. This paper discusses on the hard work put in by NGOs in Karnataka.

Efforts by NGOs at Grass root Level

Karnataka is a home to a number of Non-Governmental Organisations working hard on voter awareness. This paper provides an overview of efforts put in by NGOs in strengthening the effectiveness of democratic governance:

- Janaagraha’s ‘Jaagte Raho’ Campaign
- Bangalore Political Action Committee
- Art of Living Foundation’s ‘Volunteer for a Better India’ Movement
- Vivekananda Institute for Leadership Development’s ‘Making Democracy Work’ Campaign
Janaagraha’s ‘Jaagte Raho’ Campaign

Janaagraha is a non-profit organisation based in Bangalore which is working to improve the quality of life of citizens dwelling in cities and towns. As a citizen-based organisation, it has now evolved a robust institution for Citizenship and Democracy.

The first step in ensuring every citizen to vote is to ensure that his/her name is enrolled into the voters’ list. In this backdrop, Janaagraha and the Election Commission of India took a pilot project in Shanthi Nagar Assembly Constituency in Bangalore for taking up its intervention. Activities were initiated between September 2010 and May 2011. In this project, about 851 citizen volunteers were mobilized. About 305 citizen volunteers (Area Voter Mitra), actively took up the task of cleaning the voters’ list. Area Voter Mitras went from door-to-door to add missing names and delete obsolete entries in the voters’ list. By the end of the project, about 44,128 forms were submitted to the Chief Electoral Office of Karnataka! Voters’ list in Shanthi Nagar Assembly Constituency is now clear and clean.

Bangalore Political Action Committee (B. Pac)

The Bangalore Political Action Committee (B.PAC), is a trust which working towards making Bangalore better. B.PAC works to promote good governance practices and policies through active citizen engagement with political leadership. B.PAC is putting efforts to ensure that all eligible people register to vote and once register, they exercise their right to vote. The Trust has involved in organising voter registration drives and creating awareness about clean candidates.

Art of Living Foundation's ‘Volunteer for a Better India' Movement

Art of Living Foundation has initiated ‘Volunteer for a Better India Movement’. While closely working with the District Election office, it is organising voter awareness drives. It has adopted novel pedagogy to sensitize the voters like flash mobs, formation of human chains, motivating people to participate in signature campaigns, bike rallies, silent marches (vote-a-thon), street shows and displaying banners. Within a very short span of 15-days, the volunteers enrolled more than 20,000 people into the voters list. Being in the Information Technology (IT) Capital Bangalore, it has also launched ‘Vote for a Better India’ mobile application that guides citizens to register to vote. (Harshini, 2013).

V-LEAD’s ‘Making Democracy Work’ Campaign

Vivekananda Institute for Leadership Development (V-LEAD) initiated ‘Making Democracy Work’ campaign to strengthen the process of democracy and focusing on citizen's demand for good governance. These interventions included:

1. Campaign across all the assembly constituencies of Mysore District, Karnataka.
2. Engaging with political parties for inclusion of points in their election manifestos.
3. Public talks and discussions in colleges across Mysore district.
4. Engaging with the media: Through regular articles in the print media, community newsletter, community radio and widely read blog.

Key Focus Areas of the Campaign: The Preamble to the Constitution of India envisages the ideals of liberty, fraternity and equality among all the citizens. However, present day electoral corruption is leading to the violation of the very essence of our Constitution and
Democracy. The campaign focused on voter integrity and prevention of corruption at the voter level, the key issues, its impact and the focus are as follows:

**Table 1. Focus Areas of ‘Making Democracy Work’ Campaign**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SN.</th>
<th>Key Issue</th>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Focus Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Increasing role of money power in elections</td>
<td>Denies opportunity for good candidates to contest elections</td>
<td>Whole civil society need to work together to curb the influence of money in elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Voter bribing increasing drastically as candidates and parties are offering freebies to the voters</td>
<td>Corruption in the electoral system</td>
<td>Sensitize voters to refrain from this illegal and unethical practice to reduce corruption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Increasing young and first time voters</td>
<td>Elect undeserving and corrupt candidates</td>
<td>Emphasize the importance of voting and electing the ‘right’ candidate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key Driving Institutions:** Key organisations which involved in the campaign were:

1. Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM)
2. Vivekananda Institute for Leadership Development (V-LEAD)
3. Grassroots Research and Advocacy Movement (GRAAM) and
4. The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR)

**Campaign Objectives:** For any campaign, objectives form the roadmap for the journey. ‘Making Democracy Work’ campaign’s key objectives were to reach out to voters across Mysore district in Karnataka to:

1. Spread the awareness regarding the Karnataka Assembly Elections and role of citizens in a democracy.
2. Registration of names for election
3. Increased number of voters participating in the democracy
4. Disbursement of adequate information about all the candidates contesting from various constituencies in the Mysore district.
5. To ensure free and fair elections
6. To minimize ‘buying’ of votes.
7. To ensure a healthy sustained relationship with the elected candidates even after the elections.
**Campaign Timeline**

**Table 2. Campaign Timeline and Activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SLNo.</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Jan-13</th>
<th>Feb-13</th>
<th>Mar-13</th>
<th>Apr-13</th>
<th>May-13</th>
<th>Jun-13</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Assembly Election</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Advocacy and Election Manifesto</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Capacity building and orientation to field team</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Engagement with media</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Open meetings with communities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>College programmes and youth engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Jathas, street plays, door-to-door campaign</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Voters' clinics and signature campaign</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Jana Jagruthi Ratha</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Public competitions</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Data entry of candidates affidavits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Documentation and reporting</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Campaign Message:** The common messages and information that were disseminated in the program were:

1. **Voter registration:** Asking voters to ensure that their names are enrolled in the voter’s list and giving information about the voter registration process.

2. **Candidates profile and background:** Creating awareness among voters to be aware of the background of the candidate who are contesting the elections, issues faced by them etc.

3. **Resist all forms of voter bribing:** Asking voters not to become prey of money, liquor, clothes and other gifts.

4. **Follow-up with the winning candidates:** Requesting citizens to follow-up with the winning candidates to ensure that development takes place in the constituency.

**Campaign Overview:** ‘Making Democracy Work’ campaign broadly focused on four dimensions – Public programmes, advocacy initiatives, coverage of different stakeholders and media engagement.
**Making Democracy Work: Campaign Overview**

**Public Programmes:** College Contact Programmes: One of the key objectives of the campaign was to reach the first time and young voters. In this perspective, awareness programmes were conducted in 15 different colleges across Mysore district. Key contents during the sessions included Universal Adult Suffrage, their responsibility as citizens, importance of participating in the voting process, pros and cons and selecting the best candidate for their constituency during the elections. Since the target group was young generation, Dr. R. Balasubramaniam and team adopted participative pedagogy like interaction, video-shows, distribution of handbills etc. In total, the team was able to reach more than 8000 prospective voting students.

Open Community Meetings: During elections, political parties attempt to lure families and communities by promising or providing freebies. Based on the voters list, parties develop novel ideas to influence the families which have more number of voters. Further, carefully planned interventions are taken up for particular communities by the parties. In this backdrop, open community meetings were organised with the objective of sensitizing the importance of voting with integrity and current practices in elections. Community members were encouraged to ask questions about the candidates and developmental issues in their constituency. Key highlight during community meetings were participants were encouraged to discuss in groups and take a pledge to actively participate in ‘Making Democracy Work’!

Jaathaas and Cycle Rallies: Jaathaas (processions) are an effective tool adopted for creating mass awareness and disseminate information among the general public. With active support from both Government as well as private organisations, 19 Jaathaas were organised in all the seven taluks of Mysore district. Government officials from the Department of Health, Women and Child Development, taluk panchayath members, college students, self-help group (SHG) members, volunteers, anganwadi workers and community members. The
team also conducted novel programs such as Bicycle Jaatha and Tonga (cart) Jaatha, a first-of-its-kind for this purpose!

**Jana Jaagruthi Ratha:** Jana Jaagruthi Ratha refers to a mobile van decked up with information on the importance of voting containing posters, banners, awareness message and a Public Address System to reach maximum number of people within a short span of time. Jana Jaagruthi Ratha toured all the 11 Assembly Constituencies in Mysore district and covered 704 villages and 41 wards of Mysore Urban. It covered 3123 Km in 32 days! Through this medium, special programmes were also organised in conspicuous places like circles, fairs, markets and in front of Gram Panchayath offices.

**Public Competitions:** Open Drawing competitions were held on “Elections and Me” in three age group categories of 5-10 years, 11-15 years and 16-25 years. Mysore city is also known for writers. In this perspective, Limerick competition on “Election Corruption and Us” was also organised.

**Street Plays:** To reach the illiterate and village population, street plays are an effective medium of communication. In this perspective, 31 street plays were conducted in strategic locations by professional cultural troupes. Through street plays, the campaign reached the mass audience through drama, humor and songs scripted with local flavor.

**Voters’ Clinic:** Voters’ clinics were set up at prominent places in Mysore city wherein kiosks were set up sharing information to the general public about the campaign, voter registration and election process. When people visited the clinics (information kiosks), they were free to ask any question related to election. Trained volunteers answered the questions asked by the people and helped clear their doubts and fears throughout the day. Pamphlets, stickers and posters were also distributed at these clinics.

**Signature, Poster and SMS Campaign:** Signature campaigns were organised in and around heritage and tourist destinations in Mysore city. Since Mysore is a favorite tourist destination, people from all walks of life and different age groups participated in this campaign. Nearly 2000 people signed and committed themselves to take part in the election. Further poster campaigns were conducted in government departments, hospitals, colleges, buses, cinema theatres, apartments, corporate offices, nursing homes, industries, shops and autos.

The Karnataka Assembly elections were held on 5th May 2013. With the objective of providing the final push, mass SMS were sent out on the penultimate day and on the day of election. Mass SMS (Short Message Service) campaigns also helped to reach more than 5000 people.

**Advocacy:** Engaging the political parties in ‘Making Democracy Work’ campaign was also initiated. A letter was drafted and sent to all major political parties in Karnataka which stressed the importance of 73rd and 74th Amendment to the Constitution of India. Workshop was also conducted on the concept of democratization. The demand for inclusion of points related to good governance was also projected as a citizen’s demand in Dr. R. Balasubramaniam’s widely read blog (rbalu.wordpress.com) and regular column in popular newspaper “Prajavani”.

To everyone’s surprise, national level leadership of one national party acknowledged and gave positive response to this initiative. Further, State leadership of another party responded well. Reflections from this response indicate that advocacy work needs to be scaled up appropriately in the context of General elections of 2014.

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Campaign Coverage: In all, the program covered the following areas:

Table 3. ‘Making Democracy Work’ Campaign Coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SN.</th>
<th>Particulars</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Assembly Constituencies in Mysore District</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Villages covered</td>
<td>704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Urban Wards</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Street Vendors’ Self Help Groups</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Village Health and Sanitation Committee Federation and Committees</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Voters’ Clinic established in Mysore city</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Door-to-door campaigns in Mysore District</td>
<td>7 taluks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Cycle Jathas and Tonga Jathas</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Street Plays</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>People reach through street plays</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>College programs</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Young voters reached through college programs</td>
<td>8000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Media Engagement: Role of mass media needs a special mention in ‘Making Democracy Work’ campaign reach the wider public. Rather than publishing the issues just as a mere news item, mass media helped to penetrate the message on the importance of voting to every eligible voter. Dr. R. Balasubramaniam’s regular column “Hosa Kanasu” (New Dream) in the leading Kannada newspaper “Prajavani” created a new wave in Kannada Journalism and awakened the voters. Further, both print and electronic media gave wide publicity for the public programmes organised as mentioned above.

‘Jana Dhwani’ (People’s Voice), a community radio which is operated by from Sargur in Heggada Devana Kote, Mysore District by SVYM also aired regular programs covering a radius of 20 km.

‘Grama Vaani’ (Voice of the Village), a monthly community newsletter published by SVYM also covered regular articles and an exclusive “Election Special Edition”. In this edition, the newsletter threw light on the salient features of the campaign, procedure to procure a voter’s identity card, questions that need to be posed to candidates approaching for votes and toll free telephone number of the Election Commission of India.

Throughout the campaign, media representatives also supported by covering the content which were shared during “Press Meets” and “Press Releases” before and after all the programmes.

RESULTS

As a result of an array of interventions, following are the key results of the campaign:

- There was an increase by 4.81 per cent voting in 2013 compared to 2008.
- Voting percentages of all the 11 Assembly constituencies of Mysore District have increased in 2013 compared to 2008.
- Voter percentage in rural constituencies increased from 74.37 per cent to 79.51 per cent, an increase by 5.14 per cent.
- Voter percentage in urban constituencies increased from 56.25 per cent to 60.48 per cent, an increase by 4.23 per cent.
Table 4. Assembly-wise Voting Percentage 2008 Vs. 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Krishnaraja</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>58.49</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Chamaraja</td>
<td>51.11</td>
<td>55.11</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Narasimharaja</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>54.44</td>
<td>4.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Chamundeshwari</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>73.88</td>
<td>6.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Varuna</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>82.24</td>
<td>6.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Nanjangud</td>
<td>71.9</td>
<td>76.04</td>
<td>4.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>T. Narasipura</td>
<td>67.8</td>
<td>75.28</td>
<td>7.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>H.D. Kote</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>77.35</td>
<td>9.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Hunsur</td>
<td>77.3</td>
<td>79.15</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>K.R. Nagara</td>
<td>80.4</td>
<td>82.7</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Periyapatna</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>83.84</td>
<td>4.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average of 11 taluks</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>67.78</strong></td>
<td><strong>72.59</strong></td>
<td><strong>4.81</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LIMITATIONS

Though the Karnataka Assembly election voter percentage in Mysore District has increased, the resultant change cannot be solely attributed to the above campaign. However, visible changes have been made by a gamut of activities to increase the awareness of voting among the voters of Mysore District.

CONCLUSION

Though India has the credit of being the largest democracy in the world, it is still facing challenges in terms of citizens’ participation in the voting process. On the one hand, educated citizens do not actively participate in the voting process and keep blaming that the system is not good. Meanwhile, politicians lure illiterate people through novel means like never before. Further, corruption, casteism and communalism still make a huge impact on the overall election process.

In this backdrop, lot of efforts need to be put in to sensitize the citizens to enroll their names in the voters’ list, know the background of the contesting candidates, exercise their ‘right to vote’ and follow-up with the winning candidate so that developmental works are carried out judiciously in their constituency.

There are very few Non-Governmental Organisations in the country which are involved in sensitizing the people on their right to vote and the election process. Professionally qualified people and community based organisations can play a pivotal role changing the mindset of citizens to vote the right candidate for the right job at the right time. Both developed as well as developing countries can emulate what-works-model demonstrated by NGOs in Karnataka so that the ideals Democracy - justice, equality and liberty can truly prevail in letter and spirit.

ACRONYMS

ADR : Association for Democratic Reforms
BBMP : Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagarapalike

Available online on www.abhinavjournal.com
BPAC : Bangalore Political Action Committee
GRAAM : Grassroots Research and Advocacy Movement
KEW : Karnataka Election Watch
MDW : Making Democracy Work
MLA : Member of Legislative Assembly
NGOs : Non-Governmental Organisations
SHG : Self-Help Group
SMS : Short Message Service
SVYM : Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement
VHSNC : Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committees
V-LEAD : Vivekananda Institute for Leadership Development

REFERENCES


